

## A Texas-Sized Sector: Hill Builds on its Higher Education Best Practices

*Written by: Robert Ferguson and Rusty DeBorde, of Hill International*

With the third-highest population growth rate in the U.S., Texas is unsurprisingly witnessing booming construction on its public universities and colleges. Growth on Texas campuses encompasses all types of projects and programs, from new, cutting-edge research facilities incorporating the latest in technology and design, to the latest trends in student housing, not to mention the refits and renovations required to keep operations running smoothly.

Each school system has its own preferences and processes when it comes to construction projects, as well as its own unique culture and challenges. This is true on individual campuses and for those institutions with multiple locations, where local culture, climate, and priorities all factor into project planning and execution.

Hill International has been helping to deliver higher education projects across 270,000 square miles in Texas since 2002, when the firm began supporting the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. After 18 years, Hill is able to speak with confidence about construction for higher education clients and to offer suggestions to other firms that may want to undertake similar projects.

“In addition to the historic emphasis on traditional bachelor, graduate, and doctoral programs in Texas, there is also a movement toward career and technology education,” says Robert Ferguson, CCM, Hill International Senior Vice President and Regional Manager, Southwestern Region. “This focus, along with the demographics of the state, is driving the growth in the state’s higher education sector.”

Because of this growth, Hill is working across Texas at all five of the state’s largest systems, managing and overseeing millions in work currently underway. Hill’s project management services include oversight of planning, design management, and execution of projects, as well as project leadership, communication, coordination, and conflict resolution.

These five largest state systems include the University of Texas System with 14 campuses and institutions, the Texas A&M System with 11 campuses and seven state agencies, and the Texas Tech System with four institutions plus more than



*Wayne A. Reaud Building at Lamar University, The Texas State University System, Beaumont, Texas*



*The Carl E. Everett Education & Administration Building at The University of North Texas Health Science Center, The University of North Texas System, Fort Worth, Texas*

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a dozen additional locations throughout the state, not to mention the Texas State University and the University of North Texas Systems, each with multiple campuses throughout the state as well.

Many of these projects are managed from design through commissioning. In this way, Hill helps drive progress to achieve each project's goals and objectives by facilitating timely decisions and reporting progress and issues to key stakeholders.

Another aspect of Hill's services includes providing construction inspection for public-private partnership (P3) projects for the firm's Texas higher education clients.

"The P3 model is rising in popularity for our college and university clients," says Ferguson. "One of our higher education clients recently announced a suite of P3 projects that are anticipated to start in late 2020 and many of our other education clients are also exploring this type of delivery. For us, we provide the same high-quality services under a P3 project and always keep the end-users needs in mind, but the process is somewhat different as we are answering to the P3 entity as our client. Understanding this difference is key to a successful project."



*The Academic Building at Texas A&M, College Station, Texas*

Hill also facilitates accessibility reviews, building and fire code compliance, storm water pollution protection plan compliance, historically under-utilized business plans, and State Energy Conservation Office standards. On site, Hill provides construction management and inspection staff in addition to supporting University staff during construction. They work with the clients to review and endorse project expenditures for consultant services, service contracts, and construction pay applications. Ferguson notes this depth and breadth of experience provides Hill with the lessons learned to help make any Texas higher education assignment successful, regardless of scope, type, or location.

"Having experience across all five of the state's largest systems gives Hill a perspective few other firms have," says Ferguson. "Not only do we know the characteristics and preferences of each institution, but we can also disseminate the lessons learned and best practices from one school to another, where applicable, benefiting all of our clients.

"The first thing to realize is that each institution has its own procedures in place, and those procedures are there for a reason," continues Ferguson. "Austin is not like El Paso, for example, any more than Texas A&M is like the University of Texas. Successful teams work with each institution and with each campus to make sure the entire team is aware of the systems in place, the affected stakeholders, and the campus culture."

This goes beyond basic higher education project management best practices. "Site security, staging and logistics, and keeping faculty, staff, and students informed and up-to-date are of course critical on any

university project,” Ferguson explains. “But there are nuances at both higher levels and on the ground. For example, a smaller campus might only execute a single project over the course of a year, while a major campus could have entire building programs constantly underway. Depth of available and talented staff is key, both to have the right person on site to manage that single project—because by definition that work is going to be high-profile—and to work with the university’s in-house project team when controlling a multi-project program.”

Higher education work in the state highlights this reality for Hill: a current assignment for one higher education client involves individual building projects with pre-defined scopes of work, while Hill’s work for another higher education clients entail multiple projects assigned through multi-year indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contracts where assignments range from inspection of renovations in existing facilities to the construction of new, ground-up facilities.



*Wayne A. Reaud Building at Lamar University, The Texas State University System, Beaumont, Texas*

A second factor Ferguson notes is the right cultural fit. “We’ve done work in San Antonio, Austin, Galveston, Odessa, Dallas, Lubbock, and many, many more places,” he says. “Each of these places has its own character, regardless of the institution, and requires the right skillset for the work to progress smoothly. Projects on a system’s more rural campuses, for example, are approached differently than Texas’ urban centers in Austin, Dallas, and Houston. Ideally, you want local talent in place that knows the culture and the school firsthand.”

Ferguson adds there is an economic incentive to having local resources. “We always strive to place local people, both so we don’t have to pay for travel and relocation expenses, and so we know each job has a local person for that campus or project who knows the terrain.” Ferguson adds that when first taking on a project at a new campus, he always assigns his most experienced project leaders. “It’s always worth the investment to get the project off to a strong start. Our Texas higher education clients count on Hill to deliver the right talent for their jobs, and we’ll always make certain that happens, regardless of the up-front costs involved.”

Another factor is in the systems each institution uses to track and control work. Ferguson says Hill has had the most success when taking a nimble and flexible approach to adopting project management information systems (PMIS) on its work. “Amongst the systems, e-Builder is popular,” he explains. “But some use something different, such as PMWeb, or opt for no formal PMIS at all.



“Our teams come ready to adapt to the clients’ PMIS preferences. Going in with the attitude that you know which PMIS to use and how to use it can make for headaches, so we offer recommendations and suggestions when they’re needed and when they’re asked for. A better approach is to be ready with the knowledge of the system and the school so you can begin work with little to no learning curve. That helps control costs for the client, as well as adding a level of comfort.”

As Hill’s work continues across Texas, Ferguson knows the firm’s teams will continue to find the nuances and similarities that can help make a project run as smoothly as possible. He says: “Our work for higher education clients in Texas has grown year after year, from school to school and campus to campus. We can do this because we have the right people on the ground, for each school and for each type of work. The drivers of the growth in the market may change, but the needs of our higher education clients will always be broadly similar: to manage their risks, control costs, and realize their project objectives safely and as planned.”

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[Hill International](#) provides program and project management, construction management, cost engineering and estimating, quality assurance, inspection, scheduling, risk management and claims avoidance to clients involved in major construction projects worldwide.