

The Journey of Hannibal LaGrange University  
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Hannibal- LaGrange University

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Hannibal LaGrange University plays an important role in Missouri Baptist education and development. The university was formed through the combining of early Baptist schools. As time has progressed the school has remained closely connected to the Missouri Baptist Convention. This enduring connection has helped shape the university's foundation and form its mission to provide both excellent academic and Christian education for its scholars. The history of Hannibal-LaGrange University shows how the institution has grown into a lasting system of higher education through the powerful community support, determination even when being faced with challenges, and a continued commitment to its Christian principals.

The origins of Hannibal-LaGrange university can be traced back to 1856. This was an important year for the University as they held many meeting sessions. During this session in particular the Constitution of the Association and the Articles of faith were adopted. During an earlier date a committee who focused on education was appointed. This committee presented the idea to offer a higher education for the students. After great consideration they decided to take measures to create a male and female seminary. The committee came up with a plan on how to take action on this new idea, and to their wishes it all got approved. According to Hagood, and Hagood, Roberta played a key role in developing these new educational plans, "Members of the Association were aware of the fact that several Baptist Associations had already organized Baptist colleges in other parts of Missouri and neighboring states" (Hagood and Hagood 1). Based on their success other Baptist regions helped to serve as a guide for the new development of Hannibal Lagrange.

In 1856, the Wyaconda Baptist association founded the combined male and female Seminary in LaGrange, Missouri. This was established to better help the students to have a Christian education while simultaneously preparing some for their future roles in ministry. This

took place during a time with less opportunity. The seminary offered a reliable place for scholars to learn not only in their academics, but also taught them Christian values and morals. According to the Missouri Baptist Convention “HLGU has grown physically far beyond what its founders could have imagined, it has remained true to its original spiritual and educational mission and continues to serve as both a community of faith and a center of academic achievement”. During the first opening session nearly 90 students attended. Lagrange’s main focus would be to continue to be based upon both faith as well as character, while reflecting the Missouri Baptist commitment to create leaders who will one day be eager to serve both in their church as well as their community. This has been a perfect balance for the University to have continued growth amongst their program.

The Seminary was built on beautiful property. It was located on the Bluff’s that overlooked LaGrange and had an impressive view of the Mississippi river. The grounds were filled with large oak trees that provided shaded areas and gave the campus a more peaceful feeling.

By 1928 the leaders amongst the Hannibal community worked together and decided to establish a new Baptist College local to their area. Through numerous fundraising they were able to buy a 116-acre campus and ultimately bring together the LaGrange male and female seminary to a new college located in Hannibal, Missouri. Also in 1928 new rules were put in place so that the leaders of the college could be approved by the Missouri Baptist Convention. With this new atmosphere they were able to expand their resources and opportunities for the scholars while continuing their focus on Christian education. In just a year the enrollment of the university had increased to 222 students. The university was then renamed as Hannibal- LaGrange College (The Pathway).

In 1957 the college went through another important change. A new charter was created. This charter gave the Missouri Baptist Convention control over the college. This now meant that the convention played a role in how the school was being run and what their focus would be. A board of trustees was also formed. These members came from a variety of Missouri Baptist churches that helped to make decisions for the college. This was a great benefit for the college as it helped them to stay connected in the true Baptist beliefs and values. This personal connection allowed the University to stay rooted in its Christian foundation while also providing numerous sources of guidance and support for future growth.

Finally, by 1981 the college had gone through many important changes that would benefit the students greatly. They began offering the scholars the ability to achieve a four-year degree. This allowed the student to complete their entire degree rather than having to transfer to another school to complete their schooling. Even though this was a great benefit for the student, it also helped the University to grow immensely. This meant that they were able to keep students for a longer amount of time, and provide them a more in depth learning experience in certain areas. Overall this helped the attraction of more students, more specifically students who wanted a complete college experience where they were in a Christian atmosphere. The university grew in attendance immensely “from a two-year institution with fewer than 400 students to a four-year university with a fall enrollment around 1,200 this year” (Koonce). Along with this impressive academic growth they continued to stay rooted and focused in preparing the students to serve the church as well as their communities. Because of the expansion of the program and the resources for the students, the university had the ability to continue its mission while adapting to the needs of the students accordingly. This balance between both academics and faith has remained a very

important part of the University's identity and has contributed to being one of the main reasons that this college has continued to succeed over the years.

The college continued to be a successful place for students to learn. A small setback occurred on campus in 1989, when one of the main buildings burst into flames. The fire was uncontrollable and took the building over completely. Fortunately, two hundred fire fighters from more than twenty-five different towns in Illinois responded to this incident and helped in assisting the flames (Hendricks). The destruction was very severe as “the college’s main building burned to the ground, destroying administrative offices, most faculty offices, classrooms, chapel/theatre, gymnasium, and cafeteria” (Hannibal LaGrange University). It was later believed that the source of the fire was due to faulty electrical wiring in the kitchen of the building. Volunteers helped to clean the debris and remove the building. The arches were one of the only things left behind from the fire. To this day those arches remain standing and are now serving as one of the main trademarks of Hannibal Lagrange. Many people in the area also played a large role in helping to fund the university, so that it could rebuild its main building. Throughout the duration of this time period the president kept a positive mindset about the struggle they were facing. “There was never any thought it [Hannibal LaGrange] would not continue, but the early days were difficult,” he said. “We knew there were going to be new challenges, but we never considered closing” (Hendricks). All of these reactions helped to show what kind of community Hannibal-LaGrange truly is, and what kind of community they are really surrounded by. This is a great example of how the University has helped to influence those to value education while being willing to come together and support the University when in need. In addition to restoring all of the science facilities Hannibal has continued to strive in expanding the resources for students on campus.

One of the most significant academic developments was the completion of the fine arts museum in 2003. This was a very large building, 50,000 square feet. In this building it contained a classroom where students could learn more about music, theater, art, and even communication studies. The addition of this building demonstrated the university's commitment to developing both academic and artistic opportunities for the students.

By 2007 they made the academic advancement by offering their very first graduate degree, a master of science in education. This marked a very major step forward for the University to provide the most advanced learning opportunities for students beyond the undergraduate level. This is a great example as to how the institution continues to grow and adapt to the needs of its students. Only a few years later, in 2010, the Missouri Baptist Convention voted to change the school's name again to Hannibal-LaGrange University. "The university name will more accurately describe the institution to the public and international community." (Beth Sowers) This decision was made while reflecting its transformation from just a college to a more developed university.

They later developed the Roland Library in 2012. The new facility was designed to support the students' learning by providing spaces to study, computer labs, private and group study rooms, and access to a wide range of resources.

A few years later in 2013 a natural disaster struck campus once again damaging the Science building. This forced them to construct temporary science buildings until the newly developed building could be constructed. Carroll Science center was completed and reopened for the students to resume learning in (Hannibal- LaGrange University).

The history of Hannibal LaGrange University shows how the institution has grown into a long lasting system of higher education. Throughout the school's development the University has

stayed closely connected to the Missouri Baptist Convention. From rebuilding after major setbacks to working to expand their academic programs and campus resources HLGU has demonstrated determination to give the students the best education that is possible while still achieving their Christian mission. Today, Hannibal LaGrange University stands as an example of how true dedication and community support can help an institution continue to grow and thrive over time.

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