

Reflections on the Termination of Two Universities and the Creation of a New University

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Introduction

In 2012 the University of Texas System Regents voted to approve a request to merge two of its campuses, The University of Texas–Pan American (UTPA) in Edinburg, Texas, and The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) in Brownsville, Texas,¹ campuses located approximately 65 miles apart in South Texas. In September 2015 a new university will be created as an Emerging Research One university featuring a new medical school. In this paper I relate the history leading up to the consolidation of the two universities and explore the impact of the merger process.

A visit to the web foretells both nationally and internationally many universities have merged or have considered mergers in recent years. Susan Resnick Pierce, President Emerita of the University of Puget Sound, enumerates the most common reasons for mergers: “declining enrollment; untenable tuition discounts; too much debt; the growing skepticism on the part of prospective students, their families and elected officials about whether the value of a college education is worth the cost; staggering amounts of deferred maintenance and decreased state support for public campuses.”² In the UTPA/UTB merger funding and the opportunity for more programs are the major impetuses.

Background

The UTB campus is across the Mexico border from Matamoros, Mexico, and the UTPA campus is about 19 miles from Reynosa, Mexico, 230 miles south of San Antonio, Texas. In fall 2014 the UTPA campus had an enrollment of over 21,000³ and the UTB campus enrolled a little over 8,000.⁴ Both campuses enroll about 89% Hispanic students. UTPA began as a junior college in 1927, and in the 1970s a satellite campus was created on the grounds of Texas Southmost Junior College. That senior-level college became UTB in 1991.⁵

In 1926 and 1927 the predecessor institutions of UTPA and UTB were the only ones providing higher education to the lower South Texas

counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy, and Starr. A former faculty member who started at the university in 1945 told me enrollment was so low that in the mid 1940s she and other faculty were called together and told they would have to close the doors if they could not matriculate a specific number of students for the following year. She and other faculty members personally visited parents of every high-school graduate in several Rio Grande Valley counties and encouraged them to send their children to college. The administrators told faculty that if the college could remain open through that year, all would be well because the next year the G.I. Bill (1944) would go into effect. On opening day the college miraculously had enrolled exactly the number of students needed. Since that difficult year enrollment has never quit growing. The college evolved from a city-funded college to an area-funded college, and in 1952 became a four-year college named Pan American College. The college became a state-supported institution in 1965. Before the area had a four-year college, those pursuing a degree had to leave the area.

Before 1952 locally those who wanted to teach could receive three- and five-year, temporary teaching certificates. If a district wanted fully certified teachers, counsellors, and administrators, they had to look for them elsewhere until graduate degrees were approved in 1970. In 1971 the name changed to Pan American University. Until master's degrees were approved, most local school administrators, counsellors, and faculty pursuing master's degrees left school as soon as the last bell rang and drove the 102 miles from Edinburg or 120 from Brownsville to Texas A & I University–Kingsville,⁶ attended class then drove back after 10:00 p.m.

While the addition of master's degrees brought benefits to the public schools and their communities, there was still a void in higher education when compared to many other areas of the state. However 1989 would be a stellar year for the college beginning important growth because two important events occurred. First, a border initiative was passed. The border initiative began the first step toward improving and expanding higher education along Texas' border with Mexico, and it affected UTPA and UTB.

President Leo Sayavedra, TAMU–International [Laredo, Texas] explains,

In 1986, the Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education (TACHE) presented a report to the Texas Select Committee on Higher Education that detailed the realities of higher education funding and programs offered along the South Texas border (Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education, 1986). Once this report was conducted, it became clear that the institutions in the central and north Texas were

funded quite a bit above the institutions of South Texas. The data indicated that per capita the institutions north of Interstate 10 were being funded at a rate of \$290 per capita and the institutions south of Interstate 10 were being funded at \$69 per capita.⁷

In 1989, the Texas Legislature approved the South Texas/Border Initiative (STBI). The goals of this initiative were to provide equitable funding to nine universities along the Texas Border, merge these regional institutions with the larger university systems in the state, and create additional graduate programs at both the Master's and Doctoral levels.⁸

Then in 1989 the Chancellor of the UT System, Hans Mark, became a friend to UTPA. He and PAU President Miguel Nevarez liked and respected one another and soon UTPA became part of the UT System. Chancellor Mark initiated an engineering school, several dozen master's programs, and two doctorates. From that time it became obvious UTPA was entering a new era.

