



## **Financial Frontera: Business culture changes necessary**

by Michael Hissam / Guest columnist

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What hasn't been invented yet might very well become a driver for the El Paso economy.

"Whazzat?" After all, this region has the maquiladoras and \$71 billion in trade annually crossing la frontera. Fort Bliss continues to alchemize sand dunes into an economic blowtorch. We are now one of the 20 most-populous cities in the country.

In this era when technology turns over more rapidly than ever, inventors continue to work on turning vision into product. The challenge remains turning vision into marketplace success. Sometimes invention-to-market takes years; it always takes patience.

UTEP's Center for Research Entrepreneurship and Innovative Enterprises works to bridge the gap between the invention and the cash register. When that happens, job creation takes place.

Its director, Gary Williams, continues to look for change, innovation and a stronger El Paso economy -- it just takes some work and the right attitude. Here is the first of a two-part series on Williams.

**Q** You talk about the need to change the business culture in El Paso. To what do you want to change it?

**A** One of the changes I believe that we have to make is to have a business environment where, as an example, service providers and various specialties like legal, like accounting, like insurance have better visibility and get involved more with the increasing number of startups that we are seeing in this region.

**Q** What is the association with UTEP?

**A** One of my responsibilities is to help commercialize technology that's been invented and in some cases developed at UTEP. A key part of that process is the formation of a company that is then able to go ahead and commercialize the technology.

**Q** Where is the opportunity for commercialization of technology in the Paso del Norte region?

**A** I think the challenges that we have is that there needs to be much more commercialization of technology. I think this would lead to job creation. In the case of UTEP graduates, some may say they do not have the opportunity to find a job in this region because there's not enough technology-based jobs that exist. One of the key areas of emphasis here is job creation -- providing good paying jobs for UTEP graduates, and also to help improve the economic development activities that are ongoing in this region.

Q You are talking about jobs for graduates. What is the "head start" you are trying to get for them, especially in the world of technology?

A If you take a look at the percentage of jobs that are created on a national level, over 80 percent of them are created through small companies. Take a look at startup companies being a factor of that, understanding the risk that they have. It's a great opportunity to provide good paying jobs: Number one: more sustainability for technology trained students and people in this region. Number two: we see there is an activity. Where I see people who have left the region because there were no jobs and they see that jobs being created, they come back.

Q What does CREIE offer for businesses that are already here, and what would be a candidate business for CREIE to support?

A One of the things that I am looking to right now is to identify companies in the region. Right now my focus is principally in bio-tech and clean energy that are looking for opportunities to grow. Maybe because of the infrastructure -- lack of infrastructure -- they have in research and development they don't have opportunities to develop new products and services. What I see is an opportunity to reach out to these companies that are looking for growth opportunities and find ways to collaborate with them so that when technologies that we're developing at the university get to a point of being ready to commercialize, maybe there is an opportunity that we collaborate with these companies in town.

There are good chances going forward that willing companies in town are going to have an opportunity to get involved with the commercialization of technology coming out of the university and in some cases coming out from local entrepreneurs that we're supporting in one way or another.

Q In this case, the name UTEP is associated with CREIE. What do entrepreneurs and companies need to understand that goes beyond educational and serves as an outreach to help these companies?

A I've talked with the people in city economic development. We've got a short list of companies that we're going to reach out to. It's going to start after the first of the year. We're going to sit down with them and make them aware of different activities and projects that are ongoing right now at the university, and engage their interest in helping to be involved in the commercialization.

One of the things we do lack in this region, seemingly, is a cadre of executives who are ready to take on the challenge of leading and growing a startup company. One alternative to fill that gap is to reach out to other companies that are already in place, already have an infrastructure but for whatever reason are not satisfied with the growth opportunities. We need to see if through collaboration both of us can win. The company will win because they will have growth opportunities. Without growth comes death.

Michael Hissam is president of Trans-National Executive Communications. He may be reached at michael.tnec@ymail.com