“Let us not yet declare victory…”

The Administrations of Martin J. Anisman, Robert K. Marks, & James F. Gaertner, 1989-present

The closer history moves toward current events, the more difficult it becomes to project the historicity of recent experiences. Analogously, it is difficult to know how the rock will affect the pond until all the ripples have spread as far as they can go. Nevertheless, Sam Houston State University continues to make a big splash, and the predictors of historical significance are everywhere to be seen. Nothing is more telling than the way the school has stayed its course under three chief executives in the brief span of fifteen years. In part, it is a tribute to the skillful men who have recently headed the institution. At the same time, a common and ongoing effort to keep the school’s mission on course has certainly achieved its own momentum. While each president has possessed a unique vision of the “big picture,” they have all been swept along by imperatives to develop programs capable of preparing graduates for a changing job market, to attract and retain outstanding faculty, to upgrade and expand the physical plant, and, above all, to secure funds to make sure that all those other goals move forward.

Each of the chief executives can point with pride to particular accomplishments. Just as often their successes have been the result of continuing the actions initiated by a predecessor. In that way the university has moved forward without breaking stride, and that provides the true measure of their effectiveness. Take the sports program, for example. Each of the three recent presidents has contributed seamlessly to making the department a model for scholar-athletes.

When Marty Anisman came on board he found a program that was in compliance with NCAA regulations, but not performing at the same academic level as the rest of the university. The department was also grappling with a growing deficit. Moreover, many students wondered aloud why they should have to pay fees to support a program in which they had no interest. The president’s solution was not to cut back, but to upgrade. Anisman believed that only a healthier program would bring it more attention, and as a result, more money. Boostering the concept of the “front porch,” he proclaimed that “athletics is the
only activity that attracts a large number of students, faculty, administrators and the community."

The program responded in any number of ways. Only two years after Anisman laid bare his disappointment in the department’s academic progress, sixteen Sam Houston athletes representing football, volleyball, and cross-country, led the Southland Conference’s "All-Academic Team." Through the subsequent years every sport has produced its classroom stars, and each president has furthered the cause. Bob Marks named academic advisor Chris Thompson assistant athletic director, adding resonance to the important role she has played in making the "All-Academic Team" one title the Bearkats have come to own. And while Anisman was regrettably compelled to cut the budget, both Bob Marks and Jim Gaertner threw their weight behind efforts to raise funds through contributions. A donation of $100,000 worth of land in 1996 by former lettermen Don Sanders was matched by the school as part of a million-dollar endowment campaign, providing just one indicator of executive commitment.

Of course, nothing succeeds like success. Competing against schools with open enrollment policies assures that not every season will find the Bearkats on top of the standings, but they have still managed to win their share of titles and important games. When "Air McNair" and Alcorn State came to Huntsville in 1994 expecting to roll up another victim, 16,148 fans overflowed Bowers Stadium to cheer Sam Houston on to an upset of the NFL-bound Steve McNair and his Braves, televised live on ABC. Both Bearkat football and basketball have parlayed conference titles into post-season play, the gridders making it all the way to the NCAA Division I-AA title game in 2001, and the roundballers breaking into the NCAA tournament in 2003. When Rice won the national baseball championship in 2003, the Bearkats accounted for one of the Houston team’s few blemishes, making the Owls the best team in the whole country—and, arguably, most of Texas!

Not long after ascending to the presidency of Sam Houston, Jim Gaertner conceded: "Our image before the general public is closely related to who we play and how we do when we play them..." Leaving no question where he stood, the chief executive broke a broad smile: "I am in favor of support for our athletic program." When the 2005 season begins for Sam Houston’s baseball and softball teams, the first balls will be tossed out on new diamonds behind Bowers Stadium that will represent the finest facilities in the Southland Conference. It will be one of President Gaertner’s signal accomplishments as far as Paul Ridings is concerned. The athletic department’s spokesperson stated: "He is bringing the program into the twenty-first century. The facilities we have now were built in 1948." Ridings explained that one of the department’s goals is to host post-season tournaments. “It’s a big plus when you can play on your own field.”

This recent era began, of course, after Elliott T. Bowers stepped down as president. Immediately, a search committee composed of administrators, faculty, students, and community leaders began receiving applications for his replacement. The list topped 125 by the time the committee began paring down the hopeful candidates. Ultimately, they picked Dr. Martin J. Anisman from among four finalists and forwarded their recommendation to the Board of Regents, which gave its unanimous consent.

