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## FIRST-YEAR REPORT

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Jacob Tadesse showed up last week at his alma mater Jack Yates High School in one of Houston's grittiest neighborhoods to sell the idea of college, and Texas A&M University in particular.

With baggy jeans and some street slang, Tadesse did not look or sound the part of a typical Aggie. Then again, his nearly all-black audience once was atypical for Texas A&M.

The mostly white and conservative university is all right, he told a classroom filled with 11th-graders, because "Aggies are going to look after Aggies," like a big family.

He would understand if they are skeptical. He had doubts, too. Tadesse, who ranked third in his graduating class at Yates last year, chose to attend Texas A&M because the university offered him more scholarship money than any other school, not because it is rich in traditions.

As part of an all-out effort to get more black and Hispanic students, university officials hope students like Tadesse enjoy their campus experience and tell others back home about it.

"A&M is the best school in Texas," said Tadesse, who is studying engineering. "But that's because I go there."

While it might be a stretch to say he bleeds maroon after one semester, the university fits him better than he expected. He feels like he belongs.

Before coming to College Station, Tadesse figured he would plow his way to a bachelor's degree, relying on faith and desire. His goals did not include assimilation, and he skipped Fish Camp, a summer program that indoctrinates new students to A&M traditions. He presumed racism permeated the campus.

Instead, he found a place offering support at almost every turn.

His scholarship provides \$20,000 over four years, allowing him to attend full time and live on campus without needing a job. As a Century Scholar, Tadesse must enroll in a first-year seminar that teaches study skills and time management, attend the office hours of at least one faculty member each week and sign in at the honors program office on a weekly basis.

The sign-in book is located toward the back of the office, forcing students to pass a gantlet of advisers. The book also includes listings of upcoming activities and events.

"Incoming freshmen hate signing in," said Edward Funkhouser, executive director of the honors program. "But when you talk to them as sophomores, they don't want that to change."

Critical first year

The College of Engineering also is requiring Tadesse to be part of a small cluster of freshmen who take a common set of classes. And over spring break, the university will send him to London with other honors students for a week of sightseeing and seminars.

The intended result is a student who feels engaged in class and thus is more likely to complete college on time. The campus-wide effort comes as government officials are pressing state-supported universities to keep and graduate their freshmen at a higher rate.

With political pressure mounting, colleges and universities from Washington to Florida are placing greater emphasis on the critical first-year experience of students.

The National Survey of Student Engagement found students benefit from seminars that bring freshmen together to discuss a book or to plan an event. Students who participated in such activities said they were more challenged academically and more satisfied with college than those who did not, according to the survey conducted at 528 campuses last year.

"If they want students to do anything, like reading a newspaper, drinking less alcohol or visiting the library, they need to introduce them to it early," said John Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College and an adviser to several Texas universities.

While the strategies used by Texas A&M are not unique, education experts consider them among the best practices. Students typically see a supportive campus environment, according to the latest survey results. And the university's year-to-year retention rates are among the highest in the state.

But black students are the least satisfied with their overall experience at Texas A&M, the survey found. Their relationships with other students do not inspire the same high marks as those of their Anglo and Hispanic classmates.

#### National trend

The findings reflect a national trend, but it is a problem that seems even more acute at Texas A&M, where 2.6 percent of the 36,368 undergraduates are black. The university is working to attract more minorities, investing time and money at urban high schools that historically have sent few students to College Station.

"It's no secret that A&M has struggled hard to recruit more minority students, African-Americans in particular," said Mark Troy, the university's associate director of measurement and research services. "Even though we have had some successes, they have fewer students and mentors to relate to, and that tends to result in lower satisfaction."

#### Had to adjust

Even though Texas A&M has provided help, Tadesse still had some things to figure out. He failed his first pre-calculus test. From the first question, he knew he had studied the wrong material.

So he started dropping by faculty office hours three times a week. He also reconnected with Fred Nicholas, a senior who hosted him on a campus visit two years ago. Nicholas, who is black, gave him some hints on preparing reports for his chemistry lab and stressed reading the textbooks, instead of just relying on lecture notes and online materials. Tadesse also joined the National Society of Black Engineers, hoping to meet more students with similar backgrounds and interests.

"If I had kept to myself, talked to nobody and kept doing the same stuff," he said, "I would have failed out."

Tadesse found himself spending 35 hours each week on schoolwork. Nationally, less than one-fifth of freshmen study more than 25 hours per week, the estimated time faculty members say is required to do well in college.

"I study like it is my job," he said. "With my scholarship, they're paying me to go to school, so I might as well."

He got an A on his second math test and finished the fall semester with a grade point average of 3.6 on a scale of 4.0. A repeat performance this spring will earn him an additional scholarship of \$2,000 for each of his remaining three years.

Tadesse said he could do better, but he had to adjust to the rigors of college.

Funkhouser, the honors program administrator who led Tadesse's first-year seminar, said the freshman from Yates has grown both academically and socially in his first semester.

#### Misconceptions

"There are a lot of misconceptions about A&M across the state," Funkhouser said, "and I think Jacob is a good example of expecting one thing and getting another."

After Tadesse made his pitch at Yates, 16-year-old Kiara Davis was not convinced. She said she had been to A&M - didn't like it. "For some reason, it's not the college for me," she said.

But Trenae Smith, 16, said she liked what Tadesse said.

"He was saying people looked out for each other," she said. "And sometimes when you need a little help, you probably need somebody looking out after you."

NOTES: Editor's note: This is the second story in an occasional series chronicling Jacob Tadesse's first year at Texas A&M University. Colleges and universities across Texas are grappling with how to recruit and retain minority students to mirror the state's changing demographics. Texas A&M, for one, is trying to attract more students from urban high schools, such as Jack Yates High School in Houston, where Tadesse attended. Chronicle reporter Melanie Markley contributed to this report. [matthew.tresaugue@chron.com](mailto:matthew.tresaugue@chron.com)