

The Regents' Scholars Program: Assisting First-Generation Students at Texas A&M University

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Introduction

The Regents' Scholars Program is designed to assist first-generation students in achieving their educational goals at Texas A&M University. First-generation students whose total family income (parents and student) is less than \$40,000 per year (based upon the calendar year prior to the year the student enrolls at Texas A&M) are eligible. The program impacts access to education, financial aid, student life, academic affairs, student retention, and graduation rates.

Background

The Regents' Scholarship was established by former Texas A&M University President Dr. Robert M. Gates for students entering in the fall of 2004. On December 4, 2003, he stated:

Texas A&M, both as a land-grant university and by virtue of its culture, has always been fundamentally a university for all the people, not exclusively for the elite. Yet, for some Texans an education at Texas A&M is financially out of reach. Thus, we risk losing touch with the kind of people in Texas who made this university what it is—bright young people brought up in economic hardship yet brimming with desire, determination, and willingness to work hard, young people who left their homes and families in search of their dreams, young people like so many who are now among our most prominent former students.

How the Initiative Works

The scholarship program was announced in December 2003 with the purpose of aiding in the matriculation of the class entering in the fall of 2004. One

full-time staff member was hired by Scholarships & Financial Aid in the spring of 2004 to administer the program. The position was created as a financial aid advisor and eventually became a financial aid administrator, the Regents' Scholars Coordinator. In spring 2005, a graduate assistant position was created to assist the Regents' Scholars Coordinator with the management of the program. In the fall of 2006, the graduate assistant position became a full-time financial aid advisor position, the Regents' Scholars Assistant Coordinator.

After the arrival of the first cohort of Regents' Scholars, the university identified a need for specific programming for these scholarship recipients. As a result, the Regents' Scholars Coordination Committee was established. The committee consisted of representatives from Scholarships & Financial Aid, Multicultural Services, Residence Life, Student Counseling Services, Student Learning Center, General Academic Programs, Academic Operations Committee, and Student Life. The committee was cochaired by Scholarships & Financial Aid and Multicultural Services. The office of Scholarships & Financial Aid was selected to administer the program. The charge of the committee was to:

Develop and implement plans to ensure periodic contacts with the current students, track the students' academic progress, communicate with parents, and facilitate retention efforts across campus for the Regents' Scholars. In addition, the committee will work to attract the next cohort of the Regents' Scholars by coordinating the recruiting efforts of many offices across campus. (Personal Communication, October 4, 2004).

After research, the committee recommended three requirements of first-year programming for future classes of Regents' Scholars: freshmen are required to live on-campus, participate in a Texas A&M Academic Success Program, and attend the Regents' Scholars Orientation prior to the start of classes.

First-Year Programming

Living on campus is an important part of the college experience. On-campus residents have the opportunities to live in a community, get involved in residence hall and campus events, have access to trained residence hall staff members for advice, make lasting friendships, and have easier access to classes and extracurricular activities. In order to track the on-campus housing requirement, the Regents' Scholars Coordinator established consistent,

streamlined communications with Residence Life. The Regents' Scholars Program staff works closely with the Residence Life staff to ensure students are applying for on-campus housing, moving on-campus, and remaining on-campus during their first year at Texas A&M.

Texas A&M Academic Success Programs provide first-year students with the best possible academic start for college as well as skills and knowledge to excel in their academic, professional, and personal lives. Typically, programs have clustered courses, out-of-classroom learning experiences, social and service activities, peer or faculty mentors, and free tutorial programs. Each college identified (and in some cases created) the program their Regents' Scholars would participate in to satisfy the Academic Success Program requirement. The Academic Success Program Coordinators meet every other month to share ideas and discuss concerns. Programs include:

- Aggie Access Learning Communities (General Academic Programs, College of Liberal Arts, College of Science, College of Agriculture & Life Sciences)
- Century Scholars Learning Community (Honors Program)
- COALS Community (College of Agriculture & Life Sciences)
- College of Architecture Regents' Scholars
- College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences Regents' Scholars
- CONNECTS (Dwight Look College of Engineering)
- Financial Aid Connection (College of Liberal Arts, College of Science, General Academic Programs)
- Freshmen Business Initiative (Mays Business School)
- Gateway Program (summer provisional admits)
- Lohmann Learning Communities (College of Education & Human Development)
- Regents' Scholars Initiative (College of Liberal Arts)

Each Regents' Scholar is required to attend the Regents' Scholars Orientation that is held during Gig'em Week. Gig'em Week is Aggieland's official Week of Welcome and provides students an opportunity to learn more about the campus, the Bryan/College Station community, each other, and college life in general through a series of educational and social events sponsored by the University. During the orientation, each first-year Regents' Scholar is assigned

a Regents' Scholars Peer Mentor. New Regents' Scholars are informed about student life, academic affairs, and financial aid by current Regents' Scholars. The Regents' Scholars Orientation committee, consisting of staff and faculty, was established to coordinate and implement the fall 2005 orientation. In the fall of 2006, the Regents' Scholars Program Student Planning Board was established. The planning board, advised by the Regents' Scholars Program staff, consists of six Regents' Scholars and is responsible for the planning and implementation of the orientation and the peer mentor program.

