

The Case for a Law School in El Paso: Addressing a Regional Need



The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is exploring the possibility of establishing a law school to address a longstanding gap in legal education and services in West Texas. A recently released feasibility study, commissioned by state lawmakers, estimates the cost of launching the new institution at \$20 million over the next decade.

A Decades-Long Conversation

The idea of a law school in El Paso has been a topic of local discussion for years. As the largest city in Texas without a law school and with no other law schools within a 250-mile radius, El Paso's need for such an institution is evident. Texas, a state with a population of 30.5 million, currently hosts 10 law schools accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA).

Meeting a Critical Need for Legal Services

According to UTEP President Heather Wilson, the feasibility study highlights a significant demand for legal services in the West Texas region. Speaking at a recent El Paso Bar Association meeting, Wilson emphasized the potential for long-term sustainability, provided sufficient financial backing is secured.

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"The study shows there is a need for legal services in West Texas, and, with sufficient financial support to start it up, this study shows that it is sustainable for the long term," Wilson stated.

The next phase of the project involves identifying potential funding sources. These could include a combination of donations, endowments, and state financial support, as outlined in the feasibility study.

Challenges and Precedents in Legal Education

The establishment of new law schools in the United States has been relatively rare in recent years. Over the past decade, more law schools have closed than opened. Public institutions face particularly significant hurdles. The most recent public law school to launch was the University of North Texas Dallas College of Law in 2014. By contrast, three private law schools—Jacksonville University College of Law, Wilmington University School of Law, and High Point University Kenneth F. Kahn School of Law—have opened since 2022.

However, challenges remain. Indiana Tech University's law school, for instance, opened in 2013 but closed just three years later due to low enrollment and financial losses totaling \$20 million. These examples underscore the importance of ensuring financial viability and robust enrollment planning for new legal education initiatives.

Proposed Timeline and Financial Outlook

The UTEP feasibility study envisions the law school opening its doors in 2030. Initial enrollment would start with smaller classes, eventually growing to an annual intake of 100 students. By 2037, the school is expected to achieve financial sustainability. The study also projects that the construction of a new facility for the law school could cost between \$66 million and \$110 million.

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Focus Areas for Success

To ensure success, the proposed law school must prioritize affordability and bar passage rates. This focus is particularly important for local students who may not pursue legal education if it requires relocating outside the

region. Additionally, El Paso's location along the U.S.-Mexico border presents an opportunity to attract students from Mexico, potentially adding an international dimension to the school's student body.

The feasibility study also advises caution in managing the number of graduates to avoid oversaturating the local legal job market. A careful balance will be crucial to ensure that graduates find meaningful employment opportunities.

Moving Forward

While significant challenges lie ahead, the proposed law school at UTEP represents a unique opportunity to address an unmet need in West Texas. With strategic planning and financial investment, the project could enhance legal education and services in the region while fostering economic and cultural growth. The next steps will determine whether this long-discussed vision can become a reality.

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