The Memorial Student Center was filled to the brim, and Collin Laden '10 was wandering through the throng, pausing at tables manned by different student organizations during the annual Open House event. It was fall 2006, and Laden was a freshman trying to discover his niche in Aggieland. He paused in front of a series of tables recruiting for Freshman Leadership Organizations, or FLOs, and it was here that Laden found where his campus involvement would lie.

Like hundreds of other freshmen that year, Laden applied and was accepted into one of the organizations, MSC Freshmen In Service and Hosting, or MSC FISH. This year, he chairs the group, an organization that he says gave him a home away from home when he needed it the most.

**Getting Them Early**

A&M produces quality leaders through a process that is multifaceted and massive. The opportunities for a student to get involved in a leadership program are nearly endless—there are countless leadership organizations, conferences and even an on-campus living community dedicated to nurturing leadership. For many students, like Laden, the leadership bug bites in the form of a FLO—there are 12 FLOs recognized as student organizations, two of which were formally recognized this year.

“FLOs provide this fun experience that you’ll never get in another organization,” Laden said. “You meet people who are completely different from you, people you can trust in and learn from—these people are the next generation of leaders.”

And that’s something that James Kress ’08 knows: the students he interacts with on a daily basis are going to lead into tomorrow. Along with two others, Kress serves as director of the Freshman Leadership Advisory Council, or FLAC. FLAC has existed for nearly as long as FLOs have, but the council was only officially recognized as an organization this year. The council consists of former FLO members—Kress spent his undergraduate years as a member, counselor and director in Aggie Fish Club—who have the experience necessary to guide, connect and unite the 12 FLOs. Kress doesn’t take this job lightly.

“I’m taking a step back and looking at different things like organizational issues, finances, budgeting
and all of the behind-the-scenes stuff,” he said. “We have a chance to help the FLO directors and keep them motivated and involved.”

Incoming students have an opportunity to become leaders from the moment they first step foot on campus, Kress said, and this is something that other schools can’t offer their freshmen.

“A&M gives you chances to get plugged into campus,” he said. “It gives you real experiences to prepare you for the world.”

LEADing The Way

A freshman may have missed an application deadline or missed an opportunity to get involved, but spreading leadership to Aggies is a goal worthy of granting those students a second shot. Sophomore students have specialized leadership organizations, like MSC LEAD.

Stephanie Burns ’09 is the 2008-09 chair of MSC LEAD, a position she earned after being selected as a member of the organization as a sophomore. For Burns, the organization has shaped her A&M experience.

“I’ve met my closest friends and I’ve learned that there are so many ways you can impact people,” she said. “That’s what drew me in.”

LEAD has even influenced Burns’ future profession—she wants to make leadership a lifelong career.

Like the FLOs, LEAD is a structured group. Members are selected after an application process during their sophomore year; at the end of that year, those members can apply to be on different committees that will oversee the organization during the coming year.

MSC LEAD teaches leadership to its members through speakers and interactions. It is also service-oriented, as the group regularly participates in projects with the Boys & Girls Club, Habitat for Humanity, in McAllen and Corpus Christi, has plans to extend into the inner cities of Austin, Houston and San Antonio.

Projects like ARO—which is all student-organized—makes students excited about the work they are doing, especially when they realize the influence they are having on others, Burns said.

“It gives students opportunities to be leaders,” she said. “In fact, Texas A&M itself is unique in that fact. We don’t just learn it, we’re actually doing it. That’s what student activities really focus on, allowing students to be more confident in those leadership skills.”

It’s All In The Family

When Frank and Joanie Abbott’s middle and youngest sons wanted to attend Texas A&M in the 1980s, the couple didn’t know a thing about Aggie culture. But as both of their boys became heavily involved in the Corps of Cadets and other campus organizations, Frank and Joanie found themselves on campus more and more. They regularly connected with students in the MSC and were named Parents of the Year for 1987-88. But Frank and Joanie wanted to give back more to the University that had given their children so much.

Using their connections in the MSC, the Abbotts established the Abbott Family Leadership Conference, or AFLC, in 1995. The purpose of the conference is to promote and encourage sophomores and juniors to adopt a leadership style that is based on ethical and moral values, service and the importance of family, said Kelly Cox, the program’s director. In 1995, the conference was held once a year with 20 delegates, or students, participating. Today, the two conferences are held each year, each with 36 delegates and even more student directors who actually
help plan the conference’s logistics.

The conferences—one is held in San Antonio, the other in Austin—are four-day affairs that feature roundtable discussions, guest panels, service projects and networking opportunities, all centered on the AFLC’s four core values: ethics, service, family and morals.

“This is a full-family buy-in,” Cox said. “Frank and Joanie and their three sons all participate in each conference. Frank and Joanie come to every one and barbecue—the family is actively involved in this, and they make sure to get to know all of the delegates.”

The success and popularity of the conference is reflected by the hundreds of applications AFLC receives each year. Students of all majors apply, and after a screening and interviewing process, are notified whether or not they are selected to attend a conference.

“The Abbotts—and A&M—are here to plant these seeds,” Cox said. “After that, people leave and go out in the world and use those leadership abilities. You don’t just learn those skills, you have to experience them.”

A Retreat To Grow On

A three-day retreat in the woods of Navasota—it’s just what student leaders need to get to know one another before the start of a school year, said Ben Weiner ’08, chair of the MSC Fall Leadership Conference.

The conference, now in its 56th year, was created by the student leadership within the MSC as a way to take themselves away from campus and administration. Now, the conference’s major goal is to get student leaders of all calibers together to network and focus on goals and challenges facing them during the school year.

Weiner attended the conference for two years because of his involvement in the Corps of Cadets and the MSC. As chair of this year’s conference, he is proof that the three days at Camp Allen are well-spent.

“The conference held a special place in my heart through the relationships I’ve built,” he said. “It’s interesting to look at the dynamics. You see these relationships form or strengthen that help unify student activities on campus, and that’s what happened when I came.”

The conference includes leaders from the wide array of student organizations. Everyone from the student body president to the head of A&M’s sports car club signed up for this year’s conference, Weiner said, and every connection students make with one another only strengthens campus life.

There are teambuilding exercises, special speakers and group dinners, but it is the emphasis on focus groups that makes the leadership conference unique. Throughout the afternoon, students are separated into small focus groups, led by former students or A&M faculty and staff members. The groups give the students time to interact with one another in an intimate setting, Weiner said, fostering contacts that will benefit Aggieland for years to come, just as the students of yesterday impact the students of tomorrow.

“From day one in our history, you were always being prepared for the next step,” Weiner said. “The University has changed and adapted, but it’s held on to the fact that it’s important to be prepared for whatever you go out and do.”

Weiner said the University attracts students who want to get involved, and that helps cultivate the reputation of talented leaders that A&M has built through the decades.

“It’s been here since the beginning, this prominence of leadership—we can probably blame it on the water,” he said with a laugh. 🍃

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