

An Aggie's view of the universe

Texas A&M's Astronomical Observatory presents new opportunities for students

By Amelia Williamson
THE BATTALION

Since the beginning of time, humans have stood in awe and wonder at the magnificence of the universe. Texas A&M astronomy students are now able to explore space for themselves at the A&M Astronomical Observatory, completed in August near Easterwood Airport in College Station.

Don Carona, director of the Texas A&M Astronomical Observatory, said the original observatory was built in 1980 but lacked the space for the number of people involved in astronomy programs in recent years. This prompted the University to begin the yearlong construction of a new observatory. The facilities consist of two observatories, a large classroom and an observation deck for students to set up small telescopes.

The telescope in the main observatory is a 16-inch Meade LX200 GPS SCT with UHTC optics. The robotic observatory contains a 14-inch Celestron SCT. Students can also set up and operate any of the 25, 8-inch SC telescopes at the observatory.

The observatory is used mainly by students taking the Physics 307 Observation Astronomy course. Students use the classroom to learn how to use star atlas charts and the coordinate systems astronomers use. They are then able to apply what they learned to find different objects in the night sky using the telescopes.

Peering through the telescopes, students can locate objects such as star clusters, nebulae, galaxies and planets.

Before the new facilities were built, students went over material in a classroom on the A&M campus and then had to drive out to the observatory to make observations. Now, however, there is a classroom at the observing site that seats at

least 60 students.

The classroom gives students more time to observe the sky without the hassle of driving back and forth from campus.

Brittany Rackar, a biology graduate student taking the Physics 307 course, said she enjoys spending time at the observatory.

"Being so far away from campus is peaceful," Rackar said, "and the city lights don't interfere with our observations of the sky."

Students taking Physics 307 get much more out of class than reading from books, looking at pictures or listening to a professor's lecture. They also have the opportunity for hands-on experience that reinforces what they learn in the classroom.

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Kevin Bailey, an agricultural development major, said he is a visual learner, so sitting in a class and taking notes doesn't help him at all. "Being able to touch and learn myself really helps me understand what I am doing."

Being able to look through the telescopes and view the universe keeps students interested in the course material and actually makes them want to learn more, Carona said.

"Some students take the astronomy courses because they need another required science and this happened to be available," Carona said. "By the end of the semester, most of the students find they had a great time learning the night sky and that the course turned out to be more than just another required class."



Pictured are the robotic observatory (left), the observation deck (center) and the main observatory and classroom (right). Students interested in learning more about the observatory can check out astronomy.tamu.edu or contact Don Carona.

Many research projects are also conducted at the observatory. Current projects include measuring the periods of variable stars, creating a full Earth-based photographic atlas of the moon and searching for undiscovered minor planets and comets. Anyone who is interested in taking part in the research programs is encouraged to sign up to participate.

Students also have the opportunity to conduct research projects of their own. The observatory is an important part of the physics department at A&M and provides students with important resources.

"I think everyone should look through a tele-

scope at least once in their life," said senior math major Sagar Bhatt. "Astronomy is a universal field, and every university should have some facilities for students."

Students have a new opportunity to get an up-close look at the universe around them. The things they learn while spending time at the observatory are invaluable and are memories that will probably stay with them for the rest of their lives.

"There's nothing like watching a student who has never seen the moon through a telescope take their first look through the eyepiece," Carona said. "Without these facilities, the students would miss a truly amazing opportunity."

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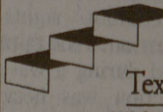
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