C-SPAN doesn’t show the half of it, political aficionados say. Though Congress’s final vote gets the glory of television, the real work is done behind the scenes—back in congressional committees, back in the office, back in home districts.
Four Ags Fight For A&M in Congress
For Texas A&M, those votes for university funding could mean the success or failure of research, programs or employment. No matter how important, support for a congressional bill is never guaranteed. That’s why having someone—scratch that—four someones in the U.S. House of Representatives can be very beneficial.

No one fights for Texas A&M like a former student.

There’s a no fly zone around the center of the world’s most powerful democracy. To get to the capital, you must travel by ground. The Capital Beltway (Interstate 495) that encircles Washington, D.C., gets lots of traffic, so don’t get in a hurry.

The north and south, give-and-take nature of its congestion is the very life flow of national politics. The bumper sticker you’re stuck behind says it: Politics rule.

Yet there’s another sticker on the streets of Washington, D.C.—The Association of Former Students decal.

Texas A&M has four graduates in the U.S. House of Representatives: Joe Barton ’72, Chet Edwards ’74, Louie Gohmert ’75 and Jeb Hensarling ’79. They represent four of the United States’ 435 congressional districts. Though the former-student crew is a tiny minority in the U.S. House, they effect big change when it comes to support for the University.

Big Numbers

“The bottom line is in 2007 we were able to add $50 million in funding that was not in the administration’s budget request for research and important programs at Texas A&M,” Edwards said.

College Station’s congressman was in town for the weekend; he stayed the night with a college roommate. Dressed in a blue suit and maroon tie, Edwards sat in one of the Texas Engineering Extension Service’s new conference rooms at its National Emergency Response and Rescue Training Center. The group was celebrating the grand reopening of the Emergency Operations Training Center, known worldwide for its homeland security training using real-world, scenario-driven examples—and made possible partly through congressionally appropriated funds.

It was 8:30 a.m. At 9:30 a.m., he was set to help christen the enhanced building. Chairs and a podium were set up outside the room for the commemoration.

“It’s a good day,” he said. “I get to cut a ribbon in my home district and cut red tape in Washington.”

When it comes to bringing funds to Texas A&M, Edwards said his job is to be a matchmaker. He knows both the need and the people who can fulfill it. The same goes for the other former students in Congress.

Here’s how it works, said Gohmert, an East Texas congressman: Representatives in the U.S. House can request money from the U.S. budget to help support university projects or research. “Texas A&M has so many worthwhile projects that help the country that others of us will sign on in agreement to help recommend a grant or an allocation go to Texas A&M when it appears clearly they would be deserving recipients.”

Together, the four Aggies are a team that crosses all partisan lines, Edwards said. They come from the political left, right and middle, but have common ground in Aggieland. “We have different legislative philosophies, but we all believe that higher education is important,” Hensarling said.

They’ve got a bit of fire pent up inside. By having a former student present Texas A&M’s need for funding, Barton said, it’s much more likely that A&M’s position will be heard, received, and then “presented more rigorously to the rest of Congress.”

This presentation of ideas happens best one-on-one, the four say. Not in meetings, or in a memo. Speeches don’t always work. But bring the living mission of Texas A&M to Congress itself, and action is secured.

Where Did The Money Go?

Examples of some of the funding for Texas A&M that was included in 2007 federal appropriations:

- $588,000 in additional funding for the Texas Transportation Institute to study traffic congestion in Brazos County.
- $22 million through the Department of Homeland Security for the National Emergency Response and Rescue Training Center at Texas A&M.
- $1.968 million in additional funds through the Department of Energy to Texas A&M’s Nuclear Security Science and Policy Institute for nuclear nonproliferation efforts.
- $1.2 million for Texas A&M’s space situational awareness technology.
- $800,000 to the Texas A&M Engineering Program to study rotor blade coatings to prevent erosion.
- $3 million for a joint project to help restore Fort Hood training land.
- $2.72 million to study the underlying causes of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- $2.64 million to research and develop handheld devices that analyze and identify airborne biological and chemical agents.
- $21.963 million for national agriculture research.
- $984,000 for biofuels development.
- $705,000 to develop new robotic technologies for Mars-Lunar exploration.
“The $50 million increase in A&M’s research budget didn’t occur because of one person,” Edwards said. “It occurred because of good people working together in good faith.”

Example: When word started spreading about a homeland security facility to be built, a group of Texas congressmen jumped to propose it be built at Texas A&M. “A number of Aggies were all well positioned and ready to help,” Barton said. The center is now a huge part of Texas A&M’s devotion to national safety.

An Aggie congressman can even be partially credited for encouraging the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum to be built in College Station, said information from Barton’s office.

“A&M does a better job than most any school in preparing students to meet dignitaries from any walk of life and not be intimated or embarrassed,” Gohmert said.

Funds For The University

It’s important to understand the depth of University research to realize how much having Aggies in Congress benefits Texas A&M. Chancellor Mike McKinney has this book, Texas A&M Federal Funded Initiatives. He says it’s a peek inside what Texas A&M can do and is doing. Since his job is to be head of the entire A&M System, he’s well acquainted with its page count.

It’s heavy and organized—from A to Z, the book binds every research project, experiment plot and knowledge-building exercise supported through federal money into an impressive list.

