

## **2020 State of the University Address**

The University of Texas at El Paso

Heather Wilson

President

October 27, 2020

Good evening, this is Heather Wilson, the President of The University of Texas at El Paso. Buenas noches.

In October 1918, during the Spanish influenza pandemic, the registrar of the School of Mines, Ruth Augur, took it upon herself to entertain students quarantined in Graham Hall, which was then a dormitory.

Over the course of several nights, Ruth sat outside the dormitory with her cello playing for the students.

Other nights, she organized concerts and plays.

Of course, this was all before Netflix or Wi-Fi – or even plain old telephone service in most places.

It was a different time, and yet, the stories of that time resonate today.

Around mining camps, a site boss was known as the “augur.”

Ruth Augur lived up to her name. She did what had to be done, without asking anyone.

Ruth’s dedication lives on today -- throughout campus -- as modern augurs can be found in our midst.

Kinley Dojie, a senior psychology major, works in our University Writing Center. Kinley is at home right now -- in Bhutan. He wakes up at 3 o’clock in the morning to go online and help students [here](#) – on the other side of the world.

Imagine for a moment if Ruth could see our music students, staging an opera virtually over Facebook, or playing their instruments on Zoom, lifting people’s spirits.

Tonight, I am speaking to you from the studios of KTEP-FM on The University of Texas at El Paso campus.

Eighty years ago, a predecessor of mine, Dossie Wiggins, became the first UTEP President to speak to the community over the radio. It was 1940, and he talked about the war in Europe. The next year, when the United States entered the war, he continued the broadcasts, endorsing higher education as an imperative during times of national emergency.

Every fall, there is a tradition that the President of the University speaks to the faculty. It's called "convocation," and it's kind of a big deal.

This year, I'm speaking to you over the radio because the world faces a different kind of war than the one that raged in 1940. This one, the novel coronavirus COVID-19, has kept us from gathering together as colleagues since last March.

The response of our faculty, staff and students to this pandemic has been remarkable.

I want to let you know that I'm very proud of all of you.

### **UTEP's response to COVID-19 has been exceptional.**

In just 10 short days last spring ... over an extended spring break ... our faculty moved some 3,000 courses completely online.

During the summer, a team led by Graduate Dean Stephen Crites came together to plan our fall semester. This group pulled together a collection of strategies that have allowed us to continue our mission.

Everyone has been part of the solution.

Students took the lead, creating a culture on campus of using best health practices all the time. We could not have asked for more from our Student Government Association during this difficult time.

Faculty figured out what courses really needed to be taught in person and arranged to teach others by distance.

This required our registrar to take apart the entire fall schedule of some 3,800 classes and rebuild it. That usually takes months, and she and her team did it in weeks.

Instructional consultants, such as Julio Batiz and Alfonso Pacheco from the Center for Instructional Design, worked long hours training faculty to set up classes online, hold virtual office hours, and engage their students in an online learning environment.

As we shifted to distance education, Financial Aid and Student Affairs managed to get grants for technology to 1,669 students in less than 10 days.

Institutional Advancement's Student Emergency Fund raised over \$162,000 for students in need from more than 1,200 donors – many of whom were faculty and staff.

UTEP's Border Biomedical Research Center, supported by some great people in our Information Technology department, built the software to enable testing on campus, and figured out how to use our research machines to test ourselves for COVID-19 and are now processing more than 2,500 COVID-19 samples a week.

As a result, there have been no lines for testing at UTEP and it takes hours – not days – for Miners to get results from a COVID test.

Analysis of testing results show that our campus is not a hotspot of the disease. But, as expected, we are affected by the presence of the disease in the community in which we live.

Last week, as the disease around us hit record levels, I met with our student government leaders to find out what we could do better.

They gave me a lot of good ideas. But as the disease increases around us and as universities across the country struggle to protect health while continuing to teach, our students praised the campus testing program, the distancing and cleaning in the buildings, and the culture of care at UTEP.

One of our student senators told me, “Students feel safer on campus than anywhere else in El Paso.”

That was really good to hear.

While distance education makes continued progress possible for our students in a really unusual time, and while this technology will change us, we’ve also learned something that we really knew about ourselves all along. We learn best when we engage meaningfully with each other.

We long for this to be over and to be back together, with our students again.

### **UTEP continues to fulfill its mission of providing access to excellent higher education.**

About a week ago, NBC News highlighted all the work that UTEP is doing as a leading Hispanic-Serving University to meet the needs of the students we serve.

This success is not only a testament to the work ethic and resilience of our students, but also to the dedication and commitment of our staff and faculty.

This past academic year, we conferred 5,103 degrees — which is the highest annual number of degrees awarded in our 105-year history.

In fact, more degrees were awarded last year than in all of the first 40 years of our existence combined.

The College of Engineering saw an all-time high number of degrees conferred at all levels, producing a record number of graduates ready to tackle the problems of the 21st century.

### **Higher education must help the nation recover.**

But this is no time to rest.