Ron Randleman. At a time when some of the country’s leading university football programs are reaping windfalls for doing anything to produce championships, Sam Houston State University can boast that its gridders are champions in their own right for keeping a balanced perspective between athletics and academics. It is part of head coach Ron Randleman’s guiding philosophy. Every player can tell you he has heard the same speech in his first team meeting. It starts out like this: “Your number one priority as a football player at Sam Houston State is to get your degree,” the coach asserts. “The second thing we want you to do is win with class.” To those not accustomed to the rhetoric of the locker room, those words might sound a bit hackneyed, but it is a valid theme, and one that is continually reaffirmed. Whether in victory or defeat—and the Bearkats have enjoyed many victories—they always walk off the field winners in the larger game of life. Randleman and his capable staff make sure of that—and, that, of course, is supposed to be what college athletics is all about.

Going into his thirty-sixth season as a head coach, twenty-two of them with Sam Houston, Coach Randleman ranks second among active NCAA Division I-AA coaches in total victories. Twelve times he has won "Coach-of-the-Year" titles, including 1991 and 2001 when he led the Bearkats to Southland Conference championships. He has produced 178 all-conference selections and sixteen All-Americans. Randleman is also one of the game’s most respected helmsmen as evidenced by his membership on the NCAA Football Rules Committee and his selection to a term as president of the NCAA Division I-AA Football Coaches Association. In 1999 his peers at every level voted him onto the Board of Trustees for the American Football Coaches Association, founded in 1922 by the legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg.

All accolades aside, the bottom line returns to what emerges from the team’s field house on the side of the building that leads to the street. As virtually any professor can attest, Randleman’s young men show up for class, they are respectful and work diligently, and most often those who enter as freshmen scholar-ship athletes graduate at a higher rate than the student body in general. On that measurement alone, Ron Randleman is one of the most successful coaches in the game today.
Bernard G. Johnson Coliseum, after completion in 1977 (top), Anisman 2003 (bottom), the school's largest single private contribution—toward enhancing when the Houston Endowment awarded a million dollars—then Kirkpatrick, proved her worth almost as soon as she got the job, a stronger curriculum. The first development officer, Twila expansion of the physical plant, and seed money for growing for students, endowments for establishing chairs, capital for the of Jim Gaertner, outside gifts have provided scholarship funds through the Bob Marks era and into the present administration a formal soliciting agent was an idea long overdue. Continuing and the federal government. “Whereas Bowers was a Southern gentleman with “vibrancy of the institution,” could not have been more delighted. A New York University Ph.D., Anisman was then serving as vice-president for academic affairs at Springfield College in Massachusetts. “Whereas Bowers was a Southern gentleman with a dry wit and shrewd political sense,” commented an observer close to both men, “Anisman is quick-witted, urbane, and always smiling.” He exuded patience as well. “Sam has been here 110 years and it got to where it is now,” he said, vowing to spend most of his first year listening before shaping his plan for the future. When that time came, the new chief executive proclaimed his primary goal would be to make Sam Houston “the best regional university in the United States.” More specifically he proposed to get there by giving faculty members more opportunities to do research and attend professional meetings. He also believed that increasing undergraduate involvement in the life of the campus and convincing them to remain in Huntsville on the weekends was a way to enhance the school’s ability to recruit prospective students. Anisman had more success with the former than the latter, but as his successors stayed the course, they acted on their own evaluations of what the institution needed, moving Sam Houston steadily forward.

What Anisman did not mention was how he aimed to finance the trip. In fact, one of the first things he heard during his “listening year” was that the hard-pressed legislature, still recovering from the recent oil bust, could ill afford to continue pouring funds into campus expansions. The solution in part came with the creation of an Office of Resource Development and External Relations, whose director would solicit funds from individuals, foundations, and the federal government. While Sam Houston was certainly no stranger to gifts, a formal soliciting agent was an idea long overdue. Continuing through the Bob Marks era and into the present administration of Jim Gaertner, outside gifts have provided scholarship funds for students, endowments for establishing chairs, capital for the expansion of the physical plant, and seed money for growing a stronger curriculum. The first development officer, Twila Kirkpatrick, proved her worth almost as soon as she got the job, when the Houston Endowment awarded a million dollars—then the school’s largest single private contribution—toward enhancing the Honors Program and boosting continuing education in Criminal Justice.

Later, under Bob Marks, the Office of Resource Development and External Relations became the Office of University Advancement, and an associate vice president was added to head the Department of Research and Sponsored Programs. The dual action reflected an even greater priority on finding new sources for supplementing the school’s operations. “The State of Texas gives us enough money to offer quality academic programs,” Marks explained, “but not enough to reach the levels of excellence to which we are committed.” Working independently, but toward the same end, the two institutional agencies brought to Sam Houston a windfall of grants and gifts.

Even a sampling of the resources paints a staggering picture, a mosaic, actually, that reflects the benefactors’ academic interests. Out of a “challenge grant” issued by the Meadows Foundation, furthered by a generous bequest from the estate of Katy and E. Don Walker, Sr., the university’s Sam Houston Memorial Museum was able to build its half-million dollar education center. The 22,000-square-foot facility, which opened in 1995, offers visitors a gallery that changes exhibits regularly, along with a spacious auditorium, classrooms, a gift shop, and offices. Again, in 2003, the museum accepted a $50,000 grant from the Summerlee Foundation that supplemented a renovation of the main building’s rotunda and allowed the completion of new exhibit galleries.