“Let’s see here,” McKinney said, opening to Page 1. “We have sustainable water for rural communities, a range revegetation project for Fort Hood.” There’s flood control and reservoir resedimentation, homeland security and the National Emergency Response and Training Center.

“Oh, this one I love,” McKinney said. “We’re applying laser-science against terrorism.” Texas A&M researchers are using lasers to detect explosives. “That’s happening here, right now. We’re working on it this very second,” he said.

The book contains A&M research on nuclear nonproliferation and the development of Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training. And there’s a listing for space situational awareness imaging system that will be used in a trip to Mars.

To Mars.

Texas A&M has the opportunity to change the universe from College Station. And that’s its goal with these projects. The results are for the benefit of others. “It’s not just trying to get money for money’s sake,” McKinney said. It’s a commitment to service, and Aggies get that. “From the inside you can’t explain it, but we have an obligation to. We explain it through demonstration.”

The University cultivates knowledge in-house, but it’s often up to outside sources for funding. “It’s really important that you fund these things,” McKinney said.

Devotion

With 435 representatives in Congress, it’s easy to wonder how much of a role four individuals from Texas A&M can really have. Sounds like introductions are in order: With 24 years in Congress, Barton is the third most senior Texan in the U.S. House. Edwards is known nationally as being an advocate for veterans; House Speaker Nancy Pelosi recommended in June that he be considered for the vice presidential slot on the Democrats’ national ticket. Gohmert, a former district judge, now serves on the House Judiciary Committee, and is the only former judge on the committee. Hensarling was called a “rising congressional star” and a “man of conviction” by the Dallas Morning News, while the National Review called him “Rep. Budget Reform.”

So how did it happen that each attended Texas A&M with the drive to continue in elected public service?
Joe Barton ’72

With his history, it’s been said that when Barton puts his weight behind a bill, his voice can be louder than others. “I don’t mind at all standing up,” he said. Not for Texas A&M, the school that instructed him in knowledge and problem-solving. Not for his alma mater.

Barton comes from a long line of Aggies. If you count his children, father and several uncles, he’s one of about 20 family members dressed in maroon.

Barton flies the family flag quite literally. His 4-foot by 5-foot Aggie flag is suspended from a place of honor in his office. It is part of the workspace, deemed just as necessary as the chair in which he sits.

He organizes by filing: file cabinets built into the walls, cabinets that are freestanding. They are in various places, but Barton keeps issues pertaining to Texas A&M in their own folder, closest to his office.

For a representative who has to prioritize, the distinction speaks volumes.

Chet Edwards ’74

The day Edwards graduated in 1974 with his degree in economics, former Brazos Valley Congressman Olin “Tiger” Teague ’32 offered Edwards a job. There were no politicians in Edwards’ family, but his Aggie family drew him toward public service.

“A&M changed my life,” he said. “It was through MSC activities that I met Congressman Teague and received my first job. He encouraged me to run for Congress.”

After eight years in the Texas Senate and 18 in the U.S. House of Representatives, that encouragement went a long way. Edwards can still remember when Teague put the idea in his head. It was during Teague’s re-election campaign. At that point he had been in Congress for 30 years and decided he wasn’t going to run again.

“He told me I ought to run for his seat,” Edwards said. “I nearly wrecked the car.”

He notes that a core value embodied in the Aggie Spirit is service to others. “That was a special focus in MSC programs. It was almost just assumed without thinking that when we graduated, we would all be involved in service of some type, whether it was volunteering in churches or running for office or being involved in communities. So my work today in public service is an extension of the values that were strengthened when I was an A&M student.”
Louie Gohmert ’75
Gohmert was an involved student at Texas A&M. He was brigade commander in the Corps of Cadets, active in student government and as a class officer. When the Opera and Performing Arts Society was created, “I was the charter treasurer,” he said.
Gohmert traveled to the Soviet Union as an exchange student in 1973. He hosted Ross Perot and Gerald Ford when they spoke on campus. It wasn’t that Gohmert was particularly spectacular, he said of himself. Instead the congressman gives credit to such mentors as J. Wayne Stark ’39, “who decided to help put some class in my life,” Gohmert said. The lessons he learned at Texas A&M are still doing him justice.
“It’s made me to every degree what and who I am,” he said. “When you’ve had to stand at attention and have upperclassmen yell at you, there’s not much that can intimidate you,” he said. Lessons put to good use on the House floor, or in the president’s office.
The experiences flowed deep. “It certainly had a tremendous impact on me.”

Jeb Hensarling ’79
“There has never been a time when Texas A&M was not part of my life,” Hensarling said. As a College Station native growing up on a side street south of campus, Hensarling’s childhood memory of waking up to the Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band’s Noble Men of Kyle never quite left him.
Hensarling’s father, Charles ’49, owned a poultry farm, just like the congressman’s grandfather, Theron ’22. Legacy? Yes, but Hensarling didn’t want to make it number three. And fortunately for Texas A&M and the U.S. Congress, he wasn’t pressured.
What he didn’t mind was the unspoken bequest to be the third generation at Texas A&M. That decision he made on his own.
The congressman has always had an opinion, but he said it was at Texas A&M that he gained the knowledge to support or reject his notions. At A&M, he learned the benefit and privilege that comes from serving the community.
His father always told him, it’s not the things you do in life that you regret, it’s what you don’t do.
So he did, choosing to serve not only his country, but his alma mater.