

# Palo Alto celebrates 25 years of success and growth

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Palo Alto College is celebrating its 25th Anniversary this school year, and this silver celebration gives students, faculty and staff an opportunity to review the many accomplishments and improvements that the college has experienced since 1985.

Palo Alto College got its start somewhere other than the campus where many students now attend classes. According to the Palo Alto College 2008-2009 Fact Book, many of the first classes that Palo Alto students

attended were held at high schools and military installations all around town. With 231 students enrolled, Dr. Terry Dicianna, Palo Alto College’s founding president, and a handful of newly appointed administrators started building the foundation that continues to support the Palo Alto College community today.

“Once you have the facilities, they will come,” said Karen Marcotte, a professor of Humanities and History at Palo Alto College. Marcotte was among the first faculty hired to teach at Palo Alto College 25 years ago.

The current campus was opened

in January of 1987 with 2,500 students enrolled. According to Dicianna, he had no trouble finding dedicated teachers who wanted to be part of the new and steadily growing educational community. Dr. Rafael Castillo, an English and Humanities professor at Palo Alto College, was the first professor to be hired, according to Dicianna.

“When the campus opened, it was like Camelot,” said Castillo, who enjoys that the campus has an old mission appearance that is both visually and architecturally attractive.

Many of the administrators, including Dicianna, wanted the campus to symbolize an opportunity for all students, and they also wanted the campus to become part of the South Side community.

Dicianna said, “We wanted them (students) to be able to drive down the street and say ‘That’s my college.’”

Today, the Palo Alto College campus is much larger and more developed than it was 25 years ago. Also, with enrollment up to 9,024 students as of September 10, 2010, the campus continues to grow and flourish. A number of changes have taken place on the campus throughout the years, allowing the campus to adjust to the needs of the growing student body and their steady appetite for higher education.

According to Virginia “Ginger” Carnes, the coordinator of publications and president of Staff Council, the General Education Building, now called San Jacinto Hall, was built in January of 1991, doubling the classroom space on campus.

In January of 1992, the Natatorium/Gymnasium complex joined the campus.

In August of 1997, Palo Alto College reached out to its students and their need for expanded research facilities with the addition of The George Ozuna Jr. Library, a place where students may conduct research as well as tap into technology.

In addition, The Ray Ellison Family Center opened in October of 2001, providing educational childcare to the Palo Alto College community.

According to the Fall 2010 Convocation Slideshow, the additions of these buildings increased the square footage of the campus from 140,793 square feet in 1987 to 522,163 square

feet in 2010, a 270 percent increase.

According to Marcotte, every addition to the campus is a landmark of the 25-year anniversary. She said that the campus has changed from a great big open pasture to what it is today.

Carnes said, “There is more of a collegiate environment.” She believes that through the development and improvements to the campus, students don’t see Palo Alto as a commuter college.

“They see it as a place where they can spend the whole day,” said Carnes.

In the Fall of 2005, Palo Alto launched “The Gateway to College Program,” which is a program that gives students who were unable to complete high school and obtain a high school diploma the opportunity to do so on campus while gaining college credit it in the process. This program diversified the student population even further and extended the reach of Palo Alto College in a big way. The Veterinary Technology Building opened in 2008, housing the only program of its kind in the region, according to Carnes.

Many of Palo Alto College’s accomplishments and developments have set the pace for subsequent programs and ideas in other schools and educational institutions.

Looking toward the future, Palo Alto continues to find ways to connect with its students.

Dr. Stacey Johnson, vice president of Academic Affairs, said, “PAC’s role must be to continue to be a beacon of hope and light to the community through the power of education. What makes PAC special is that it was the community itself that brought the political will to ensure PAC was established.”

The establishment and success of Palo Alto College cannot be credited to just one person. However, none of the school’s success would have been possible without the persistence and efforts of an organization called Communities Organized for Public Service or COPS, according to both Carnes and Dicianna.

Thanks to this organization that pushed for a community college to be built on the city’s South Side, Palo Alto College has become “the heart of the community” that steadily beats to the rhythm of the successes of its students.



Palo Alto in 1987

Photo courtesy of the Public Relations Department at Palo Alto College



Palo Alto today

Photo courtesy of Google Earth

## Palo Alto Timeline

- November 7, 1982: COPS gain the support of candidate Mark White for a campus on the South Side
- March 19, 1983: Palo Alto College is chartered by the Texas Legislature
- July-August 1985: Palo Alto’s first fall registration with 231 students enrolled
- January 10, 1987: The Palo Alto College campus opens with enrollment up to 2,500
- April 1987: First PACFest takes place
- May 1989: Palo Alto College receives full accreditation from SACS
- October 1993: Palo Alto adopts “the heart of the community” as its official slogan
- April 1996: The Frank M. Tejada scholarship fund is initiated for Palo Alto students
- August 2000: Texas A&M University-Kingsville begins holding classes for students in Palo Alto classrooms
- October 9, 2001: The Ray Ellison Family Center opens
- December 2002: Palo Alto receives word of SACS reaccreditation
- 2008: Veterinary Technology Building opens on campus
- Fall 2010: Botanical Gardens added
- Fall 2010: Enrollment reaches 9,024
- October 4-6, 2011: Next SACS site visit

Source: “Important Historical Dates” from Ginger Carnes