

The Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management Celebrates 50 Years of the Hilton Legacy

By Mark E. Young

It happened fifty years ago in October 1969 at a formal banquet at the Shamrock Hilton in Houston, Texas. Conrad Hilton, the world-famous hotelier donated \$1.5 million to the University of Houston to establish the first hotel and restaurant management program in Texas. In honor of this magnificent gift, the university named its hospitality program, the Conrad N. Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management (later renamed as a college rather than a school). Thus, began a relationship that has continued for five decades between the Hilton family, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and the University of Houston (UH).¹

The roots of the Hilton College, however, actually predate the 1969 gala event. In 1947, the Texas Hotel Association moved its Texas Hotel Short Course to the University of Houston, where hotel and motel operators and workers



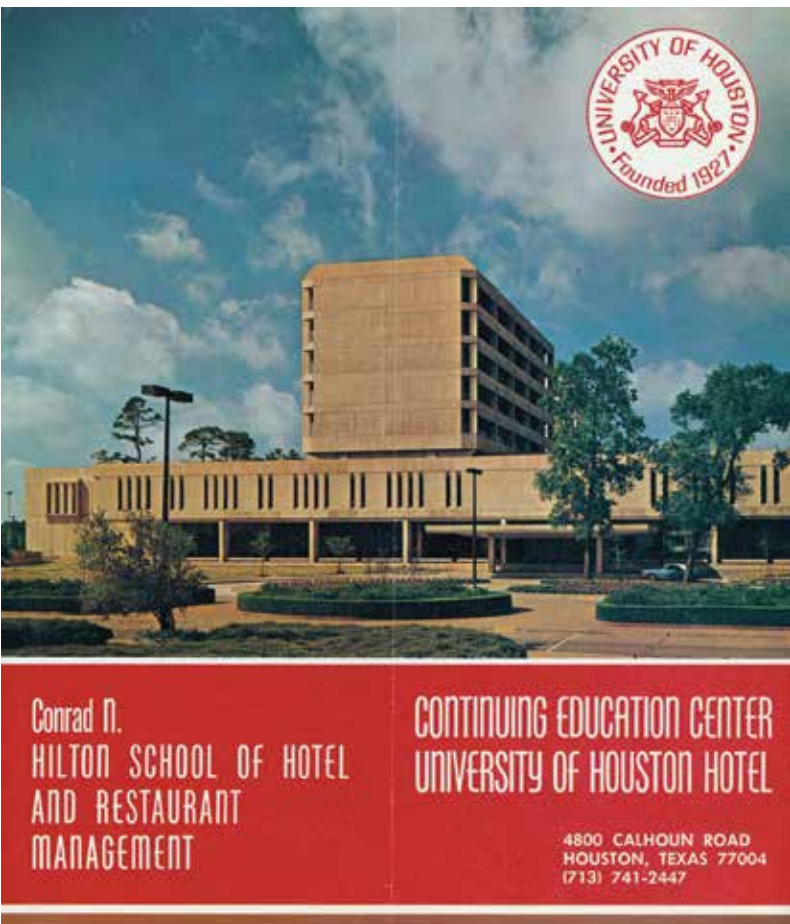
Dr. James C. Taylor, at the podium, and Barron Hilton took part in the groundbreaking for the Hilton School's new home at the University of Houston.

could spend a week in classrooms learning all aspects of the lodging industry from accounting to design concepts. In an era with few hospitality programs let alone classes devoted to the subject, the Texas Hotel Short Course was popular with people from around the country and the world.

One of the instructors for the short course was Dr. James C. Taylor, a lawyer and labor relations arbiter. More importantly, Taylor developed strong connections with the local, state, and national hotel and restaurant associations. Taylor rose through the administrative ladder at UH to eventually become the dean of the Continuing Education program.

Through his work in the hospitality industry, Taylor came to know and befriend Eric Hilton, who was the general manager of Houston's Shamrock Hilton Hotel. Hilton had served as manager since the early 1960s and witnessed first-hand the value of the Texas Hotel Short Course that Taylor operated. Over the years, Hilton Hotels sent employees to the short course and the Shamrock hosted some of the classes.

