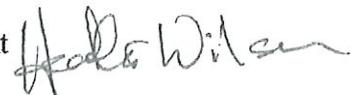




## THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

DATE: May 6, 2024

TO: Dr. Ahsan Choudhuri, Associate Vice President, Aerospace Center

FROM: Dr. Heather Wilson, President 

CC: Dr. Ahmad Itani, Vice President for Research

Dr. John Wiebe, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

Dr. Kenneth Meissner, Dean, College of Engineering

RE: Administrative Appointment

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In early April 2024, the University became aware of questionable commitments contained in NSF Proposal Number 2315782 submitted by you as Principal Investigator on January 18, 2023, in response to Program Announcement 23-200, the NSF Regional Innovation Engines Program.

On page 118 of the proposal, you commit “currently available resources” to the Regional Innovation Engine project, including five 15,661 square foot buildings, for a total of approximately 78,000 square feet of research space, that was to have opened in 2023 at the Fabens, Texas airport. The proposal states that 50% of these facilities would be made available by the Aerospace Center and the W.M. Keck Center at UTEP for the Regional Innovation Engine. These buildings do not exist and you have not coordinated with the University regarding any proposals or plans for expansion of research space off-campus.

On page 8 of the proposal, you claim that the Aerospace Center has 8000 acres of test facilities. The University leases approximately 600 acres near Tornillo, Texas, where we have an asphalt runway to launch unmanned aerial vehicles. We also lease approximately 17 acres from the UT Lands and 3.92 acres from El Paso County at the Fabens Airport. We are not aware of any other facility that might be described as a test facility of this scale.

The statements you made to the NSF in the proposal were not an accurate representation of the University’s existing or planned resources. None of these statements were corrected by you in subsequent submission to the NSF, nor have you provided any explanation that would justify these inaccurate statements. As a result of this conduct, the University has lost confidence in your suitability to lead.

Effective immediately, you are removed from your position as Director of the Aerospace Center. In addition, you no longer carry the administrative title of Associate Vice President. Pending any additional review in accordance with University policies and UT System Regents’ Rules, you will return to your faculty appointment in the College of Engineering. In addition, the University will discuss the leadership of the Regional Innovation Engine with the NSF.

Pending further review in accordance with University policies and UT System Regents’ Rules, you are not authorized by the university to submit proposals as PI or co-PI without the prior written approval of the Dean of Engineering and the Vice President for Research.



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 6, 2024

Mr. Patrick Breen  
Division Director  
Acquisition and Cooperative Support  
Office of Budget, Finance and Award Management  
National Science Foundation  
2415 Eisenhower Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22314

*Sent Via Electronic Mail*

Dear Mr. Breen,

On or about April 6, 2024, The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) became aware of statements contained in NSF Proposal Number 2315782 submitted by Principal Investigator Dr. Ahsan Chaudhuri and Co-Principal Investigator Dr. Ryan Wicker that may not have been correct. The proposal was submitted on January 18, 2023 in response to Program Announcement 23-200, the NSF Regional Innovation Engines Program. UTEP conducted a review of the statements in question and found they committed resources that do not exist, and which should not have been committed. I am writing today to correct the record.

The NSF Regional Innovation Engine award made as a result of this proposal is very important to the El Paso community. We believe UTEP's expertise in advanced manufacturing and aerospace and our ability to positively impact the economy of the region we serve are more than sufficient to have earned a Regional Innovation Engine award without the statements that we have reviewed.

Attachment 1 is page 118 of the proposal. The proposal commits "currently available resources" from the Aerospace Center and the W.M. Keck Center at UTEP to the Regional Innovation Engine project, including five 15,661 square foot buildings, for a total of about 78,000 square feet of research space, that were to have opened in 2023 at the Fabens, Texas airport. The proposal states 50% of these facilities would be made available by the Aerospace Center and the W.M. Keck Center at UTEP for the Regional Innovation Engine.

The UTEP Aerospace Center does occupy one 10,368 square foot hangar, also committed at 50% to the project, which is leased by the University from El Paso County at the Fabens Airport.

