

HOW OLD E.T. BECAME A&M-COMMERCE

Some know us as Texas A&M University-Commerce. To others, we will always be "Old E.T." From our humble beginnings as a private normal college, we've grown to become the second-largest university in The Texas A&M University System. With a diverse student body, state-of-the-art facilities, and faculty and staff of the highest caliber, A&M-Commerce is an institution that boasts a deep heritage and is proud to be at the forefront of higher education in Northeast Texas.

For our first 28 years, we were known as East Texas Normal College (E.T.), a private school established by William L. Mayo in 1889. Professor Mayo was not alone in his desire to run a college in the region. Dozens of Professor Mayo's contemporaries opened similar colleges. Mayo knew that he needed to ensure the permanence of his college, so he initiated the plans to make E.T. a state institution.

On March 14, 1917, a bill passed in the state legislature making E.T. a state-funded college. On the same day, Mayo died suddenly before receiving the news that his college would survive. Although the future leadership of the school was uncertain following Mayo's death, one thing was sure: East Texas Normal College would become East Texas State Normal College, a member of the State Normal College System.

President Randolph Binnion was named the second president of E.T. in 1917 and the first president to lead E.T. as a state-funded college. Unlike Mayo, who operated the college by relying on tuition, donations and his own pocketbook, Binnion benefited from the addition of state funds to support the college. While President Mayo answered to no one but himself, President Binnion reported to the State Normal Board of Regents.

When the State Normal College System became the State Teachers College System, the university's name changed to East Texas State Teachers College, the third name change in just over three decades.

For the next 50 years, and through the tenures of Presidents Sam Whitley, A.C. Ferguson and James Gee, ET existed as a member of the State Teachers College System. While E.T. was founded as a teacher training institution, it was evident by the 1950s that the college's academic offerings extended beyond the training of teachers alone. As a result of this growth, the legislature authorized two name changes during Gee's presidency: East Texas State College in 1957 and East Texas State University in 1965.

President D. Whitney Halladay, Gee's successor, embraced the State Coordinating Board's enrollment projections for E.T., which predicted a record enrollment of 12,200 students by 1971. Halladay continued an expansive building program established by his predecessor to accommodate this anticipated growth.

Perhaps the most significant change came in 1969 when the governor signed a bill permitting E.T. to establish a separate board of regents and become an independent university. For almost three decades, ETSU reported to its own Board of Regents.

While enrollment did increase through the mid-1970s, it remained well below projections. Enrollment peaked under President Bub McDowell in 1975 at just shy of 10,000 students before entering a sharp and steady decline for the next decade, falling below 6,400 students in 1986. Declining enrollment left E.T. in a precarious position as the state legislature's formula funding for state institutions is tied to credit-hour production. Additionally, the university was significantly overbuilt in anticipation of future enrollment growth. Empty classrooms and dormitories were a lingering reminder of E.T.'s troubles.

The legislature targeted higher education for significant cuts in the 1980s due to a decline in the price of oil. The governor established a legislative committee to recommend ways to cut higher education costs. A memorandum circulated in 1986 recommending four universities for potential closure, one of which was ETSU.

While the memorandum was only a recommendation, President Charles Austin would not leave the university's survival to chance. Some 450 ET supporters crowded the Senate chamber in defense of their institution on the day the committee discussed the potential closures. In witnessing the outpouring of support for E.T., the committee's executive director announced, "...East Texas State University should not be closed."

The potential closure was by far the biggest threat to E.T. since the early years of the college. Although this crisis was averted, the university still faced an uphill battle. President Jerry Morris was appointed president in the middle of this uncertain time. Like Mayo 70 years before, Morris faced the question: What can we do to safeguard E.T.'s future? Morris and the board of regents agreed that it was time for E.T. to join a system once again.

President Morris expressed that joining a system was not a panacea. No matter their system affiliation, all state colleges and universities have three funding sources: legislative appropriations, tuition revenue, and benevolence. However, the backing of a major system would guarantee additional support for the university in the legislature, allowing the university to share resources with other system schools and provide additional opportunities for students. For fiscal reasons, political impact, and marketing desirability, the university sought a merger with an existing system in 1994. The question remained: which one?

There were five systems in Texas at the time, including E.T.'s former system, the State Teachers College System (now known as the Texas State System). University administration quickly identified the A&M System as the best option for affiliation. A similar mission statement coupled with an understanding of the unique needs of a rural university made the A&M System the logical choice.

As a member of the A&M System, President Morris would report directly to the chancellor of the system like all other system presidents. At the time of the merger, Barry Thompson served as system chancellor. Thompson was an E.T. alumnus and former E.T. vice-president. He advocated for the union and promised to recommend the merger to the A&M System Board of Regents.

By the end of the 1995 legislative session, the E.T. Board of Regents, the A&M System Board of Regents, and the state legislature approved the merger.

Perhaps the most immediate and public result of the merger was another name change for the university. Several names were considered. The two most popular suggestions were East Texas A&M University and Texas A&M University-Commerce. Morris and other administrators preferred Texas A&M University-Commerce, although he knew many alumni would mourn the loss of the E.T. name. Morris emphasized the importance of a name that paralleled other branch campuses, like Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

The A&M System Board of Regents voted to change the name to Texas A&M University-Commerce in July 1996. The merger, along with the name change, went into effect on September 1 of that year.

The long-term benefits of joining the A&M System are numerous. Today, A&M-Commerce boasts record-high enrollment and is one of the fastest-growing universities in the state. Names have changed, demographics have changed, and times have changed. Our institution has proven adept at meeting challenges to remain at the forefront of higher education in Northeast Texas. We proudly celebrate over two decades as an A&M System member and more than a century as a state institution.

Whether we call ourselves East Texas State or Texas A&M University-Commerce, we are proud to be Lions!