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Railway center opening puts UTPA on fast track to emerging research university status

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Dr. Constantine Tarawneh's research on railway bearings has gained some momentum.



UTPA celebrated the grand opening and ribbon cutting of its University Transportation Center for Railway Safety Monday, Feb. 10. Pictured in front from left to right with students and faculty members who work in the center are UTPA College of Engineering and Computer Science Dean Dr. Miguel Gonzalez; UT System Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research Dr. Randall Charbeneau; UTPA President Dr. Robert S. Nelsen; UTPA Associate Professor, Bentsen Fellow and director of the Mechanical Engineering graduate program Dr. Constantine Tarawneh; U.S. Department of Transportation Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology Gregory D. Winfree; and City of Edinburg City Manager Ramiro Garza Jr. Pictured in second row from left to right are UTPA Vice Provost for Research and Sponsored Projects Dr. Sadiq Shah; UTPA Professor and Chair of the Mechanical Engineering Department Dr. Robert Freeman; and UTPA Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Dr. Havidán Rodríguez.

Tarawneh, the mechanical engineering associate professor, Bentsen Fellow and director of the mechanical engineering graduate program at The University of Texas-Pan American, is heading up the new University Transportation Center for Railway Safety, which was made possible through a two-year, \$3 million-dollar grant by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT).

On Monday, Feb. 10, Tarawneh and his team received praise from officials from the U.S. DOT, The University of Texas System, City of Edinburg and UT Pan American at a grand opening of the center on campus.

UT Pan American President Robert S. Nelsen said the center is an example of how the University is already on

its way to becoming an emerging research institution, even before it unites with The University of Texas at Brownsville to become The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

"We going to be a research university that will be user inspired, applied research," Nelsen said. "That's exactly what Constantine is doing with his lab, he is applying knowledge and saving lives and making a difference."

UTPA is the lead institution for the center, with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and Texas A&M University being partners in the consortium. UTPA will receive \$575,000 per year, Texas A&M will receive \$475,000 per year and UNL will receive \$425,000 per year.

Gregory D. Winfree, assistant secretary for Research and Technology, Office of the Secretary of Transportation of the U.S. DOT, said the center is a smart investment that is paying off now and will continue to do so for years to come.

"The railway vehicles and technologies of the future are going to need men and women who are prepared to plan, design, and manage transportation systems for the 21st century. This rail safety program is going to turn applied research into that equipment and system failures into tangible solutions that saves lives and minimizes economic losses," Winfree said. "That fact alone makes this transportation center a smart investment, but what makes it an outstanding investment is that this research is going to be carried on by men and women who are getting a great education while solving rail problems that threaten life and property."

The center's creation stemmed from research UTPA, under the direction of Tarawneh, has been conducting for the railroad industry for about a decade, starting with a \$15,000 grant from Amsted Rail to test railway bearings and sensors and determine how to make them safer and more reliable.

"It is by no means a single person effort," Tarawneh said. "It is an effort of the institution, my colleagues, the students."

There are about 32 students, undergraduate and graduate, and about a dozen faculty members at UTPA working with him on this endeavor, he said.

"I will not rest, and the people, the faculty, the students, will not rest until this center is a leader in railway safety in the United States and will be one of the centers that people look onto us for expertise from our faculty, our students," Tarawneh said.

Learn more about the center in this video:

