

# 2024 Student Experience Study Report

May 2024

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## Introduction

*“But there’s a spirit can ne’er be told... It’s the Spirit of Aggieland.”*

This “Spirit of Aggieland” has distinguished the student experience at Texas A&M from other institutions across Texas and the nation since its inception. It is a common, shared thread among students despite their unique campus experiences. It is exemplified in the university’s rich traditions that connect generations of Aggies and how students live the university’s core values, creating a campus environment built on leadership and service. As the university continues to garner national and global attention as a premier institution of higher education, Texas A&M must harness the power of the unique spirit of this institution in working to provide the No. 1 student experience in the nation to its students.

There is an Aggie proverb that is often used to describe the Spirit of Aggieland: “From the outside looking in, you can’t understand it. And from the inside looking out, you can’t explain it.” However, in order to measure, enhance or rank Texas A&M’s student experience, it must be defined and understood — even the less tangible aspects. This report seeks to do that while identifying opportunities to enhance the student experience and addressing potential threats to it.

The spirit and culture of Texas A&M are founded in the notion that Aggies come here to be part of something bigger than themselves. Aggies believe in each other. They are on a quest to make the world and their place in it better through a commitment to shared values. They have a sense of reverence for the excellence and devotion of students who preceded them, and they seek an educational experience that forms leaders, doers, innovators and great citizens. Students experience the university through friendships and small communities that allow them to connect and enjoy the university’s storied traditions together, even when they don’t attend all of them. All of this shapes the Aggie experience.

Each year, numerous publications and organizations attempt to rank student experiences. These rankings look at a variety of criteria. In some criteria, A&M ranks very highly and others it does not. A recent report from Hanover Research suggested Texas A&M could improve its rankings by better marketing the unique attributes of the Aggie student experience and the university overall. It also highlighted that the average size of

**“A&M is all about pride, patriotism, faith, family, loyalty, respect — all the corny things that sometimes people make fun of — here they matter.”**

***Texas A&M President  
Mark A. Welsh III***



institutions ranked highly is less than 25% of our institution, suggesting that rankings may favor smaller institutions. Therefore, the university can think intentionally about how it connects both prospective and current students to their smaller community within the large university. However, not one of the national rankings explored the full array of attributes our students describe as defining the Aggie experience.

Therefore, Texas A&M’s pursuit of the No. 1 student experience is not by achieving external rankings. Rather, it is about being true to who Texas A&M is (“true to each other”) and being the best version of ourselves (“forming leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good”). It is not about other universities and measuring up to them; it is about believing that every student who enrolls here is part of the Aggie family and each of them has the opportunity to make a difference now and well beyond. The university’s goal in this study is looking at when, where and how we can improve the opportunities and remove the barriers that will allow each student, when they leave Texas A&M, to look back fondly on their time on campus as they “muster” annually on April 21 and wear their Aggie Ring proudly as continuing ambassadors for the university they love.

### ABOUT THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE STUDY

During the State of the University address and as part of the Quick Look Assessment, President Mark A. Welsh III announced the commission of the Student Experience Study Committee to document the current student experience and establish the standard necessary to offer the nation’s No. 1 student experience. Through its work, the committee collected student feedback through pop-up surveys and listening sessions and utilized existing institutional data to support its assessment. The committee reviewed data from the following surveys or analyses as part of this process:

- Surveys administered through the [Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Evaluation](#):
  - Aggie Experience Survey (SERU: Student Experience in the Research University)
  - Former Student Survey
  - Graduating Senior Survey
  - Hullabaloo U Curriculum Committee Report and Recommendations
  - Hullabaloo U Student Course Evaluations
  - New Undergraduate Student Survey
  - Student Experience Pop-Up Survey
- Surveys administered through [Student Affairs Planning, Assessment & Research](#)
  - Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Needs and Awareness
  - Disability Resources Faculty Survey
  - Disability Resources Student Survey
  - Fish Camp Non-Participant Survey

- Fish Camp Participant Survey
- Freshman Leadership Organization Student Experience-Fall 2020 Student Survey
- Howdy Week Survey
- New Student Conference 2023 Student Survey
- Student Senate Academic Advising Survey
- University Police Department Student and Citizen Survey
- Wellbeing Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings (WISHES)
- Other Surveys:
  - Aggie Firsts: A Culture of Excellence QEP Annual Impact Report
  - College Station Housing Plan – Student Survey
  - Defining a Top Student Experience Report, conducted by Hanover Research
  - Division of Marketing & Communications Data
  - Student Body President Campaign Points Report
  - Student Experience Listening Sessions Summary Report
  - Student Financial Wellness Survey, administered by Trellis Strategies in partnership with the Office of Scholarships & Financial Aid
  - Third Party Tools Presentation, Office of the Provost

This study focused on the undergraduate experience, and the committee recommends that a separate study be commissioned to focus on the graduate and professional student experience. Additionally, the Capacity Study, commissioned by President Welsh, will focus on the infrastructure, faculty/staff sizing and service operations of campus. This report focuses on the Student Experience Study Committee's findings on the undergraduate student experience and recommended courses of action.

### COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Joe Pettibon (chair)	Vice President for Planning, Assessment and Strategy
Tim Scott	Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Office of the Provost
Harry Hogan	Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, College of Engineering
Cynthia Werner	Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, College of Arts & Sciences
Matt Upton	Assistant Dean, Bush School of Government & Public Service
Mary Bryk	Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences
Vicki Dobiynski	Associate Vice President, Division of Student Affairs
Stefanie Baker	Director of Student Life, Division of Student Affairs
Alicia Dorsey	Associate Vice President, Division of Academic Affairs
Arthur Watson	Executive Director, Division of Academic Affairs
Nancy Fahrenwald	University Health Services, Texas A&M Health
Delisa Falks	Assistant Vice President, Enrollment Management

Kenric Davies	Program Coordinator, AggieTEACH, College of Arts & Sciences, University Staff Council
Grayson Sims	Student Rep - Student Government Association, Executive Vice President
Clarissa Maldonado	Student Rep - Regents Scholars President
Lisa Cantu	Student Rep - Howdy Crew (Visitor Center)
Hudson Kraus	Student Rep - President Nominated Student
Cecilee Herd	Senior Vice President, Association of Former Students
Megan Lacy	Executive Director, Marketing and Communications
Tori Davis	Program Coordinator, Division of Planning, Assessment and Strategy

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE IS ROBUST

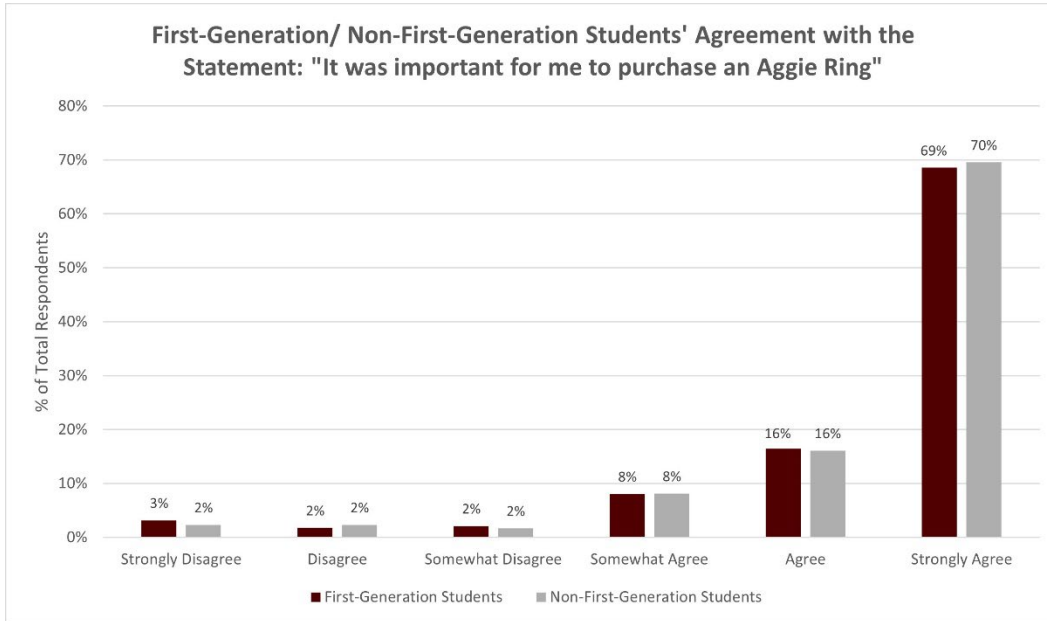
The Aggie student experience is robust and a major factor in why students enroll, succeed and make an impact on the larger world after they leave this “unique American institution.” Some students say Texas A&M University already has the No. 1 student experience. With a purpose “to develop leaders of character dedicated to serving the greater good,” Texas A&M has a long and rich history of doing just that, and the following key attributes are identified as critical components of the current student experience:

- World-class faculty who care deeply about students and their success in and out of the classroom
- Staff who go the extra mile to meet the needs of the students and enable their continued success
- Traditions that are valued, practiced and engaged in by students as part of a familial community
- An Aggie degree that opens doors of opportunity for a lifetime of success
- Leadership and service opportunities that allow the students of today to lead and serve now and build habits that can impact the communities they become a part of after graduation

Students tend to point to academics and traditions when reflecting on why prospective students should enroll here, and they highlight their courses, degree, faculty interactions and student engagement opportunities when reflecting on what is preparing them for their future career goals and post-graduation outcomes.

One of the most enduring and visible demonstrations of the value of the Aggie student experience is the Aggie Ring. From their time spent in the classroom, the research lab, their student organization, or just time spent with friends they have met while enrolled, the Aggie Ring tells the world Aggies are part of something special and helps connect the Aggie Network after graduation. Over 95% of students make the decision to purchase their Aggie Ring and wear it proudly for a lifetime.

While the current student experience is a valued and unique experience that contributes to many multi-generational Aggie families, the committee identified opportunities for improvement and areas of focus. To better explore the strengths and opportunities associated with the student experience, the committee divided its work into four broad areas: academic experience, campus services, student/campus life and affordability.



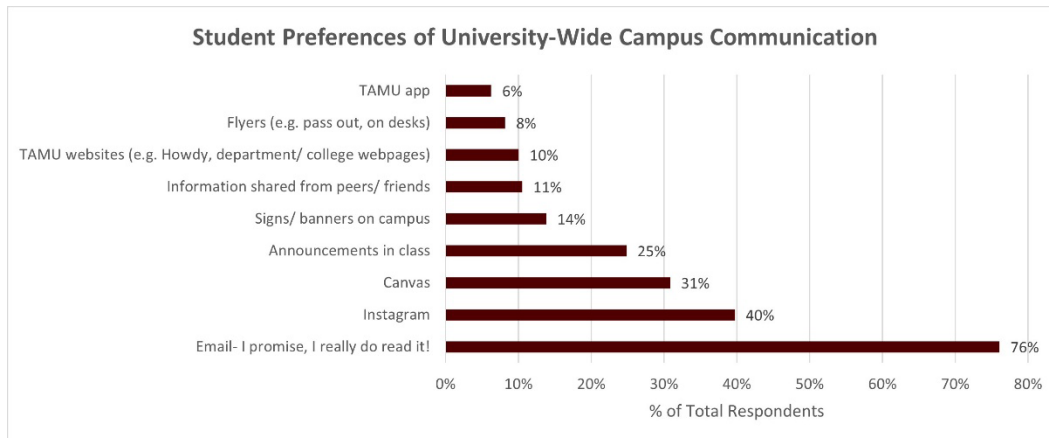
*Graduation Senior Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

### IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION TO THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The student experience is shaped by the opportunities available to students, and in order for them to understand and engage with those, communication was identified as an important component of shaping the student experience. In fact, survey data showed that students expect the university to proactively communicate campus updates and resources that shape their student experience.

The Student Experience Study Survey data indicate the main preferences for students to receive information regarding university resources are via email (76.4%), Instagram (39.1%) and Canvas (30.5%). Students view social media as an alternative means of providing information about the university and potential opportunities available to them. Texas A&M University’s social media channels serve a broad audience that includes students, as well as former students, faculty, staff and Aggie fans. Currently, across all channels, the university has over 2.2 million followers, with the majority of followers concentrated on LinkedIn (778,800), Facebook (709,028) and Instagram (402,371). In the last year, the university’s Instagram account saw the highest increase in engagement of all channels, increasing by 18.7% to over 4.4 million engagements. Beyond these main social channels, individual unit-level channels offer the opportunity to directly connect with students on topics for which they are most passionate.





