

Texas A&M Geosciences and the increasing role of transfer students

Eric Riggs, Texas A & M University

Texas A&M University at College Station is the flagship university for the Texas A&M System, and as such is a major destination for transfer students, both from inside and outside the A&M system. The College of Geosciences consists of four academic departments and many organized research centers spanning the core geoscience disciplines of Geology & Geophysics, Geography, Oceanography and Atmospheric Sciences. Two additional stand-alone interdisciplinary degree programs round out the College academically, offering undergraduate degrees in Environmental Geosciences and Environmental Studies and graduate degrees in Water and Hydrological Sciences. The College has increased its undergraduate enrollment and graduation numbers substantially in recent years, growing from 105 Baccalaureate graduates in 2006-07 College-wide to 187 in 2010-11. This 80% growth over this time period has greatly outpaced the undergraduate degree completion growth rate of 10% for the University as a whole. While the College of Geosciences is still the smallest at A&M in terms of overall Baccalaureate graduation rate, it is by far the fastest growing of our nine undergraduate degree-granting colleges over the last five years.

A significant number of our incoming and graduating undergraduate students are transfers from primarily 2-year colleges, mostly concentrated in the southeastern portion of Texas. University-wide between 2006 and 2010, 23-25% of degree recipients entered as transfer students. In the College of Geosciences transfer students are an even more significant portion of our graduating students, making up 34-35% of graduates during the same period. Most of the undergraduate enrollment growth in the College, however, has come from an increase in first-time freshmen and not from an increase in transfer admissions. Transfer admits as a percentage of the new undergraduate admissions had been relatively flat to a slight decline at near 30%, but recent efforts to reinvigorate transfer admissions has sharply reversed this trend. Current enrollment data shows that our incoming transfer students this year once again more closely mirror our historic graduation rates with 34% of our new students entering by transferring in primarily from community colleges.

Beyond the numbers, there are other observations, concerns, and opportunities for partnerships between Texas A&M Geosciences and our surrounding community college students and programs. Through careful tracking of admitted transfer students, we have seen a consistent drop in their GPAs after transferring to Texas A&M, pointing to gaps in preparation, mismatches in expectations, or curricular stumbling blocks. In any case we have a problem and an opportunity to help this incoming third of our student body reach their highest potential. Community college populations in our region also tend to be more diverse than first-time freshmen in general, and we are actively working to build stronger formal ties to community college feeder programs within the Houston metro area and other regions within southeast Texas as part of our broader strategy to enhance diversity across our College. Seeing after the proper preparation and “onboarding” of this increasingly diverse and varied group of students will be important for ensuring their success and the vitality of our undergraduate programs. Texas A&M as an entity is moving toward an increased emphasis on community college transfers, and we look forward to learning from geosciences colleagues around the nation so that we can lead by example locally.