

Quality of undergraduate education

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graduating) sometimes have difficulty receiving help from faculty members.

However, Jeff Gibbs, a freshman biology major from Carrollton, believes help is available outside class. "If you have a question, you can find somebody who will be able to answer it," Gibbs said. "I mean, there are people out there who do care."

"I've gone to a lot of mentors and a lot of my profs and counselors just to get help, without knowing very much about what to do. You get stuck in a dead end, so you go to somebody who's older and already been through it and ask them for help."

Albert Boggess, an associate professor of mathematics at A&M and head undergraduate adviser for the math department, said most professors keep office hours, but students are reluctant to seek out professors after class. Possible reasons for this are students' fears of appearing inadequate and the age difference between professors and students, he said.

CLASS SIZE

The tremendous growth of A&M during the past few decades has affected almost every aspect of University life. The campus continues to grow, new construction projects abound and finding a parking space is not getting any easier.

And with more than 40,000 students enrolled at A&M, class sizes are understandably larger than they once were.

Boggess said large classes have hindered effective instruction.

"If you go back just say 15 or 20 years, the class sizes were maybe a half or a third that (the present) size," Boggess said. "So I think the quality of instruction, at least in calculus classes, has slipped as a result."

State Sen. Kent Caperton, D-Bryan, said there is no easy solution to problems caused by the rapid growth of A&M and other state schools.

"It's a mixed blessing," Caperton said. "We're glad that people want to improve, but it does put strains on the higher education system."

"So a real issue, a tough issue, is how you respond to that. Does a state school continue to raise its entrance requirements as a method of controlling enrollment, or do you have a more open enrollment policy?"

A&M's answer to that question was to toughen entrance requirements in 1988. But Dr. Clinton Phillips, associate provost and dean of faculties at A&M, said the number of students at A&M should have been brought under control sooner.

"In past years, until fairly recently, there was a real reluctance on the part of the Board of Regents to allow us to control admissions, to manage admissions, to put it another way, to control the size of this institution," Phillips said. "Personally, I would have liked it if we hadn't gotten much larger than 25,000 students, but the fact of the matter is that we have."

Considering the size of A&M, the relationship between faculty members and students is good, Phillips said.

Many professors and administrators point out that classes are relatively small at A&M when compared to other large universities, and others say institutions the size of A&M are practically forced to have large classes.

FUNDING

Inadequate funding is another problem affecting undergraduate education at A&M. Like other state universities in Texas, A&M is dependent on state funds to pay for everything from new buildings to faculty salaries.

A&M President William Mobley said Texas' struggling economy forced legislators to decrease funding for higher education during the 1980s.

Meanwhile, A&M officials have been working to find other sources of revenues, such as private endowments.

Dr. Larry Hickman, a professor of philosophy at A&M, said funding is a crucial component of education.

Keeping faculty salaries competitive and having enough money to develop new courses are keys to providing students with a good education and ensuring that faculty members remain at A&M, he said, adding that A&M is losing some talented faculty members this year.

Others have similar concerns.

"Professors have very shallow roots in the community," one faculty member said. Professors are much more dedicated to their disciplines than the university at which they work, he said, and therefore will move to another university if they get a good offer.

Until recently Texas was among the 10 states with the highest faculty salaries at public universities. Since Texas slipped from the top 10, legislators, administrators and professors across the state are becoming more concerned about keeping Texas' salaries competitive and retaining top-flight faculty members.

State Rep. Richard Smith, R-Bryan, said the situation is not as bad as some believe.

"I'm not sure we have any major problems," Smith said. "I think that higher education is in pretty good shape in Texas."

CLASSROOM COMMUNICATIONS

A complaint often voiced by students is their professors or teaching assistants cannot communicate effectively with students.

Although foreign faculty members often are criticized for inadequate speaking skills, several faculty members and students said some native English-speakers have problems communicating as well.

Dabney said some professors are knowledgeable but have difficulty communicating their knowledge to students.