Through student listening sessions, the committee heard that students desire open and clear channels of communication in all aspects of student life (academics, campus resources, student organizations and others). The following key themes arose regarding communications:

- **Connectivity:** Students want to feel connected to campus through personal interactions with faculty, staff and other students. Intentional relationship building is key in helping students feel that they are “*more than just a number.*” It is important for students to find their community within the larger university, which opens up the opportunity for a more robust experience of Aggie traditions and culture.
- **Transparency:** Students expect the university to provide clear information up front on matters that impact and shape their student experience (university leadership decisions, course material costs, degree expectations, and available resources and services). The breadth and depth of services and resources create a challenge in making sure students are aware of them in a timely manner or know where to locate them.
- **Access:** Students need to be able to easily access the resources, physical spaces, services and personnel important to their Texas A&M student experience. Many students feel access has been compromised due to recent enrollment growth without a corresponding increase in availability of services, from dining, housing and parking, to access to advisors, counselors, and in some cases, select courses.

The committee’s recommendations include the need to proactively communicate with students and tell the student experience story — from one-on-one advising opportunities to campuswide communications.

## **MOST SIGNIFICANT THREATS TO THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

The committee found that instead of drastic changes needed to the student experience, the issue is identifying the threats and taking steps to mitigate those threats before the experience deteriorates and instead deliver timely adjustments that allow students to continue to thrive. The committee identified four significant threats, some of which are already being addressed, and others that will require more investigation and work to implement new strategies to mitigate. The four major threats are: (1) impacts of growth beyond our capacity to serve students effectively, particularly in accessibility of services and in the student support infrastructure (parking, transit, dining and affordable housing), (2) not adapting approaches to meet changing needs for early engagement of students as they transition to A&M, (3) not ensuring the academic experience from advising to the learning environment remains high quality, consistent and robust, and (4) “nickel-and-diming” students with unexpected and inconsistent costs associated with their experience in and out of the classroom.

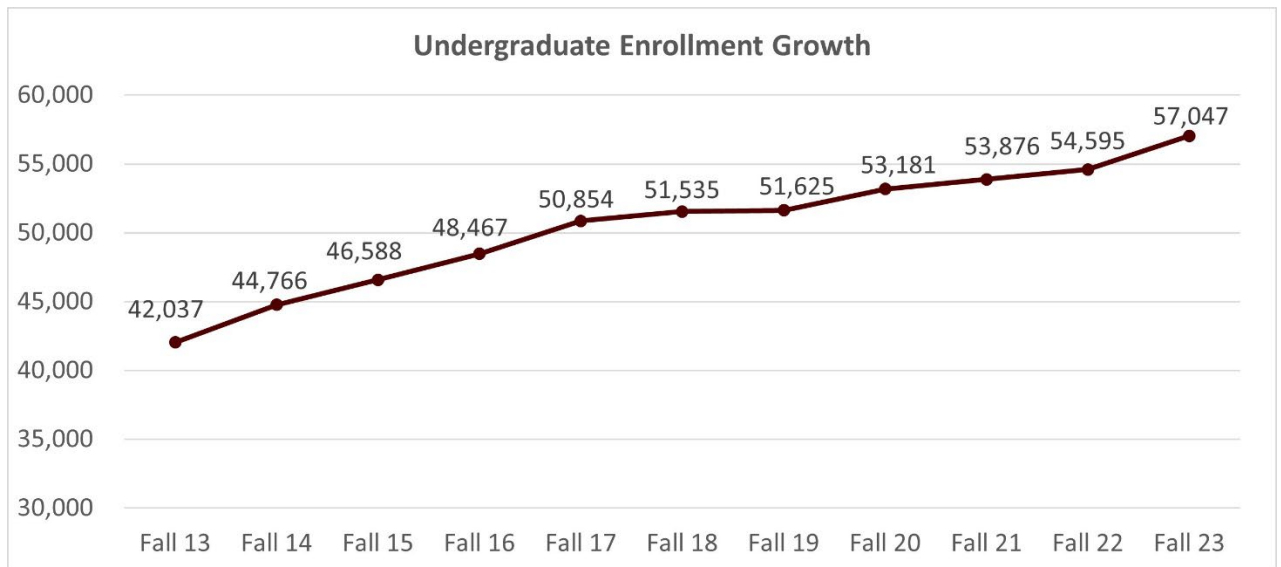
## **HIGHEST PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Below are the top eight recommendations that the committee suggests would have the most benefit to strengthening the robust Aggie experience and mitigating the threats:

1. While the simultaneous study on capacity will address more specifics, the university needs to make investments in student infrastructure support to expand on-campus housing, dining, transit and parking options for students, as well as student study and gathering spaces.
2. Target investment in student-facing services that the capacity study identifies as shortfalls, including career services, counseling, health services and disability resources. Students often report challenges with accessing these specific resources with unwarranted lead times or insufficient one-on-one support.
3. Reconsider the academic calendar as it relates to the start of the fall semester, as the engagement activities and preparation for the fall are too compressed between the end of the summer term and the beginning of the fall term. There are two options that were considered, with a stronger preference for the second one: (1) remove the added break days and holidays in the fall semester to start a week later or (2) reimagine the summer term to move from a 10-week term with two 5-weeks to an 8-week term with two 4-weeks or a variety of options within the 8-week semester (such as retaining the first 5-week period).
4. Form a presidential task force to reimagine and integrate the engagement efforts for students from the acceptance of admissions to the end of the first year, inclusive of New Student Conferences, Fish Camp (and other extended orientations), Hullabaloo U, Howdy Week, MSC Open House and capturing student organization engagement in the first year. Representation should include faculty, staff and students.

5. Academic advisors are ESSENTIAL to the student experience. Students desire to meet with an academic advisor who understands the curriculum, the relationship between course options and career paths/goals and how to balance the rigors of course schedules with competing workloads. And, they want to keep the same advisor over all four years so that they have a relationship of trust and understanding of the student's goals. Therefore, the university should adapt academic advising to meet these needs through training and professional development, stabilize the movement of advisors within the university and invest in academic advisors for a target of 275:1 as a lynchpin for student success and the student experience.
6. Request the Provost, working with the Faculty Senate, to develop more robust policies and processes for the adoption of course materials, homework systems, learning management tools and other course resources that students often pay for and are surprised by. It is not clear that the faculty and campus community understand the impacts on students and the additional expenses the students incur. Students often feel like the university is "nickel-and-diming" them and question why their tuition and fees are not already covering many of these "added" costs.
7. If the university continues to grow, the university should consider a policy that would guarantee a student has access to the courses they need to graduate on time if they follow the prescribed curriculum, and if the student is unable to do so because of limited course availability, the student would receive a scholarship or a full or partial tuition reimbursement for each semester the university forces the student to attend beyond the normal tenure due to course availability.
8. There is a wealth of data and information available in existing surveys. The university needs to develop a strategy for making that data and information available and accessible across campus to support the student experience and maintain a focus on the use of data to make informed decisions.

## I. Impact of Enrollment Growth in Serving Students



Note: TAMU Main Campus undergraduate student headcount, excludes TAMUQ

The university’s ability to keep up with student enrollment growth was consistently a concern of all audiences. Transportation, campus dining, on- and off-campus housing and university health services were areas of critical concern as the university grows.

### TRANSPORTATION

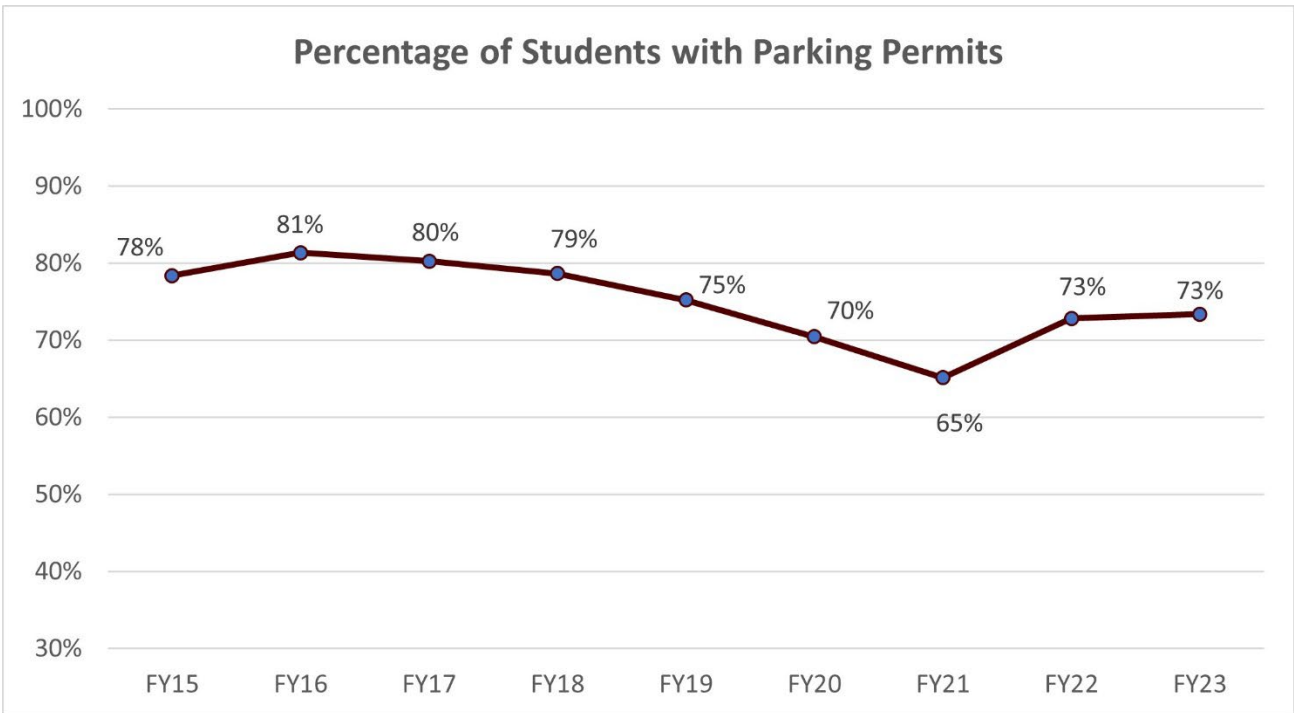
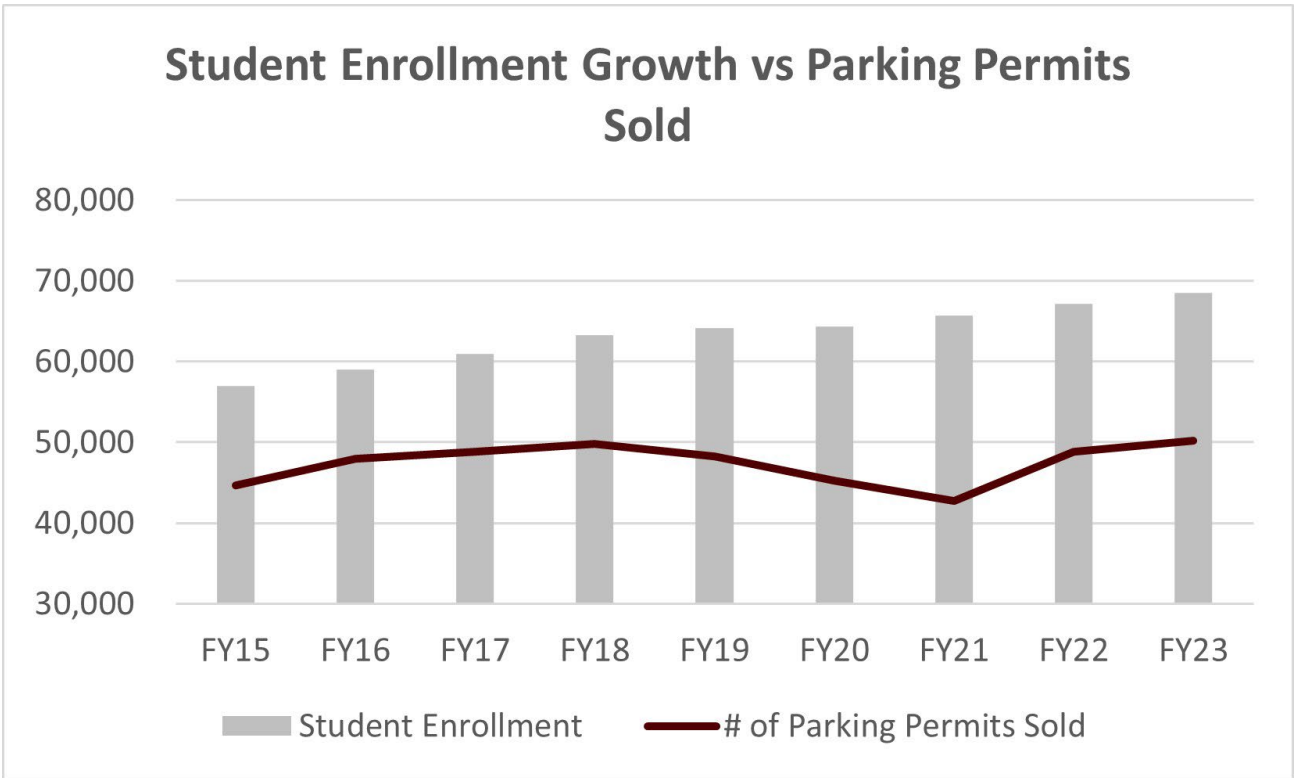
Student feedback from the pop-up survey and listening session testimonies suggest that current campus mobility issues have substantially impacted the student experience. While recent transportation improvements, such as cross guards at congested intersections and colored space occupancy lights in new garages, have improved students’ experience moving across campus, students cite that traveling across campus for pedestrians and motorists alike is dangerous. Additionally, it is difficult for students to travel smoothly across campus due to the lack of available parking and inconsistent bus arrival times. Many students must budget anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour for travel time via bus or car. The percentage of students with parking permits has declined over the years and is currently at 73%. However, permit sales are at an all-time high. While many lots have waiting lists, spaces are still available in some lots, though we are reaching capacity. An efficient, accessible and safe travel experience is vital for improving the student experience.