Vice President for  
Research & Innovation  
500 West University Avenue  
El Paso, Texas 79968-0587  
915.747.5680  
Fax 915.747.6474

While the university has a close working relationship with the County and they are building three more hangars at the airport which will be available in 2027, we do not have an agreement with the County to lease these hangars. No new buildings were bid, under construction, or opened in 2023 at the Fabens airport.

The Aerospace Center and W.M. Keck Center have not coordinated with the University regarding any proposed plans for expansion of research space off-campus.

The airport has a 4,197 foot runway, and our lease of the 10,368 square foot hangar does not allow us to conduct activities that would interfere with the normal use of the runway at this public airport.

Attachment 2 is page 8 of the proposal that claims UTEP has 8,000 acres of test range. The university leases from UT Lands approximately 600 acres near Tornillo, Texas where we have an asphalt runway to launch unmanned aerial vehicles. We have 17.92 acres of land, also leased from UT Lands, adjacent to Fabens Airport with test cells and a test stand, and 3.92 acres on the Fabens airport where we lease the 10,368 square foot hangar mentioned above. We are not aware of any other facility that might be described as a test facility of some 8000 acres. The University does not have any special arrangement with the FAA concerning use of airspace for testing. Though the area around our 600-acre Tornillo site is sparsely populated, we do not have leases or rights of way to access the surrounding acreage.

The University of Texas at El Paso takes this matter seriously and I would be happy to discuss this matter further and answer any questions you may have. I may be reached at (915-747-5680) or by email at [aitani@utep.edu](mailto:aitani@utep.edu).

Sincerely,



Ahmad Itani, PhD

Vice President for Research & Innovation

cc: Heather Wilson, President, The University of Texas at El Paso  
John Wiebe, Vice President for Academic Affairs, The University of Texas at El Paso  
Priscilla Castillo, Chief Legal Officer, The University of Texas at El Paso  
Ken Meissner, Dean of Engineering, The University of Texas at El Paso  
Megan E. Wallace, Assistant Inspector General, OIG  
Erwin Gianchandani, Assistant Director, TIP  
Graciela Narcho, Deputy Assistant Director, TIP  
Thyagarajan Nandagopal, Division Director, TIP/ITE  
Florence Rabanal, Program Director, TIP/IP  
Janis Coughlin-Piester, Chief Financial Officer and Office Head, BFA  
Lisa Smith, Grants and Agreements Officer, BFA  
Benjamin Patterson, Team Lead, BFA/DACS

Enclosures

**Attachment 1**

NSF Engines: Type-2: West Texas Aerospace and Defense Manufacturing Innovation Engine  
Proposal ID 94458

**Existing and New Resources to be Made Available to the Project**

The Aerospace Center and the W.M. Keck Center for 3D Innovation have large and robust collections of facilities and equipment. This includes a significant and growing footprint on the UTEP campus—with the new Advanced Manufacturing and Aerospace Center coming online in 2025 that the two centers will share. The Aerospace Center also has off-campus development and flight-testing sites, and access to a variety of facilities through its industry partners.

The two Centers also led the coalition that received a \$10 million Build Back Better Regional Challenge grant from the Economic Development Administration that has been matched by pledges of \$42 million from the local community. This funding will develop the physical infrastructure for the IDEA Engines Innovation Platform.

**Currently Available Resources**

Aerospace Center and W.M Keck Center for 3D Innovation (UTEP)

- Technology Research and Innovation Acceleration Park. This site will be available to tenants of the Advanced Manufacturing District who need access to its research equipment and flight test space. The partners will make 50% of these resources available to Innovation Platform participants.
  - Research Airport | Fabens, TX | 400 acres
    - Tech One Campus
      - Propulsion and Energy Systems Integration Facility | 10,200 sq. ft.
      - Uncrewed Aerial Systems Integration Facility (Opens in 2023) | 15,661 sq. ft.
      - Subsonic and Supersonic Wind Tunnel Facility (Opens in 2023) | 15,661 sq. ft.
      - Aeronautics Research and Learning Facility (Open in 2023) | 15,661 sq. ft.
      - Advanced Machining and Fabrication Facility (Open in 2023) | 15,661 sq. ft.
      - Industry Commons (Open in 2023) | 15,661 sq. ft.
    - Alpha Site | Propulsion and Large-Scale Testing | 18 Acres
      - 4,200-foot and 2,300-foot runways
      - 6 test cells and one test stand
    - Bravo Site | Uncrewed Aerial System Flight Test Range | Tornillo, TX | 600 acres
      - 400-foot runways | Test Support Facility
      - LSTAR Radar | 100 KW Power Trailer