In addition to the bequest for the Katy and E. Don Walker, Sr. Education Center, the estate provided nearly $300,000 to establish a scholarship endowment for English majors with financial needs. Similarly, a $100,000 endowment, created for student scholarships by the estate of Weldon X. Hall, Jr., Class of ’42, became a tribute to the art and English departments that set the course for the benefactor’s career as a structural engineer so long ago. Most of the gifts for establishing scholarships have drawn from a smaller, but no less thoughtful, well of affection for Sam Houston or even particular professors in whose names scholarships have been established. Virtually every department on campus has them. Then, there are groups like the Huntsville Study Club that supports “young women of good character” who graduate from the local high school. In 1993 it raised precisely $16,543.07 from two fund-raising luncheons and the publication of the official Sam Houston Bicentennial Birthday Cookbook. More poignantly, a scholarship was set up in the name of Professor Joan Coffey, who continued teaching history despite a years-long struggle with cancer. Beloved
From its very beginning Sam Houston State has enjoyed the philanthropy of the Gibbs family of Huntsville. Brothers Thomas and Sandford St. John Gibbs formed a partnership in a local mercantile business in 1841 that included “first-citizen” Sam Houston among its regular customers. It was Sandford, though, who joined other local businessmen in purchasing the Austin College property upon that school’s removal to Sherman. Afterward they donated the land and Austin Hall to the state for the creation of the Sam Houston Normal Institute. The brothers established the Gibbs National Bank in 1890, which became the First National in 1922. By then they had bowed out of the mercantile business and concentrated on acquiring land and making investments. Through the years the descendants of Sandford Gibbs, represented by the company, have donated land for campus expansions and to hold for future sale or use. The recently completed Bearkat Village, for example, sits on a portion of land the company transferred to Sam Houston during the 1970s.

Individually, several family members established ties to the school either as students or active supporters, and their generosity has taken many forms. W. S., Jr and Ruth Gibbs began funding scholarships not long after World War II and became involved in special projects such as restoring the biology department’s Warner Herbarium. Later, they endowed a chair in chemistry, appropriately, since Ruth Gibbs was the daughter of Dr. Claude Bolin Farrington, who taught the subject from 1901 to 1948. It was for the man whom students referred to affectionately as “Daddy” Farrington—but only when he was out of earshot—that the Farrington Building was named. Shortly before W. S., Jr. died in 1982, the couple divided their 1,435-acre “High Meadows Ranch,” northwest of Huntsville, among Sam Houston and two other institutions. That transaction resulted in the sale of Country Campus, whose proceeds were used to purchase the interests of the other beneficiaries. Today the ranch is the center of operations for the agriculture department and a popular spot for university-sponsored functions such as picnics and hayrides.

J. Philip Gibbs, Jr., his wife, Lu Ellen, and his sister Virginia Gibbs Smyth, along with Sandford Gibbs descendant Pauline B. Aker, have also awarded dozens of scholarships over the years to deserving students. Most recently, through the generosity of Sam Houston alumna Lu Ellen Gibbs, the President’s Speakers Series has brought to campus such prominent lecturers as former football coach Gene Stallings; dessert queen and entrepreneur Debbi Fields; and Sam Houston biographer James Haley. Yet another family member, Mary Gibbs Jones, became the wife of noted businessman and entrepreneur Debbi Fields, and Sam Houston biographer James Haley. Yet another family member, Mary Gibbs Jones, became the wife of noted businessman and entrepreneur Debbi Fields, and Sam Houston biographer James Haley. Yet another family member, Mary Gibbs Jones, became the wife of noted businessman and entrepreneur Debbi Fields, and Sam Houston biographer James Haley. Yet another family member, Mary Gibbs Jones, became the wife of noted businessman and entrepreneur Debbi Fields, and Sam Houston biographer James Haley.

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Anisman and Marks routinely topped $2 million dollars annually. More recently a renewed focus has pushed that yearly figure to almost $3 million. Through their gifts, alumni are increasingly communicating that somewhere along the way someone helped them, and they realize how important their education and the college experience was to their lives. The growing number of non-alumni donors have expressed that their contributions were made in the spirit of recognizing Sam Houston State for raising its standards and quality of education as well as to reward the accomplishments of the faculty and staff.

No doubt, elements of both sentiments entered into the decision of an alumnus who followed up a $1 million endowment to establish a chair of banking in 1996 with a commitment to fund need-based scholarships for promising business majors. The announcement came shortly after the College of Business gained accreditation. It was an accomplishment that relatively few universities achieve. According to Bob Marks, among the requirements for gaining accreditation, “almost your entire faculty had to be publishing regularly in refereed journals and doing research.”