### Listening Session Reflection

“[Having the number one] student experience means not having to think about services a lot. Dining is available when I need it. I can access transportation when I need it. I can access advising for help with class without a lot of effort. In general, [it] should not take a lot of effort [to access] things outside of the classroom.”

**-Current Student**





*Note: The transportation charts are based on all TAMU Main Campus students and not specific to undergraduate students. The decline of parking permits in FY20 and FY21 is due to the pandemic.*

### Recommendations:

Transit-related recommendations:

- Consider enhancing and expanding infrastructure to support e-bikes, bikes and motorcycles/mopeds.
- Consider readopting older features of the transit website so that students can more effectively compare multiple routes and pinpoint bus drop-off/pick-up times.
- Consider an expansion of the bus fleet and explore off-campus bus routes that stop on both East and West sides of campus (multiple hubs).

Parking-related recommendations:

- Explore opportunities for students to hold permits for multiple lots or garages.
- Assess Lot 100 parking challenges and permit assignment policy to reduce Lot strain.
- Explore feasibility of open lot access for permit holders during finals.
- Consider an expansion of the number of available parking spaces on campus.

### Listening Session Reflections

“During my time in undergrad, parking in general has been a huge stressor.”

“One of the reasons I don’t leave campus during the day is because of parking. I feel [that] I don’t have time to return, finding a parking spot, park, then commute to class even if I have a 2+ hour break.”

**-Current Students**

### CAMPUS DINING

Students desire readily available dining options that are accessible across different areas of campus. In the past 10 years, the number of average daily dining transactions for both dining and retail locations has increased by 87%. The number of seats in the three dining halls decreased by almost 1,000 during that time as renovations and retail space took away seating that had been allocated to the dining halls. However, the number of dining hall visitors has increased by 112%, with over 900,000 additional visits despite less seating available to students.

Dining Metrics	FY13	FY18	FY23
Average Daily Transactions	19,400	34,207	36,319
Dining Hall Visitors	813,363	920,127	1,720,636
Meal Plan Holders <sup>1</sup>	24,186	32,749	33,981
Venue Count (Dining Hall + Retail)	37	48	54
Dining Hall Seats <sup>2</sup>	5,090	4,150	4,150

<sup>1</sup> The total meal plan holders include mandatory and voluntary plans for fall and spring semesters.

<sup>2</sup> Dining hall seating decreased in Sbisla between FY13 and FY18 due to the conversion to retail space in that area. The Commons seating is included in the FY13 number though it was closed for renovations that year.

For many students, the early and between closure of dining halls during the day is a barrier to meal access. Dining Services has been working to accommodate student needs by offering late-night mobile ordering at select dining halls. Locations across main campus experience long wait times and limited seating during peak hours, creating issues for students during the afternoon. While the Aggie Express' Mashgin Kiosks, a touchless self-checkout system, help remedy these issues, some students express the concern that there are not enough dining options on West Campus. Chartwells is exploring strategic points across campus to add food lockers for expanded “on-the-go” pick-up options. Student knowledge of mobile ordering does not appear to be widespread across campus.

### Listening Session Reflections

“Why are dining halls closed from 2:30-5:00pm? This is when I am the most hungry. Even the Corps TAMU has their dining halls open with no breaks.”

**-Current Student**

### Recommendations:

- Consider options to increase dining hours for dining services and expand food lockers across strategic points of campus to meet later breakfast and early dinner dining needs.
- Consider expanding campus transit kitchenettes for quick personal prep across campus.
- Work with Dining Services to increase campus knowledge of mobile app ordering through the Transact App and its offerings, such as late-night mobile ordering.
- Amplify promotion of campus resources, like The Pocket Pantry Program, that are geared toward combating food insecurity.
- Expand dining options, capacity and availability across campus, including West Campus.

### ON- AND OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING

Student housing on and off campus has presented several challenges that currently impact the student experience at Texas A&M. Students' most pressing concerns center around housing affordability and housing proximity to campus. According to the City of College Station’s Housing Action Survey, the most important factors when searching for potential housing are price (97%) and proximity to campus/academic buildings (85%). As enrollment numbers climb, space for on-campus housing has become more limited and expensive. Compared to other peer institutions, Texas A&M cannot guarantee housing for its entire incoming class, and many spring-admitted students have a difficult time securing their on-campus housing for the start of the fall semester. In Fall 2022, 63% of freshmen lived on campus.

Year	Total Freshmen Living on Campus	Total Freshmen in College Station	Percentage of Freshmen Living on Campus
Fall 2017	7,452	10,767	69%
Fall 2018	7,097	10,243	69%
Fall 2019	7,065	9,850	72%
Fall 2020	6,606	10,341	64%
Fall 2021	7,154	11,308	63%
Fall 2022	7,150	11,427	63%

Notes: (1) Freshman headcounts are based on the First Time in College (FTIC) definition. (2) Total Freshmen in College Station is based on TAMU - Main Campus FTIC students living in Bryan/College Station. (3) Data includes Res Life dorms, Corp of Cadets dorms and White Creek apartments; it does not include the Gardens apartments. (4) The pandemic affected Fall 2020 on-campus living.

Due to this, there is a trend of first-year students opting to live off campus. While off-campus housing options costs vary across the Bryan/College Station area, many new high-density campus developments closer to campus mirror high on-campus housing costs. Additionally, students find the enforcement of the “No More Than Four” ordinance, which limits the number of unrelated individuals living in a single-family household to 4, exacerbates the student housing shortage and lack of affordable housing.

The department of Student Life has revitalized the Off Campus Student Services unit to include staff support to assist students in navigating off-campus living. The unit is currently exploring ways to expand the unit’s promotion opportunities to include resource packets for academic advisors, transition resources for exiting on-campus residents through Res Life, and breakout sessions and resource tables at New Student and Family Programs.

**Recommendations:**

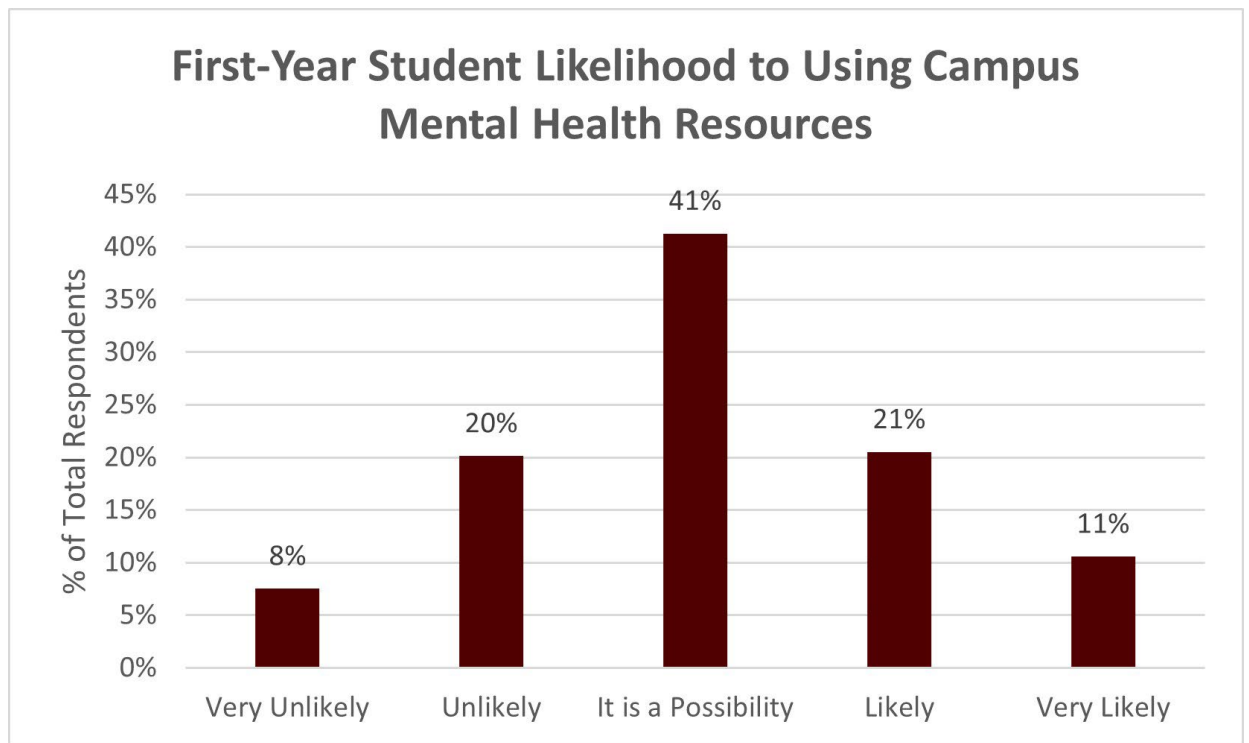
- Assess and evaluate findings from the TAMU Housing Study and incorporate those findings into a broader strategic plan that addresses on- and off-campus housing concerns.
- Engage Off Campus Student Services, Student Government Association (SGA), Bryan-College Station community leaders and representatives for continued discussion on student needs related to student housing.



## UNIVERSITY HEALTH SERVICES

University Health Service (UHS) provides comprehensive, integrated care for students' physical and mental health. Previously separate departments, Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and Buettel Health Center, UHS now offers a streamlined and centralized approach to student health needs. The appointments for physical health are limited by space available in the Buettel Student Health Clinic, which impacts students' ability to receive readily available care. Student feedback on counseling appointment access has varied. Institutional data suggests that the number of students served in counseling and crisis counseling appointments has increased by 24% and 22%, respectively, over the past 10 years.

To proactively address student mental health on campus, The Texas A&M University System has become a JED Campus partner and launched the Healthy Minds Study to establish a baseline on student mental health and perceptions of campus resources. In the past, University Health Services has partnered with campus units and student groups, like the Student Government Association, and hosted campus programming such as Mental Health Week.



*New Student Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

### Recommendations:

- Consider co-locating physical, mental and preventive health services for integrated whole-person care.
- Create a facilities improvement plan to update needed primary care services infrastructure.

## II. Meet changing needs for early engagement of students as they transition to A&M

### FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES (FYE)

The university provides many resources to first-year students to support their successful transition to campus, such as New Student Conferences (NSCs), extended orientations (including Fish Camp and T-Camp), Howdy Week, MSC Open House and Hullabaloo U (HU)/certified courses. Throughout the Student Experience Study, committee members heard from students that they want and need to feel connected through personal interactions with faculty, staff and other students.

