

HERE'S THE BIG IDEA:
Making History at UNT Dallas

Like many historic achievements, the University of North Texas at Dallas started as a simple idea—a big, ambitious idea that would take hold and blossom because of the vision and hard work of a diverse group of energetic and tenacious community leaders.

Two North Texas legislators—State Senator Royce West and Representative Helen Giddings—had taken the lead in making the university a reality. “I had felt for some time that Dallas County needed a state-supported university,” West recalled. “And I thought the single best place to put that institution was in the county’s southern core.”

By the spring of 1997, West and Giddings introduced SCR 75 in the Texas 75th Legislative Session. The bill authorized the establishment of a commission to study the creation of an institution of higher education to be located in southern Dallas County. The bill also called for the allocation of \$200,000 to fund the study.

The measure was supported wholeheartedly by the community: mayors, school districts, municipalities, and chambers of commerce. “Imagining a state university for the city, and then having the energy and tenacity to turn something imagined into something real and tangible—that’s the kind of leadership that has made Dallas what it is today,” noted former city of Dallas Assistant Manager Levi H. Davis.

Though the bill passed, it was vetoed by the governor. Not to be deterred, organizers formed the Southern Dallas County Higher Education Feasibility Study Task Force. “The task force was very involved and did some vital work,” recalled West. “Without them, it’s not certain the university would have ever come to life.” By summer, the task force had made a formal request to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to conduct the study.

“The need had been clearly established and we were committed to making the building of this university a reality, said Giddings.

By fall, the coordinating board commissioner had appointed a special committee to coordinate the feasibility study. The committee, in a report filed in July 1998, recommended that the study area be broadened to include Ellis County as well as southern Dallas County.

AREA OF OPPORTUNITY

This target area, which included nearly 800,000 young men and women who needed access to a public university, is among the most economically viable regions in the United States. Included is that part of Dallas County south of the Trinity River to the Dallas city limits, and an array of bustling, dynamic suburban communities.

Those communities include Duncanville, DeSoto, Lancaster, Hutchins, Wilmer, Cedar Hill, Ennis, Ferris, Cockrell Hill, Glenn Heights, Waxahachie, Crandall, Kemp, Mabank, Palmer, Red Oak, Rosser, Scurry, and Seagoville.

By September 1998, it was time for the selection of an educational partner for the new university. Though there were several options, the task force settled on the University of North Texas. UNT, under the leadership of its president, Dr. Alfred Hurley, supported the broadest and clearest pathway to fully accredited and independent status for UNTD. The partnership gave birth to what today is UNT Dallas.

THE UNT DALLAS COLLEGE OF LAW

The task force also made it clear that a public law school should be a complementary component of the partnership.

“Our regional aspirations to host a public law school had gone nowhere before the Southern Dallas County Higher Education Feasibility Task Force made it a priority,” said Chancellor Jackson. “We looked at many approaches to fill this critical need but it didn’t have a champion. When the Task Force embraced this goal, we could go into legislative discussions with strong community and financial support.”

Jackson added that Dallas legislators “Senator West, Representative Giddings, Tony Goolsby, Rafael Anchia, Roberto Alonzo and Dan Branch all provided critical support at key times.”

“This had been on my mind for a long time,” Senator West said. “Dallas was the largest metropolitan area in America without a public law school.” He added that Dallas County was importing thirty per-

cent of its attorneys from out-of-state law schools to meet regional demand.

UNT System leaders worked tirelessly to get the law school, to be situated in downtown Dallas, approved and funded. Bills to establish the first public law school in North Texas had been filed, unsuccessfully, in 2005 and 2007.

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In 2009, however, SB 956 by Senator West (House Sponsor: Dan Branch), which authorized the law school, passed and was signed by Governor Rick Perry.

Startup costs were funded in a \$5 million appropriation that was authorized in the 2010–2011 state budget. The law school's initial, temporary home, in shared quarters at 1901 Main Street, would move to the historic Dallas Municipal Building with completion of extensive refurbishing. Built in 1914, the historic, Beaux Arts-style building once served as Dallas City Hall.