Taylor and Hilton had often worked together on hotel related issues and it is fair to say they respected each other's business acumen. Taylor's dream was to take the hospitality training courses spread out among different schools and colleges at the university and create a hospitality college. Taylor had shared his thoughts about hospitality training with Eric, and in 1968 Eric told Taylor to put his ideas on paper. The following year, Taylor visited Eric in his office and presented him with a plan for a stand-alone hospitality program at the university. Further, Taylor asked if



The Conrad N. Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management opened in 1969 and its original building, now known as the North Wing, opened in 1974. Over the last fifty years the college has earned a reputation as one of the nation's best hospitality programs.

All photos courtesy of the Hospitality Industry Archives, Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, University of Houston.



Eric, Barron, and Conrad Hilton celebrate with UH President Philip G. Hoffman at the 1969 dinner announcing Hilton's generous donation to establish the hospitality school and promote professional training in the industry.

Eric's father, Conrad, might be interested in supporting the creation of such a school. Hilton was enthusiastic about the idea but before he approached his father he showed the plan to his older brother Barron. Eric knew that if he and Barron presented the idea to their father together it would make a more powerful impact.

Eric Hilton's instincts were correct, and his father liked the idea. As early as the 1920s Conrad Hilton valued the importance of professional hotel training and education. He

had always encouraged his employees to attend hospitality training at the Texas Hotel Short Course and at the Cornell School over the years. Now fifty years after his start in the hotel business in Cisco, Texas, he was able to give back to the industry and support professional training of hotel and restaurant students. Hilton committed to financially supporting Taylor's dream of a hospitality school at UH.

In October of 1969, during a banquet in the Emerald Room at the Shamrock Hotel, Conrad, Barron, and Eric Hilton, along with state and city dignitaries and hotel and restaurant leaders, gathered to honor the hotel magnate. In a speech titled "Beyond the Horizon," Conrad laid out his vision of the school, saying, ". . . the keeper of the inn is the keeper of the flame, that thousand-year-old flame of hospitality which the graduates of our Hilton School of Hotel and Restaurant Management must hold high and carry into the hotels of the 21st century."

The first class enrolled thirty-nine students in 1969. The original college building, now the North Wing, was completed in 1974. It had over twenty-two conference and classrooms of various sizes, faculty offices, eighty-three hotel guestrooms, a kitchen, full-service dining room, school administrative offices, and rooms for the Continuing Education Center. In the meantime, classes were held across the UH campus and at the Shamrock Hilton Hotel. The faculty had their offices in a downtown building owned by the university. Despite not having a "home" the first couple of years, the Hilton school flourished, with student enrollment and faculty size both increasing.

In 1974 Hilton Hotels held a management meeting in Houston. Barron Hilton, president of Hilton by this time, brought the Hilton Hotels executives to tour the almost completed building. Acting as host, Dean Taylor showed the



Having the right faculty members ensured the new hospitality degree program and its students would succeed. Shown standing left to right in 1976, Anthony J. Mandola, David Dean, Frances Knipe (dean's assistant), and Dean James C. Taylor. Seated left to right are Dr. Clinton Rappole, Walter G. Lindemann, Dr. Herbert L. Williams, Gloria Perry (secretary), Donald Greenaway, Donald I. Smith, J. Patrick Stewart, and George E. Young. Not pictured, Robert D. Wickham and Thomas Lattin.



President George H. W. Bush had Hilton College Par Excellence students serve at a formal dinner for the international G7 Economic Summit held in Houston, 1990.

Hilton Hotel people the latest in hospitality training. Later, Barron stated how impressed he was with the facility and thought it an appropriate way to honor his father.

Reflecting the increased status of the Hilton program, the University of Houston changed the status of the school to a college in 1978, making it an independent college among the other colleges on campus.

In 1980, the American Hotel and Motel Association held its annual meeting in Houston. While in town, Barron Hilton, speaking to enthusiastic faculty and students, announced his desire to establish the Conrad N. Hilton

College as the “No. 1 hotel and restaurant program in the world.” Afterwards in a discussion with Taylor and Prof. Clint Rappole, Barron told the men to put together a plan of action to bring the Hilton College to the status of number one.

Soon, Taylor, Rappole, and others created a plan of action that not only expanded the physical size of the college but also increased the numbers of courses and students. Taylor flew to California to deliver the plan to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, where Barron Hilton served as president and Eric served on the board. Plus, most of the foundation’s board members were longtime Hilton executives who recognized the needs of the college and what it would take to reach the stated goal.

