

**Testimony of Dr. Michael R. Smith
Vice Provost for Strategic Academic Initiatives
University of Texas at El Paso**

Executive Summary

The University of Texas at El Paso is deeply committed to the success of our military-affiliated students and to providing them with outstanding value in pursuit of their post-secondary educational goals. UTEP is one of the most affordable public universities in the nation and was ranked first in the nation by *Washington Monthly Magazine* for increasing the social mobility of its graduates.

UTEP's military-affiliated student population has grown by more than 120% in five years. At the same time, UTEP has invested in and strengthened the services that it provides to its military students and their family members. Its Military Student Success Center serves as a central point of coordination for support services on campus, with a goal of easing veterans' transition to campus life, increasing retention, enhancing achievement of educational and career goals, and improving quality of life by augmenting pre-existing services and support with newly-created programming specifically developed to meet the needs of military-affiliated students.

In the near future, UTEP will formally ratify the Principles of Excellence embodied in Executive Order 13607. The University is in the final stages of integrating its student records and financial aid systems with the Department of Education's Student Shopping Sheet to provide our military-affiliated students with a customized, clear, and easily understood estimate of their tuition and fees, Title IV financial aid, and VA benefits or military Tuition Assistance. These data, along with University metrics such as the six year graduation rate, loan default rate, and median borrowing level of UTEP students, will be soon be available to our military-affiliated students on a single page accessible through a convenient web portal.

As required by Public Law 112-249, obtaining and publishing student feedback on quality of instruction, recruiting practices, and post-graduation employment placement by institutions of higher learning is an important goal. The Veterans Benefits Administration should develop a standardized set of metrics for reporting student feedback in these areas and permit institutions of higher learning to respond annually in writing to student survey findings. A process that standardizes student feedback and publishes responses by colleges and universities will allow military-affiliated students to make meaningful comparisons among institutions with similar missions.

While higher education costs have outstripped median income and Consumer Price Index growth for more than 20 years, UTEP's net price makes it the nation's 12th most affordable public four year university. Military-affiliated students at UTEP have access to outstanding engineering and STEM programs and nationally-recognized faculty while attending one of the most affordable public universities in the nation

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Chairman Flores and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, my name is Mike Smith, and I serve as Vice Provost for Strategic Academic Initiatives at the University of Texas at El Paso. It is my great honor to appear before this House subcommittee to testify on "The Value of Education for Veterans at Public, Private and For-Profit Colleges and Universities." On behalf of UTEP, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to be with you today.

The University of Texas at El Paso is deeply committed to the success of our military-affiliated students and to providing them with outstanding value in pursuit of their post-secondary educational goals. UTEP has a deep and long-standing connection with the United States military. Indeed, UTEP was founded on the grounds of the Fort Bliss Military Institute in 1914 and has shared the City of El Paso with Fort Bliss ever since. The University of Texas at El Paso honors the service and sacrifice of our more than 1,500 military-affiliated students, who include approximately 175 active duty service members, 650 veterans, and 500 military children and spouses.

The University of Texas at El Paso is a comprehensive, research university of more than 23,000 students. Mirroring the population of the El Paso region from which 83% of its students come, 77% of UTEP's students are Hispanic, and nearly 50% of its undergraduates report a family income of \$20,000 or less. Despite the socioeconomic challenges of the region, UTEP has found ways to provide both access and excellence for its students. Over the past decade, for example, degree completions have grown dramatically at UTEP, with an 85% increase in undergraduate degrees awarded over the past decade. As a result, UTEP now consistently ranks among the top three universities nationally in the number of Hispanic graduates per year in nearly every disciplinary area.

Even while maintaining its access mission, however, UTEP's research expenditures have increased steadily to more than \$76 million last year, which places UTEP fourth among all Texas public universities in federal grant funding. UTEP's success in serving as a catalyst for human and economic development and quality of life in the region also has earned it a place in the national spotlight as model 21st century research university with a firm commitment to access and excellence. In last year's *Washington Monthly* magazine rankings, which seek to assess an institution's impact on the social mobility of the students it serves, its research and doctoral degree productivity, and its commitment to serving the region in which it is located, its state and the nation, UTEP was ranked #12 overall among all U.S. universities and colleges — between #11 Harvard and #13 Michigan—, and in the social mobility ranking, UTEP ranked #1 among *all* U.S. universities for our success in enabling students from all backgrounds and cultures to achieve the American Dream.