Emily Calderón Galdeano relates,

It is estimated that between 2000 and 2040, Texas' population will grow from 20 million to 50 million, and 96% of the net increase will be non-Anglo, with 59% of those being Latino (Murdock, White, Hoque, Pecotte, You, & Balkan, 2003). Latinos currently make up 38% of the Texas population (U.S. Census, 2012), with the greatest area of growth along the Texas–Mexico border. Additionally, the number of Texas residents in public colleges and universities is set to double in the next 40 years (Murdock et al., 2003).⁹

In 1990 the area of Texas just above the border had 26 universities, which offered 4,384 degree programs, while the nine border universities only had 649 with only two doctoral programs for the border institutions versus 589.¹⁰ Galdeano explains, “this translated into one doctoral program per million people in the border area, as opposed to 43 doctoral programs per million people in the rest of the state.”¹¹ Because those students affected are overwhelmingly Hispanic, access to higher education has been an ongoing social justice and affirmative action issue in this area. For students in the poorest area of the state to be without the same educational opportunities as the rest of the state due to geography and potentially racism led to a workforce less ready for the demands of work, so limited in future career options.

In looking back it is obvious South Texas higher-education institutions have made significant progress. The new problem we now confront is how we utilize opportunity presented by the coming merger.

As many can attest, any marriage is a challenge. A good marriage is not easy, and so this cooperative venture we have started will have many complexities. As higher education evolves, more mergers are likely. Therefore, I ask how the process has unfolded and what might we learn from the experience thus far?

Merger History

The news that UTPA and UTB would be dissolved and recreated as another university came as a surprise to students, faculty, and many administrators of both campuses. No specific reasons were given for the decision at first, but the ability to share in the Permanent University Fund, better known as the PUF, was often mentioned. Another less-well-known reason has also been posited. In a doctoral defense of a dissertation concerning the history of the border initiative, former UTPA President Miguel Nevárez argued a strong reason for merger is the agreement no university could have a medical school if another system school had been previously approved to submit a request. UT–Austin wanted a medical school, but UTPA’s request was made prior to UT–Austin’s request. Therefore, no medical school could be awarded Austin until UTPA had one.¹² Quite possibly both access to the PUF and the granting of a medical school to the UT–Austin campus were considerations. The University of Texas Regents have great power, and all those sitting at the time of the merger decision had been appointed by Republican Governor Rick Perry, who approved the merger, and the state legislature is predominately Republican, so the request for a merger was quickly approved by the legislature. Once the Regents voted to make a request for creation of a new university, the request was introduced in the Texas senate, and that body voted unanimously to create a new university in South Texas. Governor Rick Perry signed the bill July 16, 2013.¹³ On December 12, 2013 the name of the new university, The University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley, was approved by UT System Regents.¹⁴

The Permanent University Fund (PUF)

While many in the community were unaware of the PUF, they soon found there was one outstanding benefit to the creation of a new university: more money. The PUF was created when 2.1 million acres of land in West Texas was dedicated to “help fund higher education” by Texas Governor Mirabeau Lamar who says “a cultured mind is the guardian genius of democracy” (his quotation is also the UT–Austin motto).¹⁵ The original recipients of funding from PUF profits were UT and Texas A & M and then later their system schools. This land, in the days before oil, was poor for farming and ranching and very sparsely populated so legislators gladly approved it for the use of higher education, which included mineral rights.

According to Amy Madden:

Revenue from oil production and lease sales does not go directly to university operations. Under state law, it feeds the permanent fund, which is managed by The University of Texas Investment Management Co., a private, nonprofit company. University regents can distribute 4.75 percent of a three-year average of the Permanent University Fund's asset value for uses such as paying off debt and administrative costs. The UT System gets two-thirds of the return, while a third goes to A & M, said Jenny LaCoste-Caputo, spokeswoman for the UT System.¹⁶

In a state with the U.S.' number one (Brownsville–Harlingen) and number three (McAllen–Edinburg–Mission) high poverty areas, the opportunity to share in such wealth presents a staggering windfall.¹⁷ However, since UTPA and UTB did not enter the UT System participating in the PUF, but in another lesser fund, their ability to share in the interest on the \$14.5 billion¹⁸ PUF could only be approved in one of two ways: either the voters of Texas would have to approve a constitutional amendment or a new university would have to be created. Since Texas voters are not known to support constitutional amendments and since the creation of a new university by dissolving UTPA and UTB and reforming them was possible through the legislature, the latter was chosen.