Once completed, plans included linking the new Main Street Garden Park, the College of Law's new home, and the UNT System Center at Dallas, at 1901 Main, creating a campus-like atmosphere.

In August 2014, the UNT Dallas College of Law seated its first class. That inaugural class represented what UNT System Chancellor Lee F. Jackson referred to as “ten years of active planning and forty years of regional aspiration.”

Community and business leaders welcomed the new downtown Dallas law school enthusiastically. Downtown Dallas, Inc., CEO John Crawford noted that the law school would be a boost to downtown revitalization, “allowing us to add to our growing residential base, create more pedestrian traffic, provide a needed update to a wonderful historic structure preserving history and tradition, and offer an educational option that had not been previously offered.”

Marcus Ronquillo, former chairman of the Dallas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said that the new law school is “very healthy, very welcome, and long overdue.

As its founding dean, the school selected Senior U.S. District Judge Royal Ferguson, Jr., who stepped down from his bench at the Northern District of Texas, Dallas Division. Ferguson was attracted to the law school's focus on an innovative curriculum that stresses rigorous analysis of the principles and precedents that form the U.S.

legal system, along with an equal commitment to the practical application of that knowledge.

“The legal profession and the legal academy are in the midst of an epic change,” Dean Ferguson said. “How we come out at the other end will be largely influenced by how the profession and the academy join together to figure it out. I want to be a part of that.”

The law school brought aboard nationally renowned torts scholar Ellen Pryor as its first Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. “The school will emphasize real-world practicalities over the theoretical for every student, from Day One through graduation day,” she said.

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Dean Pryor also pointed to the school’s emphasis on keeping student costs affordable. “We will emphasize keeping tuition low and using scholarship funds for financial need,” she said. She added that the law school’s innovative approach would help students by including “more feedback and assessments, experiential learning, writing throughout the curriculum, finances and management of legal practice, and a curriculum mapped around competencies as well as subject area coverage.”

“Our commitment,” UNT System Chancellor Jackson said, “is to produce graduates who are ready to apply their skills after hands-on experience in the real world of legal practice. Thanks to UNT Dallas College of Law, many outstanding students are taking advantage of access to a convenient and affordable legal education.”

A CENTURY ENDS, A JOURNEY BEGINS

In January 1999 the coordinating board granted permission to the University of North Texas to open the UNT System Center in Dallas. “This was an important milestone,” said Dr. Rosemary Haggett, the UNT System’s Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs and Student Success. “It was a first step, but looking back, it was a very big step.”

The following June, the Texas legislature and governor approved a \$4.2 million appropriation to fund start-up costs and

operations at the System Center. Support for the funding was led by Senator West and Representative Giddings. Dr. Virginia Wheeless, UNT's Associate Vice-Chancellor for Planning, was appointed interim Executive Director. With the fall 2000 semester, the institution began offering degree-related academic programs at temporary quarters in a Dallas business park.

The one-story industrial building that served as the school's first "campus" was rudimentary. "It served its purpose," remembers Vice-Chancellor for Facilities and Master Planning Rich Escalante. "It was never intended for the long run."

On May 8, 2001, Governor Rick Perry signed into law Senate Bill 576. The measure formally created an independent University of North Texas at Dallas—once total enrollment reached 1,000 students. The sponsors of the bill were Senator West and Representative Giddings. "That thousand-students threshold was critical," said Dr. Haggett. "It was quite a hill for a fledgling institution to climb, and everyone involved worked hard, and smart, to make it happen."

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Also in 2001, UNT Dallas named Dr. John Ellis Price its first Chief Executive Officer. Dr. Price would become the school's first president in 2010. He headed the institution for a dozen years—years in which the university made great strides and achieved a number of important milestones.

BRICKS, MORTAR, AND MISSION

In 2002 Rich Escalante, who had joined the UNT System as Vice-Chancellor for Facilities and Master Planning, turned his attention to planning the future UNTD campus. Escalante had enjoyed a successful career in municipal government, including serving for 15 years as city manager of the Dallas suburb, Farmers Branch.

"I was attracted to the UNTD opportunity because it's not often that you get to plan a university from the ground up," Escalante said. "It was exciting, and I wouldn't trade the experience for anything."