In 1983 the foundation awarded the Hilton College \$21.3 million to build the South Wing of the college’s hotel complex, which was completed and opened in 1989. This addition with more than 94,000 square feet of space once again took the college to a new level of excellence. The college now had its own lab space for the students and faculty, a library and archive for hospitality papers and memorabilia, and faculty offices. The facility included an instructional kitchen, food science lab, a food demo kitchen, a food research lab with taste test facilities, a new student-run restaurant and a 6,300-square-foot ballroom, appropriately named the Conrad Ballroom.

The premiere student-led event at the Hilton College is the annual Gourmet Night dinner. For over forty-five years, students have served guests a delicious five-course meal with fine wines, incredible food, and decadent desserts. What makes Gourmet Night so special is that it is an entirely student-run event, with the exception of a guest chef who helps guide the students in their meal execution. Gourmet



Hilton College students produce the annual Gourmet Night, a culinary extravaganza and college fundraiser, to show their creativity and ability to orchestrate a large-scale event from menu selection to food prep, synchronized service, marketing, and a silent auction. Each year has a unique theme, such as this 2013 program for the Wizard of Oz Gourmet Night and the 2017 Kentucky Derby theme with women donning unique hats.



Photo at right by Steve Lee Photography, courtesy of Hilton College.

Night features the synchronized service of the meal at the thirty-six tables with ten place settings each in the Conrad Ballroom. Each year has a different theme that has varied from the Wizard of Oz to An Evening of Carnivals to Hats off to Hilton. The night's theme is a closely guarded secret that is unveiled in the invitation and carried through the night of the dinner.

As the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management reaches its fiftieth anniversary, the program is consistently ranked as one of the top hospitality programs in the world. The diversity of the students and faculty reflects the international stature of the college. At home, the University of Houston administration has consistently supported the growth, expansion, and enhancement of the college. In 2019 Dean Dennis Reynolds, the college's seventh dean, announced the approval of funding for another hotel tower adding seventy guest rooms to increase the total number of available rooms to 150. This much-needed addition will provide more rooms for guests in the largely student-operated hotel and is one more symbol of the college's future growth.

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Dean Dennis Reynolds in the Hospitality Industry Archives, Massad Family Research Center, at the Hilton College.

Hilton College

- Has grown from 39 students in 1969 to over 1,000 in 2019.
- Has more than 30 full-time faculty.
- Offers six degree plans, including a Ph.D. program.
- Has a diverse student body from over 54 countries.
- Experiences a 92% student job placement rate.
- Offers over 12 student hospitality organizations.
- Hosts the annual student-led Gourmet Night initiated in 1974.
- Is home to the Hospitality Industry Archives, the largest repository devoted to the hospitality industry, founded in 1989.
- Houses the Hospitality Industry Hall of Honor, started in 1996.
- Opened the student-operated coffee bar Cougar Grounds in 2008.
- Added the Spec's Beverage & Food Appreciation Laboratory in 2014.
- Opened the Conrad N. Hilton College–San Antonio campus in 2014.
- Received approval for a new hotel tower opening in 2022 or 2023.
- Received approval for a brew pub, for the beverage management program, opening in 2022 or 2023.

“Celebrating the College’s 50th anniversary has provided a wonderful opportunity to look back at our past and ahead to our bright future. It’s only fitting that for fall 2019 we launched our new, innovative undergraduate curriculum, which consolidates our areas of emphasis into four tracks – Lodging, Foodservice, Wine & Beverage Studies, and Project Management & Analytics – allowing our students more latitude in customizing their academic experience. Additionally, we changed our core classes to better serve the changing needs of our industry and increased our work-experience requirement to 1,000 hours. Our undergrads are also expected to complete a practicum in professional development as well as a hospitality internship, all of which will better prepare them to lead this industry.

“Our forward-thinking curriculum, a \$30.4 million hotel expansion, an impressive 92 percent job-placement rate, 100 percent placement of our first cohort of doctoral students, our faculty’s record-setting research productivity (an 81 percent increase since 2013), and successive years of positive financial performance are all markers of success that truly portend what we will achieve in the next 50 years.”

– **Dean Dennis Reynolds**
Conrad N. Hilton College of
Hotel and Restaurant Management