During listening sessions, students also expressed that making connections at Texas A&M can be a daunting task. WISHES survey data reinforces this sentiment and the importance that connection plays in resilience and individual well-being. Research shows that students need to have both social belongingness and academic belongingness for success in higher education. “Social belongingness concerns a human need for connectedness while academic belongingness involves feeling successful and capable in one’s endeavors.” (Strayhorn, 2018)

First-year experience programs are designed to familiarize students with campus resources and help them build relationships with faculty/staff and other students, which in turn are designed to create a positive experience that supports students during their first year and beyond. According to WISHES data from the 2023-2024 academic year, 47% of students who completed the survey indicated that they are experiencing loneliness; 62% of students indicated that they have a friend they can count on; and 62% feel they belong at A&M. Additionally, 45% of students completing the survey indicated they were engaged in at least one extracurricular activity.

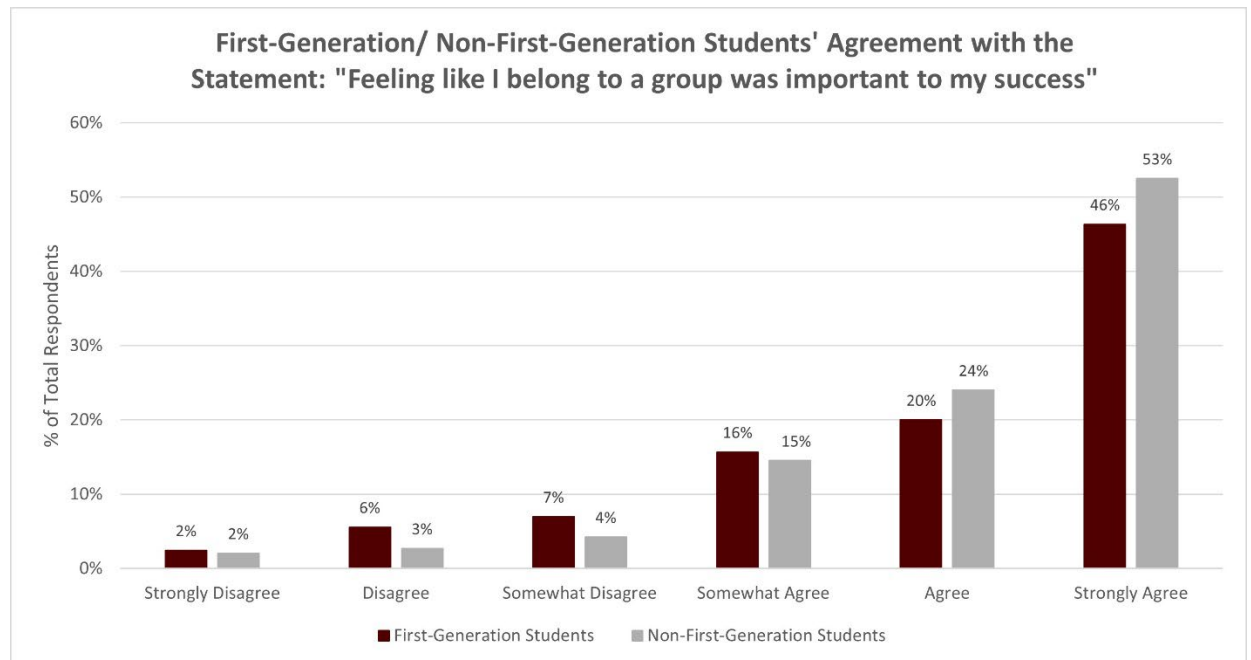
During the Student Experience listening sessions, students shared perspectives ranging from feeling that they had to be “invited to participate” in both campus traditions and campus activities; that the complexities and nuances of the campus traditions and many student organizations make getting connected difficult; and that “to feel welcome on campus it is super important to find your group.” Additionally, students spoke to the difficulty of finding a group the first semester (and in some cases the first year) based on the size of the incoming class, the size of classes they took their first semester (citing 300+ person classes as impractical to making friends), and navigating events like MSC Open House where 20,000+ students in a small space make quality interactions and connections impractical.

Texas A&M has many components/programs that are deemed “best practice” in creating a robust first-year experience. Upon reflection and reinforced by student voice, these programs operate in silos and are often repetitive, producing survey results that indicate

an over emphasis on some aspects of campus life but fail to provide the breadth of information students desire.

According to Barefoot (2000), goals of a strong, intentional FYE program include:

- Increasing student-to-student interaction
- Increasing faculty-to-student interaction, especially out of the classroom
- Increasing student involvement and time on campus
- Linking the curriculum and the co-curriculum
- Increasing academic expectations and levels of academic engagement
- Assisting students who have insufficient academic preparation for college



*Graduation Senior Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

### **Recommendations:**

Form a presidential task force to reimagine and integrate the engagement efforts for students from the acceptance of admissions to the end of the first year, inclusive of New Student Conferences, Fish Camp (and other extended orientations), Hullabaloo U, Howdy Week, MSC Open House and capturing student organization engagement in the first year. Representation should include faculty, staff and students.

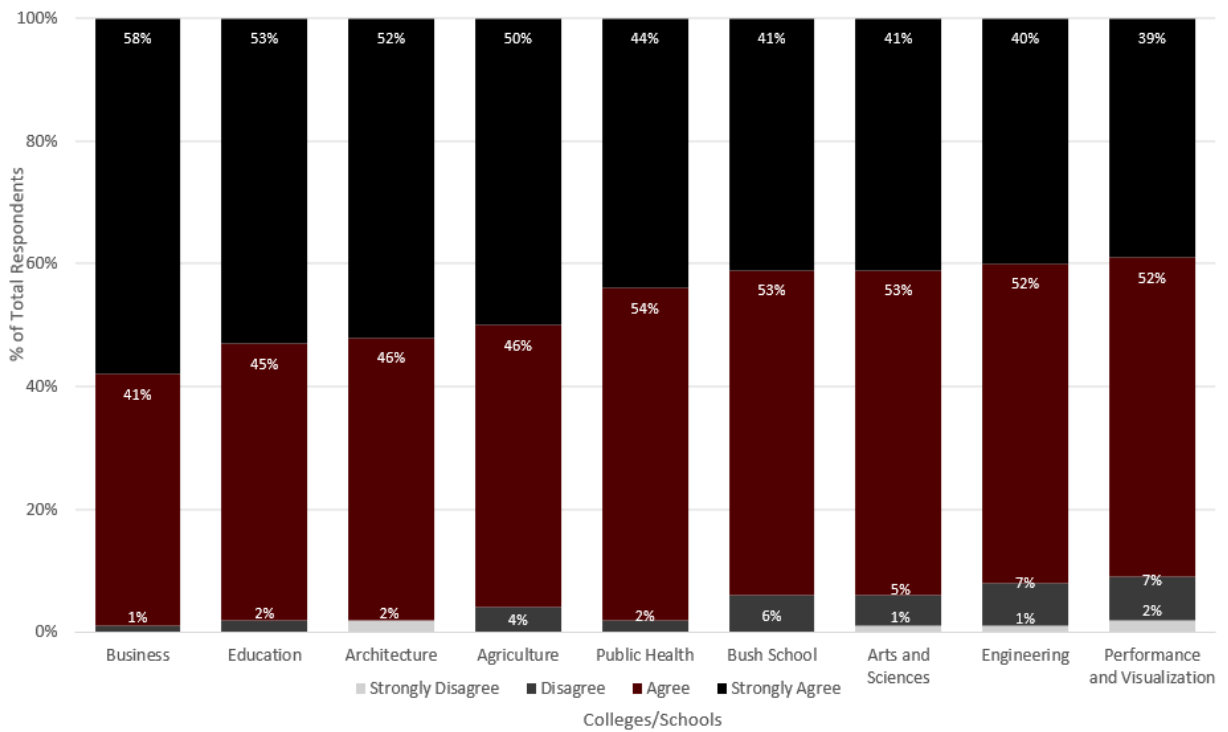
### **New Student Conferences**

While the purpose of new student orientation (conferences) varies slightly depending on the source reviewed, The College Board, Best Colleges and NODA (National Association for Orientation, Transition, Retention in Higher Education) all indicate that first-year orientation aims to teach new students more about the campus, go over the various services and resources available to incoming students, and provide meet-and-greet

opportunities with peers. According to TAMU’s New Aggie website: “During your New Student Conference (NSC) you will learn how to take full advantage of all the academic programs, student life services and extracurricular activities Texas A&M University has to offer.” Inherent to the placement of NSCs as both the way a student accepts their admission into TAMU and the first step in integration into the Aggie community, NSCs play a vital role in setting the stage for the first-year experience.

All incoming undergraduate students must complete an online orientation prior to their required two-day on-campus NSC. Day one of the on-campus NSC is focused on Texas A&M, campus services and peer connections. Day two provides colleges an opportunity to highlight their unique academic programs and resources. Additionally, on day two, incoming students receive advising and register for their first semester courses. The effectiveness of both the online orientation and the two-day in-person NSC received divided feedback according to data from the 2023 NSC Student Survey. Overall, students indicate that the NSC experience prepared them for their first year at TAMU.

### Student Agreement with the Statement: "After attending the New Student Conference, I feel prepared for my first year at TAMU"



*New Student Conference 2023 Student Survey*



However, comments provided in the survey indicate that students have mixed feelings about the material covered and the order of the content. Many commented on the overlap between online orientation and day one of their NSC. Some preferred the online delivery format while others advocated to do away with online orientation altogether. Additionally, students provided similar feedback between day one and day two components on in-person NSCs. Some felt day one could be combined with day two or discarded altogether, while many others felt day two was too long, took too much time and did not afford peer connection. Finally, feedback from new students indicates that more peer-to-peer interaction in smaller groups is desired. However, staffing NSCs with Orientation Leaders has become a more significant challenge as current students are seeking internship or study abroad experiences in lieu of staying in the B/CS area for the summer.

**Recommendations:**

- As part of the recommended Presidential Task Force on an integrated first-year student engagement experience, determine the role and purpose of online orientation and each day of NSC. Special attention to content and sequencing should limit redundancy but assist students with knowledge/information retention.
- Determine the value or lack of value in having registration coupled with orientation.
- Consider ways to increase peer-to-peer interaction throughout the on-campus experience.
- Look for ways to incentivize the recruitment and retention of orientation leaders through additional benefits such as reduced summer tuition, internship credit or other alternatives to assist in providing small peer group sessions for students.

**Hullabaloo U Courses**

Since 2019, Hullabaloo U (HU), a first-year seminar through the Office of Student Success, has become a key component of the first-year experience at TAMU. Research examining the impact of HU on student outcomes has found that when looking at achievement metrics, there were significant differences in those who are enrolled in HU (GPA, retention, willingness to seek help) versus students who were not enrolled in the course (Das, Schmitt and Stephenson, 2021). Each HU seminar is taught by a staff/faculty instructor and a student peer mentor, and the curriculum is designed to address the unique needs of current first-year students. As the HU program has continued to grow,

**Reflections from the NSC 2023 Survey**

“I wish there was more activities where new students could interact with each other and make possible friends!”

“There should’ve been more small group activities. Like playing games to get to know one another, like bingo or something.”

“I felt I wasn’t thoroughly prepared for scheduling my classes. I am in engineering and it may be because there were so many students. But they showed us how to add classes, but not to discern what classes to take.”

“Please have day 2 be quicker as I feel it was mostly filler. This time could be used to give people more time to register and finish early.”

**-Current Students**

colleges/units can submit proposals to offer HU courses for certification through the Office of Student Success. The required lesson themes delivered within every certified HU seminar include Wellness and Mental Health, Academic Success Strategies, Aggie Core Values, and Goal Setting and Careers. Student feedback on HU has varied.

From the listening sessions, it was clear that students who had more tailored HU classes by their department/college articulated a consistently better community experience. Other students, some who were enrolled in interdisciplinary HU course sections, found the program ineffective in assisting their transition to college. There are many and varied reasons for the differing experience of HU courses, including ties to the discipline, the individual student’s college readiness and preparation, and the potential repetition of information from New Student Conferences or other engagements the student has had. A sentiment shared by students in interdisciplinary and college-focused HU seminars alike has been that instructors and peer mentors play a vital role in the “make or break” of their HU experience. University officials continue to regularly evaluate HU, including it being one essential element of the ongoing Quality Enhancement Program (QEP), Aggie Firsts, which is reviewing HU’s impact on the first-generation student experience (as a required element of the university’s Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges accreditation). In the last several years, HU has partnered with the Student Government Association (SGA) to incorporate education on campus traditions into its curriculum. The ongoing, systematic assessment of the impact of HU has continued to strengthen the important role HU plays in shaping the first-year experience.

The following are Student Course Evaluation (SCE) items administered as part of the end-of-term evaluation for all HU-certified courses.