The stunning gift and commitment were even more remarkable for the low profile the principal benefactor insisted on maintaining. Even though the business administration building was renamed Smith-Hutson, “Mr. Smith” prefers to remain anonymous. What is clear, however, is that between fifty and eighty Smith-Hutson scholars are on campus each year, making good use of their full scholarships.

Equally important to the university’s progress have been grants from federal, state, and private sources, many of them procured through the Department of Research and Sponsored Programs. Although none can be called typical, a $15,000 grant from NASA to test a navigational instrument for the space shuttle called “Star Tracker” certainly piques curiosity. Officials at the Johnson Space Center selected SHSU and the Country Campus Observatory, they said, “because of its ideal location and superior facilities.” Others range from the peculiar, like the one physics professor Charles Meitzler received for developing “an H ion source and low energy beam transport system,” to self-explanatory grants that have assisted such endeavors as bilingual education.

Occasionally, the grants that support departmental programs have exceeded a million dollars. Not surprisingly, the Criminal Justice Center seems always near the head of the line.
Seven-figure awards have established new programs with titles like "National Institute for Victims Studies" and "Texas Regional Community Policing Institute." One of the largest recent grants—$10 million—allowed the school’s Texas Regional Institute for Environmental Studies (TRIES) to perform field projects at sites as far away as the Seymour-Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina and Camp Navajo outside Flagstaff, Arizona. Awards for various projects in education, moreover, have allowed the department to set a course for the future, rather than having to wait and react. A $6.7 million partner grant, for example, joined Sam Houston with A&M, SMU, and the Aldine I.S.D., in 2003 to explore ways to improve teacher effectiveness.

The proliferation of grants along with the expansion of academic programs signals a complexity that has presented students with options that can seem overwhelming. Neither is campus life as simple as it once was. At a social level, freshmen still arrive in a kind of twilight zone between adolescence and adulthood, but a backdrop of seriousness has left them little room for feeling out the boundaries of their values. "Boys will be boys" and "girls will be girls" no longer covers the mistakes of youth. Like every American college and university, Sam Houston State has made “awareness” a constant theme, always reminding that behavior carries consequences. Alcohol abuse, “date rape,” AIDS, the hallucinogen ecstasy, fraternity and sorority hazing, sexual harassment, and racial tolerance have all provided topics for school-sponsored forums. Despite occasional scoffing, the steady drumbeat has nevertheless reached its target audience.

On the other hand, little of that matters to non-traditional students, a segment of the university population that continues to increase. Many of them have full-time jobs and families and go to school part-time or at night. After twenty-plus years Mary Reut-Overman, a 45-year-old English and journalism major, decided to reenroll in 1995 when her children grew up and left home. "I was bored," she remarked, "so I thought it would be a good time to come back." What struck her immediately was a sense that she was more focused on her studies and knew exactly what she wanted to pursue. At first, being surrounded by so many young people made her self-conscious until she looked more closely. Everywhere, it seemed, there were others just like her.

As the ranks of non-traditional students grow, they no longer attracted stares from the “twenty-somethings” who sat beside them in class. Except, perhaps, for Laura Thresher Johnston. At 85, she became the oldest graduate in the school’s history—by far. Spanish professor David Gerling estimated: “Laura has a youthful outlook…that the other students picked up on immediately.” Then again, maybe she was drawing on a source of energy that traditional students cannot tap. “When you’re older, you don’t have the tension that the younger people do,” she explained. “I don’t have to go out and get a job. I don’t have to prove a doggone thing. I’m just going to school for fun.” When the day of her commencement arrived during the spring of 2001, Mrs. Johnston even pulled Sam Houston into the national spotlight with her. Across the land, radio listeners tuned into Paul Harvey’s Saturday broadcast heard all about her, and many others read an Associated Press story describing her accomplishment.

Certainly, Sam Houston State University has attracted a diverse student body. The many constituencies overlap in social functions and study groups, and in activities such as drama or ROTC where they represent their academic interests, and, of course, in endeavors like sports where they represent the university itself. There is also a consciousness of race that demands acknowledgment. In that regard, both students and the institution have actively responded in a number of ways.

