

A History of Southeastern Louisiana University

Southeastern Louisiana University began as a grass roots movement by the people of Hammond and the surrounding area, who recognized the need for an institution of higher education in order to further the educational, economic, and cultural development of Southeast Louisiana. What began as a junior college supported by local taxes has developed into a major university as Southeastern has grown to meet the evolving needs of Southeast Louisiana and the Florida Parishes.

On July 7, 1925, the voters overwhelmingly approved a bond issue that created Hammond Junior College. Operated under the auspices of the Tangipahoa Parish School Board, President Linus A. Sims opened the doors on September 14, 1925 with a faculty of three women, two men and forty students. The two-year, coeducational institution offered basic undergraduate work in arts and sciences and culminated in a teaching certificate.

Rapidly increasing enrollments quickly forced the college out of its two rooms in Hammond High School. In 1927, voters supported the purchase of the Hunter Leake estate, on Hammond's north end. The main house served as the president's residence and women's dormitory. Classrooms, laboratories, and the library occupied the servants' quarters, while the barn served as the locker room for the football team.

In 1928 Hammond Junior College became Southeastern Louisiana College, formally adopted into the state educational system under the control of the State Board of Education. The purchase of sixty acres adjoining the original fifteen acre plot provided the space to develop a suitable campus, and in 1934, a state bond issue provided for the construction of McGehee Hall, and a gymnasium.

In 1937, public funds permitted the construction of Strawberry Stadium, a unique, multipurpose facility which served as football stadium, men's dormitory, cafeteria, and student union.

In 1937, the State Board of Education authorized curricula for four-year programs in the liberal arts, teacher education, business administration, music, social sciences, and physical education. The first baccalaureate degrees were conferred in May, 1939.

From 1938 through 1940, federal funds provided for the construction of seven buildings: Linus Sims Memorial Library (now J. Leon Clark Hall, part of the visual arts complex), the Science Building (now Eleanor Mead Hall), the Education Building (now Jay McClimans Hall), the women's dormitory (now George Campbell Hall), the Humanities Building (now the Ralph R. Pottle Music Building), the men's gymnasium, and the president's residence.

Voter approval of Act No. 388 in 1938, an amendment to the 1920 Louisiana Constitution, granted Southeastern Louisiana College the same legal status as other four-year colleges. The amendment did not, however, require the state to fund Southeastern at the level of other institutions of higher education, despite strong local support.

On January 18, 1946, the State Board made available funds to purchase seven city blocks east and west of the campus, and 275 acres of land North and Northwest of the campus, increasing Southeastern's total area to approximately 365 acres.

On March 3, 1946, Southeastern was formally approved and accepted into full membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), as a four-year degree-granting institution.

After WW II, returning G.I.s caused exponential growth of the college, necessitating construction of classrooms, a student union, a cafeteria, a health center, dormitories, apartments for married students, and many surplus temporary buildings donated by the federal government. In 1948, the U.S. Navy contributed two steel barracks for use as dormitories, one of which, substantially remodeled, remains in use as a counseling center (McNeely Hall).

In 1960, the State Board authorized Southeastern to offer master's degrees through the newly-formed Division of Graduate Studies. Southeastern began awarding the Education Specialist degree in 1967.

Student enrollments continued to climb through the 1960s, bringing about the construction of an administration building, a new biology building, the Vera Thomason Health Center, a new student union, Pursley Hall, and the Kinesiology and Health Studies Building. Space shortages continued to require the use of temporary buildings until the early 1970s.

Governor John J. McKeithen on June 16, 1970 signed into law the legislative act turning Southeastern Louisiana College into Southeastern Louisiana University. Early 1970's also saw the construction of D Vickers, the Athletics Building, and the C.E. Cate Teacher Education Building.

The Clark Hall Annex, the War Memorial Annex, the University Center, the Music Recital Hall, and the Music Building Annex were built between 1981 and 1982. Other than the Sims Memorial Library built in 1985, no new construction takes place at Southeastern over the next sixteen years, despite university enrollment almost doubling in size.

Southeastern's enrollment, continually increasing since its inception, reached an important milestone in 1997, registering over fifteen thousand students for the fall semester. Since 1925, Southeastern has conferred over forty thousand degrees.

In 1998 Southeastern Oaks, the first Louisiana university housing facility to be financed through a non-profit corporation, is completed.