**The information provided during this course helped my transition to TAMU.**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
<b>Fall 2023</b>						
N=5950	2110 35.5%	1656 27.8%	1366 23%	244 4.1%	276 4.6%	298 5%
<b>Fall 2022</b>						
N=5482	1593 29.1%	1578 28.8%	1443 26.3%	261 4.8%	289 5.3%	318 5.8%

**The peer mentor(s) supporting this course helped my transition to TAMU.**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
<b>Fall 2023</b>						
N=5915	2699 45.6%	1712 28.9%	987 16.7%	178 3%	179 3%	160 2.7%
<b>Fall 2022</b>						
N=5481	2237 40.8%	1706 31.1%	995 18.2%	199 3.6%	169 3.1%	175 3.2%

*Data provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

**Recommendations:**

- The university should work in partnership with colleges and units to improve the student experience of HU, including an annual review of curricular content and ongoing assessment of identified outcomes (such as for the QEP).
- Consider building opportunities within HU to support first-year students who are having difficulty finding community, specifically during the time Freshman Leadership Organizations (FLO) choose their members.
- Consider creating a First-Year Experience Advisory Board comprised of current first-year students, FLO leadership and current/former HU mentors who can provide input and review of first-year programs/initiatives.
- Explore an option to develop a new student experience map that would collect interest and engagement data from incoming students, match them with available campus opportunities and aligned student organizations to provide each student with a customized first two to three weeks of student experience and engagement schedule.
- Explore opportunities to expand curriculum to encompass information on how to navigate resources such as Howdy Portal, TAMU bus map and others. Consider adding to curriculum “Aggie Network Specific Tools,” such as how to navigate Jobs for Aggies/Hire Aggies, Find an Aggie and Aggie Ring ordering.

**Reflections from the NSC 2023 Survey**

“The amount of traditions [at Texas A&M] can be a lot... It can be a culture shock or a lot at the beginning. Hullabaloo U classes help a lot.”

“Hullabaloo U class was a ‘drag’ and I felt it could have been online. I didn’t learn much because it seemed repetitive. I did feel that the peer mentors were helpful.”

**-Current Students**

## START-OF-SCHOOL-YEAR PROGRAMS

Essential to a well-thought-out and robust first-year experience goes beyond NSCs and HU. Howdy Week, Extended Orientations (Fish Camp, T-Camp and spring Howdy Camp), Freshman Leadership Organizations (FLOs) and other intentional first-year integration programming needs to be more systematically incorporated into a full FYE plan.

Howdy Week is Aggieland’s official welcome for new and returning students and takes place each fall between move-in and the start of classes at Texas A&M. This campus-wide “week” (the last few years has been three or four days) is a collaborated effort between colleges, divisions, student organizations and community events. From the Howdy Week 2023 survey, students indicated that seeing other students they already knew or making new friends was the primary factor contributing to a positive Howdy Week experience. Students also expressed that the welcoming community of peers, staff and faculty helped them feel acclimated to the upcoming semester.

Statement	2023 Yes	2023 No	2023 Unsure
I interacted with at least one new or returning student.	98%	2%	1%
I learned about at least one campus resource (such as a student organization, office/department, or service).	94%	3%	3%
I increased my comfort in navigating Texas A&M to find services and opportunities available.	89%	3%	8%
I developed a great sense of belonging within the campus community.	83%	5%	12%

Table 3: Overall Outcomes (n=213)

2023 Howdy Week Survey, Student Affairs Planning Assessment and Research

Students did express a desire for Howdy Week to not overlap with move-in, as many students were unable to attend. According to the Howdy Week survey, over half of respondents weren't able to participate in programming because they were not moved in. Additionally, students recommended that it be scheduled for a full week and not just a weekend, and to not have most of the big events the first two days of Howdy Week when most students were not moved in or still in the process of moving in.

Student-driven programming that offers first-year students an opportunity to further integrate into the campus community and form peer connections should also be considered for sequenced information. While extended orientation programs only host about 50% of the incoming new students (6,000 at Fish Camp, 200 at T-Camp and 125 at Howdy Camp), 30% of students (30%) who did not attend Fish Camp in 2023 indicated they wish they would have attended. For those students who did attend Fish Camp, freshmen reported positive interactions with all camp staff, especially with their Discussion Group (DG) leaders and felt that the time spent with their DGs was sufficient.

Participants also indicated they would prefer more free time and slightly more time spent with DG groups focused on involvement and cultivating peer connections.

Freshman Leadership Organizations (FLOs) are perceived by freshmen as coveted experiences. Student Experience Study committee members commented that feedback from students, HU instructors and parents in the Aggie Parents Facebook group indicated that, at least anecdotally, FLOs create stress and sometimes a sense of loss/disappointment from application through selection. Currently, TAMU houses 24 FLOS, which support immersive leadership experience for approximately 1,500 freshmen. Students who applied for FLOs, whether selected or not, indicated in the FLO Student Experience – Fall 2020 survey that their primary reason for applying for a FLO was to make friends. Additionally, students indicated that they hoped the FLO would help them get involved on campus, have fun and build leadership skills.

What reasons did you have for wanting to join a FLO? (select all that apply)	Fall 2020 [n=579]	Spring 2020 [n=520]	Spring 2019 [n=496]
<b>Make friends</b>	97%	97%	95%
<b>Get involved on campus</b>	96%	96%	92%
<b>Have fun</b>	82%	88%	82%
<b>Network with other students</b>	76%	75%	66%
<b>Build leadership skills</b>	75%	77%	78%
<b>Attend social events on-campus</b>	73%	76%	65%
<b>Participate in service events</b>	72%	77%	69%
<b>Attend social events off-campus</b>	68%	60%	52%
<b>Join a group of similar people</b>	64%	64%	62%
<b>Thought it would be cool to be in a FLO</b>	60%	72%	66%
<b>Network with former students/professionals</b>	40%	31%	32%
<b>Learn new things about myself</b>	39%	55%	52%
<b>Organization was connected to things I believed in</b>	34%	43%	36%
<b>Form study groups with students in my major</b>	30%	30%	27%
<b>Felt like everyone was joining a FLO</b>	9%	26%	23%
<b>Thought I needed to be in a FLO to be successful at A&amp;M</b>	7%	14%	11%
<b>Other</b>	1%	<1%	1%
<b>I did not have any expectations</b>	<1%	<1%	<1%

Table 3: FLO Expectations

*Freshman Leadership Organization Student Experience – Fall 2020, Student Affairs Planning, Assessment and Research*

**Recommendations:**

- Consider a more intentional investment of resources and structure into Howdy Week, helping to utilize the week as an all-campus orientation and shared experience with particular emphasis in college programming/belongingness events that cultivate first-year integration into the degree department, which is especially important for students who may not have a course in their major their first semester or first year.



- Ensure student-led initiatives, such as FLOs, are connected with campus partners (Office of Student Success, Career Center, etc.) that advance students' knowledge of campus resources.
- Consider alternative options to FLOs that could promote freshman connections for making friends and getting involved on campus, while highlighting leadership, social and service in a way that can be scaled to meet the needs of a larger number of new students.
- Develop a roadmap that incorporates a full-year FYE moving beyond start-of-school programs that fosters social belongingness, connectivity and communication between students and the larger campus community.

### ACADEMIC CALENDAR CHANGES

Given the importance of connecting with students at the start of the semester, the university needs to examine the impacts of recent university academic calendar changes. With modifications to the fall schedule, including Labor Day as a holiday, the two-day fall break with no classes and the reading day on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, the start of school has been pushed back into August earlier than previous academic calendars. After three summers of operating with four days between graduation and summer II and 10-week grades being due, the compressed schedule has produced strain on the student experience infrastructure and limited academic preparation time for faculty. The constraint and compression on residence hall make-ready and move-in time, the last two NSCs that support out-of-state and international students and start-of-the-school-year programs such as Howdy Week have impacted the university's ability to orient students to campus in a conducive manner.

All of the changes have been made with good intentions intent on helping students and meeting their needs. However, a broader review of the total impact should be considered. For example, the introduction of Labor Day as a faculty/staff holiday along with Juneteenth and Memorial Day has resulted in semesters in which staff do not have a day off at spring break in some years.

Having multiple weeks with a single day off in that week complicates the delivery of laboratory courses that are designed to deliver the same topic in a given week for all students in a given course. Since these courses meet only once each week, a single day off impacts the laboratory prep for the faculty and the delivery of content in a timely manner for some students.

The introduction of the fall break was an attempt to address concerns over mental well-being and provide a mid-semester break for students similar to spring break. However, a full week was not feasible unless it was at Thanksgiving, and that was thought to be too late during the semester. The evidence from University Health Services indicates that the fall break has had a mixed impact on students' well-being.





*In 2022 and 2023, a Labor Day break occurred in week 2 and 3. Overall crisis numbers were lower than in 2021 (no Labor Day break).*

*In 2022 and 2023, a fall break occurred in week 7 and 8. Total weekly crisis visits declined for week 8 in 2022 and 2023 in comparison to week 8 in 2021.*

**Recommendation:**

Reconsider the academic calendar as it relates to the start of the fall semester, as the engagement activities and preparation for the fall are too compressed between the end of the summer term and the beginning of the fall term. There are two options that were considered with a stronger preference for the second one — (1) remove the added break days and holidays in the fall semester to start a week later or (2) reimagine the summer term to move from a 10-week term with two 5-weeks to an 8-week term with two 4-weeks or a variety of options within the 8-week semester (such as retaining the first 5-week period).

**Reflections from the Committee**

Approximately 25-30% of undergraduate students enrolled in the fall semester also are enrolled in at least one summer class.

**STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

Student organizations are a valued aspect of student life at Texas A&M and are an integral way for students to find community and connection on campus. Data from the Graduating Senior Survey shows that 76.8% of graduating students report participation in a Recognized Student Organization (RSO). Unique to Texas A&M are the variety and number of RSOs for students to join; the university boasts over 1,200 RSOs and has seen a 36% increase in new student organizations over the past ten years. However, students face the enormous challenge of filtering through organizations to find their best fit. The

university-sponsored practices that assist students in discovering student organizations include the “Get Involved” online tool and in-person and virtual options at the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Open House. Students remark that the “Student Org search” and “Org Match” functions within the “Get Involved” tool are cumbersome and lack user-friendliness. Additionally, student feedback suggests that the MSC Open House experience is overwhelming and crowded.

**Recommendations:**

- Explore and consider options to reimagine the MSC Open House Experience for fall of 2025.
- Enhance opportunities for students to connect with student organizations that have open membership throughout the semester.
- Incorporate student feedback on potential new tools and platforms that are designed.
- Consider investing in digital platforms that allow for students to easily navigate finding student organizations that match their interest.
- Increase campuswide knowledge of student organizations and student leader funding opportunities such as the Good Bull Fund and the Aggie Experience Fund.
- Continue to invest and create opportunities for student leader development.

**Listening Session Reflections**

“A&M can feel very daunting as a freshman; I want to get involved and ‘buy into’ the Aggie Experience.”

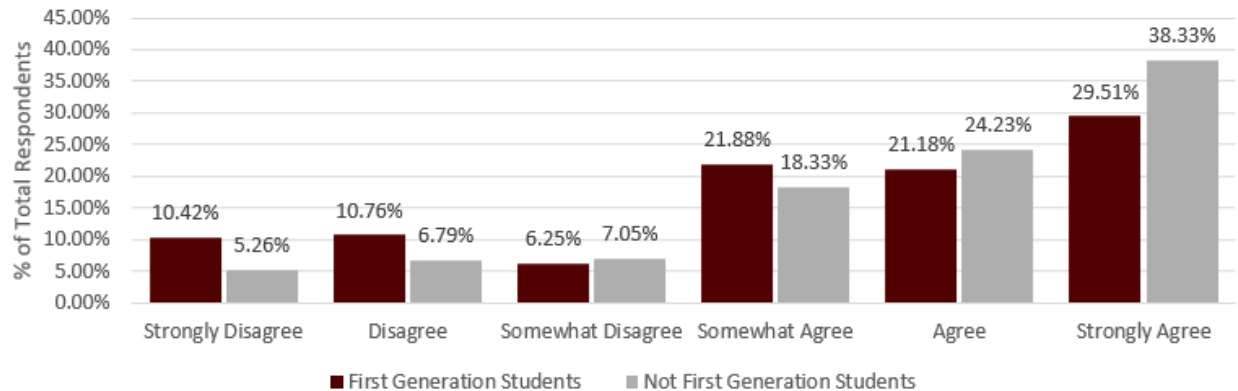
**-Current Student**

**“BIG T” AND “LITTLE T” TRADITIONS**

While the student experience at Texas A&M has continued to evolve, the university’s cherished traditions remain a central aspect of student life, from the beginning of their first year to the end and beyond. As the student body grows, students remain committed to the rich history of older, established traditions while embracing the newer and smaller activities that make Texas A&M feel like home. Traditions at large can play a vital role in fostering authentic connection on Texas A&M’s campus in the face of a nationwide loneliness epidemic.