Providing U.S. military personnel and veterans with the ability to achieve academic, professional, and career success is likewise integral to the mission of UTEP. UTEP's military-affiliated student population has grown by more than 120% in the last five years – from 713 students in the fall of 2008 to more than 1,500 students today, and over the last decade, UTEP has graduated almost 2,250 of these students. At the same time, UTEP has invested in and strengthened the services that it provides to our military students. UTEP is a member of the Service Members Opportunity College Consortium, a network of more than 1,900 accredited colleges and universities that follow the principles of good practice outlined in the *Joint Statement on the Transfer and Award of Credit* and which have adopted flexible academic residency requirements and processes to ensure that service members and veterans receive appropriate transfer credits for specialized military training and occupational experiences. UTEP is also a member of the Department of Veterans Affairs Yellow Ribbon Program and provides matching tuition assistance with the VA to help out-of-state veterans obtain an affordable college education at UTEP.

In April of this year, UTEP renamed and re-dedicated what is now known as its Military Student Success Center. The Military Student Success Center serves as a central point of coordination for support services, with a goal of easing veterans' transition to campus life, increasing retention, enhancing achievement of educational and career goals, and improving quality of life by augmenting pre-existing services and support with newly-created programming specifically developed to meet the needs of military-affiliated students. Staffed with knowledgeable and well-training counselors, the Military Student Success Center serves as a single point of contact for UTEP's military student population and provides or facilitates the provision of services ranging from admissions to financial aid and from academic and career counseling to assistance with filing for VA benefits or Tuition Assistance.

UTEP is providing national leadership in military education by facilitating the transferability of credits by service members. The University recently received a \$1 million planning grant from the Kresge foundation to create a network of public universities across the country that will ease the transferability of college credits. Members of the AIMS network will eventually enter into articulation agreements that will recognize credits earned at partner institutions and seamlessly transfer them to a university in the network that is close by a soldier's assigned duty station. Closer to campus, five of our military students were recently selected to participate in the University's award-winning 21st Century Scholars Program where they participated in an interactive leadership workshop, networking luncheon with key El Paso-area employers, and ongoing engagement as University ambassadors during high profile events on campus.

UTEP is honored to serve its military-affiliated students as they and their families have served the nation. We appreciate the character, work ethic, maturity, and perspective that these students bring to our campus, and we are committed to ensuring their success at UTEP as we are committed to ensuring the success of all of our students.

Today, I have been asked to review progress in implementing the provisions of House Bill 4057, now Public Law 112-249, as well as the provision of Executive Order 13607. I'll begin by discussing the Executive Order establishing Principles of Excellence for educational institutions that serve military students, veterans, and their family members.

One challenge for universities in complying with the Executive Order 13607 is to create automated processes for integrating various electronic data systems in order to produce individual student-level estimates of costs and debt as required by the Principles of Excellence. For example, every military-affiliated student comes to UTEP with a unique set of variables that affects how much the student can expect to pay for a degree and what the student's financial aid profile may look like. Currently, generating a reasonably accurate estimate of net costs for an individual student is a manual process that is labor intensive and therefore expensive. As UTEP's military student population has grown over the last five years, the need to create automated processes to produce reliable net cost estimates at the student level has become a necessity.

I am pleased to report that UTEP will formally adopt the Principles of Excellence in the very near future. The University is in the final stages of integrating its student records and financial aid systems with the Department of Education's Student Shopping Sheet to provide our military-affiliated students with a customized, clear, and easily understood estimate of their tuition and fees, Title IV financial aid, and VA benefits or military Tuition Assistance. These data, along with University metrics such as the six year graduation rate, loan default rate, and median borrowing level of UTEP students, will be soon be available to our military-affiliated students on a single page accessible through a convenient web portal.

With respect to the other major provisions of Executive Order 13607, compliance by universities, including UTEP, is more easily accomplished. For example, UTEP has policies in place for the readmission of service members due to deployment or other military duties, it has institutional refund policies that are aligned with the Department of Education's Title IV rules, and all students can access the University's CAPP system to view their degree programs and progress toward their degrees. UTEP does not now nor has it ever engaged in fraudulent or unduly aggressive recruiting practices for any student, including our military-affiliated students, and the University follows all requirements of its regional accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, for approval of new courses and programs. In sum, implementation of the Principles of Excellence by universities is, in most cases, fairly straightforward. Providing individualized net cost estimates for service members and veterans is more complex, and for universities with significant military student populations, long-term implementation of Executive Order 13607 may require integrating student records, financial aid, and military education benefits systems to generate accurate net cost estimates for students, which may change during the course of a student's journey towards a degree. UTEP is committed to full implementation of the Principles of Excellence, supports the goals embodied in Executive Order 13607, and intends to formally certify its compliance with the Principles of Excellence in the near future.

With respect to Public Law 112-249, passed by the 112th Congress and signed into law by the President on January 10, 2013, the Veterans Benefits Administration recently released its report to Congress in which it makes several policy recommendations for implementing this new statute. These recommendations include:

- 1) The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service will conduct an outreach campaign to raise awareness about Chapter 36 Educational vocational counseling and make the application available online.
- 2) The Education Service will modify an existing system or build a new system to publish positive and negative feedback about IHLs on gibill.va.gov.
- 3) The Education Service will coordinate information sharing between the state approving agencies and National/Regional accrediting agencies.
- 4) The Education Service will initially utilize College Navigator to provide information regarding postsecondary education and training opportunities. A long-term approach will be a permanent centralized web application that will provide resources for beneficiaries to compare the cost of attending different schools.
- 5) The Education Service will collaborate with the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service to utilize CareerScope as an academic readiness tool.

