Benefactor’s building on a dream

His name might not be etched in stone, but Peter O’Donnell Jr. is leaving a lasting imprint on the University of Texas with the donation of the Applied Computational and Engineering Sciences Building.

Laura Skelding / AA-S

He envisioned a top-notch research center in Texas – and UT’s ACES Building was Born

BY SHARON JAYSON
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He'll lend his name to a hamburger, but Peter O'Donnell Jr., the University of Texas' No.1 benefactor, would rather leave his name off the technology-rich research center he's just built at 24th Street and Speedway.

The Applied Computational and Engineering Sciences Building, a project estimated to cost more than $36 million, will make its debut when classes open Wednesday. It's the latest example in a lifetime of quiet philanthropy and behind-the-scenes leadership for a man who has left his fingerprints, if not his name, on 'Texas' most important educational, cultural and political institutions – from UT to the Dallas Museum of Art to the Texas Republican Party.

"I'm not sure there is a Texan who has had a greater impact on the face of present-day Texas than Peter O'Donnell Jr.," said UT President Larry Faulkner.

O'Donnell, a Dallas investor referred to around campus as UT's best-known anonymous donor, had already contributed almost $50 million to UT before offering an estimated $30 million toward the building project. But he has made only one concession to the university officials who wanted to etch his name on the building: Students, faculty and visitors will be able to buy a Peter O's burger at O's Campus Cafe on the ground floor of the building.

"I do not feel the need for recognition," O'Donnell said. "The important thing is what the ACES stands for – the Applied Computational and Engineering Sciences. That is what's important, not my name."

The five-story limestone and brick building is an interdisciplinary research center where the mingling of great minds and the latest scientific gadgets is expected to raise UT's stature among the nation's major research institutions and attract talent to Austin.

Committed to excellence

"Pete is a doer," said former Texas Gov. Bill Clements, a close friend of O'Donnell. "If he really
gets involved, he's going to give time and effort and energy to get something done."

O'Donnell said he realized more than 20 years ago that Texas' economy needed a push toward technology. He believes UT-Austin, his wife's alma mater, is one of the best places to make that happen.

So, it's not surprising to those who know him that he would bankroll a major research facility and construct it quicker and cheaper than the university could. By leasing the site, O'Donnell bypassed state bidding procedures. Although UT officials monitored every step, the ACES Building is the kind of private venture that observers say could become a model for future givers, both in Texas and across the nation.

The impetus for the ACES project dates to the early 1980s when O'Donnell served on President Reagan's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and saw the Japanese gaining prominence in supercomputing. O'Donnell was among those who championed the superconducting supercollider for Texas, which has since folded. Yet his interest in ensuring Texas' spot among the nation's powerhouse research centers never waned. Once he decided that UT-Austin should be the beneficiary, O'Donnell took on the project as he approaches all of his important work, Clements said.

Over the 18 months of construction, O'Donnell and Carolyn Bacon, the O'Donnell Foundation's executive director, flew regularly to Austin for weekly meetings about the project.

"If he wasn't quite satisfied with the quality, he was willing to put extra money into it," said Peter Flawn, UT-Austin president emeritus and a paid consultant to the O'Donnell Foundation.

And when it was largely completed, O'Donnell recognized the construction workers with a buffet lunch and mariachi music. In July, faculty in the departments that share the building were invited to a reception and tour.

The building might be the most impressive thing O'Donnell has done for the university, but it
certainly isn't the first. Aside from the ACES Building, O'Donnell's contributions include $44.8 million made anonymously and another $4.9 million in the O'Donnell name, according to UT-Austin's development office.

His influence on the university includes creating endowments in the business school; contributing millions toward the creation of 32 endowed chairs in science and engineering; inspiring the development of a graduate academic degree program in computational and applied Mathematics; and spurring the creation: of the Texas Institute for Computational and Applied Mathematics in the new building. O'Donnell has provided resources for other UT System schools, including the medical school in Dallas.

**Extending his influence**

The 76-year-old philanthropist, who rarely grants interviews, has plenty to say about programs he's supported to help others but is reticent to talk about his personal life or the details of his wealth.

