

The History of the University

In 1909, the General Assembly of the State of Tennessee moved “to provide for the improvement of the system of Public Education of the State of Tennessee, that is to say, to establish a General Education Fund.” The major thrust of this “improvement” embodied in the legislative act that was to become known as the General Education Bill of 1909 was the establishment of three normals or teacher-training institutions. Following the intent of the act that one was to be located in each of the grand divisions of the state, the State Board of Education assigned the middle Tennessee institution to Murfreesboro.

Opening on September 11, 1911, with a two-year program for training teachers, Middle Tennessee State Normal School evolved into a four-year teachers college in 1925 with the power of granting the Bachelor of Science degree. In 1943, the General Assembly designated the institution a state college. This new status marked a sharp departure from the founding purpose and opened the way for expanding curricular offerings and programs. In 1965, the institution was advanced to university status.

During the progressive movement from a two-year normal to a university, several significant milestones may be identified. In 1936, the Bachelor of Arts program was added. Responding to the expressed needs of the institution’s service area, the Graduate School was established in 1951. To effect better communications and improve administrative supervision, the schools concept was introduced in 1962.

As Middle Tennessee State University developed and grew, the prestigious Doctor of Arts program was added in 1970 and the Specialist in Education in 1974. These two degree programs became attractive centerpieces for other efforts to improve and enhance institutional roles. Library resources were dramatically increased and sophisticated computer services were developed to aid instruction and administration. A highly trained faculty enabled the University to continue growth in program offerings. In 1991, the University’s six schools—five undergraduate and the graduate school—became colleges.



In 1998, MTSU’s Honors Program became the Honors College, the first in the state. In 2006, the Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service changed to the College of Continuing Education and Distance Learning. In 2002, approval was granted to redesignate three D.A. programs to Doctor of Philosophy programs, expanding the progressive institution’s offerings.

Since 1911, MTSU has graduated more than 90,000 students. Despite the University’s growth from a campus of 100 acres, 125 students, and a faculty of 19, to an academic city of over 500 acres, more than 22,000 students, and a faculty of over 900, the institution is still essentially a “people’s university” with a concern for the diverse needs of the area that it serves. In the 1980s and ‘90s, the institution dedicated resources to become a leader in technology, both in the classroom and in many services to students. In 1986, James McGill Buchanan (’40) became the first MTSU alumnus to be awarded the Nobel Prize. Buchanan received the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his development of the theory of public choice, a way of studying the expenditure of public funds.

