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UT icon helped put school on map

BYLINE: Mary Huber Austin Community Newspapers

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Peter Flawn never settled for mediocrity. Those who lived and worked with him say it was his propensity toward perfectionism that helped transform the University of Texas into the nationally prominent school it is today.

Flawn served twice as the university's president, beginning in 1979. In all, he devoted 60 years of his life to the Austin institution.

Flawn died overnight Sunday in his West Austin home, his family said. He was 91.

"Our family is saddened to announce the death of our beloved father, grandfather and great-grandfather Peter Flawn today," the family said in a statement.

"When one looks back at the intellectual giants that led the University of Texas, Peter Flawn's name will be right at the top of the list," UT System Chancellor Bill McRaven said.

Flawn served as president of UT-San Antonio from 1973 to 1977 and came to the Austin campus as its president from 1979 to 1985. He presided over UT's first major capital campaign in the 1980s, and many say that launched the university into national prominence.

But before he was a renowned administrator, Flawn was a budding young scientist. He was born in 1929 in New Jersey, and after high school he moved to Ohio to attend Oberlin College, where he met his wife, Priscilla. They were married for 70 years and had two daughters.

Flawn earned his doctorate in geology from Yale University and worked briefly for the U.S. Geological Survey. He came to UT-Austin in 1949 to conduct research at the school's **Bureau of Economic Geology**. He would eventually serve as director of the bureau and as a professor in the department of geological sciences.

In 1973, he left Austin to lead UT-San Antonio.

During his first term as UT-Austin president, he declared a "War on Mediocrity." It was the theme of his tenure.

"His motto was â no whining," friend and former UT-Austin President Bill Cunningham said. "He understood the mission of the university probably as well as anyone I know. He was a great proponent of graduate research at the university, as well as having a large undergraduate school to support it."

Flawn launched the Centennial Campaign in the early 1980s in celebration of the university's first 100 years. Its fundraising helped increase the number of faculty endowments from 112 to 851, according to UT officials. He also

oversaw the construction of five new research buildings on campus, and during his tenure, research awards would reach \$100 million.

He was investing in the future of the university, Cunningham said.

"His contributions to our great university were immense," current UT President Gregory L. Fenves said.

Flawn retired from UT in 1985. That year, the Flawn Academic Center, next to the UT Tower, was named for him.

By outward appearances, he was not an especially towering figure. But Dean of Pharmacy James Doluisio, a friend of Flawn's, described him as someone who looked 6 feet 5.

"He was just that awesome as a leader," Doluisio said.

"He loved appearing as the curmudgeon," friend, professor and retired Adm. Bobby Inman said. "But he actually had a superb sense of humor."

After he left UT, Flawn worked in the private sector. He was involved in the venture capital business and was a key player in Texas' successful bid for the superconducting super collider physics research facility, a project that later collided with cuts by Congress.

He also was paid \$50,000 a year to be a consultant to one of UT's largest donors, Peter O'Donnell of Dallas.

But he gave that up when UT came knocking again and asked him to serve as interim president in June 1997 while regents searched for a permanent president.

He took the job for no salary and led the school during a stormy time. UT's beloved president, Robert Berdahl, had just left to become chancellor at the University of California, Berkeley, and his second-in-command, Provost Mark Yudof, also was leaving. That leadership vacuum came as the Hopwood court decision ended affirmative action programs on campus, fueling racial tensions.

Flawn restored confidence and calm. His family said the job reinvigorated him.

It wasn't an easy, ride, though. Three months after Flawn took office, UT law professor Lino Graglia said that black people and Mexican-Americans were not academically competitive with whites, unleashing a months-long furor that captured national attention.

Flawn said in a February 1998 interview that the controversy was probably the lowest point of his tenure. "We spent a great deal of time trying to make clear that Graglia was not speaking for the university," he said.

Some students, including then-Student Government President Marlen Whitley, said Flawn did not do enough to quell the ill will the remarks generated.

Despite the tumult, people surrounding Flawn said they believed he had fun during his second stint as president. In 1990, he wrote an irreverent book, "A Primer for University Presidents," which included this tongue-in-cheek rule: "Eschew humor."

Tragedy struck the Flawn family in October 2001 when his daughter, Dr. Laura Flawn, a gifted spine surgeon in Austin, was killed in a car wreck at age 48.

His wife, Priscilla, died in 2016.

Contact Mary Huber at 512-321-2557.

Twitter: @maryhuber

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CORRECTION: An article on Page B1 of Monday's Metro & State section about the death of former University of Texas President Peter Flawn misstated the year and place of his birth. He was born in 1926 in Miami.

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