

# opinion



## In pursuit of academic excellence

by Dr. Gordon P. Eaton

The meaning of the term "academic excellence" is one on which there is not universal agreement. It has rather different meanings for different people. Even among those of us most immediately concerned with it at Texas A&M, the perception of academic excellence is often quite different.

To an undergraduate student, the term may imply a consistent degree of excellence in formal classroom instruction that, over a four-year span, will provide solid preparation for professional practice in one's chosen field. Often, that student does not see himself as having any substantive role in the maintenance of academic excellence, but tends, instead, to view himself as just a passive recipient of something provided by others.

To a faculty member, on the other hand, the term academic excellence may suggest a high degree of dedicated scholarship on the part of academically well qualified and carefully selected students, as well as a consistent application of academic craftsmanship on the part of one's faculty colleagues.

A third party, the graduate student, may look far less to formal classroom instruction than to keenly analytical and vigorous seminars in which he learns as much from his student peers as from the faculty, and to a first-rate bench research experience in the laboratory or clinic.

Can Texas A&M be all these things to all these people simultaneously? Is it? Should it try?

For many of its 107 years, the academic emphasis at Texas A&M was on undergraduate teaching, particularly on preparation for the professions of agriculture, the mechanical arts (engineering), and military science. Twenty years ago the undergraduate college known as the Agriculture and Mechanical College of Texas became, in name, a full-blown university. Ten years or so ago, it began to become one in fact.

With 36,500 students, we are both an old college and one of America's newest large universities. We are young and vital. As a community of scholars, we have enormous opportunity before us. Unlike

many other universities around the country, we are blessed with substantial resources.

Texas A&M made major contributions to the state and nation throughout its past in the preparation of their young for the professions. It must not now, in its quest for wider preeminence, turn its back on this achievement and the great contributions we have made (and should continue to make) through undergraduate teaching. We need not abandon that position of strength as we continue to strive for excellence in terms of our national academic reputation.

What is that reputation today? As in the case of the term "academic excellence," this, too, depends on whom one

asks. Ask a major Texas firm's employee recruiter and in most cases he'll wax enthusiastic about the virtues of the academic preparation provided a student here. Ask an Aggie parent and the response may be much the same.

Ask an academician at another institution, however, particularly one at a non-Texas institution, and you will, more often than not, get a rather different view.

Along with several hundred other academic institutions in the United States, we were subjected to wide national scrutiny last year when the National Academy Press published a multi-volume work entitled "An Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs in the United States." It was prepared by a nationwide

committee of scholars as an assessment of quality-related characteristics of such programs throughout the country.

This comprehensive, largely objective and widely-publicized study was sponsored by an august and respected body, the Conference Board of Associated Research Councils. The board viewed Texas A&M University as merely average.

In many fields, 30 to 40 other institutions around the United States ranked ahead of us by numerical score, among them Caltech, Harvard, MIT, UCLA, Stanford, the University of Texas, Cornell, the University of Wisconsin and many others.

If there was an encouraging side to the findings, we did somewhat better than others in scores related to recent program improvement. Nevertheless, I would hope that 10 years from today we may have the opportunity to see our name elevated to higher levels in the rankings of studies of this kind.

Two things that clearly contribute to national or international reputation are graduate education and research. The advancement of knowledge for the betterment of humankind and the production of scholars qualified for competitive faculty membership at other institutions are traditional measures of a university's academic excellence.

Where do we stand by such measures? Last fall, 17 percent of our 36,000 plus students were graduate students. In contrast, at the University of Wisconsin (another, more widely recognized land-grant institution) 32 percent of an enrollment of 42,000 were graduate students.

Part of the issue has been our growth rate. While the enrollment at the graduate level has been rising over the past several years, the number of undergraduates has risen even faster.

Therein lies a mild concern if we hope to attain a reputation of excellence in graduate education and research. Much of the funded research, while conducted under the direction of faculty, is carried out by graduate research assistants.

