

COLLEGES AS CATALYSTS FOR LAND DEVELOPMENT IN THE U.S.

FOCUS ON NORTH & EAST TEXAS



LANDZILLE

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INTRODUCTION



Colleges and universities are more than centers of education—they are powerful forces for local transformation. From the early days of founding institutions on undeveloped land to today’s master-planned expansions, colleges shape the economic, housing, and infrastructural landscape of towns and cities. In North and East Texas, examples from Denton, Dallas (University Park), Nacogdoches, and Commerce provide a compelling story of how public and private institutions reshape the communities they call home.

THE ROLE OF COLLEGES IN COMMUNITY GROWTH



Colleges often give rise to towns or significantly elevate their status. SMU's arrival in the early 1900s birthed University Park, which grew from a residential cluster to one of Texas's wealthiest cities. Similarly, Texas A&M–Commerce's relocation in 1894 transformed Commerce into an educational hub. Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) helped stabilize and expand Nacogdoches, and the University of North Texas (UNT) turned Denton into one of the fastest-growing cities in North Texas. Each of these towns grew in size, economy, and infrastructure in direct correlation to the growth of their institutions.

ECONOMIC EXPANSION THROUGH CAMPUS GROWTH



Modern universities are regional development engines. SFA contributes over \$348 million annually to the local economy. UNT graduates add \$5.4 billion in potential earnings yearly to the DFW workforce. New facilities, like the \$70M event center at A&M–Commerce, not only improve student life but attract tourism, support local jobs, and spark adjacent retail and housing development. As universities build new campuses or satellite locations (such as UNT in Frisco or UTA in Fort Worth), they bring with them a ripple effect of growth in utilities, housing, business, and public services.

REAL ESTATE TRANSFORMATION IN COLLEGE TOWNS



The demand for student housing significantly affects real estate markets. College Station, Denton, and Commerce have seen older homes replaced with student apartments or rental conversions. These trends raise property values but also introduce housing affordability challenges. Cities like College Station and Denton have responded with zoning overlays and occupancy ordinances to maintain neighborhood integrity while accommodating student populations. Mixed-use developments like U Centre at Fry Street in Denton represent the new face of urbanized, college-driven development.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND URBAN PLANNING



University growth demands infrastructure investment. Transportation systems—like Denton’s A-train rail and campus shuttles—evolve to meet commuting needs. Roads are widened, water and power capacity expanded, and parking garages constructed. Cities and universities often collaborate on long-range infrastructure, sharing costs and planning for future population and traffic growth. Projects like UTA’s west Fort Worth campus include new road systems to serve incoming development.

INTERESTING STATISTICS

UNT enrolls nearly 47,000 students and contributes over \$5.4 billion in potential annual earnings to the regional economy.

SFA supports 4,819 jobs and \$348 million in economic impact in Nacogdoches County—accounting for 18% of local employment.

Denton's population grew from ~2,500 in 1890 to over 139,000 by 2020, largely driven by its universities.

Commerce, TX reached 9,534 in population at its peak in 1970, mirroring the university's enrollment trends.

New developments like the \$70 million A&M–Commerce event center are expected to stimulate tourism, jobs, and real estate growth in Hunt County.

Zoning adjustments in Denton (Oak Gateway Plan) and College Station help manage housing pressures resulting from university expansion.

College Station's rental prices have increased ~29% from 2019 to 2024, with over half of renters cost-burdened.

Student apartments like U Centre at Fry Street in Denton reflect a growing trend toward purpose-built, high-density student housing.

CASE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Denton (UNT, TWU):** Proactive planning and zoning tools, including the Oak Gateway Plan, have guided the city's balanced growth amid soaring enrollment and housing demand.
- **University Park (SMU):** A private university's prestige helped create one of the state's most exclusive residential areas. Zoning and land swaps have enabled continued growth in a dense, high-value area.
- **Nacogdoches (SFA):** A regional economic engine, SFA has revitalized downtown and collaborated closely with the city to manage growth, infrastructure, and housing policies.
- **Commerce (A&M–Commerce):** This rural town's identity and prosperity are intertwined with its university. Joint planning, zoning shifts, and a massive events center are positioning it for renewed vibrancy.

CONCLUSION

Colleges are drivers of transformation—economically, socially, and physically. As enrollment rises and institutions expand, towns evolve with them. From housing to zoning to roads and beyond, college towns across Texas offer clear lessons: successful partnerships between cities and campuses lead to sustainable, strategic, and inclusive land development. Embracing these relationships and managing growth thoughtfully ensures both the students and the broader communities thrive.

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