In October 2003, the Communities Foundation of Texas awarded the UNT System a \$500,000 planning grant to fund a high quality, professional master plan for property UNTD owned. "There were a

number of issues that had to be addressed,” said Escalante, “including where to site the first building and to make sure we built it properly.”

The problem of where to site the university had been solved with the acquisition of a 264-acre parcel of land on the east side of Houston School Road, just north of Interstate 20. The purchase was made available by a \$3 million contribution from the city of Dallas and the donation of 62 additional acres by local developers, particularly Mike Boney and Vernon Jordan.

Under the leadership of Dr. Price, UNTD had concluded a land swap with the Dallas Independent School District that allowed DISD’s Early College High School to be built on a portion of the UNTD property. This laid the groundwork for a close partnership that developed between UNTD and the DISD.

“The property suited our needs perfectly,” Escalante said. “It afforded easy access off I-20 and offered a commanding view of the downtown Dallas skyline.” Houston School Road, north of I-20, was renamed University Hills.

Escalante worked with a committee of community leaders that were very involved and important to the process. Their input was invaluable, he says.

Particularly critical to the planning process was Sasaki Associates, Inc., a world renown Massachusetts-based architectural and planning firm.

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The relationship was funded by the Communities Foundation of Texas grant; the Sasaki lead planner, who worked closely with Escalante on the UNTD project, was Dan Kenney.

Approved in 2005, the Master Plan for UNTD’s new Dallas campus was completed in 18 months. The Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) recognized the plan for its excellence, as did the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

In 2003 the legislature authorized \$25.4 million for construction of UNTD’s initial academic building. After an October 2005 ground breaking, the modern, 75,000 square foot, three-story building was completed and occupied in January 2006. Construction of a companion building, begun in 2009, was completed in 2010.

Members of the Task Force and Dallas County Regents, along with UNTD students and staff, had earlier concluded a branding exercise that chose the jaguar as the school mascot. Also selected and approved was the school's official seal and colors—blue, green and yellow. With its own campus, students, faculty and staff now firmly established, UNTD was brimming with confidence, and on the grow.

EARLY STRATEGIC PLANS

By April 2009, UNTD leadership had accomplished one of its key objectives—enrolling 1,000 full-time students. In reaching that number, the university achieved official status as an independent, general academic institution.

A month later, Governor Perry signed Senate Bill 629, which allowed for the expansion of UNTD and released \$25 million in tuition revenue bonds.

By all accounts, 2009 was a banner year for UNTD. Not only did the university achieve independent status, benefit from the release of \$25 million in bond money, and begin construction on a second building, but work got underway on Vision 2020: A Framework for Achieving Comprehensive University Status. Development of Vision 2020 was spearheaded by Bain & Company, which did the work pro bono. This strategic plan's focus was as precise as it was encompassing:

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Goals

- >Graduating career-ready professionals
- >Becoming a major economic driver for Dallas in general and the southern sector in particular
- >Providing opportunities for underserved students to gain

access to an affordable, high-quality education

Initiatives

- >Achieving Academic Excellence and Student Success
- >Developing Human Capital
- >Creating an Interdisciplinary and Technological Focus
- >Promoting Civic Engagement
- >Fostering Institutional Effectiveness
- >Leveraging Institutional Resources

With the fall 2010 semester, UNTD welcomed its first freshman class. The following year another of Dr. Price's initiatives was completed with the Dallas City Council's approval of changing the name of Houston School Road north of I-20 to University Hills Boulevard.

In 2011 the UNT Dallas Commission on Building the University of the 21st Century was formed. Comprised of 15 community leaders, the committee's work was also supported by Bain & Company.