O'Donnell grew up with a brother and two sisters in Highland Park, a wealthy enclave surrounded by the city of Dallas. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., with a bachelor of science degree in math. He thought about teaching calculus. But the promise of better pay with a business degree prompted him to enroll at the Wharton Graduate School of Finance in Philadelphia, majoring in banking and finance. After graduation, he worked for a small bank for about a year and then tried real estate.

"I wasn't very good at that," he said. "Then I got into something which I was good at, which was securities."

Those investments have enabled the O'Donnell Foundation's philanthropic endeavors to be far-reaching and results-oriented, with primary giving related to science, math and engineering education because those are the areas that can distinguish Texas in the future.

O'Donnell has traveled the state promoting development of technology as Texas' ticket to greater national prominence and an educated public as the means to achieve that goal.
records, the O'Donnell Foundation in 1999 granted more than $14.2 million of its $140.7 million in assets to several causes.

The foundation has given more than $987,000 to Dallas-area public and private high schools for their AP Incentive Programs, which offer financial incentives to teachers, reimburse students for some exam costs and provide students financial bonuses for passing Advanced Placement exams.

The O'Donnell model later was adopted as a statewide program. The tests are in many disciplines, such as math, English, the sciences and the arts. The incentives have boosted the numbers of students taking the exams, particularly among minority groups, and have the added benefit of reducing college costs to students because those who pass receive college credit.

"I call him the Father of AP," said Raul Romero, a UT System regent from Houston.

In crafting his proposal, O'Donnell sought help from Philip Uri Treisman, a renowned educator and director of the Charles A. Dana Center at UT-Austin, which aims to strengthen public schools.

"When you look at the state data, you can see Peter O'Donnell's footprints," Treisman said. "Where in the state are African American children succeeding in high levels in Advanced Placement? In Dallas, in DeSoto, in Duncanville."

Although the foundation focuses most of its efforts on education, it also makes considerable contributions to the arts, which are of particular interest to Edith O'Donnell, who majored in art history at UT. The foundation has contributed to the Dallas Public Library, Dallas Children's Museum and Dallas Summer Musicals.

Sharing the wealth

O'Donnell, who served as state Republican Party chairman from 1962 to 1969, was chairman of the National Draft Goldwater Committee, which spurred the 1964 presidential campaign of U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater. Although O'Donnell's trim, 6-foot frame is less visible these days, he continues to be a force in Republican politics.

"In my view, he's the godfather of the party," said Jim Francis Jr. of Dallas, who was an adviser during Clements' gubernatorial reign.

The former governor, who has known the O'Donnells since the mid-1950s, entrusted his 1978 campaign to his fellow Highland Park High School alum. In later gubernatorial efforts, Clements' said O'Donnell was his "hand-holder and senior adviser."

For several years, Clements' wife, Rita, has served on the O'Donnell Foundation board of directors. Clements says he and his wife are the best of friends with the O'Donnells and calls the O'Donnell union a strong partnership because they complement each other well. The couple has three daughters – one in Dallas and two in Santa Fe, N.M. – and six grandchildren.

The O'Donnells' financial arms extend deep into the pockets of Republican candidates. Federal campaign finance reports for 1999 and 2000 show O'Donnell and his wife have given $190,000 to Republican candidates in Texas and across the nation, including Gov. George W. Bush, U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

The foundation has enabled the O'Donnells to share their wealth with projects that will reward individuals and the state. Their efforts have been recognized many times. O'Donnell has received a host of honors, including the Santa Rita Award, which is the UT System's highest recognition.

"I think his motives are absolutely pure. He doesn't have any ego invested in this," said Austin lawyer Larry Temple, who has known O'Donnell more than 30 years. "A lot of people want to make an impact on the present. What he'd like to do is make an impact on the future."

Faulkner says the handoff letter transferring ownership from the foundation to UT, is indicative of O'Donnell. The four-page letter details the building's purposes, including use of space, expansion, technology and the overall vision for the facility's future. But Faulkner said O'Donnell's sign off is even more telling.

"He's giving us more than $30 million and he closes by talking about the pleasure of his relationships at UT and how much he appreciates the people and how glad he is," Faulkner said. "The final phrase in the letter is 'with great appreciation, Peter O'Donnell.' That captures Peter O'Donnell."

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