Although this statute is new and its implementation is still evolving, I would like to comment on its provision for reporting student and state approving agency feedback on quality of instruction, recruiting practices, and post-graduation employment placement by institutions of higher learning. Student feedback is certainly helpful and may aid future students in making useful comparisons among institutions. I respectfully recommend that the Veterans Benefits Administration develop a standardized set of metrics for reporting student feedback on all areas identified in the statute. These standardized metrics are particularly important for gauging quality of instruction because student perceptions of instructional quality are idiosyncratic and can be influenced by the grade received in a course. Perhaps utilizing a web-based portal, military-affiliated students at institutions that accept VA benefit dollars or DOD tuition assistance could be asked a series of questions about recruiting contacts, career placement services offered or utilized, and perceptions of instruction. The results from this web-based survey could then be aggregated and reported for categories of institution along with student response rates. In contrast, simply reporting the number of complaints or cataloging qualitative comments about an instructor or a course are not valid mechanisms for comparing quality across types of institutions.

Once aggregate responses to standardized questions are compiled, Public Law 112-249 allows institutions of higher learning to “address issues regarding feedback before the feedback is published.” In practice, colleges and universities should be permitted to respond annually in writing to the survey findings, and those responses should be made publicly available alongside the survey findings themselves. With a process such as this in place, military-affiliated students can make meaningful comparisons among institutions with similar missions.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the costs of higher education have steadily shifted from the public at large to the individual student and his or her family. The National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education reports that the price of college tuition and fees grew by almost 450% between 1982 and 2006, far outstripping other major indices and expenditure categories including the Consumer Price Index and the cost of food, housing, transportation, and health care. At the same time, state and local expenditures on higher education have been steadily declining to an average of \$5,896 per student last year, the lowest level of expenditure in 25 years. The combination of increasing costs, decreasing state support, and rising tuition and fees is unsustainable.

Across the nation, state-supported universities have responded to these pressures by reducing student services, increasing class sizes and teaching loads, capping or reducing enrollments, and relying more heavily on less expensive part-time and adjunct faculty. Like many other institutions, the University of Texas at El Paso has felt the effects of state budget reductions but remains deeply committed to its mission of access and excellence. UTEP remains an outstanding value for all of its students, including its service members, veterans, and their families. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the national average net price for a public four year institution was \$10,471 in AY 2009-10. UTEP's net price of only \$2,066 placed it as the 12th most affordable public four year university in the nation. And among the eight emerging research institutions in Texas, UTEP has the lowest average tuition fees. Military-affiliated students at UTEP have access to outstanding engineering and STEM programs and nationally-recognized faculty while attending one of the most affordable public universities in the nation. While not immune to the pressures of rising costs and diminishing public investment, UTEP has worked diligently to keep its tuition and fees affordable while maintaining its commitment to high quality instruction and cutting-edge research.

On behalf of President Diana Natalicio and the University of Texas at El Paso, I would like to thank the Subcommittee for this opportunity to discuss the value of higher education for our service members and veterans. We honor their service and sacrifice and are committed to ensuring their success at UTEP.

Biographical Profile of Michael R. Smith

Dr. Michael R. Smith serves at the Vice Provost for Strategic Academic Initiatives at the University of Texas at El Paso. Before his appointment at UTEP, he served as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences and vice provost at Georgia Southern University. He also chaired the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Smith's responsibilities at UTEP include the development of new academic programs and initiatives, public and private sector educational partnerships, community engagement, and the expansion of UTEP's global mission. He has oversight of the University's Office of Professional and Public Programs and its Military Student Success Center. In that arena, he works closely with Ft. Bliss in ensuring that UTEP provides outstanding educational opportunities to service members and their families. Dr. Smith is a former police officer and holds a J.D. from the University of South Carolina School of Law (1993) and a Ph.D. in Justice Studies from Arizona State University (1996). He has served as a principal investigator on many grants and evaluation contracts over his 17 year career as a police and criminal justice researcher. He is a nationally-recognized expert on racial profiling and has written extensively on this and other critical issues at the intersection of law, public policy, and policing. His most recent publications have appeared in *Criminology & Public Policy*, *Justice Quarterly*, the *American Journal of Public Health*, and *Review of Policy Research*. Dr. Smith was also recently named as the new Director of the National Center for Border Security and Immigration, a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence housed at UTEP.

Neither The University of Texas at El Paso nor Dr. Michael R. Smith have received any federal grant or contract relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or previous two fiscal years.