City of El Paso

- 250 acres of land near the El Paso International Airport for the Development of the Advanced Manufacturing District will be built. This will be the centerpiece of the IDEA Engine's physical infrastructure. The partners will make 100% of this resource available to participants in the Innovation Platform.
- \$30 million matching fund pledge to Build Back Better Regional Challenge Grant
- Tax Reinvestment Zone to capture new tax revenue from the site and reinvest it in the project.

**Attachment 2**

and skills that are transforming the way engineers design, build and test. The Aerospace Center has grown from a 3,000 square foot lab employing 30 students as research assistants to over 35,000 square feet in laboratory space and 8,000 acres of test facilities employing 200 students today and still growing. The Aerospace Center's mission is to educate and prepare a diverse, future-ready workforce for high-paying, in-demand careers through project-based learning in applied, cutting-edge research in aerospace, defense, and energy.

The **W.M. Keck Center for 3D Innovation**—a unique multidisciplinary research facility—is leading the additive manufacturing revolution through applied research in the use and development of additive manufacturing (AM) technologies with primary focus areas in AM Technology Development, Engineered and Structured Materials, and Advanced AM Applications. The Keck Center was established in 2000 and is arguably the best equipped ~~University~~ <sup>Facilities</sup> ~~AM~~ <sup>AM</sup> Laboratory ~~for~~ <sup>for</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~additive~~ <sup>additive</sup> manufacturing (AM) in the world. This center occupies 13,000 square feet of floor space within the university, with an additional 17,000 square feet of floor space in downtown El Paso as research infrastructure. The Keck Center houses more than 100 AM systems with powder-based metal fabrication capabilities unparalleled at any university along with multiple UTEP-developed custom hybrid polymer AM systems used, in part, for fabricating unique 3D electronic structures. The Keck Center boasts combined facilities for AM (metal, polymer, ceramic, electronics, and large-area), subtractive manufacturing, CAD and simulation, reverse engineering, metrology, materials characterization, mechanical testing, post-processing, synthetic and analytical chemistry, and cell culture.

The Aerospace Center and the Keck Center are frequent collaborators who have also developed and scaled a solution to the STEM talent crisis facing our nation with a student-centered research model unlike any other in the nation. One of the biggest threats to our nation's global competitiveness is our inability to tap the full breadth of our diverse talent pool for participation in the aerospace, defense, and advanced manufacturing industries. The Centers' research programs exist as a vehicle for the economic mobility of their students, who join the centers as paid research assistants. Over the last decade, these two centers have placed more than 1,000 of their graduates in high-paying careers in the A&D workforce at employers like NASA, Lockheed Martin, and Blue Origin. UTEP is an open access, R1 institution, and the students that are employed as research assistants reflect the demographics of the communities that they serve. The Centers' students are 80% Latino, two-thirds come from families who make less than \$37,000 and half of their students are the first in their family to attend college. The two centers are national leaders in training female engineers—29% of their students are women, which is much higher than peer institutions—however they won't be satisfied until 50% of their research assistants are female.

Both centers have expanded their talent development expertise to focus on building a pipeline to the middle-skill workforce for A&D manufacturing. Partnering with the Western Technical College, the Aerospace Center developed the curriculum for an associate degree in Aerospace and Defense Technologies. The Aerospace Center is now working with the El Paso Community College to build short skills development courses. With funding from the DoD, the Keck Center has developed a robust curriculum for additive manufacturing that has trained over 1,000 DoD personnel across more than 30 military sites (national and international), including warfighters and support staff, engineers and technicians, and DoD contractors.

Both centers are deeply connected to the national A&D ecosystem through long standing partnerships with Lockheed Martin, Blue Origin, NASA, the DoD, and Siemens. The two centers rely on a strong working collaboration with the National Center for Defense Manufacturing and Machining (NCDMM) to inform their workforce and economic development efforts. NCDMM is driving manufacturing innovation throughout the defense industrial base to ensure the U.S. warfighter always