In the area of research, the Texas A&M University System's budget recently topped \$90 million, placing it first in both the state and the region and also

placing it among the top 20 universities nationally.

Such a measure is, to some degree, simplistic, as well as materialistic. A large fraction of that budget is for research in the area of agriculture, for which we are well known and as befits a significant land grant research institution. We are now embarked on an effort to try to increase funding in other areas of expertise in order to place us in a competitive position dollar-wise in other areas in addition to agriculture. Three fields currently lead the way: chemistry, engineering and oceanography.

Clearly, the significance of our research findings will ultimately be far more important than the dollars spent on them. In some fields of endeavor, budgets are quite small, but the work receives extraordinary national attention. One such field is nautical archaeology. Another is history.

Several of our colleges here at Texas A&M are carrying heavy teaching loads at the undergraduate level, and this bodes well neither for the undergraduate students nor the faculty. Students in these colleges are not getting the kind of personal instruction and careful attention that they used to get at this university and for which the university is so well-known locally. Management of enrollments may be our only solution to this problem over the short haul.

What of the future? What are we to do? At its May meeting, the Board of Regents accepted a set of comprehensive review and planning documents entitled

Academic Report. In it, the Task Force on Academic Institutions compares conditions at Texas A&M University with those at other preeminent universities, primarily as a basis for making recommendations for improvement here during the remaining years of the present century.

There was agreement among the task

*In the area of research, the Texas A&M University System's budget recently topped \$90 million, placing it first in both the state and the region and also placing it among the top 20 universities nationally.*

force members that the university can reach preeminent status. The Task Force stated the belief that Texas A&M is not as well-known throughout the country for academic achievement as it should be.

Though undergraduate education was viewed as of generally high quality, it was suggested that it will be difficult to maintain present levels of excellence unless ballooning enrollments are brought under control.

Graduate education was seen as receiving too little emphasis. The Task

Force stated the belief that the university must increase graduate-level enrollment and step up research activity, particularly in the area of basic research.

The pursuit of excellence in the area of research is not incompatible with teaching, and we must vigorously pursue that fact. The truth is, good teaching is not possible at advanced levels without substantial involvement in research, inquiring and restless mind on the part of both faculty and student is basic to the entire process. Thus, the university must move each year, at the direction of the Association of Former Students, toward unished achievements in research as well as in teaching.

In the process of continued growth, we must look at the entire enterprise of Texas A&M University and ourselves if we are where we want to be, and, if not, how we might strive there.

We will build toward our goals in areas of academic strength and opportunities. Change is inevitable. Hopefully, the time the Class of 1987 gathers on campus for its 10th reunion, the Texas A&M will be recognized as a leader in the nation.

*(Editor's Note: Guest columnist Gordon P. Eaton is Provost and President for Academic Affairs.)*



## Free speech is in danger

by Randy McDougal

The open exchange of ideas, both in and out of the classroom, should be protected for the sake of individuals as well as the university. I doubt many — if any — students have not been exposed to opinions and contentions they disagreed with. However, disagreement with a speaker does not provide the right to try to curb any person's freedom of speech.

On Dec. 7, an article was printed on the front page of the Battalion ("Limitations discussed") about the present discussion on limiting individuals' rights to express themselves publicly because of the opposing opinions of a few people. No reasons were given for placing the limitations on where (and when: the article mentioned future considerations for limiting how often individuals can speak) an individual can speak except that a few people disagreed with what speakers have said.

Obviously no one has reported being forced to listen to any outdoor speakers (though we are at times forced to listen to free expression inside the classroom). So why are some students unable to "ignore and walk by" the speakers as the article suggests many students do? I fail to see how allowing public speakers to continue as they have in the past is a problem.

The suggestion to limit outdoor speakers poses a couple of major problems. First, the limitation is clearly aimed at preachers, or evangelists. Does this mean that all have the right to freedom of speech but some, depending on their views, have more (or less) freedom than others? Certainly this is in conflict with the rights we all share.