Throughout the listening sessions, students expressed that the institution's “Big T” traditions, such as Muster and Big Event, give a strong sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, a larger family, but are experienced best when they can find the “Little t” tradition of a student organization, group or program from which they can engage in the “Big T” tradition. “Little t” traditions create a vehicle for Texas A&M’s traditions overall to feel personal.

### First Generation/ Not First Generation Students' Agreement with the Statement: "I participated regularly in some of TAMU's traditions"



Graduation Senior Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation

#### Recommendations:

- Share the story of traditions, small and large, and their role in fostering community for students in Texas A&M’s marketing efforts (universitywide and within individual units).
- Colleges and departments are an important dimension of the “Little t” traditions. These units should provide opportunities in which students from shared disciplines can together participate in “Big T” traditions (i.e., a department signs up for Big Event so students can volunteer alongside peers from their academic unit, or a college sponsors a meet-up before Midnight Yell).

#### Listening Session Reflections

“Traditions themselves aren’t anything special — they are processes. Participation is the special sauce — nothing else is like it. Big Ts [traditions] make this place feel like family. Meaningfulness is developed by the other students/people sharing that experience with you.”

**-Current Student**

#### AGGIE NETWORK

The Aggie Network and its base of over 600,000 former students worldwide create a unique opportunity for current students to have meaningful interactions with alumni even before graduation. In this way, the Aggie Network plays a vital part in shaping the current student experience through investing in the success of Aggies while they are on campus and connecting them to an array of possibilities after graduation. There are numerous examples of this engagement, such as the investment by The Association of Former Students in student and academic programs through the annual fund distributions, through a partnership with the Career Center for a mentoring solution that connects former students with current students, and through the many engagements of former students with colleges, departments and student organization support.

The Aggie Network is often cited as a lifelong component of the overall Aggie experience and something that begins the day a student accepts their admission to Texas A&M. The university must continue to develop strategic ways for current students to be integrated into the Aggie Network in their first year and throughout their time at Texas A&M.

***Recommendations:***

- Consider how to connect the Aggie Network to the first-year experience and include a representative of The Association of Former Students in the president's task force on the early student engagement effort.
- Examine the distribution of the annual fund resources that The Association of Former Students provides to the university to determine how resources could be reallocated in support of new initiatives within the student and academic experience.

### III. High-Quality Academic Experience from Advising to the Learning Environment

#### ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic advisors are essential to a student’s ability to plan their academic roadmap and navigate their degree plans effectively. As enrollment has grown, the growth of academic advisors has not grown at the same pace. The most often cited minimum standard for student to academic advisor ratio is 300:1, but given the importance of advisors, turnover and vacancies, the university should ensure all colleges can remain below the target even with turnover. Currently, eight colleges were under the target threshold, while three colleges exceeded the threshold, but vacancies regularly push the actual experience of students to advisors above that threshold. A 275:1 ratio would better keep the experience closer to the minimum standard (an addition of 14-15 advisors).

#### Listening Session Reflections

“I now have an advisor for my [neuroscience] major, which is lovely. The new challenge is that there is just one advisor who really knows the program, so it makes it difficult to schedule appointments.”

“Academic advising makes or breaks the student experience.”

The listening session feedback suggests that there are varied experiences based on the number of advisors within a department or unit. Early general advising has impacted time to degree due to missteps in courses and registration sequencing. For students, it is essential that they can access an academic advisor who understands the curriculum they are studying and is knowledgeable on related opportunities that will enhance their academic experience. Students desire to meet with academic advisors who understand the relationship between course options and career paths/goals. In this way, advisors should serve as an entry and extension into the work of the Career Center. Greater availability, accessibility and consistency in advisors are crucial to improving the student experience in academic advising.

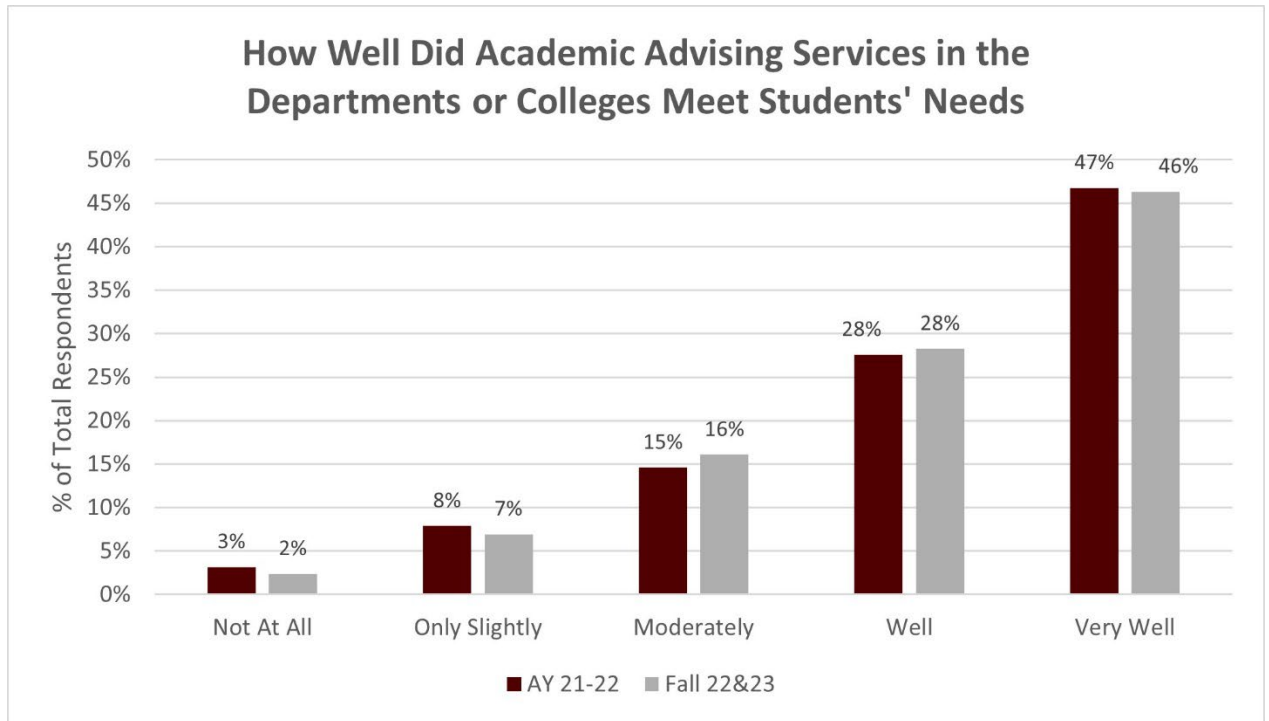
#### -Current Students

Current Advisor and Student Headcounts			
College	Advisor Headcount	Undergraduate Headcount	Undergraduate Student to Advisor Ratio
Performance, Visualization & Fine Arts	4	498	125
Education and Human Development	14	3,282	234
Bush School	5	1,272	254
Public Health	9	2,456	273
Architecture	8	2,189	274
Agriculture and Life Sciences	25	7,160	286
Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences <sup>1</sup>	8	2,305	288
Undergraduate Studies <sup>2</sup>	11	3,264	297
Arts & Sciences <sup>1,2</sup>	38	11,498	303
Mays Business School	16	5,198	335
Engineering	52	18,473	359

<sup>1</sup> BIMS majors were included in the Veterinary Medicine headcount.

<sup>2</sup> Blinn Team and General Studies majors were included in the Undergraduate Studies totals, as well as students enrolled in Study Abroad courses.

Note: Advisor headcounts include those employees in the following titles: Academic Advisor I-IV, Senior Academic Advisor, Coordinator of Undergraduate Advising (50%) and Manager of Advising (50%)



Graduation Senior Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation

#### Recommendations:

- Ensure academic advisors in units understand the relationship between course options and career paths. Academic advisors must be equipped to understand how to balance the rigors of course schedules with competing workloads, and not just work through one-size-fits-all approach with catalog requirements.
- The university should conduct a systematic and rigorous assessment of advising practices to explore which models for advising have been more effective.
- The university should work to determine factors that contribute to the retention of academic advisors within colleges.
- Incorporate student education on academic advisors and their role in students' academic experience.
- Provide professional development to academic advisors aimed at enhancing their knowledge of the relationships between the courses in an academic program and the career paths students in the program might pursue.



## DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND ONLINE COURSE OFFERINGS

Texas A&M operates in a modern educational environment where all students benefit from digital platforms associated with their classroom experience. All instructors have the option of using Canvas as a digital platform, and most classes use Canvas. During the listening sessions, students reported inconsistent quality in Canvas usage between colleges or departments. Furthermore, students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of many of the online course offerings. In Fall 2023, 43% of undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one distance education class, compared to 34% in Fall 2018. The university has a robust process to assess the quality of degree programs and thus, online degrees are high quality. However, there is not a robust process for assessing online courses outside of online degrees, and therefore, there is varying quality of those courses.

Online courses require students to pay an additional fee (i.e., the distance education differential tuition), which some students reported being unknown to them when they registered for the courses. Many students also find their class experience to be inferior to an in-person section of the same course. Many students desire in-person class experiences and are frustrated when their only option is to enroll in an online section. Of course, it is also true that many students enroll in an online course by choice and out of convenience to fit their schedule and needs.

The distance education differential tuition has presented challenges for students and for administrators trying to manage sufficient in-person course availability for students, so no one is forced into the online courses for required courses. Further, it is theoretically possible for a student to complete most of the core online, and therefore, the university has to constantly monitor for students not exceeding more than 50% of courses in their degree online, for which the university does not have approval.

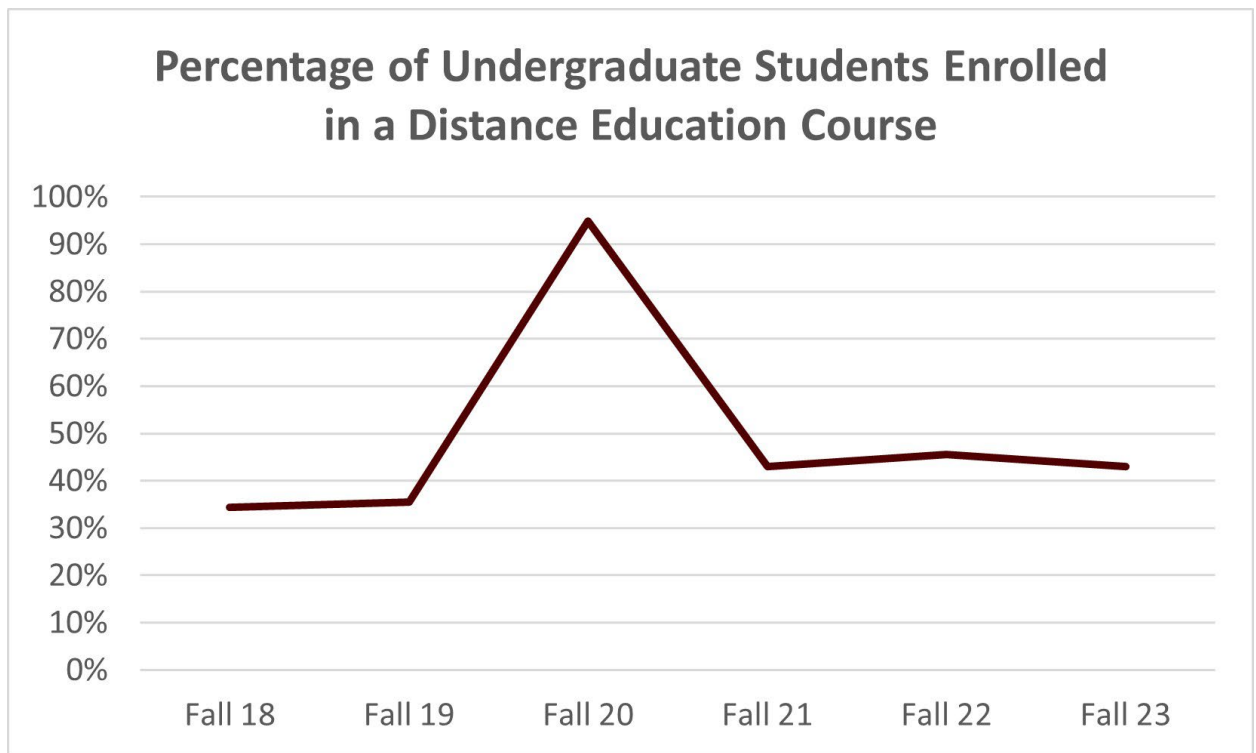
The university was poised to phase out the distance education differential tuition several years back but stopped that process. Some colleges have the ability to charge the additional tuition while others do not. Further, with three-fourths of our students choosing a fixed tuition plan, there is the potential for issues if the university does not monitor appropriately. The distance education differential tuition generates between \$16-18 million annually, focused in a few colleges.

