



University of Texas at El Paso President Dr Diana Natalicio



Victoria University Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Dawkins

REFLECTIONS ON THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO/VICTORIA UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP WITH:

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The leaders of The University of Texas at El Paso and Victoria University have met on several occasions and have built upon their shared commitment to serving their surprisingly similar student populations. Both institutions are committed to educating a 21st century student population characterized by those largely from urban areas representing diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They lead their institutions with a commitment to access and excellence to make a positive difference in their communities – both local and global.

The following conversations with UTEP President Diana Natalicio and VU Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Dawkins highlight some of their thoughts, goals and dreams for the future.

INITIAL THOUGHTS

When asked about her introduction to Victoria University in 2006, President Natalicio reflected back to the first contact made by then Vice Chancellor of VU, Professor Elizabeth Harman, who had been searching globally for institutions with blue-collar student populations that were employing innovative strategies and articulating an overt statement of commitment to that population. As Professor Harman was planning a visit to the US, President Natalicio extended her an enthusiastic invitation to visit UTEP. At their first meeting, the two leaders immediately connected. Acknowledging that they were dealing with very similar issues – despite being halfway around the world from each other – was an exciting discovery for both of them.

After a year or so of communication, President Natalicio and a team from UTEP were able to visit VU in Melbourne. It was the alignment of

their schools' missions, together with a real commitment to do something more innovative to serve their students that became the driving force of the partnership. During that visit, there were clear touch points where the UTEP and VU teams discovered they could work together and develop a sense of common purpose, best practices and new ideas. Robert Stakes, an Associate Vice President at UTEP responsible for the University Library, was particularly intrigued with the potential to transform UTEP's library into a learning center modeled after VU's approach. It was energizing for both teams to find kindred spirits half a world away to validate their own missions and visions for enhancing student success. Because both institutions are in environments where neighboring universities with different missions and priorities might regard UTEP and VU's approach with skepticism, it was empowering and refreshing to find a like-minded partner.

When the current Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Dawkins, took office at VU in 2011, he had already visited UTEP. During that meeting there was

a particular focus on measuring student progress and achieving increased retention and graduation of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds. “I took an interest from a policy context as I could see it was a good fit,” he said, “but I didn’t realize the breadth of the activities and opportunities for collaboration”.

When introduced to President Natalicio, he was struck by her amazing presence, warmth and enthusiasm for the partnership. “I had no difficulty in supporting the partnership intellectually and emotionally,” he recalled. “UTEP’s way of describing access and excellence was the best description I’d heard, and experiencing directly how they achieve both with nontraditional students was more than lip service – the university lives it.”

FOR TWO INSTITUTIONS ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE PLANET, WHAT SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT POPULATION DO YOU SEE THAT MAKE THIS PARTNERSHIP SPECIAL AND IMPORTANT?

President Natalicio: It is the focus on serving low-income, blue-collar students; students who, historically in both of our societies, did not traditionally have access to higher education opportunities that would create for them a pathway to professional lives and prosperity. It’s about confronting a rigid set of assumptions about who deserves higher education. There is squandered talent in this environment; there are talented young people with huge potential to contribute to our society and nobody is taking responsibility for creating educational opportunities for them, so why not us? Our shared commitment to those students creates the best possible convergence from two sides of the globe to the same set of values and guiding principles. That proved to be very empowering to people who understand that this is not merely a narrow, regional agenda but rather there is a broad global issue of untapped human potential.

Professor Dawkins: What makes the partnership special is that we feel a great sense of having the same mission, and seeing UTEP celebrate being a leading university while pursuing both the access and excellence agenda helps us

to keep to our mission and feel proud about this. Our collaboration with UTEP is different from collaborations with other universities in Australia. There is much we can learn and each time we spend time with our UTEP colleagues we can be deeply reflective about all aspects of our work. In the early days, we learned about student retention, entering students and student exchanges. Then we collaborated on the learning commons and UTEP was able to learn from us. Mutual benefit is important and there’s a commitment on both sides.

HOW HAS TECHNOLOGY ENHANCED THE PARTNERSHIP? WHAT HAS BEEN THE ROLE OF FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS?

President Natalicio: Both technology and face-to-face interactions have a place. Working around the time differences obviously isn’t easy, but being able to use technology means that we can have more frequent contact, not only with telephone calls, but also video communication that can be more appealing and engaging. I think the technology is really helpful in maintaining the continuity of the relationship. But, in the end, it can’t substitute for face-to-face meetings for two reasons. First, as human beings, that face-to-face contact is important to us. And, second, those in-person meetings transport us into the context of the other institution. Even though you can look at photographs and remember what the context is, there’s nothing quite like being there to understand the way people behave, the way they work, the way they play, the way in which they interact with each other and so on.