Each freshman Regents' Scholar is also invited to the Regents' Scholars Fall Reception, Welcome Back Breakfast (spring semester), and the Regents' Scholars Spring Banquet. In addition, each freshman is provided a monthly online newsletter, the Regents' Review, which provides vital information about the scholarship program and the University in general (financialaid.tamu.edu/regentsreview). Finally, each first-year family is provided the Eye on Regents' Family Newsletter at the beginning of each semester.

In the spring of 2008, the Regents' Scholars Program Blog launched. Scholarships & Financial Aid hired Regents' Scholars to write about their daily adventures in Aggieland. The purpose of the blog is to provide prospective Regents' Scholars with the opportunity to understand what life is like at Texas A&M. For more information, please visit financialaid.tamu.edu/regentblog.

Second-Year Programming

The Regents' Scholars Program has focused solely on the first-year experience, and yet there are second-year Regents' Scholars who are in need of continued support and programming. Scholarships & Financial Aid has recognized the need and has initiated programs for them.

The first of these initiatives is the continuation of the Regents' Review newsletter. The sophomore edition provides more specific information geared toward second-year students. Topics include beating the sophomore slump (recognizing it, you are not alone), soul searching (who am I, what do I want to become), career services, internship and study abroad guidance, and leadership development.

The second initiative, which will launch in the fall of 2008, is the Sophomore Retreat. The Sophomore Retreat will reconnect sophomore students to campus resources as well as introduce them to services they may not have realized existed during their first year. Potential workshops include beating the sophomore slump, study abroad, career planning and interviewing, major and college exploration, and life skills.

The final initiative, which will launch during the 2008-2009 academic year, is the Think Big Grants program. Scholarships & Financial Aid will award several grants through an application process. The money will be used to complete a project during the summer after the student's second year at Texas A&M. The application process itself will be designed to give the student experience in writing a proposal; the proposal will consist of an application, a description of the project, rationale for the project, a detailed budget, and a timeline. Upon return, the student will complete a follow-up project such as a presentation in a class, creating a student organization as a result of their experience, or writing an article for publication describing their experience.

Leadership Development

Each Regents' Scholar is invited to complete an application to serve as a Regents' Scholars Peer Mentor after their first year at Texas A&M University. Regents' Scholars Peer Mentors train and work to aid in the transition process of new freshmen Regents' Scholars. After serving as a peer mentor, students are invited to apply to serve on the Student Planning Board (SPB). The SPB is responsible for the planning and implementation of the Regents' Scholars Orientation and the Peer Mentor Program. Each January, Scholarships & Financial Aid provides each board member with the opportunity to attend the National Conference on Student Leadership Certified Student Leader Weekend Retreat.

The Regents' Scholars Organization (RSO) was proposed by the Student Planning Board and the Regents' Scholars Program staff in the spring of 2007 as the result of upperclassman Regents' Scholars seeing the need for a community for the scholarship recipients. The RSO became a recognized student organization and was launched in the fall of 2007. After serving as

a member of RSO, students are invited to apply for the Executive Board, which includes the president, vice president, finance executive, and social/service executive. The Executive Board is selected through an application and interview process.

Work Processes and Resources

As the result of the creation of the Regents' Scholars Program, many partnerships between university offices and departments have either been established or strengthened. First, communication has strengthened between the previously-mentioned committees that were established to assist in the management of the program. Second, informal relationships have been formed to provide better assistance to the students. Students who may find they are struggling can visit the Regents' Scholars Program staff in Scholarships & Financial Aid to receive information on services available to them through other offices. Finally, formal relations have been established. For example, the Regents' Scholars Coordinator attended the National Summer Institute on Learning Communities with a team from the Aggie Access Learning Community in the summer of 2005. This was a unique situation in which a staff member of Scholarships & Financial Aid participated in an institute designed to help campuses strengthen learning communities.

Funding for the Regents' Scholarships is drawn from a tuition set aside that has been designated for financial assistance programs. In addition to the scholarship money, the program and administrative costs include two full-time staff members, event funding for the orientation, the fall reception, the welcome back breakfast, the spring banquet, and the graduation reception as well as newsletters, peer mentor materials, and leadership development for the planning board and the executive board.