As Southeastern celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2000, the Fall semester marked an exciting change as Southeastern implemented screened admissions standards for the first time. Also during the 2000-2001 academic year, the Village, Fayard Hall, and the Pennington Student Activity Center were completed.

In May 2001, Southeastern received full approval from the Board of Regents for its first new graduate degree program in more than a decade, a Master of Science in Integrated Science and Technology. This was followed in Fall 2001 with approval of a MA in Organizational Communications and a MS in Applied Sociology and in Spring 2002 approval of a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) and BS in Athletic Training. The most recent degree approved is a BS in Health Education and Promotion which was approved in December 2002.

Fall 2003 set a new milestone with enrollment reaching 15,662 a new record which included a record number of graduate students (2,033). Fall 2003 also saw the return of football to Strawberry Stadium. The Lions completed the season 5-7.

In Fall 2004, Southeastern began implementing portions of the Board of Regents Master Plan admissions criteria, a full year ahead of schedule and before any other schools in the state. In Fall 2005, Southeastern began its first year under the full Board of Regents Master Plan admissions criterion.

On August 29, 2005, just six days into the semester, Hurricane Katrina hit southeast Louisiana, devastating the parishes of St. Bernard, Orleans, Jefferson, Plaquemines, and St. Tammany, as well as the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Southeastern fared well and suffered no major structural damages (although the University campus did lose many trees). After the storm, Southeastern was able to play an instrumental role in the relief effort by providing housing for the National Guard, disaster relief teams from across the country, and utility workers. The University also provided housing for its displaced faculty, staff, and students as it re-opened its doors on September 6, 2005. In addition, the University re-opened enrollment and provided housing for many displaced students from other universities and community colleges in the disaster area; this also included the hiring of several displaced faculty from these institutions. By the 14th class day, in spite of Katrina, Southeastern had again enrolled a record breaking number of students, 16,068.

In Fall 2006 Southeastern enrolled its very first doctoral students. Ten students began in the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership doctoral program Southeastern began offering in conjunction with the University of Louisiana - Lafayette. The implementation of the doctoral program was a historic moment for Southeastern. As one of the state's largest producers of teachers, the doctoral program is a natural progression for the excellent teacher preparation program that Southeastern has operated since the institution was first created.

In Fall 2012, the Louisiana Small Business Development Center at Southeastern was awarded full accreditation by the Association of Small Business Development Centers (ASBCD).

In Fall 2013, Southeastern football claimed its first Southland Conference title ever and it's first football crown since winning the Gulf States Conference in 1961. The win also sewed up Southeastern's first ever FCS playoff bid.

In the Spring semester of 2017 Southeastern received the largest single donation in its 92-year history, a bequest totaling \$10 million. Seth W. Ryan, a 1953 Southeastern business graduate bequeathed a significant portion of his estate to Southeastern's Foundation in the name of his wife, Thelma McNamara Nicaud Ryan. In August 2017, the Southeastern Promise was announced. This groundbreaking program promises students who opt to participate that there will be no tuition increases and classes will be available to ensure their degree completion in four years. Students agree to maintain good standing, a minimum GPA, and earn at least three hours each year.

In March 2020, in the face of the growing COVID-19 pandemic, Southeastern undertook the monumental task of moving all of its classes and other operations to remote in less than a week's time. The university subsequently moved all its Summer classes to remote. The fall semester saw a variety of course delivery methods including face-to-face, virtual, 100% online, and various combinations. In an effort to further combat the spread of COVID-19, students did not return after Thanksgiving break and final examinations were administered remotely.

As COVID continued to affect Southeastern's community in 2021, Hurricane Ida made a near direct hit on Southeastern in the fall. The storm caused significant damage to multiple trees and buildings. However, despite the damage and extended power outages, Southeastern was able to recover quickly and welcome its students back resuming classes within three weeks.

In Fall of 2024, Southeastern kicked off its Centennial celebrations which will have a variety of events and specials throughout the year; culminating in its 100th anniversary celebration in Fall of 2025.

Since 1925, many dedicated individuals have led Southeastern from a junior college to the vibrant university it is today. Those individuals who have served as a Southeastern President are: Linus A. Sims, Yves Leon Fontenot, J. Leon Clark, George W. Bond, Gladney Jack Tinsley, Luther Dyson, Clark LeBlanc Barrow, J.B. Wooley, Clea Parker, J. Larry Crain, G. Warren Smith, Sally Clausen, Randy Moffett, John Crain and William Wainwright.