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Delays & degrees: At UTEP, many find college years interrupted

By Adriana Gómez Licón / El Paso Times
Posted: 01/25/2010 12:00:00 AM MST

EL PASO -- More than two-thirds of El Pasoans quit college before they get their degrees, according to Census Bureau estimates.

Many of these are not the traditional students who enroll in four-year programs right after high school.

"Our students overwhelmingly work to pay tuition," said Richard Jarvis, chief academic officer of the University of Texas at El Paso.

The Department of Education tracked the progress of first-time, full-time students who entered in 2000. People in that category accounted for 56 percent of UTEP's student body.

Four percent graduated within four years; 31 percent within six years; and 38 percent within eight years.

Jarvis said the graduation calculation is "a false standard" because UTEP has so many nontraditional students.

"The concept is just flawed," Jarvis said. "What we are trying to do is graduate more students whether you are full-time, part-time ... we are trying to get you graduated."

The graduation rate, measured by the federal agency, does not affect funding or grants UTEP receives.

"It's really only a matter of reputation," Jarvis said. "We are doing a really good job for a student body that is handling a lot of challenges in their lives."

The average age of an undergraduate at UTEP is 23. Many find their college years interrupted because they need to work full-time or they are deployed to military assignments.

Vanessa Ramirez "stopped out" in 2001 to work a full-time job. She needed two classes to graduate.



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"I thought, 'I'm going to go back,' but I had a great job, and I just kind of forgot about school," Ramirez said.

She worked as an on-air personality for Clear Channel Radio in the early 2000s.

In the process, Ramirez became one of at least 59,400 people age 25 and older in the El Paso region who dropped out of college. The Census Bureau in 2008 estimated that 87,100 people in that age group had taken some college credits, but only about 27,700 were enrolled in school. That means 68.1 percent of people with some college got stuck along the way.

In San Antonio, the percentage of people who had some college but were not enrolled was larger at 77.4 percent

the same year.

By contrast, about 50,000 people age 25 and older in El Paso had a bachelor's degree in 2008.



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Figures show, the longer students postpone graduation, the more they pay for tuition, and the longer they earn a lower salary.

Full-time tuition more than doubled at UTEP between 2000 and 2009, from \$1,200 to \$2,500.

In El Paso, the median salary for people with some college is \$26,600. And the number goes up to \$42,500 for degree holders.

For women, the salary gap between degree and non-degree holders is greater than for men. The median salary for a woman with some college is less than \$20,700, Anglo female degree holders earn more than \$40,200. Men with some college earn a median salary of about \$33,200, while male degree holders earn a median of \$47,000.

Ramirez, 33, finally took the two classes she was missing and received a bachelor's degree in communications after eight years, a layoff, a marriage and a baby.

"I'm very happy, very proud," Ramirez said. "I can be a role model for my daughter."

Financial decisions

Financial struggles are often what forces UTEP students to drop out.

"The vast majority are not in academic difficulty," Jarvis said.

UTEP ranked third in the Least Debt list of national universities in U.S. News and World Report in 2006. Calculating the average debt of students upon graduation, UTEP was third with \$6,041. Princeton University was first with \$4,030 and the University of Hawaii-Manoa was second with \$5,379.

"This is a community that takes paying their bills very seriously," Jarvis said.

Because UTEP students cannot afford the rising tuition at the moment of registration, they choose to attenuate their programs and work more hours.

Ramirez now recognizes she made the decision to move out of her parents' home in 2000. She ended up working full-time and enrolling in fewer classes.

"I wanted to be out there on my own," she said. But the car expenses, rent, utilities and tuition amounted to a lot of money she could have saved if she had chosen to stay at home, work part-time and stay dedicated to school.

Eight years later, Ramirez paid tuition for her last two classes with the money she got in a severance package.

'Students want flexibility'

A busy schedule and the fact that UTEP is a commuter campus make it difficult for students to graduate, said Sunay Palsole, who directs distance learning programs.

"Students want flexibility. If you look at UTEP's population, these are nontraditional students," Palsole said. "They are trying to juggle their lives and study for their classes."

Diana Natalicio, president of UTEP, said she does not believe students lack the motivation to complete their degrees.

"There is a huge desire," Natalicio said. "But people struggle because they have to balance many responsibilities at a younger age and before they are able to complete their education."

More and more UTEP students are turning to classes online.

Although the price is about the same -- about \$3,100 in tuition and fees for five classes -- almost 2,600 students are taking at least one class online. In the spring of 2007, about 1,100 students were enrolled in online classes.

Jarvis said UTEP is moving toward a customization of education. There are night classes, four-week classes called "minimesters," fast-track degrees and online classes.

"The degree programs have become more flexible," he said.

UTEP, for instance, just launched a new online bachelor of multidisciplinary studies degree for people in El Paso with some college. It is geared to those students who took about 20 classes or made it about halfway through.

This multidisciplinary program customizes a curriculum for those students who do not have enough credits for a specific program. The program started in the summer of 2006 and has awarded degrees to about 500 people.

Another option in the menu includes a fast-track format that will begin in fall 2010. With a \$500,000 grant, the University of Texas at Arlington, UTEP and the University of Texas Permian Basin will launch accelerated programs online. The courses are six to seven weeks long allowing adults with some college to complete their degrees in the shortest time possible. In this format, students may choose humanities, university studies or multidisciplinary studies.

"There are a large number of people who have some credits and for them it is hard to come back on campus full time," Jarvis said.

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UTEP women knock off UCF, 77-67



EL PASO -- For 25 strange minutes Sunday afternoon, the UTEP women's basketball team got zero shots and points from Jareica Hughes, gave the ball away withstartling regularity, rarely missed a shot and managed a

two-point lead against UCF.

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