

TAKING A Breather

Returning to Texas A&M
attractive option to students

BY SUZANNE BRABECK
The Battalion

With more than 43,000 students in one place, people commonly get lost in the crowd, and individual stories are not told. There are many non-traditional students who come to AggieLand to increase their educations and marketability — after they have already entered the working world and gotten a taste of what it is really like out there.

Mohamed Khedhiri, a post-doctoral student in agriculture economics, took a six-year break from school after completing his master's degree. In 1989 he received a bachelor's degree while living in Tunisia; three years later he received a master's degree in Spain.

Khedhiri said coming back to school was even harder because the educational systems differ in their teaching styles and grading.

"Here they emphasize the experimental sides of things more than the theoretical," he said.

Mark Fealner, a graduate student in nautical archeology, came to A&M three years ago after graduating from the University of Central Florida in 1994.

"I was working outside of my field after I graduated, and I had reached my top earning potential at my company without a master's degree," he said. "I got motivated to return back to school when I visited my little sister at Saint Louis University, and I remembered how much fun I had in college."

Khedhiri said it was difficult to come back to school because of the six-year gap in his studies.

"Every day science changes, and I had to do a lot of extra research to get caught up before I started school again," he said.

Fealner said one of the best things about graduate school is that it lets students focus on what in-

terests them, rather than being distracted by work and classes outside of their major.

"I was less active as an undergrad because the last two to three years I worked full-time while I was going to school," he said.

Fealner said extracurricular activities still appeal to students who have experienced life outside of college.

"As an older student, I still feel that there are enough activities here to take advantage of," he said. "Everything feels accessible, and I have met a lot of other graduate students in various departments."

Whether students come back to finish their bachelor's degrees or to obtain additional degrees, the benefits are huge, though it may be an uphill battle.

Khedhiri said students should wait a while, then come back to school if they do not have any money and are really struggling.

Fealner said there are many other benefits to taking a long break from school.

One can diversify their education and their skills through work experience and real-world scenarios, he said.

"I feel my work experience helped improve my work ethic as a professional," he said. "It has been a real advantage. Now I am a real self-starter, I work better unsupervised and my problem-solving skills have improved."

In addition to the future benefits of higher education, some students like the more flexible schedules academia offers.

"The biggest thing is that I no longer have a regimented 9-to-5 schedule," Fealner said. "I enjoy my freedom, but some things slip through the cracks without [a] structured [schedule]."

As students look forward to holiday breaks and vacations to refresh themselves, both Fealner and



RUBEN DELUNA/THE BATTALION

Khedhiri said getting away from school for an extended time is also helpful for students with financial difficulties or who are between degrees.

"As a finishing undergraduate student, unless you know exactly what you want, take time to figure it out," Fealner said. "I had a really good friend who went straight to graduate school. He had taken out a lot of loans, and he later dropped out of the program to pursue his real interest — writing."

Khedhiri said while few people would argue education is not beneficial, taking the time to make in-

formed decisions about when to return to school also is important.

"The more knowledge, the more education, and the more income you can get, the better off you will be," Khedhiri said. "That's why I chose to continue."

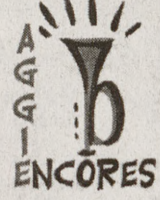
Fealner said other students struggling with the problem of deciding whether to come back to school after an extended break should go for it.

"If you have come as far as enrolling into college and have put in a few semesters, you owe it to yourself to finish what you start," Fealner said. "Even if it is harder, the payoff is immense, and your options widen."

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