When, in 1990, a series of critical letters appeared in the Houstonian regarding the school’s racial environment, a forum was called to air out the issues. Columnist Molly Ivins, who happened to be a guest lecturer in the journalism department that week, attended the meeting, later proclaiming it a “three-hour celebration of democracy, diversity, dialogue, passion, common sense, and hilarity.” About four hundred “kids,” as she called them, including “a good showing of whites,” spoke their minds and tried earnestly to find a common ground. What struck Ivins as the most significant aspect of the forum was that the African-American students needed to sort out for themselves “the differences between pride, militance and intolerance.” It has become an exercise that every generation of students must attend. The many constituencies overlap in social functions and study groups, and in activities such as drama or ROTC where they represent their academic interests, and, of course, in endeavors like sports where they represent the university itself. There is also a consciousness of race that demands acknowledgment. In that regard, both students and the institution have actively responded in a number of ways.
For many students and their parents, however, “Encuentro,” co-hosted by the university and the Huntsville Arts Commission since 1997, imparts a sense of empowerment all its own. History professor Carolina Castillo-Crimm, one of the event’s founders and certainly its driving force, believed that by contracting the Hispanic culture to its *tejano* contributions, the conference would help its participants to understand what an important part of the community they really are. Those who attend, Dr. Crimm promises annually, will “learn about more than just festivals and food.” From the beginning, the imaginative approach was made even more novel by holding panels in both English and Spanish and tackling issues such as health care, welfare, and how to function in the mainstream economy in addition to celebrating the lives, letters, and history of the *tejano* culture.

One of the remaining hurdles in overcoming issues of race regards the recruitment of minority faculty and women. Compared to Texas universities similar in size and mission, SHSU has enjoyed more success than most. Yet to the extent that the school has sometimes fallen short of its planning goals set by the federal Office of Contract Compliance, it cannot be faulted for a lack of effort. Sam Houston must still compete with schools across the nation for a limited pool of qualified candidates. Too many recently minted Ph.D.s who know Texas only by its history and what they see in the media and popular culture do not bother to apply. Unlike earlier times, recent students at least seem to acknowledge that the university has strived mightily to attract qualified black, Hispanic, and Asian-American faculty as well as women of all races. Dr. Genevieve Brown, for example, became the school’s first woman academic dean when she took over the College of Education and Applied Science. She won the post, however, on the strength of her record.

The institution has had more success attracting minority students. In fact, in 1995 Sam Houston was among a handful of institutions to receive recognition from the Coordinating Board of the Texas College and University System for creating “a positive multicultural environment.” In making its determination, the board had examined a five-year period, considering both numbers and the conditions that prevailed on each university campus. What made the accomplishment more impressive was that the gains came at no sacrifice to the rising standards for admissions. A gratified President Anisman accepted the award on behalf of the school. It fulfilled a promise he had made in his inaugural speech six years ago.
earlier "to utilize our institution...to further the cause of social justice."

The acceptance would be one of the last times Dr. Anisman represented Sam Houston State University. Unknown to all but a few of his closest associates, the president was burdened by some personal troubles that he felt were beginning to interfere with his ability to administer effectively. Scarcely over a month into the fall semester of 1995, he abruptly announced his resignation. From Huntsville to Austin the news came as a shock to his admirers, many who expressed publicly their admiration, not just for his record of service, but also for the engaging manner they had come to value.

With Anisman's departure, all eyes turned to Bobby K. Marks. His rise through the ranks revealed a dazzling resume. Starting out as a professor in the business department, he became dean of his college, and in fifteen years he doubled the number of programs. During that time the business faculty almost tripled, and the number of majors grew accordingly. In eleven years as Vice President of Academic Affairs, he raised university admissions standards three times, yet managed to attract a student increase by initiating a creative recruitment program. He was largely responsible for assuring the creation of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs as well, which he followed up with a system of faculty awards whose highest honor carried a medallion for Excellence in Research. His achievements were all the more impressive, because of the high regard in which the faculty held him.

Certainly Marks was the right man to serve as acting president. Yet, he let the Board of Regents know that he would not accept the position unless they allowed him to hit the ground running. There were so many loose ends. Anisman had run into difficulty getting the Coordinating Board to approve Sam Houston's second doctorate program. Delaying action further would surely jeopardize the proposal. The Estill Building and the Administration Building were both in desperate need of renovations. Save for the museum's education center, moreover, the campus had not seen a major construction project break ground since the Bowers era. It would take a savvy chief executive to push those kinds of measures to their conclusion, and Marks did not want the institution to be handicapped because he was keeping another man's seat warm. 'The Board of Regents not only assented to Marks' demand, but also let the interim president know he could be a candidate for the permanent position.'

The most pressing business concerned gaining approval for Sam Houston's second doctorate program, an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. A review team had endorsed the plan in 1990, but the Coordinating Board, reluctant to add any new programs, put it on hold indefinitely. The chief obstacle concerned the oversight council's classification of the institutions under its purview as either "single doctorate" schools or higher. Additional prestige meant a corresponding investment.

Quite simply, commented Dr. Marks, in the estimation of the Coordinating Board, "we were a single doctorate institution." In the months before Anisman's resignation, the state legislature had approved funding for the new program, but the council gave every indication that it was going to hold the line. At that point, Marks asked Congressman Jim Turner to write a letter to the Commissioner of Higher Education. "I asked him to appeal to the commissioner and tell him about our historic role as Texas's first teachers college and that sort of thing," Marks explained. The president's case was so fervent that Turner asked him to draft a letter for his signature.

