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North Texas finally has a top research university, so ‘bang the drum loudly’ about UTD



Mitchell Schnurman, Business columnist – July 27, 2018

North Texas has something new to brag about, which also turns a long-running weakness into a strength.

The University of Texas at Dallas has been named a national research university by the state, a designation that means millions in new funding and a shot of prestige.

It’s not quite Tier One, not by the definition that covers just 62 universities in North America. But it’s an important milestone along that path — and validation of the progress underway on the campus in Richardson.

The recognition boosts UTD, a relatively young school that didn’t admit freshmen until 1990 and has been growing faster than any large public college in Texas. It also helps the region’s reputation in higher education, long a sore spot for a metro that couldn’t counter acclaimed research schools around Silicon Valley, Boston and Austin.

University research is highly coveted because it often brings high-paying jobs, talented students, investments and breakthroughs. While many rival schools still have a big edge in total research spending, UTD is making impressive strides — and that matters to current and prospective employers.

“There’s a common denominator among cities attracting high-tech industry today: the presence of a major research university,” said John Boyd, a location consultant at the Boyd Co. in Princeton, N.J.

UTD’s designation comes at an opportune time because Amazon isn’t the only tech giant with big expansion plans. Google and Apple are looking to grow in the U.S., as are others.

“Dallas should bang that drum loudly and make sure that corporate decision-makers around the world are aware of what’s happening there,” Boyd said.

In 2009, then-Gov. Rick Perry and lawmakers pushed through a bill to encourage colleges to step up and close the R&D gap. The plan included two pools of state money — one to provide a match for private donations and another to provide a recurring revenue stream for schools that met the criteria.

Seven (and later, an eighth) were named emerging research universities, and Texas Tech and the University of Houston met the thresholds in 2012. UTD is the third to qualify, and this month it received \$7.5 million from the state.

Since Texas launched the initiative, UTD has more than doubled its endowment to over \$500 million. Total research spending grew from \$66 million to a projected \$122 million this year. Student enrollment grew 75 percent, approaching 28,000 last year, and the quality has improved.

Last year's freshman class had some of the highest average test scores in the state and 157 National Merit Scholars — three times more than in 2011.

"We're better than people know, but when you're not in the club, they just don't realize it," said Richard Benson, who's been president of UTD for two years after serving in leadership roles at Virginia Tech and Penn State.

In his view, UTD has achieved Tier One status after the state recognition and an earlier nod from Carnegie Classifications, which cited 115 American universities. But Benson wants to crack the elite Association of American Universities, whose members include just three from Texas: UT-Austin, Texas A&M and Rice.

California has nine schools, New York has six and Boston, four.

"To be frank, [three] is a little thin for a large, prosperous state like Texas," Benson said.

He's been comparing UTD against seven AAU members, including Georgia Tech. His benchmarks include total research spending, enrollment, degrees awarded, state support and more.

Georgia Tech, which was invited to join the group in 2010, had seven times more research spending than UTD.

"We have to earn it and we have a ways to go," Benson said about the AAU. "But I don't regard us as an emerging research university — we've emerged."

The \$7.5 million from the state is more flexible than most research funds. Benson plans to use it in various ways, such as providing a "startup package" for top professors or matching a grant on a research project.

Higher-ed investment can have major ripple effects. In 2012, UTD created a biomedical device center and two chairs in bioengineering. It used \$8 million in private donations and an \$8 million match from the state, which was part of the emerging universities program.

In six years, UTD said, the center landed \$25 million in additional funds, hired 25 doctoral students and educators, trained over 300 students, ran four clinical trials and developed an assortment of technologies and therapies.

UTD is still owed almost \$40 million in matching funds on private donations, and the Legislature should attack that backlog soon because the Richardson school is growing fast. Two of its most popular majors, biomedical and mechanical engineering, are less than a decade old, Benson said.

The founders of Texas Instruments started a research institute in the 1960s, in part to create a talent pipeline. That grew into UTD, which doesn't have Division 1 football. But it does have a top chess team and over 100,000 alumni, two-thirds of whom live in the metro area.

UTD also ranks No. 9 for international students, and that diversity should be another attraction for tech giants — if they look close enough.

“Reputation is a lagging indicator,” Benson said. “We’ve risen so fast and so far, and we’re so young. A lot of people haven’t taken note of what’s going on at UT-Dallas.”

The story is getting harder to miss.