What is the benefit of freedom of speech if it is confined to areas specified according to how a few feel about the subject matter? The whole point of outdoor speaking is to openly communicate

### reader's forum

ideas which the speaker feels people need to be made aware of. The principle is that we are guaranteed to hear the ideas of others as they deem it important enough to tell us publicly. The implication is for

public speakers to go where they are. The idea is wasted if people are forced to search out the speakers

We are faced with the question of whether or not a true freedom of speech will continue to exist on this campus. We have heard many things I disagree with since coming to A&M. But let us have the liberty of listening without restriction.

*(Editor's Note: Randy McDougal is a junior majoring in business administration.)*

## Fund goals probed

Two major fund raising campaigns — all dependent on students' participation and contributions — failed to reach their respective goals during the fall semester. Are students poorer this semester? Could be. But maybe too many organizations are basing their goals on strong student support. Aggies may be generous, but everyone has a limit.

Eddie Stoker, student leader of the Christian Children's Fund, told The Battalion Monday his group's goal of \$25,000 was "reasonable, yet still demanding." Though they missed their goal, the students — and there were many involved, from fraternities to the Corps of Cadets — still collected and donated \$20,000 in cash and pledges.

John Williams, publisher of the Bryan-College Station Eagle and editor of the 1983 United Way, pointed to the rainout of three projects as one reason the students fell short of its goal.

Those involved say a campaign to lap wasn't a problem. And no one is saying their goals were too high. Concerns The Battalion is the only every group with a goal expected to contribute heavily to their campaign.

We feel students should be more generous because they want to help because they feel pressure to meet times unrealistic goal. Taking advantage of the Good Ag syndrome, what charity is all about.

— The Battalion Editorial Board

### The Battalion

USPS 045 360

Member of Texas Press Association Southwest Journalism Conference

- Editor: Rebeca Zimmermann
- Managing Editor: John Wagner
- City Editor: Patrice Koranek
- Assistant City Editors: Kathleen Hart, Stephanie Ross
- News Editor: Tracey Taylor
- Assistant News Editors: Susan Talbot, Wanda Winkler
- Editorial Page Editor: Kathy Wiesepape
- Sports Editor: Donn Friedman
- Assistant Sports Editor: Bill Robinson
- Entertainment Editor: Shelley Hoekstra
- Assistant Entertainment Editor: Angel Stokes
- Photo Editor: John Makely
- Staff Writers: Robin Black, Bridget Brockman, Bob Gaster, Ronnie Crocker, Bonnie Langford, Christine Mallon, Kay Mallet, Sarah Oates, Michelle Powe, Lauri Reese, Dave Scott, Kelley Smith, Karen Wallace
- Photographers: Michael Davis, Bill Hughes, Katherine Hurt, Eric Lee, Dean Saito
- Cartoonists: Paul Dirmeyer, Scott McCullar

#### Editorial Policy

The Battalion is a non-profit, self-supporting newspaper operated as a community service to Texas A&M University and Bryan-College Station. Opinions expressed in The Battalion are those of the editor or the author, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Texas A&M University administrators or faculty members, or of the Board of Regents.

The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes within the Department of Communications. Questions or comments concerning any editorial matter should be directed to the editor.

#### Letters Policy

Letters to the Editor should not exceed 300 words in length, and are subject to being cut if they are longer. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must also be signed and show the address and telephone number of the writer. Columns and guest editorials also are welcome, and are not subject to the same length constraints as letters. Address all inquiries and correspondence to: Editor, The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, or phone (409) 845-2611.

The Battalion is published Monday through Friday during Texas A&M regular semesters, except for holiday and examination periods. Mail subscriptions are \$16.75 per semester, \$33.25 per school year and \$35 per year. Advertising rates furnished on request.

Our address: The Battalion, 216 Reed McDonald Building, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843.

United Press International is entitled exclusively to the use for reproduction of all news dispatches credited to it. Rights of reproduction of all other matter herein reserved.

Second class postage paid at College Station, TX 77843.