The economic impact of the pandemic is accelerating changes to the way we all work and live.

Some jobs that have been lost during the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic won't be coming back, and new jobs will need more education and training than ever before.

Higher education must help the nation recover by developing the talent of our people.

UTEP has long been a gateway to opportunity.

Meeting the changing needs of our region will require some new programs, and the updating of others.

This semester, the School of Nursing started a nurse practitioner program in psychiatric mental health to prepare advanced practice nurses to care for the mentally ill.

A few weeks ago, the fourth cohort of pharmacy students gathered outside on Centennial Plaza to receive their white coats.

And in the Department of Mathematical Sciences, our Ph.D. in Data Science has been approved by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and is currently admitting students.

**UTEP continues to advance discoveries of public value across our colleges and schools through innovative and relevant research.**

While teaching is how most people in West Texas know us, over the past 20 years, UTEP has built itself into one of the top 5% of doctoral research universities in America.

Our research grants are growing in both size and number.

In the past year, Dr. Robert Kirken and our Border Biomedical Research Center received a National Institutes of Health grant for \$19 million to continue research on cancer-related Hispanic health disparities.

The faculty in the College of Science earned grants to study cancer, COVID, glaucoma, tick- and mosquito-borne viruses, and other health issues that impact the well-being of people in this region and worldwide.

In the College of Health Sciences, Dr. Julia Lechuga is directing a binational HIV risk reduction project through a study funded by the National Institutes of Minority and Health Disparities.

UTEP is positioned to be a leader in research on Hispanic health disparities, with direct implications for improving the health of the community we serve.

This year, we awarded 139 doctoral degrees.

By opening doors of opportunity where we are, UTEP produces more Hispanic Ph.D.s in the sciences than any other university in America.

**UTEP's contributions to our region's economic, education, and cultural well-being remain strong.**

As a public research university, UTEP has a responsibility to positively impact the health, education, economy and culture of the community we serve.

We do that in a lot of different ways.

Our opera program gave its first performance of the season this month in partnership with El Paso Opera through Facebook Live. It was all in Spanish, performed by the students and pianist Dr. Esequiel Meza, as well as special guest and UTEP alumnus Luis Alejandro Orozco.

Our business school has deepened its partnerships with Prudential Finance, ADP, and Charles Schwab, to prepare UTEP students to take the Security Industry Essentials exam. Over 100 students have participated in the program, and almost half of them have already achieved their certification.

And our College of Education has expanded its year-long student teaching residency in partnership with local districts, and they have redesigned their Alternative Certification Program to enable professionals to earn full certification and a master's degree in one year.

**There are significant challenges ahead.**

Now, while we have accomplished a lot in the past year even while coping with a global pandemic, there are significant challenges ahead.

With the economy buffeted by the closure of businesses, the State of Texas required us to reduce our current state budget by five percent this year.

We were able to do this by eliminating vacant positions, reducing student employment, and reducing our operating expenses.

Our athletic program has also been hit hard by the pandemic and the resulting decline in attendance at games.

Our 315 student athletes have higher average GPAs than the student body as a whole, and they are in demand after graduation because they know how to manage their time, work as a team, and persist when things get hard.

The Athletic Department reduced its budget to cope with the pandemic while maintaining our commitment to our students and our capacity to bounce back when this is over.

As we look forward to the 2021 Texas legislative session, we will carry the message to Austin that UTEP is determined to be one of the engines of economic recovery, critical to the future of Texas.

Higher education remains the best path to a better life. This is particularly true after an event like we have experienced over the past eight months.

Over the past 30 years, three counties in West Texas have created a college-going culture where one did not exist before. Fifty-four percent of recent high school graduates enroll in some kind of post-secondary education – the vast majority of them at UTEP or El Paso Community College.

That rate – 54% – is the highest rate in Texas – and it is still not good enough.

Since the last recession in 2008, 90% of the jobs that have been created require some post-high school training or education.

Nine out of 10 new jobs created require some post-high school training or education, and this economic recovery isn't going to be any different.

Regions of the world that educate their people will thrive in the 21st century and those that do not will be left behind.

Working with other higher education leaders, we will bring this message to Austin.

We will prioritize protecting the base funding for the University and paying for expenses due to the pandemic.

And we will also advocate for desperately needed new buildings now – when interest rates are low, and jobs are needed.

### **At UTEP, there are no borders on our imagination.**

A century ago, this university was indebted to the actions of Ruth Augur. She saw something had to be done to care for the students isolated from others due to the influenza pandemic of 1918.

And she did it.

She took the initiative. She saw a need and met it with care for the students. She responded to the situation around her and served others.

Our faculty and staff are still “augurs.”

Meeting our students where they are, with a culture of care.

Building on their strengths.

Providing access to excellent education with new tools.

Adapting with agility when needed.

Driving discovery.

And meeting the needs of the community that we serve.

It is an honor to be the President of this fine institution. Thank you, and Go Miners.