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Dallas CEO hopes to create future entrepreneurs with huge donation to SMU

William Spears' gift to the university's business school, while not disclosed, is described as one of its biggest donations.



The Dallas Morning News

By [Alexandra Skores](#)

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William Spears has a favorite quote about the role of business education: “We’re sending messengers to times and places we will never see.”

And that’s exactly what the [founder and CEO of Dallas-based Cenergistic](#) intends to do with his donation to Southern Methodist University’s Cox School of Business. Spears isn’t disclosing the amount, but SMU describes it as the largest gift from a nonalumnus in its 111-year history.

His donation will establish a number of business school initiatives, such as the William S. Spears Institute for Entrepreneurial Leadership and the Spears Accelerator to seed and grow businesses launched by students and faculty.

Born in Tulsa, Okla., and raised in Lubbock, the 81-year-old leads an energy conservation company founded in 1986 that has helped more than 1,500 customers reduce their electricity bills.

“I love the spirit of SMU,” Spears said. “I love entrepreneurial thinking. It’s just been very inspiring.”

According to the university, Spears’ joins some of its largest donors.



William Spears leads Cenergistic, a Dallas-based energy conservation company that he founded in 1986. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

In 2019, SMU received a [\\$100 million gift](#) from the Galveston-based Moody Foundation to establish its eighth degree-granting school — the Moody School of Graduate and Advanced Studies. At the time, SMU president R. Gerald Turner described that as its largest donation ever and “a big bang moment.”

SMU also has gotten several \$50 million donations in recent years, including [a 2019 gift](#) from private equity firm co-founder David Miller and his wife, Carolyn, and one [earlier this year](#) from investment firm owner Garry Weber’s foundation. Both Miller and Weber are SMU graduates.

Weber’s donation last fall kicked off a [\\$1.5 billion multiyear fundraising campaign](#) — the largest target ever set by a private university in Texas. His gift will help build a \$100 million three-tiered end zone complex at SMU’s Ford Stadium.

SMU’s donor list also includes many other notable Dallas business leaders, including ClubCorp founder Robert Dedman Sr. and family, whose gifts to the school [total \\$82 million](#), and oil magnate Ray Hunt and his wife, Nancy, who’ve

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It's not the first time Spears targeted a business school with his philanthropy.

In 2004, he gave his alma mater, Oklahoma State University, an undisclosed donation that it described as its [largest academic gift in its history](#). The university [named its business school](#) in his honor.

“I’m a native-born Oklahoman, but I got to Texas as quick as I could and certainly want to stay in Texas,” said Spears, who has a personal tie with SMU. His wife of 15 years, Candye Gould Spears, and his stepdaughter Meghan Bartos are both alumni.



William Spears' Cenergistic office in Dallas includes memorabilia from his earlier philanthropic gift to Oklahoma State University. (Shafkat Anowar / Staff Photographer)

The business accelerator his donation supports will help students, faculty and local industries launch research and development, as well as create new revenue for SMU. The institute will create leadership programs, scholarships and internships for business students.

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“The ability to bring the research to a commercialization stage really changes the landscape of the university and that’s what we really want to emulate here at SMU in this next stage of our life,” Myers said.

About 70% of SMU business school students come from out of state. Nearly three-quarters stay after graduation and work in Dallas.

“If you’re 18 years old, anything that involves some kind of technology and entrepreneurial activity is what they’re interested in,” Turner said. “It’s really tied to what makes Dallas run and what helps to attract students to Dallas.”

For Spears, leadership and entrepreneurship go hand in hand, which excites him about the opportunities his donation will bring to students.

“Mentorship and coaching is really the most enjoyable thing that I do as a leader,” said Spears, whose career includes over 40 years working directly with education and energy management. “When I use the word ‘entrepreneurship,’ that word’s synonym is ‘leadership.’”

His gift also forms a competitive Spears Scholars Program to attract new leaders to SMU. In addition, a Spears Interns Program will allow students to travel to New York, London and Washington, D.C.

The entrepreneurship institute will be led by an endowed executive director. Students will also be able to participate in a Spears Speaker Series that will bring high-profile Dallas business leaders and experts to the school.

“Dallas is such an entrepreneurial city,” Spears. “We’re hoping to create entrepreneurs for the future.”