History of Lee College

Lee College was established in 1934, and when registration was completed for that first semester, 177 students had enrolled in the inaugural session of Lee Junior College of Goose Creek, Texas. The Board of Trustees of the Goose Creek Independent School District had agreed as early as 1931 that a junior college should be established to provide educational opportunities to students who could not otherwise afford it.

The first graduation was on May 24, 1935, with four women receiving diplomas: Juanita Barrington (Mrs. David Holm), Byrtis Avey (Mrs. Elmer Brinkley), La Del Payne (Mrs. Barney Hillard) and Hudnall Spence (Mrs. Robert Southwick). A 33 percent increase in the fall of 1935 boosted enrollment to 236.

The founders of the College were interested in providing a strong academic curriculum and a comprehensive technical/vocational curriculum. In 1936, the vocational program was initiated. No college credit was given for work in the vocational program until 1941, and it did not become an integral part of the College until 1945, following a two-year period when no technical/vocational courses were offered.

By the mid-1940s, the administration and faculty of the College had become increasingly aware that the College needed its own governing board. In 1945, Walter Rundell, one of the original faculty members, became Dean of Lee College. Dean Rundell became the guiding force behind major developments for the two decades which followed. In 1948, the name was changed to Lee College. In the same year, Lee College gained accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The association urged Lee College to develop a campus facility separate from the high school.

A successful bond election in 1949 led to the completion of the first two buildings, the administration building and the gymnasium. The College moved to the new campus in 1951. Following the move to a separate campus, the growth of the College exceeded the expectations of the leaders, and plans for additional buildings had to be accelerated. A Liberal Arts Building, now Social Sciences, was added in 1958. By 1961, the campus had doubled in size. The library was completed and the gymnasium expanded in 1962. Moler Hall, Technical Vocational Building One, and Bonner Hall followed.

Under the leadership of Dean Rundell, Lee College successfully separated from the local public school district in 1965. On August 18, 1965, Lee College’s first Board of Regents, appointed by the public school board, assumed governance of the College.

A significant event in the history of Lee College occurred in 1966, when the College, under the leadership of Dean Rundell and George Beto, in cooperation with the Texas Department of Corrections, began a program of courses in the state’s prison system. This program has grown from 182 students that first year to a current enrollment which exceeds 1,100 students.

In 1966, Dr. Richard Strahan became the first full-time president of Lee College. Since the separation from the local public school district, the College has had eight presidents: Dr. Strahan, 1966-71; Dr. Raymond Cleveland, 1971-73; Dr. Jim Sturgeon, 1973-76; Dr. Robert Cloud, 1976- 86; Dr. Vivian B. Blevins, 1986-1991; Dr. Jackson N. Sasser, 1992-2001, Dr. Martha M. Ellis, 2002-2008; Dr. Michael Murphy, 2008-2012; Dr. Dennis Brown, 2012-2020; Dr. Lynda Villanueva, 2020-2026; and Jacob Atkin, 2026-present.

In 1969, Lee College, in cooperation with two Liberty County school districts, began offering courses at Liberty and Dayton. Another milestone in the history of Lee College was the offering of community education courses in 1972. These community-oriented, short-term courses have experienced a dramatic growth in popularity and are further evidence of the flexibility of the community college concept. The College also established a program for senior adults in 1972.

In 1986, Lee College began two new programs to serve not only Lee College's district constituents, but also interested citizens outside the College's service area. The San Jacinto Mall site was the result of cooperation between the mall and the College.

Coordination with local groups led to the formation of the Hispanic Educational Access Committee and the Black Educational Access Committee in the fall of 1986. The work of these committees has received favorable national recognition and has served to encourage educational access to these underrepresented groups.

The Lee College Foundation, established in 1968 to provide scholarships to deserving Lee College students, today has assets of over $13 million and provides more than 350 scholarships each year.

A focus on economic development resulted in the Small Business Development Center being opened in 1987. In response to needs of local industries, Lee College began to institute new industrial programs and to revise existing ones.

Obtaining a Bachelor of Science degree in nursing became possible through an agreement with the University of Texas School of Nursing at Galveston in 1987 for registered nurses in the area.

A successful bond election in 1988 enabled the College to initiate a construction program which featured a new science building, a lecture hall, and major renovations to several campus facilities.

The 711 West Texas Avenue property, acquired in 1990, was renovated to house a performing and fine arts complex in addition to an allied health suite named the McNulty-Haddick Complex in honor of Alma Haddick and her husband Luther.

In February 2000, local voters passed a $20 million bond election to build a new advanced technology center/library and a completely renovated gymnasium and newly constructed sports/wellness complex. Other renovations and additional parking were also included.

In recent years, Lee College has been the recipient of many prestigious awards including the 2015 American Association of Community Colleges Award of Excellence for Student Success; the 2018 American Association of Community Colleges Award of Excellence for Advancing Diversity; and the 2018 Association of Community College Trustees Regional Equity Award and National Finalist.

In the fall of 2018, Lee College saw record enrollment of 8,234 students, 2,300 of whom were dual credit students.

Nationally recognized as one of the top 150 colleges in the United States by the Aspen Institute for five consecutive years, and a final contender for the Bellwether Award for its Weekend College, Lee College has expanded to offer more than 100 associate degree and certificate programs, as well as non-credit workforce and community education courses. Over the last five years, the College has conferred just under 12,000 degrees and certificates aimed at preparing its diverse student body for advanced higher education, successful entry into the workforce, and a variety of in-demand careers.

Currently, the top 10 performing degree and certificate programs include Business Management (Huntsville); Process Technology; Instrumentation; CADD and Engineering Technology; General Studies; Business Management; Welding Technology (Huntsville); Culinary (Huntsville); Nursing; and Horticulture (Huntsville).

With the main campus and McNair Center located in Baytown, Texas, and a satellite center in nearby Liberty, the College serves a geographic area of more than 220,000 residents that continues to expand. The College's current service area includes the school systems of Goose Creek, Anahuac, Barbers Hill, Baytown Christian Academy, Chrysalis, Crosby, Dayton, Devers, East Chambers, Hardin, Hardin-Jefferson, Huffman, Hull-Daisetta, Kountze, Liberty and West Hardin.

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