The Coordinating Board was won over, and in that way Sam Houston got its new doctorate, admitting its first candidate in April 1997. Later, at a meeting in Galveston, Marks ran into Commissioner Don Brown, and in the course of their conversation, he asked: "Say, Bob, you haven't written letters for any congressmen lately, have you?" Caught off-guard, the president awkwardly "fessed up," extracting a rolling laugh out of the high-ranking official. As it turned out, it was Brown's secretary who had grown sufficiently accustomed to Marks' impassioned writing style over the years to know one of his letters when she saw it.

Even before Educational Leadership gained approval, a Ph.D. in forensic psychology was already in the works. This third program, approved ten months after the second one, placed the school in the Carnegie system's "Doctoral Intensive" category, moving Sam Houston State University into the arena of comprehensive research institutions. Forensic psychology provided a fitting complement to the work of the Criminal Justice Center. Its primary function applies the science of psychology to criminal investigations, ranging from helping police officers adapt to stress to profiling murder suspects.

In the meantime, the Board of Regents installed Bob Marks as eleventh president of the institution. At his inauguration, attended by system chancellor Lamar Urbanovsky, President-Emeritus...
Elliott T. Bowers, and descendants of General Sam Houston, he shared his administrative philosophy, a belief “that authority should be vested at the lowest level at which decisions can effectively be made.” Marks then expressed his goal to put his words into action: “My intention is to operate on a decentralized basis wherever it is practical to do so.”

That philosophy, however, actually figured most prominently at the top. As he vested more autonomy in his deans, the concept of “colleges” within the university came to take on more significance. The material goals Marks outlined in his speech concerned areas he had already begun to address while he was still acting president. At the top of the list was his desire to take fuller advantage of available technology. Like so many institutions, Sam Houston moved from the bar ditch of the information highway into the fast lane seemingly overnight. In 1990, for example, the Criminal Justice Center was expressing its gratitude to IBM for a thirty-six-month loan of thirty personal computers and an AS-400 mini-computer that provided the system’s nexus. “With this donation…we have the hardware to take advantage of everything out there,” expressed CJC director Charles Fried. Seven years later there was a lot more “out there” than almost anyone had dreamed, and virtually all professors on campus had access to most of it from computers atop their desks.

The transformation did not come without intense planning and execution, however. Behind the force of a $2.5 million grant, Ken Craycraft, Dean of Education and Applied Sciences, chaired the Technology Implementation Committee that explored ways to do precisely what its title suggested. When President Marks told the faculty: “What I want is for you to get excited about it,” there was no doubt a multitude of groans, even if they were swallowed out of respect for the zealous chief executive. Yet sooner than most of the faculty would have predicted, they were learning about search engines and “Power Point” presentations and lining up for laptops. Indeed, they had gotten excited.

Some departments introduced computer technology into their classrooms faster than others. But eventually all would find it impossible to sustain progressive programs without taking advantage of the growing bank of resources. Among several grant-supported programs in education, for example, the college joined a collaborative technological teacher induction program with the Region VI Education Service Center and Texas A&M. Even where there was no grant money to be won, the college remained well ahead of the technological curve.

The history department also responded to the computer age with alacrity. After exploring several options, it the saw potential of going online as a solution to the stagnating numbers in its graduate program. Concentrating on military history at a time when other institutions were shying away from the popular field, it soon boasted the first accredited online graduate program in the United States. Students from across the country and as far away as Germany and the Persian Gulf soon tripled the department’s graduate program. Concentrating on military history at a time when other institutions were shying away from the popular field, it soon boasted the first accredited online graduate program in the United States. Students from across the country and as far away as Germany and the Persian Gulf soon tripled the department’s graduate program. Concentrating on military history at a time when other institutions were shying away from the popular field, it soon boasted the first accredited online graduate program in the United States. Students from across the country and as far away as Germany and the Persian Gulf soon tripled the department’s graduate program. Concentrating on military history at a time when other institutions were shying away from the popular field, it soon boasted the first accredited online graduate program in the United States. Students from across the country and as far away as Germany and the Persian Gulf soon tripled the department’s graduate program.

University Center, The Woodlands
into cyberspace from any place on campus. A campaign to outfit classrooms with the latest technology has also enhanced the learning environment by allowing instructors to present material in any number of visual and audio formats. The ability to post syllabi, assignments, and even tests online and for professors and students to communicate electronically is now taken for granted.

Another opportunity that expanded Sam Houston's horizons came almost unexpectedly, when the North Harris Community College District assembled a consortium of senior colleges to teach classes at the University Center in The Woodlands. President Marks exclaimed: “We found ourselves in a situation where we were either going to get run over by it, or become part of it.” North Harris had been supplying more transfer students to Sam Houston than any other junior college district, and with Texas A&M, Prairie View, the University of Houston system, and Texas Southern all expressing an avid interest in joining the new program, Marks’ assessment was no exaggeration. “We decided right there to become a key part of that center,” the president insisted.