"Some of them, from my experience, have kind of a problem teaching it," Dabney said. "I mean, they know it themselves, but they just have a problem getting it across."

Dr. E. Dean Gage, acting provost and vice president for academic affairs, said the Classroom Communications Enhancement Program, which will become operative at A&M in the fall, will give students a chance to speak out if their professor or teaching assistant does not communicate well.

STUDENTS

In some cases, the barriers to an effective education can be the students themselves: They might not be serious about getting an education,

"I believe that there is a higher percentage of students today who are not equipped to deal with life's hard knocks," Milford said. "I have more students today by far who do not successfully complete my course than I had 15 or 20 years ago. Most of those who don't complete it fail because they quit."

Gage said some students receive a poor education before they come to college and often lack the study skills to do well in a university environment, but he added that students entering A&M last year received better scores on the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test than students entering other public universities in Texas.

He said A&M is working with public schools in Texas to increase the quality of public school education in Texas.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE

If anyone gets the impression these issues are being ignored by A&M officials, there are a number of programs, plans, committees and panels to convince them otherwise.



Battalion File Photo

A professor says large classes, a result of increased A&M enrollment, may hinder teaching.

tively with students. Some faculty members and administrators, however, say this may be an excuse on the part of students.

"I think it's a problem," Milford said. "But I honestly believe it's more often an excuse than a problem."

He said many students do not make an effort to understand foreign professors or teaching assistants. Instructors who make a sincere effort to work with students can often overcome any problem they have with English, he said.

Boggess said some professors and teaching assistants have problems communicating, but they often can

they could lack the necessary skills to pursue a college degree or they might have a difficult time adjusting to college life.

One faculty member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said many students do not really want to learn.

"Ideally, most professors come in thinking, 'Gee, I'm here to teach, and people want to learn,'" the professor said. "And then you get this feeling that, no, they don't really want to learn."

"If you try to do something other than a multiple choice exam at this

Some of these are:

• **Multiple Missions Task Force:** This group is examining the many goals and responsibilities of A&M. Among other things, it seeks to determine whether A&M is balancing its teaching mission with requirements such as research and service.

• **Regents' Committee on Academic Campuses:** This committee, which has formed an advisory panel of students, faculty members, parents and former students, is examining many issues related to undergraduate education at A&M. Regent Douglas DeCluit, chairman of the committee, said the committee is attempting to foster a dialogue among those who are involved with or affected by undergraduate education at A&M.

• **Student Advising and Counseling Committee:** Examining the effectiveness of academic advising and counseling at A&M is the purpose of this committee. It is expected to come up with recommendations concerning advising and counseling by June 15.

• **Classroom Communications Enhancement Program:** This program, which will begin in the fall, provides students the opportunity to express concerns about their instructors' communications abilities early in each semester. Upon being approached by a student, department heads will have seven class days to investigate a complaint.

• **Center for Teaching Excellence:** By providing support for A&M professors, this organization encourages effective teaching and helps faculty members improve their teaching skills.

"If you try to do something other than a multiple choice exam at this school with freshman or sophomores, screaming and yelling occurs."

— A&M professor

be understood if students make an effort to do so. He said the mathematics department screens teaching assistants to be sure they can communicate effectively.

"We have a program here at the beginning of each academic year ... where we sit in an audience and let a TA (teaching assistant) present calculus problems to us, and we judge their performance," he said. "And if there's anyone who we feel cannot adequately explain calculus problems, we let them go at that point."

Phillips said there always will be some professors and teaching assistants at A&M who cannot communicate well, but he added that A&M compares favorably to other universities in this regard.

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The faculty member said many students receive a poor education prior to attending college.

"I think that's one of the major problems that all professors feel that we're working against, is the lack of instruction of students before they get into college," the professor said. "I can't understand how some of them get in here."

"If you can't divide three by four and get 75 percent, that's pretty bad. But I've had three people come to my office, and they can't do that."

Milford said today's students are not as committed to learning as students were at one time.

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