A Vision. Thunderbird began as a place and an idea. The place was Thunderbird Field #1 – a deserted postwar oasis in the hot Arizona desert originally constructed in early 1941. The idea was a plan to educate American GIs for the international market that was developing in the wake of World War II. The men who made it happen were retired Army colonels--Stouder Thompson and Finley Peter Dunne. They brought in one of the finest generals of World War II, retired Lt. General Barton Kyle Yount, to lead this new educational venture.

Six Months to Start-up. In just six months, the trio obtained financing from Phoenix businesses and New York banks, remodeled the barracks and classrooms, furnished the facility, bought the books, hired the staff and faculty, and sent out publicity for their new American Institute for Foreign Trade. They also developed the three-part curriculum that would later become known in academic circles as “The Thunderbird Model, copied by institutions around the world.” All this in spite of being interrupted midway by a Congressional investigation into the land given for the school at a 100% discount.

Yount’s Short Reign. Those early years were dominated by continuing efforts to enroll students and raise money. Granted, the publicity surrounding the investigation jump-started the initial enrollment with 285 students, but maintaining that momentum was the challenge. Yount had the name and the charisma, but his sudden death after just three years of operation shocked the struggling administrators.

Schurz, the Legend. William Schurz, one of the school’s greatest scholars, took the presidency for a year, but he disliked administrative details. In spite of that, he established the Keyman program, precursor to today’s executive education. In the end, Schurz was born to teach, and remains a classroom legend among those who took his courses on Latin America.

The Fund-Raising Challenge. Thunderbird’s third President, businessman Ed Juliber, hit the corporate fund-raising trail with his story: Thunderbird educated individuals to help businesses successfully expand into new markets. For that, he said, the businesses were indebted to the School. Juliber, and every president thereafter, played from that songsheet, sometimes with great success, sometimes not.
A Sense of Family. As President Carl Sauer assumed leadership in 1953 the focus remained on enrolling students and raising money. By this time the School was nearing its 20th Anniversary and there was growing sense of “family” on campus. Twenty new modest homes were constructed on the south side of campus as faculty and administrative housing.

Also during this era, the School professionally produced its first promotional film, entitled “The Common Ground” (1962). School administrators used the film on recruiting trips around the world.

Enter--the AMA. By 1963, it was clear that having a corporate partner could be mutually beneficial, and Thunderbird affiliated with the American Management Association.

Through that 20-year partnership, Thunderbird got financial help in the form of backing for some loans and contributions for key programs and new buildings; the AMA got the educational partner it needed to develop its training programs.

At the conclusion of Sauer’s administration Thunderbird was recognized by the U.S. Commerce Dept. with the “E” Certificate for its contribution to the U.S. Export Expansion Program.

Flying High. It didn’t take long for new president Dr. Arthur Peterson—pilot, politician, academic, and author—to make his mark. In just three years, under the tutelage of AMA’s Larry Appley, he doubled enrollment, put forth a nationwide publicity campaign, began $3.4 million of construction, started English as a Second Language, and developed the 48 credit-hour Master’s Degree. A second professionally produced promotional film was made, called “Marco Polo’s of Thunderbird,” featuring Lowell Thomas as narrator.

It was also during this time that the School changed its name to Thunderbird Graduate School of International Management at the insistence of advertising executive Ray Rubicam.

Accreditation by the North Central Association capped Peterson’s short but stellar Thunderbird presidency. Dr. Peterson resigned his post for health reasons. Upon his departure, the Board of Trustees gave him a 30 year service pin, explaining that he deserved it because “in his short three-year stint, he had done 30 years of work.”

1966-1989 From Trade School to Graduate School

Trauma and Turmoil. From the moment Robert Delaney became president in 1970 until his forced departure a year later, it was clear that the match was a poor fit. Faculty and students rebelled against dictatorial methods, and a decisive Board of Trustees acted quickly to halt this hiccup in Thunderbird’s forward progress.

Steadying the Course. With the appointment of Dr. William Voris as president, Thunderbird was on a course that would lead to greatness. His academic reputation, international experience and administrative skill were a perfect fit. Slowly and methodically he molded the faculty, the curriculum, and admission standards to make Thunderbird a true graduate school of international management. The name of the School was changed, exchanging the “Thunderbird,” to become the American Graduate School of International Management (AGSIM). Faculty governance brought academic stature, and the GMAT exam and TOEFL exam became part of the admissions picture. Winterim was created, executive education expanded, and the Global Council brought corporate executives on board.
Thunderbird Traditions. During the ‘70s and ‘80s, Thunderbird traditions created a unique culture. The Pub became a campus fixture; the hot air Thunderbird Balloon Race was an annual highlight; Opening Ceremonies kicked off the school year; and the flag parade awed crowds at special events. Homecoming on campus and alumni reunions abroad enhanced the Thunderbird alumni network.