When the fall semester of 1997 began, approximately 2,000 students attended classes in a Conroe strip mall. Most of the undergraduates had two years of community college behind them, lived in the area, and held full-time jobs. The Center gave them an opportunity to enroll in any of the classes offered by the participating four-year institutions without ever having to step foot on a main campus. After the Thanksgiving break, the operation moved into the University Center's permanent home, a three-story, 78,000 square-foot building located in the pine forest adjoining Montgomery College. What the facility lacked in resources, it made up for in creativity. In place of a library, for instance, it offered a resource room full of computers linked to area databases from which students could order books via interlibrary loan. In its seven years as a participant, Sam Houston has taken full advantage of the opportunity, as Marks promised. In fact, he said, “we ended up producing more credit hours than the others combined.”

Although local bonds and the generosity of The Woodlands Corporation, headed by energy giant George Mitchell, were largely responsible for financing the University Center, the complex signaled a more inviting climate for new construction. The year before the Center opened, the Board of Regents approved $10 million worth of renovations to bolster some of Sam Houston's.
After recovering, he was meeting with some members of the Student Government Association, Marks was talking at length about all the people who had made everything possible. Commenting particularly on what they had done to make every building accessible, he concluded: "For a campus built on a hill, we're pretty well set." Suddenly, from the back of the room, a wee voice intoned: "Sir, would you be willing to tour the campus in a wheelchair?" Marks was stuck. Of course, there was only one answer, so directly he found himself sitting at the head of an entourage looking over a course some of his wheelchair-bound companions had mapped out for him.

The president was all smiles as he led the group across campus. After a while of huffing and puffing, he looked up to see one of the students rolling up next to him: "Hey, Dr. Marks, they slipped you a Mickey on that wheelchair," the young man said. "That's the kind that nurses use to push patients out into the parking lot." Sure enough, related Marks, "I looked down at his chair, and there was a big difference—but, I made it!" he said with obvious pride. The president insisted on opening all the doors himself, and was one of the first of several major projects, setting a course for new construction that rivaled the work of Elliott Bowers.

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“Sam can-do!” During the summer of 2002, Bearkat student Max Mejia of Houston was looking forward to his final semester in the fall. He was one course away from graduating with a degree in Radio & Television. While waiting tables at Champps Americana in Houston, his girlfriend and fellow Sam Houston graduate Pam Hess waited for him to finish his shift.

Sitting next to her, a gentleman with a Fox Sports Southwest logo on his shirt sat reading the sports page. Pam introduced herself and asked if he worked for the company. It turned out that he was Tony Martinez, news director for the Southwest Region. They began visiting, and, of course, Pam told him about Max. Martinez asked her to introduce them, and the two hit it off immediately. What resulted was a casual interview.

Max is what you might call a “sports nut”; in fact, he knew immediately who Tony Martinez was, because he had seen him do interviews with athletes on the Fox sports channel. Max also felt that the training he had received under the direction of Dr. Maryjo Cochran prepared him for this moment. The news director was impressed with the range of experience he had gained in the RTV department; the kinds of skills he possessed; how knowledgeable he was about the industry and sports in general; and, how much he knew about the equipment and techniques they used. Max learned later that what impressed the man most was his critique of an interview Martinez had recently conducted. It was not just about the exchange between interviewer and subject, but also the lighting, the camera work, and the technical support that made it successful.

That night Max went home with Martinez’s business card and an invitation to visit the Houston office. After being introduced to the staff, he got an on-the-spot offer to intern with Fox Sports Southwest. It was an opportunity that Cochran readily accepted as that final course credit. Immediately, Max determined to make himself indispensable. He came in early and stayed late, always asking: “What else can I do for you?” Soon, the senior members of the staff would come to work and find that Max had already prepared “voiceovers,” trimmed irrelevant footing, did editing jobs, and many of the tedious responsibilities that are not difficult, but take up valuable time. On his own, he learned how to work the network’s $40,000 camera, feed satellite links to other studios, and how to read codes that operated other equipment. His intern duties expanded to covering the Houston Texans games from the sidelines at Reliant Stadium, coordinating interviews with players, and running equipment. Even more memorable than interviewing first-round draft pick David Carr was keeping former president George Bush company, who was a Fox guest at one of the games.

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Nothing, of course, can change the profile of a university more than transforming the landscape around it. Nevertheless, Sam Houston has continued to make academic progress that will be every bit as significant. A fourth doctorate was recently added under the Department of Education Leadership and Counseling. The program has drawn great interest because of the demand for counselor educators and because it would be the only one offered within driving distance of Houston. Doctoral programs in Math Education and Literacy Leadership are currently going through the approval process, and other departments are laying plans for introducing terminal degrees as well. For a fourth time in the recent era, academic standards have been raised, too, again with a corresponding increase in enrollment.