### Listening Session Reflections

“I think my biggest frustration is my online business classes, which are large and feel lack luster.”

“Online major courses make the student feel like they are missing out on something.”

**-Current Students**



*Note: In Fall 2020, most students were enrolled in online classes due to the ongoing pandemic.*

**Recommendations:**

- The university should reestablish the process to phase out the existence of the separate, course-based distance education differential tuition for undergraduate students during the fall and spring semesters.
- The university should establish minimum quality standards for online course delivery based on established (national) guidelines.
- The university should encourage colleges to review the quality of approved online courses. Consider tasking the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), the Office for Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation (OIEE) and the Director of Digital Learning and Technology to compile and disseminate resources to assess the quality of online courses and programs.

## FACULTY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

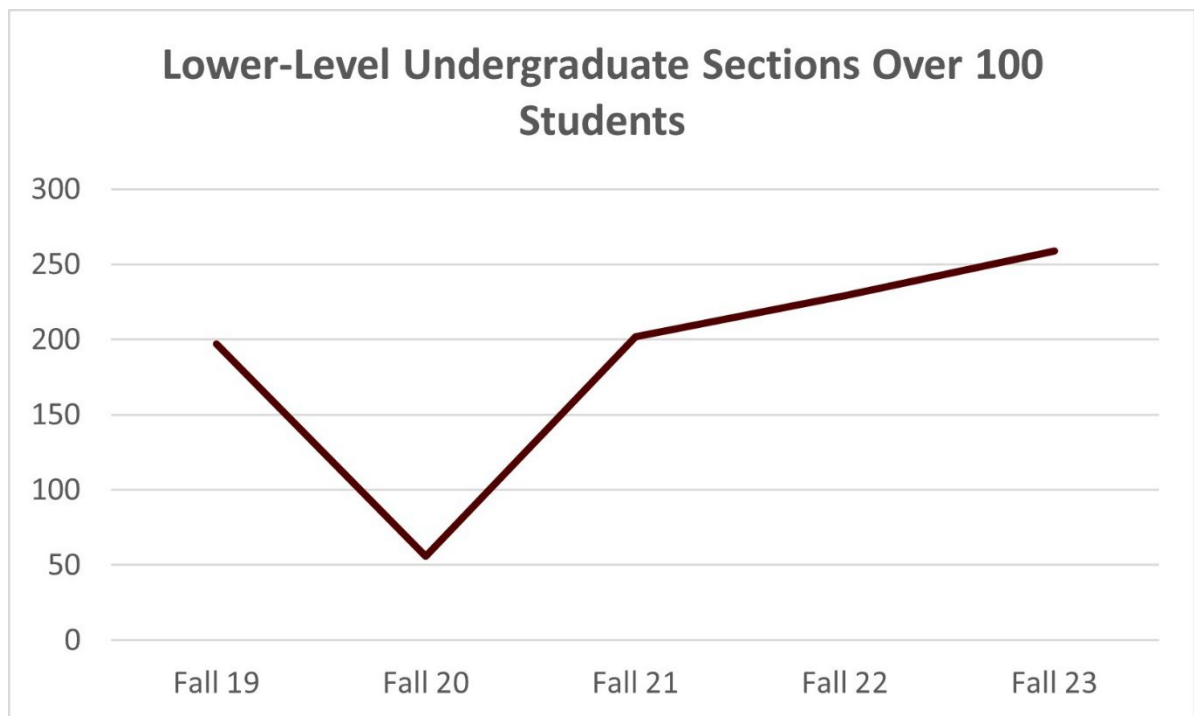
While Texas A&M University offers a wide variety of ways for students to engage with faculty, within and beyond the traditional classroom, listening session feedback and survey data from the Wellbeing Improvement Survey in Higher Education Settings (WISHES) indicate that personal connections with faculty are an integral component to a positive student experience. According to the WISHES Report, “Students who reported having a professor who cared about them the first year they took the survey were significantly less likely to be experiencing academic risk in the following academic year.”

The university’s large introductory courses can feel overwhelming, specifically for first-year students. Since Fall 2019, the number of lower-level undergraduate, in-person sections of 100 students or more has risen by 31%, as seen in the chart below. In some of the larger colleges, students find it challenging to build relationships with professors. For many students, engagement with faculty members is their only formal linkage point to a representative of the institution. Strong relationships between students and faculty create an access point for students to connect to the essential campus resources and support they need.

## Listening Session Reflections

“It’s the Aggie Family that makes the student experience. [It’s the] relationships with fellow students and professors. Lots of these [relationships] were fostered through involvement or traditions.”

**-Current Student**



*Note: The dip in Fall 20 is due to the pandemic.*

### Recommendations:

- Highlight and recognize examples of faculty who have excelled in fostering connections with students by providing college and university awards or grants.
- Expand opportunities for students to build meaningful interactions with faculty within their department or college through campus programs or university traditions and by offering high-impact/transformational learning experiences with relatively small student-to-faculty ratios.
- Offer faculty development opportunities that highlight active learning strategies, including those specifically for connecting with students in large lecture settings.
- Explore ways to better embed teaching assistants (TAs) into the classroom to better support large lecture settings, specifically for core curriculum courses.
- Add an item to the standardized Student Course Evaluations (SCEs) that specifically asks students to rate how connected they felt to the instructors and utilize data to support continued faculty.

### COURSE REGISTRATION

For many students, course registration is a stressful and time-consuming process. Feedback from the listening sessions suggests that some departments release seats later in the registration period, making it difficult for students to register for necessary core curriculum classes. Furthermore, students cited barriers to course registration, such as course curriculum changes after enrollment and required courses not offered during the semester they expected to enroll. Students desire the registration process to become more streamlined for easier course scheduling.

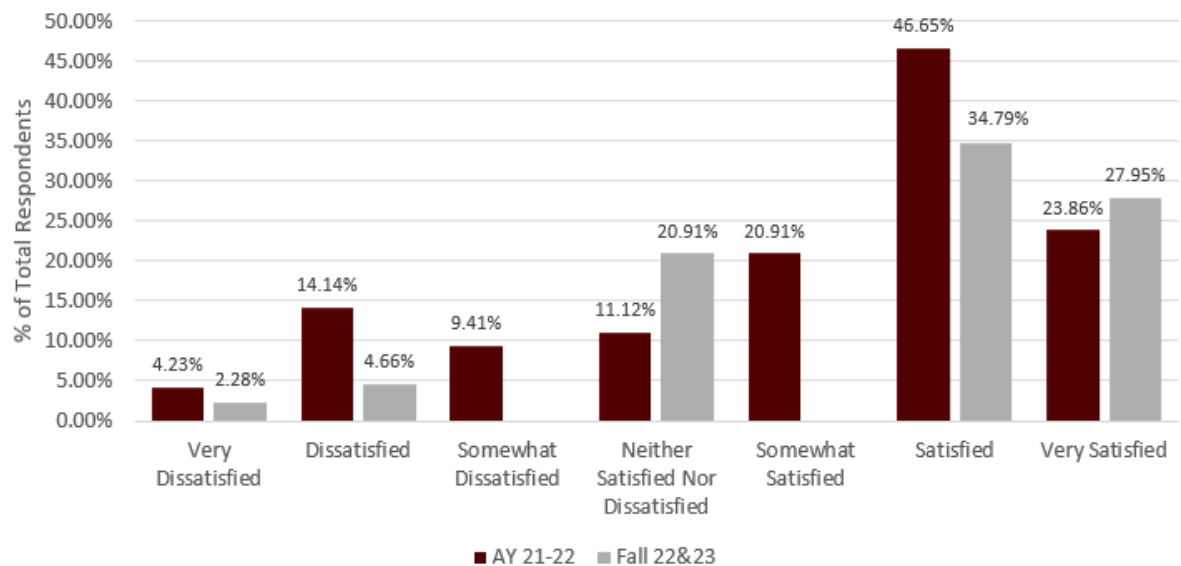
Further, despite university investments in bottleneck courses, multiple examples were given by students regarding difficulty in getting into certain courses when needed, particularly core curriculum courses. There are two areas of concern: (1) courses prohibited to senior classification and (2) courses with high demand or high enrollment that students cannot easily register for.

Students expressed concern with internal policies of specific departments that restrict courses to prevent seniors from registering for them — ENGL 104 and COMM 205 were specifically cited. This is a capacity and course availability issue and an attempt to encourage students to take courses earlier. However, the internal policy is not well known by students. The solution proposed to students, often in their final semesters, is to refer them to a community college, often increasing the total cost of education and creating added stress of late transfer of grades for the completion of the degree. There are 16 core curriculum courses identified by the Office of the Registrar with this restriction.

In addition, the university and the colleges have made great strides to address bottleneck or high-demand courses students need as part of the core curriculum. While bottleneck

courses are difficult to define, an analysis of registration data identifies 13 core curriculum courses that regularly have more than 50 students unable to take the course in the semester in which they attempt to register. Of these 13, seven are at more than 95% capacity across all sections, and more than half of the students are juniors or seniors (AGLS 235, COMM 203, COMM 205, COMM 243, DCED 202, ENGL 210 and SPMT 220). The remaining six courses are above 95% capacity across all sections, but the majority are still underclassmen (AGSM 105, COMM 257, KINE 223, PBSI 107, PHIL 111 and SOCI 205).

### Student Satisfaction with Availability of Courses Needed for Graduation



*Graduation Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

#### Recommendations:

- The university should ensure that adequate funding is in place to eliminate all bottleneck courses, especially in required core curriculum courses, by the Fall 2025 semester if the only constraint is sufficient faculty to teach the courses.
- If the university continues to grow, the university should consider a policy that would guarantee a student has access to the courses they need to graduate on time if they follow the prescribed curriculum, and if the student is unable to do so because of limited course availability, the student would receive a scholarship or a full or partial tuition reimbursement for each semester the university forces the student to attend beyond the normal tenure due to course availability.

## PREPARATION FOR WORKFORCE OR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

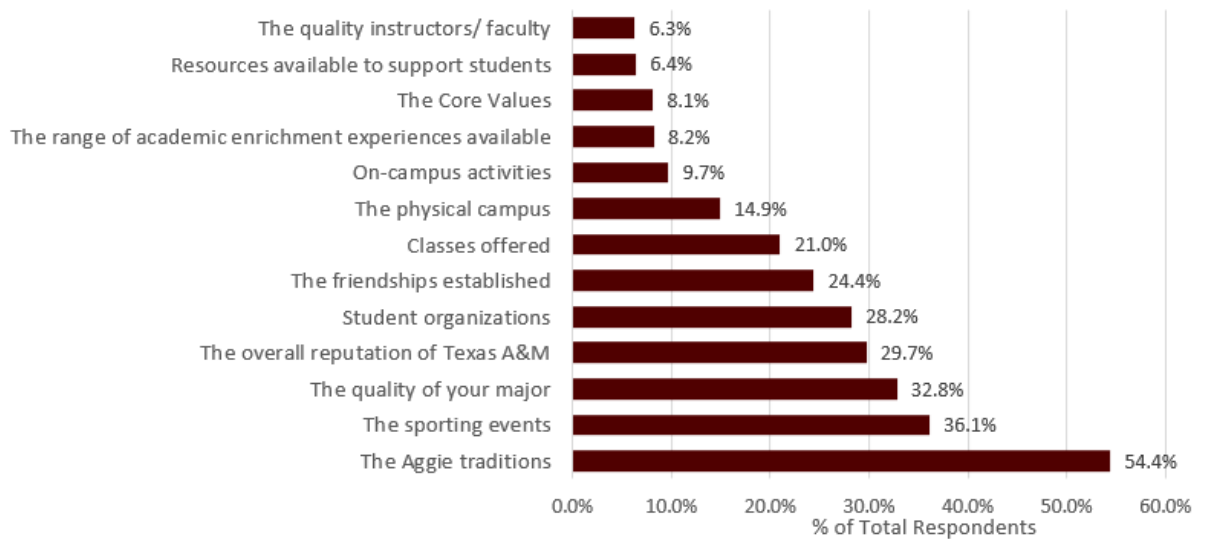
A consistent finding in the listening session feedback and the pop-up survey data is that students perceive their coursework and degree as crucial for their career preparation and outcomes. Students report that the level of career preparation varies from one academic unit to the next. Students observe that some colleges and departments better prepare students for post-graduation success than others.

