History of Georgia Southern University

On December 1, 1906, the newly-appointed First District Board of Trustees convened in Savannah, Georgia. It was one of 11 such boards created for each congressional district by state legislation that year to build and oversee agricultural and mechanical schools for elementary and secondary students. The trustees were prepared to hear bids from local leaders who wanted the First District A&M School to be built in their communities and were willing to provide the funding to do so. Among the bidders were 50 representatives from Bulloch County who had journeyed from Statesboro on a train called the “College Special.” Their bid of $125,000 in cash and in-kind contributions, including a donation of 300 acres for a campus, won handily. Early in 1908, just outside Statesboro (on a site called “Collegeboro”), the First District A&M School opened its doors with 15 students, four faculty members, and three buildings.

By 1920, the First District A&M School had 150 students and was fielding teams in football and baseball; the “Aggies” typically won more than half their games in any given season. But by 1921, a combination of rapidly growing debt and drastically declining enrollments almost spelled the end of the fledgling school.

Hard work and commitment prevailed, however, and by 1924, not only were the school’s finances and enrollments back on track, but the Georgia General Assembly upgraded the school to a two-year college for teacher training and retitled it the Georgia Normal School, one of three in the state. With this first change in the school’s status, “Principal” Ernest V. Hollis became “President” Hollis, Georgia Southern University’s first president. The following year, private donors funded the first scholarships for the campus.

In 1929, the General Assembly was persuaded that yet another major institutional promotion was due, and the Georgia Normal School became the South Georgia Teachers College via state legislation, converting the Statesboro campus from a two-year junior college to a four-year teachers college. The Aggies had receded, and the “Blue Tide” had rolled in, bringing programs not only in football and baseball, but also in basketball and track; basketball was played in a tobacco warehouse until the first gymnasium was built in 1931.

Also in that year, the long-supportive First District Board of Trustees, like all freestanding boards of college trustees in the state, was dissolved by state legislation. Higher education in Georgia was reorganized into its present form, with all state colleges and universities reporting to a single Board of Regents. Now, the Regents, not the General Assembly, were responsible for determining any changes in mission for the college in Statesboro.

In 1939, South Georgia Teachers College became Georgia Teachers College by action of the Board of Regents. This new title represented less a change of status for the college and more a recognition by the Regents that the Statesboro campus was the statewide college for teacher education. Later, the “Blue Tide” receded, and “The Professors” became the official name of Georgia Teachers College’s intercollegiate teams.

When Eugene Talmadge was elected governor in 1940, he remembered, according to some observers, that the electoral district dominated by Georgia Teachers College had voted for his opponent. Within a year, the governor had initiated an effort to remove President Marvin Pittman on charges that included advocating “racial equality and teaching communism” (the latter conclusively disproved). President Pittman was fired, and as a direct result of his dismissal, all state-supported institutions of higher education in Georgia saw their regional academic accreditation withdrawn by what is now the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. In 1942, a new governor was elected, and the Board of Regents was reorganized; a year later, Georgia Teachers College and the University System of Georgia were reaccredited, and Dr. Pittman was reinstated by the Board as president of Georgia Teachers College.

This incident, which received international media coverage at the time, was a formative and symbolic experience in the history of Georgia Southern University and a measure of its resilience in the defense of academic and institutional integrity, qualities that remain today.

In 1957, the college in Statesboro was authorized by the Board of Regents to offer its first graduate degree, a Master of Education. In some ways, that benchmark was the beginning of the ultimate evolution from a college to a university.

Only two years later, Georgia Teachers College was upgraded by the Board of Regents to Georgia Southern College, a recognition by Georgia’s policymakers that the College was now a comprehensive institution with responsibilities well beyond the specialized mission of educating teachers. In 1960, the “Professors” was retired as the name of Georgia Southern’s intercollegiate teams, and by student vote, the “Eagles” was hatched.

The first fraternities and sororities were chartered on the campus in 1967 and 1968. The first three Schools, Arts and Sciences, Education, and Graduate Studies, were established in 1968, followed by the School of Business in 1971, and the School of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Nursing and the School of Technology in 1980. These schools were organized as the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (in 1994), Education, Graduate Studies, Business Administration, Health and Human Sciences, and the Allen E. Paulson College of Science and Technology (in 1994). In 2003, the College of Information Technology was established, and in 2005, the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health became the University’s eighth college. In order to accurately reflect the addition of an engineering college, in 2012, the College of Science and Technology was renamed the College of Science and Mathematics, and the College of Information Technology became the Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Information Technology. In 1981, football was reintroduced to Georgia Southern after a hiatus of almost 40 years, inaugurating a new winning tradition of Division I intercollegiate sports.

Beginning in the early 1970s, a resurgent effort to acquire university status for the Statesboro campus emerged, culminating in 1989 with the Board of Regents’ vote to promote Georgia Southern College to Georgia Southern University. When university status became effective on July 1, 1990, Georgia Southern received its sixth and final name. Georgia Southern University became the first new university in Georgia in 21 years and the third largest university in the state. In 1992, the Regents authorized Georgia Southern University to initiate its first doctoral program, the Doctorate of Education, which was the first doctorate to be offered by an institution located in South Georgia. In 2006, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classified Georgia Southern University as a doctoral/research institution.