

A Community-Empowering Research University: What UTRGV's \$100 Million Milestone Means for the Rio Grande Valley

By Dr. Can Saygin (can.saygin@iutrgv.edu)

Senior Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) – Oct 20, 2025

The following article was published online:

Lone Star Standard (Oct 24, 2025)

<https://lonestarstandard.com/stories/675897727-opinion-a-community-empowering-research-university-what-utrgv-s-100-million-milestone-means-for-the-rio-grande-valley>

The Monitor – MyRGV.com (Nov 2, 2025)

<https://myrgv.com/publications/valley-morning-star/2025/11/02/commentary-a-community-empowering-university/>

Rio Grande Guardian (Nov 13, 2025)

<https://riograndeguardian.com/stories/saygin-a-community-empowering-research-university-what-utrgvs-100-million-milestone-means-for,39672>

Rio Grande Valley Business Journal (Nov 13, 2025)

<https://www.rgvbusinessjournal.com/news/25/10/2025/analysis-what-utrgvs-100-million-milestone-in-research-funding-means-for-the-rio-grande-valley/>



A Community-Empowering Research University: What UTRGV's \$100 Million Milestone Means for the Rio Grande Valley

By Dr. Can Saygin

Senior Vice President for Research and

Dean of the Graduate College

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

(UTRGV) – Oct 20, 2025

This week, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) announced a historic achievement: surpassing \$100 million in annual total research expenditures for the first time in our 10-year history. While this milestone positions us on the path toward Carnegie R1 status, joining the ranks of the nation's most research-intensive universities, the real story isn't about rankings or recognition. It's about what this means for our community, our students, and the future of the Rio Grande Valley.

Research That Serves Our Community

A research university doesn't exist in isolation from the community it serves. It exists *because* of that community and *for* that community. At UTRGV, every dollar of our \$103.7 million in total research expenditures represents an investment in solving real problems facing real people in the Rio Grande Valley.

A Community-Empowering Research University: What UTRGV's \$100 Million Milestone Means for the Rio Grande Valley

By Dr. Can Saygin (can.saygin@iutrgv.edu)

Senior Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) – Oct 20, 2025

Consider what our researchers are working on right now: developing innovative approaches to manage diabetes in a region with some of the highest diabetes rates in the nation; advancing cancer research to address health disparities that disproportionately affect our low-income population; creating cutting-edge manufacturing technologies that can transform our regional economy; studying the unique ecosystem of the Rio Grande to protect our environment for future generations; and improving educational outcomes for first-generation college students who represent the majority of our student body.

This isn't abstract academic work. This is community-empowering research that directly addresses the challenges and opportunities unique to our region.

Economic Impact: Jobs, Innovation, and Opportunity

Research universities are economic engines. Our \$103.7 million in research activity generates high-quality jobs, not just for doctoral students, but for laboratory technicians, project managers, data analysts, and skilled tradespeople. These are careers that keep our brightest minds here in the Valley rather than forcing them to seek opportunities elsewhere.

The Rio Grande Valley, with a population of 1.4 million and a median household income of \$45,500, deserves access to the same level of research-driven economic development that transforms communities nationwide. When we establish facilities like our Advanced Manufacturing Research Facility, our Marine Ecosystems Research Facility at Port Isabel, or our Railway Safety Research Center, we're creating infrastructure that attracts private investment, spawns startups, and builds industries that didn't exist here before.

Our partnership with Oak Ridge National Laboratory on battery technology, our collaboration with the Federal Railway Administration on transportation safety, and our work with NVTX Energy on energy resilience and battery energy storage aren't just research projects, they're pathways to new industries and economic diversification for our region.

Student Success: From Learners to Leaders

Perhaps most importantly, a research university transforms students from passive learners into active creators of knowledge. Our undergraduates work alongside faculty on cutting-edge research projects. Our graduate students, who now number in the thousands, develop expertise that positions them as leaders in their fields.