Professor Dawkins: I agree. And, once the face-to-face has been conducted, then we can do more using the technology. The video conferencing is particularly powerful in forging those connections; one video conference which made a big impact on me was the session with VU students who were on exchange at UTEP reporting back to us in Melbourne while experiencing a semester in El Paso.

WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS AND SUCCESSES?

President Natalicio: Something I found extraordinarily impactful was the visit to the Northern Territory, Alice Springs and the surrounding areas because I really didn't know enough about the Aboriginal people. I had learned some from reading, but actually being there was amazing. A former UTEP student, Kia Dowell, was originally from the Alice Springs area. Kia gave me really helpful insights, but again, being there, seeing where they lived, how they lived, was very different.

I was especially interested in VU's commitment to creating opportunities for their students through civic engagement programs in the Northern Territory – the rich set of opportunities it offered. Listening to VU students talk about their experiences led me to think more about civic engagement at UTEP and the diverse pathways to learning. This experience offered me not only a different perspective on Australia but a way of seeing our own work from a new vantage point.

Professor Dawkins: We were very excited when UTEP did so well in the Washington Monthly index. We worked with the Mitchell Institute to look into developing a comparable index for Australia. This is such a valuable resource in America to measure student outcomes in a different way, and it will be a very important aspect of the next phase of our collaborative work with UTEP. Universities such as UTEP and VU need to stand together and make a statement about the benefits to the new generation of university students. We need to identify like universities from other parts of the world who share our mission. I hope this partnership continues and explores other exciting options and maintains great momentum.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE VALUE TO STUDENTS? PARTICULARLY THE STUDENT EXCHANGE?

President Natalicio: We have developed a program that has one feature other exchange programs don't have – a job. Giving students work experience over the course of a full semester in another culture teaches them a lot about that culture and about themselves. It teaches students a great deal about

their own resilience and their capacity to be away from home for a longer period of time, to make new friends, to live in another culture. Australia offers an opportunity for this kind of work/study exchange without having to learn another language. Although I'm a strong advocate for learning other languages, that's a story for another day.

Professor Dawkins: I see the student exchanges as a particularly exciting contribution to the whole global citizenship agenda. Our students do need to be able to study abroad. Many of our students haven't been out of Australia, and with UTEP being such a culturally diverse university, this cross-cultural experience is so important. It was inspiring to hear students speaking about how and what they learned from their time in El Paso.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS A VISION FOR THE FUTURE? WHAT IS THE NEXT BIG THING?

President Natalicio: One of the things that I worry about the most is ensuring the succession of programs: continuity and sustainability. I was very happy that Peter Dawkins was an enthusiastic proponent – he might not have been. He might've said, "I only want to work with universities in California, or New Zealand, or South Africa" or who knows, but he really supports it. We are delighted that Chancellor George Pappas really embraced the partnership as well.

How are we going to ensure sustainability moving forward? It's not only about money. Money matters and we must constantly think about that and do, but the sustainability of commitment on the part of the people at the institutions may actually matter more.

Professor Dawkins: It will be really good to have time with the UTEP delegation in August this year to discuss possible futures for the partnership as it moves into its second decade. The work that has occurred to date has established a sound foundation that we need to sustain. One idea is to focus on student exchanges for elite athletes and to build an important sporting connection between UTEP and VU, and perhaps identify other potential partners through elite sports.

WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO SHARE ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP?

President Natalicio: I think a lot about trying to recalibrate the higher education narrative these days. One of the really important things to underscore is that within UTEP's access and excellence mission, experiences of this sort are a critical element. Just because they're hard to do doesn't mean they shouldn't be done. Just because they cost money doesn't mean we shouldn't be creative in investing in them. We have to take responsibility for doing them in the most efficient way possible because our students aren't in a position to participate in international experiences without our support – without creative work on our part. In some ways, the real test of an access and excellence mission is the extent to which we do things like this, whether it's study abroad, work/study abroad, internships, or whatever it might be. We have to think about this commitment holistically from the point of view of the student, not as discrete activities, but the intellectual-social-cultural development of a whole person. This is what we ought to be doing to ensure that our students have access to whatever they may need while they're with us, so that when they graduate us with their degrees, they are as well prepared and confident as more affluent students in more privileged settings.

That's a really big goal; you've really got to push hard to make that happen. We, VU and UTEP, can do a lot. We have to build on each other's work. You can't start over every time. So I think this is the real test, whether institutions like ours can sustain programs like this through successive administrations and personnel changes.

Professor Dawkins: We need to continually learn from each other, we initially learned a lot from UTEP in the students-as-staff and student experience, and UTEP has said that they have learned from us around the learning commons – mutual benefit and in the last year collaborative research.

Universities of our kind need to stand up and make a statement on a global stage about our commitment to our mission. We want to know – are there others who could join our global connection? There's the possibility of building an international network and including other like universities committed to our vision of student success.



LIBERAL ARTS BUILDING AT UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS AT EL PASO



STUDENTS ON CAMPUS AT UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
AT EL PASO