



Building an Educated Populace: Higher Education in Texas

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Aug 7, 2022) Once again it is almost time to begin another academic year, and as the college semester begins my profession allows me to observe the hustle and bustle of university life—students scurrying to find their correct classroom, the bustle of the bookstores, and the anticipation of a new year. At the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon long before my age should qualify me (or maybe not—perhaps my gray hair does qualify me!), I do not think today’s students realize the history involved in assuring the delivery of higher education in our state.

When the Republic of Texas emerged after the Texas Revolution, Texans (naturally) had a grandiose vision for their nation. One of those visions was the establishment of institutions of higher learning. Churches and religious orders took the first initiatives, and between 1836 and 1845 the Republic granted twenty-five different charters to some form of higher education (most of them preparatory schools). After statehood and before the Civil War, the state of Texas approved of another 117 such institutions. Many more began with no official state charter.

The financial situation of most of these was always tenuous and the majority did not survive, but some notable and still extant schools did, such as Baylor University (generally acknowledged to be the oldest university in the state), and Southwestern University. Both of these schools struggled to find a place, but they did survive and today offer a fine education to their students. Private and church-affiliated institutions remain a tradition in the state; schools such as Southern Methodist, Texas Christian, Austin College, Trinity, Wiley, and Rice University (arguably the premier undergraduate institution in Texas) greatly contribute to educating Texas’ college students.

The state of Texas did not establish state-funded higher education until the 1870s and 1880s, first by utilizing federal funds through the Morrill Land Grant to establish the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas (now Texas A&M University—the Aggies may now all “whoop” in unison). A&M began holding classes in 1876. In that same year, Alta Vista Agricultural College (now Prairie View A&M) opened as a school for African Americans in the era of segregation. Finally, in 1881, the legislature provided the authorization to build a “university of the first class,” and voters approved a referendum to locate the new institution in Austin. The University of Texas opened in 1883 as the first state supported, full liberal arts university in Texas.

During the late 19th century, Texas’ legislators were austere to say the least and funding for these state-supported schools was frugal and sporadic. Political differences also hindered full funding of state institutions. However, the legislature did mandate a system of free public education for the state’s schoolchildren, and thus necessitated the need for trained teachers in classrooms. During the latter half of the 19th century and the early twentieth century, Texas built a number of Normal Schools and Teacher’s Colleges. Sam Houston Normal Institute (Sam Houston State University) began operations in 1879, closely followed by East Texas Normal School in 1889 (Texas A&M-Commerce), Southwest Texas State Normal School in 1899 (Texas State University-San Marcos), North Texas Normal and Teacher’s Training Institute (taken over by the state in 1901 and now the University of North Texas), and West Texas State Normal School in 1909 (West Texas A&M). The legislature gave authorization to build Stephen F. Austin State Teacher’s College in 1917 but neglected to fund the building of what is now Stephen F. Austin State University until 1921. It opened in 1923.

The citizens of West Texas had clamored for an institution of higher learning almost from the moment settlement began in the region, but the legislature was slow to act. Finally, in 1923 state senator William Bledsoe of Lubbock pushed through a bill that granted Bledsoe’s hometown Texas Technological College, which opened its doors in 1925. It is now Texas Tech University and one of the largest and most comprehensive universities in the state, but the author does admit to bias in this regard as his household holds four degrees from the fine school.

The New Deal brought new funding streams to Texas’ universities, which provided new buildings and expansion at most Texas schools. The fruits of oil discoveries on university lands in West Texas also guaranteed vast forms of revenue for the University of Texas and, to a lesser degree, Texas A&M. Following World War II, student enrollment at Texas colleges and universities skyrocketed with greater funding for veterans, and the normal schools and training institutions began more broad-based curriculums. Finally, Texas

established the Higher Education Coordinating Board in 1965 with the charge to coordinate and standardize university education at state supported schools.

Funding problems and other issues do still nag at Texas' higher education entities, but the state's efforts have succeeded in building a comprehensive and relatively inexpensive college and university system. Higher education in twenty-first century Texas faces new threats, as political divisions have begun to threaten the mission of Texas' universities and question the independence and efficacy of instruction. Universities and colleges in the Lone Star state may now stand at a crossroads, so perhaps students should think about the past and the present as they also are worrying about exams and preparing to attend Saturday football games.

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