Gaertner has raised the bar for faculty as well. While teaching remains the standard for calculating merit, publishing has become exposure; and, improving the campus atmosphere and its sense of community and culture.

If the recent past is any indication of what lies in store, then Nancy Neal will have been right on target. In just three brief years President Gaertner has presided over one of the most breathtaking times of progress in the school’s history, the most obvious being the continuation of the campus master plan, named “Y2K+10.” There are brand-new buildings, buildings just breaking ground, and other buildings on the drawing board. Currently, two residential projects, the apartment-style Bearkat Village I & II and Sam Houston Village—at a combined price of $33.8 million—represents the first new campus housing construction since 1962. Add the costs of renovations to existing residence facilities recently completed or underway, and the amount climbs to $49 million. A $36 million investment in academic space includes two new structures with a price tag of $24 million. Renovations and additions to science, business, and education buildings come in at almost $12 million. A parking garage, expansion of the HKC, a visitors center that will also house alumni relations, the new softball-baseball complex, and the first dining facility on the south side of campus totaling $21 million cap the execution of the master plan—for now. Architect-planner Ralph Spencer cautions: “Many things happen, and do.” Like when the school’s first master plan fell apart at the onset of World War II. Nevertheless, the future for Sam Houston State University has never appeared brighter. President Gaertner vowed at his investiture ceremony: “Let us not yet declare victory.” The substantial progress toward bringing the master plan to fruition since that time certainly attests that enhancing the physical plant is one area that represents a long and committed campaign.

Anisman, Marks, & Gaertner
To help the faculty achieve those goals, and, consequently to help attract better students, the president has recommended a reduction in teaching loads to allow professors more time to perform research. Just beginning to unfold is the work of committees assembled to study the quality of SHSU’s learning environment, to explore ways to expand international programs, and to study admissions standards and student retention in an effort to raise those bars in the future.

With so many changes taking place, an air of anticipation seems to pervade the atmosphere on campus. It has expressed itself in such simple manifestations as wearing the orange and exhibiting SHSU decals on the windshields of cars and pickups. In loftier expressions, students have become more involved in the life of the campus, and increasingly they are beginning to realize they can have a more rewarding time sticking around for the weekend than going home. Wherever new paths lead, let no one forget that this place called Sam Houston State University honors Sam Houston the man.

Scarcely a decade ago the institution was preparing to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth. Noted author and historian Greg Cantrell, called him a man of “valor… wisdom…and personal integrity.” Houston, he wrote, “overcame a lack of formal education to become a statesman. He overcame a failed marriage to become a model husband and father. He overcame alcoholism to become a sober pillar of the church.” Our own shortcomings may not be as great, but whatever they are, his life instructs us to face adversity and strive for those things that make us better people. The mission of any university is not just to teach, but also to sand off the rough edges of character. Sam Houston’s greatness, moreover, “came from his willingness to take unpopular stands rather than follow the crowd.” In this imperfect world, he seems the perfect man to represent those who call his namesake school “alma mater.”

James F. Gaertner. James F. Gaertner, a native of Yoakum, admitted that when he was growing up he was more interested in athletics than academics. “If we had the sport, I played it,” he said. That did not stop him from making the National Honor Society, however, or becoming president of his senior class. As a first-generation college student, Gaertner arrived in Huntsville not knowing what to expect. “Sam Houston just changed my life,” he declared. As an undergraduate, he worked his way through school as a clerk in the campus bookstore. He also met his wife Nancy on the campus. Today, forty-one years after they were married, the Gaertners have three children and two grandchildren. Daughters Denise and Amanda reside in San Antonio. Amanda, the youngest, is completing her education at the University of Texas at San Antonio. No doubt they enjoy visiting their oldest, Scott, the most. Not because he is the favorite, but because they must travel to Hawaii, where he has a doctor’s practice.

Jim Gaertner, as current president, has not only raised the academic standards of the university, but has also elevated the expectations of students and alumni alike. The events surrounding the 125th anniversary of the institution’s founding have cultivated a sense of anticipation that suggests SHSU is ready to make another great leap, this time toward becoming one of the country’s premier regional universities.

Prior to becoming President of Sam Houston State University, Gaertner was Interim Provost at UTSA and also served as Vice President for Academic Affairs. He was also a professor at the University of Notre Dame, where in 1979 he embarked on his administrative career upon becoming Director of the London MBA Program at the school’s England Campus.

Dr. Gaertner has also maintained his connections to the business world, complementing the many academic leadership positions he has held. He was on the audit staff of accounting firm KPMG in Houston and became comptroller for the Tex Tan Welhausen Division of the Tandy Corporation from 1968-1973. In 1990 he joined the Board of Directors of Tandy Brands Accessories, Inc., and became its Chairman in 1997.