"Higher education faced a number of challenges," said Haggett "Against that backdrop of change the committee was charged with helping the university develop a realistic roadmap for innovation and results. They held five meetings over 12 months and produced an outstanding report." The committee's recommendations focused on three key areas:

Teaching

- >Become an early adopter of new models of blended or hybrid learning
- >Make teaching and mentoring students the university's primary focus

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- >Use comprehensive analytics to predict student success

Students

- >Increase access and the number of college graduates in the region by reaching out to highly motivated high school students as well as community college and other transfer students
- >Brand distinct program options such as freshmen and transfer cohorts
- >Develop the opportunity for students to pursue their education year-round
- >Develop integrated high-touch academic and career advising
- >Make experiential learning a component of every UNTD graduate's education

Affordability

- >Develop strategies to reduce the cost of tuition
- >Build a portfolio of academic programs based on regional needs

A CULTURE OF GIVING

Philanthropy is an integral part of UNTD's proud heritage and promising future. The value friends and supporters place on the worth of the university to the good of the communities it serves is epitomized by the first \$1 million pledge, committed by Ryan, LLC.

A \$10 million gift from the Caruth Foundation, endowing a special criminal justice program, is an example of the kind of profound, far-reaching commitment that will help UNTD build programs of permanent quality.

The university has benefitted from individuals and institutions too numerous to enumerate. However, gifts and pledges exceeding \$100,000 have been received from the following:

AT&T Foundation, Bank of America, Bank One Foundation, Best Southwest Partnership, Citigroup Foundation, City of Dallas, Communities Foundation of Texas, The Dallas Foundation, Greater Texas Foundation, GTE Foundation, Hillcrest Foundation, Hoblitzelle Foundation, JP Morgan Chase, The Meadows Foundation, The Lupe Murchison Foundation, Northrop Grumman Foundation, Oncor Electric Delivery Company LLC, Harold Simmons Foundation, State Farm Foundation, Roy & Christine Sturgis Charitable & Education Trust, Texas Instruments Foundation, and Senator Royce B. West.

SACS ACCREDITATION

In May 2013, UNT Dallas presented degrees to its first graduating class. While the Class of 2013 realized their personal dreams, it was also a time of reflection for those who had given so much and worked so hard to make UNT Dallas a reality.

UNTD received accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges in June 2009. SACS is the regional body for the accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions in the southern states. It serves as the common denominator of shared values and practices among diverse institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Latin America and other international sites approved by the Commission on Colleges that award associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral degrees.

SACS approval had been a key objective of Dr. Price. Prior to SACS accreditation, all UNTD academic programs were extensions of the UNT Denton campus. With SACS accreditation UNTD was positioned to respond to unique community needs and address unfolding workforce opportunities.

“Dr. Price had made SACS accreditation his highest priority, and he deserves much credit for providing the leadership to achieve that important goal,” said Chancellor Jackson. “Independent accreditation was a huge factor in allowing UNT Dallas to take charge of its own destiny and build a unique identity.”

THE BEST IS YET TO BE

Firmly established as an accredited university and having graduated its first class, the university welcomed Dr. Ronald T. Brown as its second president on July 1, 2013.

Dr. Brown immediately set out to recruit a talented and experienced management team to help lead the university in pursuing bold new plans for the future. Since his appointment, Dr. Brown has launched a number of initiatives focused on increasing the opportunities for quality education and enrollment and has helped articulate six strategic initiatives that will ensure the university's success over the next decade:

- Respect for evidenced-based decisions subject to on-going assessment
- Develop a critical mass of curriculum degree programs addressing societal needs, particular for the North Texas region
- Develop strategic partnerships that enhance the university's mission
- Pursue a broad-based approach to supporting and developing students
- Build a large, diverse, motivated, focused, and participating student body
- Enhance the culture of philanthropy that includes sustainable giving

Dr. Brown's brand of leadership will help guide the university in becoming a prestigious university known for the delivery of quality education and instilling a confidence in students to obtain success in their academic pursuits.

"You will know UNT Dallas students by their educational preparedness and practical know-how," said Dr. Brown. "We feel that

such a commitment resonates with first generation college student families as well as our graduate students in answering the question of whether an investment in a degree is really worth it. We offer degree plans that lead to careers.”

“The university has much to look forward to,” Dr. Brown said. “We will be making some significant additions to our infrastructure, growing enrollment, adding academic programs, and continuing to make certain that in everything we do, our first concern will be what is in the best interests of our students.”

Under Dr. Brown’s leadership, UNTD can look forward to a bright tomorrow—one filled with opportunity, accomplishment, and service.

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