### Listening Session Reflections

“Students must learn how to forge their own way if their goals don’t align with what the college or program is preparing them for.”

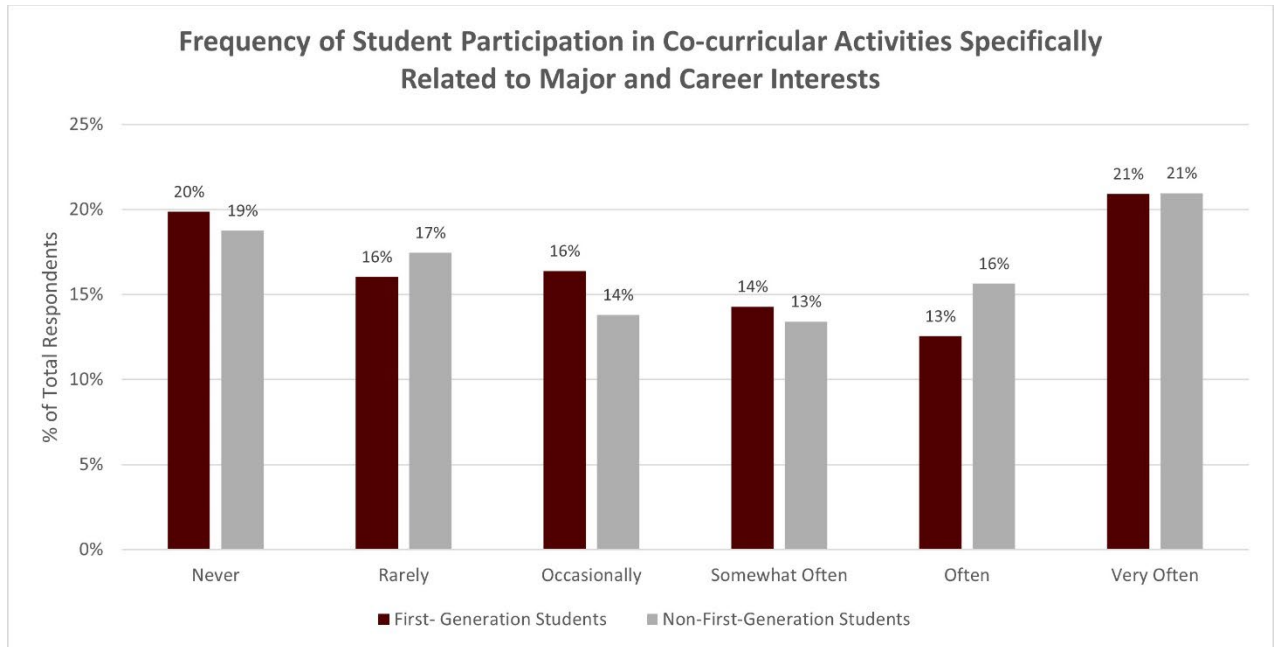
**-Current Student**

**Factors of the Aggie Experience Students Would Highlight to Potential Students**



*Student Experience Pop-Up Survey*





*Graduation Senior Survey*

**Recommendations:**

- Career preparation should be embedded in each major. Information about career skills and career opportunities should be provided at multiple stages, rather than provided exclusively at the end of a degree program. Students should receive advice on how to market their skills and expertise based on their degree programs and co-curricular experiences.
- Introductory courses should consider weaving in information that helps students understand various disciplines and career opportunities in each college.
- Expand opportunities within colleges and departments for students to access networking and career development opportunities outside of the classroom.
- Units should integrate transformational learning experiences (i.e., high-impact experiences) into their majors as early as possible, including reflection on marketable skills learned through these experiences.

## IV. “Nickel-and-Diming” Students

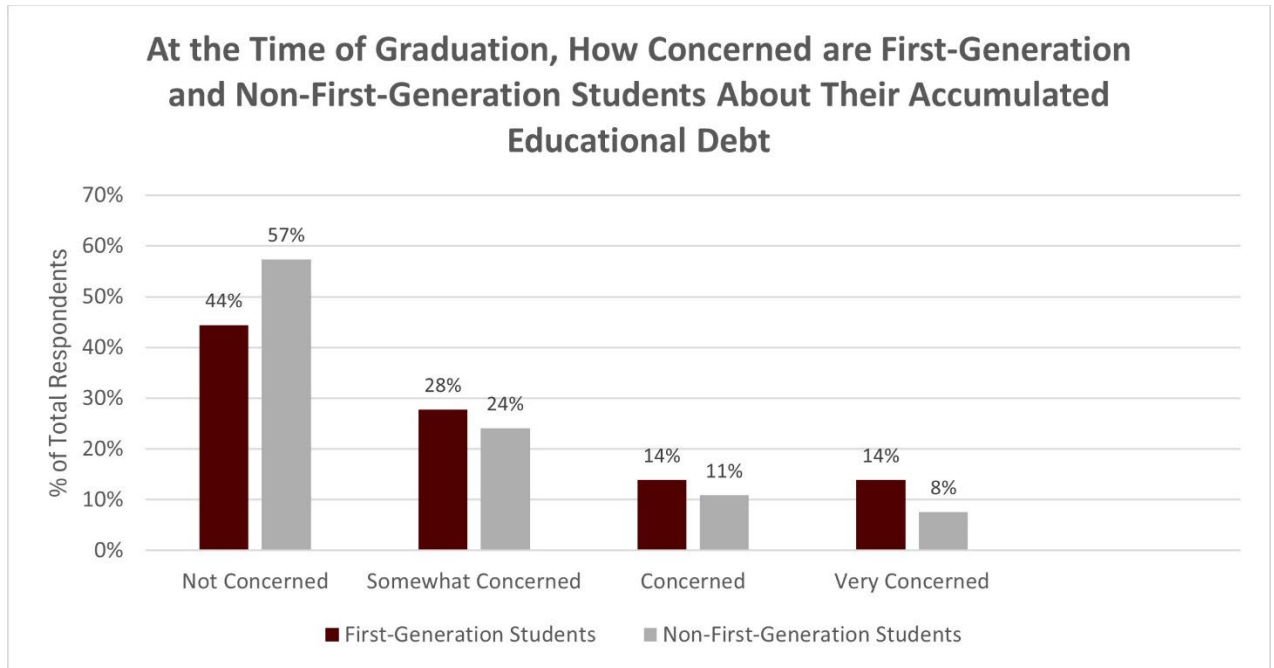
### OVERALL CAMPUS AFFORDABILITY

As a publicly funded institution, Texas A&M University is committed to providing a high-quality and affordable education to Texans and beyond. Texas A&M’s average cost of attendance has fluctuated subtly over the past three years, and the net price by income levels has stayed relatively the same over the past two years. The university has consistently made investments in scholarships and financial assistance, including allocation of emergency assistance for acute needs. The Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid administers almost \$900 million in student financial assistance annually, and supported by the Aggie One Stop and Student Business Services, ensures students are advised on financial solutions for attending Texas A&M.

Students continue to want to understand exactly what they are paying for when they are billed. Students reported confusion over the detailed statement they review online, whereby the descriptors used often have codes, acronyms or abbreviations. While one can discover what all the charges are on the Student Business Services website, students desire more transparency. Further, the University Advancement Fee is often cited as a charge that generates more questions given it is used to cover a wide variety of services, from technology and the university network to library and career services, academic advising and student activities, among many others. While there are technical limitations on the number of characters used as descriptors, the bill and language used should be reflective of the charge and easily understood by students.

Nevertheless, a degree from Texas A&M is an investment of resources that the university must remain cognizant of and focused on strategies to address student financial concerns and needs. In the Student Experience Survey, 44% of respondents indicated overall costs as an improvement area to strengthen. As the average cost of attending college across the country still rises, the university must remain dedicated to taking a holistic approach to addressing college affordability and student needs beyond the scope of tuition and fees.

TAMU Student Assistance Services reported that of their 2,279 cases in FY23, 26% were related to food insecurity, 11% were related to financial insecurity and 2% were related to housing insecurity/homelessness support. These numbers are further validated by the Financial Wellness Survey conducted by Trellis Strategies that indicated 13% of students “ran out of money 6 or more times in the past year.” Strong partnerships with campus affiliates, such as the Texas A&M Foundation and the Texas A&M Association of Former Students, are an integral part in enhancing the value of an undergraduate education while keeping costs within reach. Financial literacy and education are valuable support components for students getting the most value for the dollars they and their families are investing in their education.



*Graduating Senior Survey, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Evaluation*

#### **Recommendations:**

- Increased financial transparency is a crucial component of improving the student experience. Students should receive clear information upfront on their expected out-of-pocket costs for course materials, increased transparency on what they are paying for and where their dollars are going, and how to connect with additional financial resources on campus.
- Texas A&M should work proactively to understand and address the “gap” in unmet need for students who struggle to finance their education. This should include students who are Pell eligible or grant eligible and still have need, or students who are not Pell eligible but still have unmet need.
- The university should continue to encourage students and families to be informed on “smart borrowing” and “college financial literacy” prior to their matriculation to Texas A&M and throughout their time here.
- The university should consider re-invigorating the Money Education Center that ceased many of its programs following changes in structures from the Path Forward.

#### **SUPPLEMENTAL COURSE MATERIAL COSTS**

Additional out-of-pocket costs for supplemental course materials can be a surprising, hidden expense for Texas A&M students despite efforts to publicize that information at the time of registration. These extra course material costs threaten the financial transparency students desire from the university. Students report that some courses require a third-party platform for turning in assignments or for completing coursework

in which subscriptions are costly and often nonrenewable. In this way, faculty preferences for platforms unintentionally drive up student costs.

For example, for students required to use Packback, the cost is at least \$39/course/semester. For AY24, students were billed \$1.16 million. In some cases, students are forced to purchase multiple products that function almost identically. For example, a student buys a Spanish language package for the first semester and then must buy a different one for the second semester because the faculty member chose to use something different.

The university should work proactively to reduce excessive out-of-pocket costs for students. A separate university committee is examining which third-party tools can be supported at the institutional level. Additionally, the committee is working on creating professional development to inform faculty about how to use university-funded online tools, such as Canvas, that do not have additional costs for students.

### Listening Session Reflections

“Why am I paying [extra] to do my homework?”

*-Current Students*

Open Educational Resources (OER) is an area that the university has invested in and should continue to invest in as it promotes affordability of course materials. There is great potential in savings for students as OER is adopted by more faculty. It is also important to consider high-enrollment courses for the greatest impact on the most students. Out of more than 14,000 sections in the fall semester, just over 3.5% are currently identified as utilizing OER course materials, with almost 10% of sections offered through the College of Arts and Sciences with the highest adoption in the Departments of Biology and English. The enrollments in all sections with OER in the fall total over 21,000 enrollments.

### Recommendations:

Request the Provost, working with the Faculty Senate, to develop more robust policies and processes for the adoption of course materials, homework systems, learning management tools and other course resources that students often pay for and are surprised by. It is not clear that the faculty and campus community understand the impacts on students and the additional expenses the students incur. Students often feel like the university is “nickel-and-diming” them and question why their tuition and fees are not already covering many of these “added” costs. Additionally, these should be incorporated in this process:

- Remain committed to encouraging and supporting the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) and other affordable course materials.
- Establish a university standard that colleges/units can use to evaluate OER.
- Consider adding a standard Student Course Evaluation question that focuses on course material cost transparency.

- Assess colleges and departments' progress in reducing students' out-of-pocket costs for field experiences/off-site campus experience costs.
- Create awareness among faculty that these tools cost students, including looking at including cost in description and potentially notifying faculty when they adopt this in a course.
- Investigate Canvas and other enterprise options that provide similar services and adopt them.
- Create professional development options that help faculty know how to provide some of these options with existing tools.

## External Sources

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