UT CELEBRATES 90 YEARS OF PROGRESS

Ninety years ago today, Tampa Junior College – what would two years later become The University of Tampa – held its first classes. Classes were initially held at Hillsborough High School, until moving into the vacant Tampa Bay Hotel – now Plant Hall – in 1933.

The first student to register for classes that year was Anne Carey of Seminole Heights. Forty-nine other young students would follow. Students were charged $10 to register, and $4 per credit hour. Faculty numbered 12.

It's easy to forget that The University of Tampa basically began in the throes of the Great Depression, which would last another eight years after the university's founding. But it was this economic stagnation that emboldened UT's founder and first president, Frederic Spaulding, to create a university in Tampa. At that time, many young people in Tampa couldn't afford to attend college in Gainesville, or Tallahassee, so the fledgling University of Tampa filled a much-needed gap in higher education for southwest Florida.

This remained true for many years. While UT's student body diversified to an extent, Joyce Newell Sundheim, a member of UT's graduating class of 1956, recalls in her upcoming book, "Minaret Tales: Life at the University of Tampa in the 1950s," that generally speaking, the student population resided either in Tampa or suburban towns. Only approximately 15 percent of UT students at that time were from out of state.

Much has changed between those early years and now. Today UT has more than 10,500 students who come from all around the country, and 130 countries around the world. About half of UT students are from out of state. There are also 759 full-time and part-time faculty who come to UT from the region as well as from all over the country and world, providing unparalleled expertise and experience. This year, despite the pandemic, UT hired a record number of faculty.

In the 1960s, as the University of South Florida joined UT in Tampa's higher education arena, UT made a shift to seek more out of state students to bolster its enrollment. A side effect of that shift became clear, which impacted Tampa outright. In 1970, then UT president David Delo estimated that out of state students spent about $5 million a year in Tampa.

Today that number is a thousand times that or more. We estimate that UT's annual economic impact — in terms of purchasing power and economic multiplier — is about $1.2 billion. That of course includes UT's $370 million annual operating revenue, plus tens of million in annual construction projects, its payroll for 1,670 full-time, part-time and vendor-contracted employees, as well as spending by both out of state students and in state.

In her book, Sundheim also recalls her peers working multiple jobs, including in nearby restaurants and department stores. That's also true today, as current students — many of whom supplement financial aid with part- and full-time jobs — provide much of the inexpensive labor needed by urban businesses. That's especially useful in today's tight labor market.

But the other side effect of UT's student population is that so many students end up living in Florida and the Tampa Bay region after graduation, providing the area a workforce of talented, bright young people who are eager to put their degree to work, start businesses, create culture, own homes, and build the Tampa Bay economy.

Each year, UT surveys its graduating seniors to find out where they plan to live after graduation. The most recent data, for the 2019 graduating class, showed that almost two thirds of those who responded plan to stay in Florida after graduation – most likely in the Tampa Bay region.

Of those who decided to stay in Florida, many were originally from out of state or out of the country, meaning they came to Florida for college and decided to start their careers in Florida. So, UT is an intellectual talent importer to our area and is part of the reason companies are coming to Tampa, i.e., to be near a key source of talented young professionals that are in short supply in many communities. That's huge for the future of Tampa Bay. And many who stay in Tampa continue living near the urban core, adding to the vibrancy of downtown neighborhoods. That's huge for downtown Tampa.

Despite the pandemic, UT has remained an attractive destination for students seeking a distinctive, high-quality education, and an education that includes easy access to internships, community service and outstanding recreational opportunities. Certainly, Tampa Bay's exposure through professional sport successes also helped to highlight Tampa as a preferred educational destination. I commend the City of Tampa and Mayor Jane Castor – a UT alumna herself – for continuing Tampa's momentum and recognition as a world-class city.

Back to 1931, due to its meager beginnings, Frederic Spaulding was initially reluctant about Tampa Junior College being renamed The University of Tampa. He hoped that UT would "some day live up to its name." I'd argue that it definitely has.

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