Retention Report for Regents' Scholars: 2004-2007

Regents' Scholars Class	Fall 2004 enrollment	Fall 2005 enrollment	Fall 2006 enrollment	Fall 2007 enrollment
Class of 2008	625	574 (91.84%)	512 (89.2%)	462 (90.23%)
Class of 2009	n/a	594	524 (88.2%)	469 (89.50%)
Class of 2010	n/a	n/a	562	501 (89.15%)
Class of 2011	n/a	n/a	n/a	544

The first graduation rates will be available in May 2008 as the first cohort completes their undergraduate education.

Also, as a result of the scholarship program, Texas A&M was able to reduce the amount of loans borrowed for first-generation students. On average, Regents' Scholars borrow less than 10% in loans.

Attributes and Problems in Development and Implementation

By far, the driving factor at the inception of the program was the university leadership. Dr. Gates, as well as his administration, was extremely committed to providing first-generation students the assistance needed to receive a college education. In addition, the administration was dedicated to the statewide initiative Closing the Gaps which was created to encourage students to attend college. Another positive attribute is the fact that the students receiving the Regents' Scholarship, who in most cases are also Pell and Texas Grant eligible, are able to limit the amount of money they borrow to complete their education.

There were two main concerns when the program was being developed initially. First, with the absence of a retention office at Texas A&M, who would be responsible for the programming, tracking, and assessing of the Regents' Scholars Program? The issue was identified shortly after the arrival of the first cohort of scholars. Dr. Mark Weichold, then Associate Provost for Undergraduate Programs, designated Scholarships & Financial Aid to lead the program. The second issue stems from the fact that Texas A&M has decentralized many of the processes that directly impact the Regents' Scholars.

With a student population of 45,000 and 10 distinct colleges, academic advising, programming, assessment, and funding were concerns of the Regents' Scholars Coordination Committee and the respective colleges. Who would be responsible for the Academic Success Programs? How would the programs be assessed? What types of interventions would occur during the academic year to assist students who were struggling, and who would be responsible for them? These were just a few questions which have been addressed over the years. The colleges work very closely with Scholarships & Financial Aid to assist the students to the best of their ability. In addition, Student Life has been able to work with the colleges to assist students who were not just struggling academically, but also those who were struggling with their transition to college in general.

Many of these issues were addressed by the Regents' Scholars Coordination Committee as well as during the Academic Success Program Coordinators meetings. With open communication between the involved departments and offices, the Regents' Scholars Program has flourished.

Applicability

The Regents' Scholars Program and its elements may easily be applied to other institutions. Many institutions are using several or a variation of these elements to aid in the retention of low-income, first-generation students. Scholarships & Financial Aid has found that the most important element for assisting first-generation students in achieving their educational goals is to communicate to them about the services available within the University. This information is essential, especially as their parents generally do not possess such knowledge on the resources a university is able to provide to its students. Through partnering with Residence Life, Student Life, and Academic Affairs, Scholarships & Financial Aid has found that the first step toward student success is the education outside of the classroom about the services that can help the students inside the classroom. The Regents' Scholars Program does this through a variety of means, from the Academic Success Programs to the Regents' Scholars Orientation to the monthly newsletters.

Future Status

It is expected that the Regents' Scholars Program will continue to exist at Texas A&M University. The program itself will continue to grow by providing programming not only to first-year Regents' Scholars, but also to those upperclassmen returning to the university. Graduation rates will be examined and the program will continue to be assessed regularly to ensure it is as beneficial as possible to the scholarship recipients.

Lessons Learned

First and foremost, a supportive leadership will enable the university to go far beyond simply educating the students. Supportive leadership provides a means to assist the students in becoming successful in managing the entire university setting, both inside and outside of the classroom. Second, communication across campus is a key element when working to create a program which will aid in student success. By opening lines of communication between all offices a student may encounter, the university is allowing the staff to become more educated about the university and its processes, which can only help the students in the end. In addition, conducting quantitative research is necessary to fully assess the program. This university should also gather qualitative data through speaking with the students. The institution should inquire as to what the scholarship recipients need assistance with and seek to provide this for them and those coming after them. Finally, the institution should strive not only for access, but also for the success and academic excellence of its first-generation students. In his keynote speech to the first cohort of Regents' Scholars, Dr. Gates affirmed:

At our dedication, Governor Coke stated, 'The excellence of the college will be determined by your progress.' That excellence today rests in your hands and your progress, both now and while you're in school, and after you graduate and have gone into the world, will determine our excellence yet to come.

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