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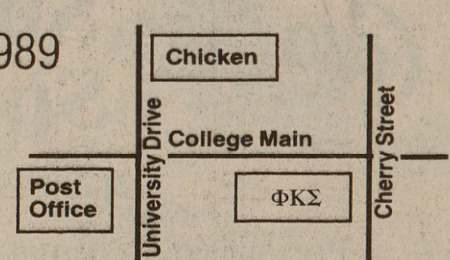
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Registering students say howdy to 'Mr. Vocom,' easy scheduling

By Sissie Allensworth
Reporter

As students frantically add and/or drop classes in search of the perfect class schedule, they are quickly becoming familiar with the soothing sounds of "Mr. VOCOM."

"Mr. VOCOM" is the nickname members of the Student Information Management System have affectionately given Texas A&M's touch-tone phone registration system.

The nickname refers to the voice communications used in the system. Larry Malota, manager of SIMS, said the people who have worked with the system have become attached to it.

SIMS is the organization that implemented and maintains the phone registration system Texas A&M students use to register for classes.

The system was first tested in the summer of 1986 by students who were given instructions while standing in line to register Pavilion. Students were asked to test the new system and provide feedback about problems and possible improvements. Malota said the students loved it and the system was set up for use by all students the following fall.

"We've been using the system as our primary mode of registration ever since that time," Malota said. "It has been accepted well and has been good for Texas A&M."

Before touch-tone registration, computer terminals set up in the Pavilion were used for registration.

"Students had to stand in line and, quite honestly, those lines got pretty long," Malota said. "Students had to wait a long time in the heat and sometimes rain."

"There were 30 to 35 operators dedicated to the registration process. Now we only need three to six operators for a help line for students."

Malota said having less operators means lower costs which is just one of the many advantages of phone registration.

"Registering by phone is much more convenient for the students," Malota said. "They can call in from their dorm rooms or apartments. They can even call, or have their parents call, long-distance."

Phone registration times are from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. as opposed to 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. for computer registration. Hours have been extended to accommodate students who are in

class or at work during working hours.

Malota said few schools have adopted the telephone registration system, but many more will.

"We got the idea from the folks over at Brigham Young University," Malota said. "They were probably one of the pioneer schools using the touch-tone, voice-response system for telephone registration. (VOCOM) is patterned a lot like what they use, although we've expanded here a lot. We want to give the students here more options."

Malota says SIMS hopes to expand the touch-tone system by allowing students to obtain information about class times and locations and about billing.

"Now it's just Math 103 — Section 501 — three hours," Malota said, imitating the voice-response heard when registering. "But we'll have to get some additional hardware before we expand."

"Some stuff we're looking at farther down the road is help in the financial aid area and the admissions area. We want to allow the students to call and say, 'What's the status of my (school) application?' or 'What's going on with my loan?'"

Malota says the students will be

"There were 30 to 35 operators dedicated to the registration process (before phone registration.) Now we only need three to six operators for a help line for students."

—Larry Malota, manager, SIMS

able to receive an answer by voice-response over the telephone.

Malota said that SIMS, to make registering more convenient for students, posts lists of class sections that are closed in the Pavilion. He said they also post lists of students that are blocked for registration by the University.

"It makes it easier for students so they don't call up on their day to register and find out they're blocked

and have to run around getting unlocked before they can register," Malota said.

There are 32 incoming lines in the phone registration system.

"We hope to expand that by an additional 32 lines," Malota said. "We had hoped to have them by this

"This University has too many lines as it is and I like not having to go to campus to register like we used to."

—Ginger Reneau senior

November but negotiations have taken longer than we had hoped."

Malota said the lines should be available by April, in time for registration for Fall 1989.

The problem isn't the number of lines available but the times the students call, Malota said.

"Everybody decides at 7 or 6:30 (a.m.) to start calling and all the lines get bottlenecked-up," Malota said. "People get discouraged because they dial, and dial, and dial."

Malota says the students start calling early because they are anxious to get the classes they want.

"I can understand from the students' perspective that they want to get in early in the day so they can get into these classes that tend to fill up really early," Malota said. "It's easy for me to say, 'Hey, students! You need to wait until right after lunch or afternoon or until another day,' but, quite honestly, that is the best thing to do."

Malota says SIMS and GTE are working together to try to alleviate some of these problems.

General Telephone is queuing-up calls during registration, which will help students not have to continue redialing.

Students are assigned specific days to register based on classification and last name initials. Graduate students and seniors are first.

Malota said that on the days of registration for upperclassmen the lines were usually free by the afternoon.

"For the juniors and seniors, there's a lot of activity in the mornings," Malota said. "When you get the sophomores, and especially the freshmen, the time that it took for to get any free lines went farther and farther into the afternoon. In fact, on the freshmen days it was actually late in the evening."

Malota said there were several possible reasons for the busy lines: freshmen days including the late contention for freshman class. Other possible reasons include a large number of freshmen enrolling in the University and the inexperience of the caller.

Another problem the students are having, Malota said, is confusion about their specific day to register.

"Students call and say, 'But I am senior. I'll be a senior next semester,'" Malota said. "But students have to register by the hours they currently have at the time of registration."

The touch-tone registration system is on the 260-exchange, meaning the number called to register starts with 260. The system starts on the 845-exchange and this causes problems for the system.

"The 845-numbers are the numbers on campus, in all the offices, and when the students started to register it flooded the system," Malota said. "Calling from an 845-number also gave the caller an advantage. Students who called from an 845-number could get in easier than from off campus or from a 260-exchange."

Malota said there is no advantage now from a 260-exchange or another lines.

Malota said students like this system better than terminal registration.

Ginger Reneau, a senior finance and accounting major, agreed.

"I like the new system," Reneau said. "This University has too many lines as it is and I like not having to go to campus to register like we used to."

Other students who have never experienced terminal registration have different views.

"I think it's a neat system but they need to make it so it's easier to get or something," said Michelle Allan, a junior transfer student from Louisiana State University.

"The students by-and-large have liked it," Malota said. "I don't see anything at all. We've been very pleased with it."



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