The PUF may be used for “instruction, research equipment [including labs], library acquisitions, scholarships, recruitment, and student services such as counseling and career center services.”¹⁹ Prior to the implementation of the PUF new buildings had to be requested as special items in the budget. With the PUF, a lump sum is allocated to each university each time interest is distributed.

Reflections on the Process

Facilities

The fund has already begun its impact on the Edinburg campus, the subject of my reflection. So far Edinburg has completed or begun a \$96-million-dollar science building, a \$54-million 88,000-square-foot building dedicated to the first two years of students' medical education, an \$11.9-million 46,000-square-foot Student Academic Center,²⁰ and a \$124-million medical-school building dedicated to the first two years of study.²¹ When I arrived in 1967 Edinburg was a campus split by railroad tracks, with “old” campus on one side and “new” campus on the other. We struggled for years as did all border colleges in areas with a poor but fast-growing population. The funding from the PUF for buildings and

labs should also help with the college's overall budget. With a rapidly growing student enrollment of over 31,000, come September PUF funding will be essential to providing up-to-date labs, technology, and buildings for students.

Administration

Shortly after the announcement the universities would merge came the announcement all administrators from the president and deans down to faculty and staff would no longer retain their positions when UTRGV came into being in fall 2015. If they wanted to be employed at UTRGV, they would have to reapply for their positions. Juliet Garcia, president of UTB, resigned to assume the position of Executive Director of The University of Texas Americas Institute.²² UTPA president Robert Nelsen applied for the position as president of UTRGV, a position for which he was not selected. A new president of The University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley, Dr. Guy Bailey, arrived on campus; so our campus now had two presidents: one president of UTPA with one year to go before the merger and a new president for the newly named UTRGV. Dr. Nelsen resigned instead of staying for the 2014–15 academic year. He was given tenure on the faculty and a one-year appointment to work within the UT System, and later named president of California State University, Sacramento. An interim dean was appointed for the College of Education who, at the time of this writing, spends two days a week on the Brownsville campus and three on the Edinburg campus.

Deans were told they would not be informed of their status until July 15, 2014, when they would receive a letter outlining “pathway” options. The College of Education dean immediately sent out his résumé because of the short time line and uncertainty. He is now dean at a Research One university. On January 20, 2015, the faculty received an email announcing search committees for deans would be formed. As of June, 2015 a College of Education dean has yet to be named.²³ No permanent department chairs have been selected but interim chairs for the 2015–16 academic year have been appointed across campus, albeit without faculty input.

Tenure

Soon after the merger announcement, in an early meeting faculty members came away with the impression tenure would not be affected. However, soon afterward, Dr. Francisco G. Cigarroa, Chancellor of The University of Texas System, was asked at a meeting of the UTB faculty what would be the status of tenure, and he did not give a direct answer. His public lack of clarity created anxiety, unrest, and rumors among faculty.

Faculty were then told tenure would cease and everyone with a terminal degree who had earned tenure or who held a tenure-track position would have to reapply. The rehiring would be conducted in two phases. Phase One required the faculty member have a recent criminal background check, no grievances filed or found against him or her, and a terminal degree. Faculty who did not apply for Phase One or who were turned down for Phase One could apply for their former position or a different position, but their job would be advertised and those who applied would have to compete in a national search. At the November 19, 2014 UTPA Faculty Senate meeting the chair asked the Ad Interim President about the results of Phase One (since Phase Two was not complete).

He stated that 620 positions had been opened representing positions for all current UTB and UTPA faculty. They had received 612 applications. Of those, 583 (96%) were automatically transitioned. 25 were not automatically transitioned as they did not meet the criteria because they either 1) did not have a terminal degree in the field, 2) had nonsatisfactory evaluations, or 3) had disciplinary actions, and that the reasons were stated in their rejection letters. They were also given the opportunity to appeal that decision. [In the minutes the faculty Senate Chair] reiterated that he is receiving many comments from faculty that they are disappointed in the way that this process has been completed, and that morale is low and faculty are feeling disrespected.²⁴