A New Look. Voris also enlarged the campus south of the Tower with the Snell Center, West Apartments, Talley Building, Lincoln Computer Center, the Erickson Pavilion and Mall, and the former language building that bears his name, plus several residence halls.

Going Abroad. He also promoted the international mission of the school, bringing the number of languages offered to ten, including Russian and Italian, and expanding programs into Mexico, China, and Japan.

1989-2000 Becoming Truly Global

Bold Moves. By the close of the 1980s, Thunderbird was rising as a major player in the corporate and academic arenas. Dr. Roy Herberger, president from 1989 to 2004, saw the potential and ran with it. Tuition rose 50% and the student body increased from 1,000 to 1,600 students.

A New Campus Center. The campus mushroomed with a focus around the new World Business Building that now carries the Herberger name. The Thunderbird Commons replaced the dining hall, and an elegant new building housed Career Services and Executive Education. The Merle A. Hinrichs International Business Information Centre put new emphasis on technology. The School’s name was changed once again to incorporate its past manifestations as Thunderbird, the American Graduate School of International Management.

AACSB Accreditation. Few developments have affected Thunderbird as dramatically as the 1994 accreditation by AACSB. With it came media rankings stating clearly that Thunderbird was number one in its field. Faculty recruiting improved.

Globalization. Herberger took major steps to globalize Thunderbird by developing a facility near Geneva, expanding Winterims overseas, and increasing foreign student enrollment. The Master of International Management degree for Latin America (later called the Global MBA) leaped into prominence, and Executive Education soared. “Global” was the new buzzword and everyone was speaking the language.

2000-2011 A New Century—Challenge and Change

Tough Decisions. With the new century, Thunderbird saw clouds of change. Competition was fierce, and enrollment plummeted following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorism. Faculty, staff, and programs were trimmed. Thunderbird’s three academic departments merged into a single faculty with eight areas of emphasis. In addition, Thunderbird changed the MIM degree to MBA in International Management. Nevertheless, Herberger closed his presidency on a high note, with a $60 million gift from alumnus Sam Garvin. Still, challenges remained.

Thunderbird 2010. Dr. Angel Cabrera, the young energetic Spaniard who took the Thunderbird helm in 2004, set a course to put Thunderbird in the black and on the world map. The Thunderbird brand was
vigorously promoted through advertising and public relations. A new Global MBA On-Demand leveraged the successful Global MBA and took further advantage of technology.

Plans were laid for selling vacant land and commercially desirable parts of the campus, leaving the fundamental central core intact. A new team of administrators and faculty leaders developed centers for ethics, entrepreneurship, corporate learning, and research. The School’s name was changed once again, to Thunderbird School of Global Management.

2012-2013 A New Beginning

In the Interim. With the resignation of Ángel Cabrera, Ambassador Barbara Barrett took the lead as “Interim” President, and the school recalibrated its focus to “students, jobs and donors.” She was also instrumental in bringing in high profile guest speakers and expert advisors to guide the School through an uncertain transition.

A New Beginning. In November, 2012, Dr. Larry Penley began his tenure as President with a renewed focus on finding a strategic partnership for Thunderbird. The future partnership would be acceptable only with strict parameters that would allow Thunderbird to keep its brand as well as maintain control over its academic programs. At the same time, the President and Administration recognized the need for the school to find a source for financial opportunity and stability, something that had eluded the school for most of its 65+ year history.

Going into the second decade of the current millennia, the School seems to be on track, poised to handle a new generation of bright, savvy and highly-focused students with high expectations for job placement and salaries. In addition, the School is developing a master plan that will include improvements to an aging campus, construction of new buildings, and destruction of 70 year old buildings originally built with a temporary purpose. Furthermore, a new partnership will allow Thunderbird to increase its worldwide impact, with the establishment of overseas campuses.

Guided by the Thunderbird 2020 strategic plan and a new strategic partnership, the School will continue to see increased enrollment, high rankings and a world of opportunities for growth and exploration.

By Nelda S. Crowell, Archivist, 2007
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