In fiscal year 2025, we awarded 74 research doctoral degrees, a 48% increase from just two years ago. Each of these graduates represents a new leader equipped to drive innovation, whether they stay in the Valley to strengthen our community or carry the Valley's story to the wider world.

A Community-Empowering Research University: What UTRGV's \$100 Million Milestone Means for the Rio Grande Valley

By Dr. Can Saygin (can.saygin@iutrgv.edu)

Senior Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) – Oct 20, 2025

When a first-generation college student from the Rio Grande Valley publishes research in a top-tier journal, presents findings at a national conference, or earns a doctorate, they're not just advancing their own future. They're proving to thousands of younger students that they too can aspire to become researchers, innovators, and scholars. This is how we break cycles and build generational change.

Building on Our Strengths: Border Innovation

The Rio Grande Valley isn't just any community, we occupy a unique position as a bilingual, bicultural region on the U.S.-Mexico border. Our research university leverages this as a strength, not a limitation. Our partnerships with Universidad de las Américas Puebla enable collaborative research that addresses challenges common to border communities throughout the Americas. Our work on societal transformations and living on the U.S.-Mexico border provides insights that can inform policy and practice far beyond our region.

We are now being sought after to join other research universities on large-scale grants because of our technological capabilities, our research excellence, and our unique perspective that no other institution can provide.

The I.M.P.A.C.T. Framework: How We Got Here (Click for [I.M.P.A.C.T. Report](#))

Our journey from \$60.7 million to \$103.7 million in research expenditures in just three years wasn't accidental. It resulted from strategic investments across six pillars: Infrastructure that provides researchers with world-class facilities; Metrics that enable data-driven decision-making; Programs that support faculty and student success; Alignment of policies to eliminate barriers; Collaboration across disciplines and with external partners; and Targets focused on measurable outcomes like Carnegie R1 status.

This framework doesn't just drive institutional growth; it ensures that our growth serves community needs. When we track metrics on doctoral student completion, we're measuring how many Valley students are becoming research leaders. When we align our research priorities with regional challenges, we're ensuring our work addresses real community concerns. When we collaborate with local industry and government, we're ensuring research translates into community benefit.

Looking Forward: The Next \$100 Million

Reaching \$100 million in research expenditures is not a finish line; it's a launching pad. With this milestone, we've secured National Research Support Fund designation, bringing an additional \$10.5 million annually to support our research mission. We're positioned to

A Community-Empowering Research University: What UTRGV's \$100 Million Milestone Means for the Rio Grande Valley

By Dr. Can Saygin (can.saygin@iutrgv.edu)

Senior Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) – Oct 20, 2025

achieve Carnegie R1 status in the 2028 classification cycle, joining fewer than 150 universities nationwide in the highest tier of research activity.

But more importantly, we've demonstrated that a young institution in an economically underserved region can compete with and surpass institutions with decades more history and vastly greater resources. We've proven that investing in research isn't a luxury for wealthy communities but it's a necessity for communities that want to transform their future.

A Call to Action

A community-empowering research university only reaches its full potential with community support. We need local leaders to champion research as economic development. We need businesses to partner with us on applied research that solves industry challenges. We need parents to encourage their children to see research careers as achievable dreams. And we need our entire region to take pride in this achievement as evidence of what the Rio Grande Valley can accomplish.

Ten years ago, skeptics said it couldn't be done and that we couldn't build a Carnegie R1 research university in the Rio Grande Valley in just one decade. Today, we're well on our way to proving them wrong. But this isn't just UTRGV's success story. It's the Rio Grande Valley's success story.

The question isn't whether we can become a top-tier research university. The question is: What will we do with that status to empower our community, transform our region, and change lives for generations to come?

The research is just beginning. The real impact is yet to come. And it will be written by our students, our faculty, and our community, all together.

Dr. Can Saygin is Senior Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Under his leadership since August 2022, UTRGV's research expenditures have grown 71%, positioning the university for Carnegie R1 status in 2028 while maintaining its commitment to serving the Rio Grande Valley.