Faculty

While the rest of the UTPA campus was allowed to begin meeting with their colleagues on the UTB campus before winter break 2013 to become acquainted or to plan programs, College of Education faculty were forbidden to meet or discuss any changes with the UTB faculty until UTB faculty had completed its National Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) review. Since NCATE no longer exists, rather it has become CAEP, all faculty met with a CAEP consultant June 18, 2014. The deadline for completion of our new degree plans and catalogues was September 15, 2014. By June faculty were gone or teaching and planning to be away. Only a few days' notice of the first meeting was given. I kept wondering when we would meet again. Finally I asked if I could organize a meeting, and we met a couple of times in August with the UTB faculty at Texas State Technical College. With the exception of an early meeting which seemed tense the graduate Curriculum and Instruction (C & I) faculty came to like one another and worked well together.

Things were tense in some program meetings so the CAEP consultant was called back September 4, 5, and 6, 2014. During this time the C & I graduate faculty continued to work well, but we congratulated

ourselves too soon. The carefully constructed programs and courses were submitted on deadline, September 15, 2014. On Thursday September 18 at 4:00 p.m. I received an email from the Provost's office with the formal submission attached as it would be presented to the combined Graduate Studies Council of UTPA and UTB for approval to be presented to the UT System. Two core courses had been changed even though they had been approved by faculty. Trying to find some area of agreement, we explored the possibility of cross-listing for one, and there seemed to be agreement. However at 11:00 p.m. the night before the combined Graduate Studies Committee was to meet and approve all courses for submission to the UT System, we received a brief email from the UTB graduate C & I committee chair stating, "My folks do not want to cross list." Later one course was restored but another in the UTB catalog that everyone in our joint faculty meetings had voted to replace was substituted for the one approved unanimously by faculty. The time line was too tight to do anything but leave it as presented. We never found out for certain who made the change although we have opinions. I do not think it was any member of the UTPA or UTB faculty. I feel that we had a good beginning experience with our counterparts at UTB. I believe we genuinely like each other and can express ourselves openly. I do not know where the change came from, but there had been some changes in personnel and responsibilities, and I thought it best to be on alert but positive. This new UTRGV entity entails a lifelong commitment so it was to our advantage to work well with one another.

Staff

Another serious concern is the continuing low morale of the staff, who, ten weeks before the fall 2014 semester was to begin, are still waiting to find out if they will be rehired and they may not be notified for weeks or even a month or two because of the amount of time the procedure requires. At this point some excellent staff have retired early and can now work elsewhere and have their UTPA pension and medical benefits. Some staff no longer will have their old positions at the beginning of the fall semester because their positions were advertised and the market is competitive. Faculty and students depend on staff and share concern about their morale.

Upon reflection I would urge anyone who is involved with a merger to stress the need for a well-thought-out communications approach. Many of the morale problems could have been avoided if information had been clear, timely, and specific. Also, since this is such a complicated process, someone trained in negotiations and conflict management would have been invaluable. Counsellors also would have been helpful. I

urge readers to search the internet using the term “university mergers” to see how widespread mergers have become in the U.S. and in other countries. This practice is becoming a trend—much more so today than in the past.²⁵

Community

The unity of valley communities toward UTRGV is promising. All area towns and officials have been very supportive. Many are also supporting the medical school with funding. The medical school’s emphasis will be on medical research into diabetes because the area has the highest incidence per capita in the U.S. “Over the next 30 years, the number of Latino adult Texans with diabetes is projected to grow from 855,000 to 4.7 million, more than the number of white and [B]lack diabetics combined. These rates will be particularly pronounced in South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley, demographers suggest, where obesity is particularly prevalent and health insurance coverage is extremely low.”²⁶

Students

New PUF-driven funding for UTRGV buildings will provide the facilities needed for an Emerging Research One university.²⁷ “To be designated an emerging research institution, research expenditures need to be more than \$30 million, the institution should offer 10 doctoral degree programs, have at least 150 students enrolled in those programs and grant 20 doctoral degrees every year.”²⁸ This will be a boon for this area of Texas. Poverty does not encourage higher education, but the PUF monies and support of the powerful UT System will go a long way toward offering new and exciting opportunities to the youth of the Rio Grande Valley and increase the percentages going on to attend university and earn degrees. “Between UTB and UTPA, the schools offer five doctoral degree programs. . . . UTPA has \$29 million in awards, while UTB accrued approximately \$15 million in awards.”²⁹

Another positive result of building a new campus in Brownsville as it transitions from the Texas Southmost College site is it will provide a safer environment for students. The new campus will be farther away from Matamoros, Mexico now in view of the current campus. Bullets from drug cartel gang warfare in Mexico sometimes penetrate campus in its current location. In 2010 drug cartel violence reached a critical mass and the university took action.

Students, faculty and staff at the school are being asked to enter their cell phone numbers in a university database, so whenever drug violence explodes near the campus, warnings can be text-blasted out. The plan comes after a particularly scary incident a couple weeks ago

caused university officials to cancel weekend classes. Hair Balls, the Houston Press news blog, “wrote about that gun battle, but, basically, 55 people, including a cartel boss and journalist, were killed in Matamoros, Mexico, which is about half a mile from the UT–Brownsville campus. When police heard the gun fight from the university’s soccer fields, they decided to send students and faculty home.”³⁰

Moving Forward

Reactions to leadership salaries have been mixed. Although not everyone is positive, it is interesting how many people in the larger community are very impressed with the \$600,000 salary awarded UTRGV President Guy Bailey³¹ and the \$630,000 salary awarded Dr. Francisco Fernandez,³² the UTRGV Medical School’s founding dean. UTRGV will be an Emerging Research One University. The medical school will improve health care in the Rio Grande Valley, and students in the first class will attend tuition-free for their first class.³³ The fact the UT System offers the UTRGV campus administrators such large salaries has lent prestige to the university’s image in the minds of many people. There will be no raises for UTPA faculty this year because UTB faculty salaries must be raised. With higher and higher salaries being paid to administrators and more administrators being hired, this trend has not gone overlooked by faculty. The UTB faculty had to be brought up to the level of the UTPA faculty, but many UTPA faculty were not pleased because many understand UTPA faculty salaries to be already below the national average. Some hope as an Emerging Research One university, UTRGV faculty will receive raises because their salaries will be compared with other Emerging Research One institutions.

Driving distance is something that will have to be addressed. Even though technology can bring us closer together, person-to-person contact still is important in preventing morale problems. Faculty have been told they may have to teach on campuses 44 to 65 miles away. That makes a round trip at night on the freeways for a graduate class quite a challenge. However the amount of new technology that will be in place next academic year is impressive so driving may not be required as much as some fear.

There is ongoing controversy over the new school’s mascot. UTPA’s much-loved mascot is Bucky the Bronc and UTB’s is the ocelot. The new selection has resulted in dozens of letters to the editor and even political entities making official pronouncements opposing the new mascot, the Vaquero. Many letters to the editor state unequivocally the writer will never, ever again attend an athletic event and never donate more money to the university. Even the merged universities’ new name did not evoke such an uproar. However, the early outbursts of anger are

subsiding.

A major plus for the College of Education, especially the Curriculum and Instruction Department, is the opportunity to share in one another's programs, which will provide an exciting challenge. UTPA has an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, UTB has one in Curriculum and Instruction. Having our own C & I doctorate is something I never thought would come to fruition so I am especially excited about that as are my graduate students, several of whom just graduated and have applied to the Ed.D. program in C & I.

The doctoral degree programs are just two of many collaborations we will need to work through. Another exciting one will be when our science-education students and teachers have access to the development of Stargate, the Spacecraft Tracking and Astronomical Research into Giga-hertz Astrophysical Transient Emission (STARGATE) complex which will be a public-private partnership between the Center for Advanced Radio Astronomy (CARA) at UTB and SpaceX.³⁴ Now this partnership will be part of UTRGV.

The future is exciting. In an area of the country where students are somewhat isolated by geography and poverty, the newly merged UTRGV now provides opportunity for their futures right in their own area. Those of us who may have become a little too comfortable with the status quo will be challenged by new experiences, learn to be more flexible, and make new friends at the other end of the Rio Grande Valley. This area of Texas has too few doctors and too many health problems. The doctor shortage is predicted gradually to shrink thanks to the presence of the medical school. The life of every community and every community member will be improved once the medical school is up and underway. The capital investment in this area of the country will improve the lives of our students and their families, enrich our communities, and supply much-needed employment. This transition to UTRGV and its future are an important part of south Texas' and Hispanic's educational history. The UTPA-UTB merger promises to be an exhilarating learning experience for us all.

Endnotes

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