

RISE Foundation Excellence Award

Established in 2021 by Daisey McCloud

Every day, Daisey McCloud meets students at a crossroads in their lives. As Texas A&M University at Galveston's director of counseling services since 2009, she regularly draws from her experiences as a first-generation college student to offer guidance. "When students come to campus, people assume that they know things from their parents' experiences," she said, "but many students don't even know what questions to ask."



(Dr. Carol Bunch-Davis on left)

And despite social advancements since McCloud first attended college, many students still report struggling with race and identity issues. Academically and financially struggling students that are part of an underrepresented group can feel especially isolated, compounding their alienation further and dragging down their well-being and success. "They can feel like they don't matter—like they're not even in the room," McCloud said.

In looking for ways to further support these Aggies, McCloud discovered the Foundation Excellence Award (FEA) scholarship program, a long-running initiative at Texas A&M University's College Station campus that recently expanded to support Aggies studying at the Galveston Campus as well. These unique scholarships provide students a four-year stipend during their college experience to offset the cost of tuition and typically support underrepresented groups, including minorities and students from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

Immediately, she saw an unignorable opportunity to change lives. Her recently established FEA scholarship joins an ever-growing list of groundbreaking initiatives that are helping every Aggie feel at home on Texas A&M-Galveston's seaside campus.

Just Trying to Do Something

Though McCloud's current work often revolves around encouraging students to accept help from others, her story reveals a dogged independence. Born in Texas and raised in New England, she was the eldest of five children raised by her divorced mother. During her senior year of high school, when her mother and siblings moved to Houston to be closer to their extended family, McCloud stayed behind in Massachusetts and secured a job to pay for her own apartment.

Months away from graduating high school with the Class of 1978, the headstrong student who always established her own way forward found herself crying in her physiology teacher's office. "What's wrong?" her teacher asked. Slowly, McCloud repeated what the guidance counselor down the hall told her moments before.

"I understand you want to go to college," the counselor had said, "but colored children don't go to college. And your parents probably couldn't afford it. You might want to think about doing something else." With a few terse words, the counselor turned McCloud's biggest dreams to dust. All her hard work down the drain, just because she was Black.

McCloud's physiology teacher, however, would not stand for it. "Daisey, you're the top student in this class," her teacher said. "There's no reason you can't get a college degree if you want one." With her teacher's backing, McCloud applied to different schools, going on to study fashion retail at a predominantly white women's junior college in Boston. "I didn't know anything about college," she said. "Neither one of my parents went. I was just trying to do something." She was so determined to do something that she worked three jobs outside of class to pay for tuition and living expenses.

After earning her bachelor's degree, McCloud moved to Houston and worked in retail for 18 years before personal circumstances pushed her to reconsider her trajectory. She went back to school at 40, enrolling at Houston Baptist University and earning another bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology as well as a master's degree in pastoral counseling and psychology. McCloud never forgot the encouraging words her teacher gave that helped propel her forward, but she also still remembers the prejudice that nearly stopped her in her tracks.

Not-So-Soft Skills

Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. These once-innocuous terms have taken on substantial weight in recent years, especially after political and social unrest swept the country during summer 2020. According to Dr. Carol Bunch-Davis, they are not matters of

simple political correctness or social etiquette. Instead, they are essential building blocks of a better world and a stronger university.

Bunch-Davis serves as Texas A&M-Galveston's assistant vice president of academic affairs and associate professor in the Department of Liberal Studies. As chair of the Civic Literacy, Inclusion, Diversity & Equity Committee (CLIDE), she spearheads initiatives that seek to instill in the campus community critical thinking, proficiency in bridging and understanding differences, and the ability to imagine and sympathize with others' situations.



Located centrally in Hullabaloo Hall and named after the year that women and Black students were first admitted to Texas A&M - Galveston, the 1973 Center is a space designed to welcome Aggies from all walks of life.

Seeing as Texas A&M-Galveston is one of only seven maritime academies in the United States, Bunch-Davis points to the professional value of teaching students to practice intercultural competency in their post-graduate ventures. In international business, accounting for and respecting cultural differences is crucial. "These aren't just 'soft skills,'" she said. "Take our cadets, for instance. For everything they learn to get their merchant marine licenses, intercultural competency is the glue that will make them functional leaders in the real world."

CLIDE's most significant initiatives involve coordinating workshops and other events to help students, faculty and staff navigate difficult conversations and foster true inclusion. "You look at the Aggie core values—respect, excellence, loyalty, leadership, integrity and selfless service—and they all align with our mission," Bunch-Davis said. "We want to bring everybody into the Aggie family." Reaching out to students of color and LGBTQ+ students specifically, she argues, only strengthens that larger family by building bridges between those Aggies' different cultures and experiences.

A Dream Home

Danny Roe '13 knows just how much a difference that outreach can make. Inspired by family vacations to Galveston throughout his childhood, Roe became a Sea Aggie in 2009 and quickly took to studying on the beach. But even as the island lifestyle drew him in, he regularly felt alienated on campus because of his transgender identity. "That was a very difficult time for me," he said. "I almost didn't continue with the university."

When Dr. Todd Sutherland '90, associate vice president of student affairs, caught wind of the situation, he quickly recognized Roe's value as a passionate, hardworking Aggie and jumped to make things right. Inspired by Sutherland's allyship, Roe soon took a position in student affairs, where he now proudly serves as assistant director of student diversity initiatives. "Every day, I get to shape future leaders and build more inclusive communities," Roe said.

For the past year in particular, he has reveled in creating a place that brings everyone closer together. "In summer 2020, after the killing of George Floyd, we were having big campus conversations around race," Roe said. "One thing to come out of them was students specifically requesting a space where underrepresented Aggies could meet and find community." From that campus-wide demand, the 1973 Center was born.

Named after the year that women and Black students were first admitted to Texas A&M-Galveston, the 1973 Center is a space designed to welcome Aggies from all walks of life while celebrating the achievements of women, LGBTQ+ community members, and people of color. Located centrally in Hullabaloo Hall, the center offers a warm and inviting student lounge complete with a functional kitchen and a small, diversity-focused library.

Though many student affairs faculty members participated in creating the center, it is universally acknowledged as Roe's labor of love for the Texas A&M-Galveston community. "I want this to be a place for students who feel like they don't belong to find each other and feel included," he said. It is a space he could only dream of as a student, making it all the more spectacular as a gift to future generations of Aggies.

A Dream Home

In 2020, after years of emotional conversations with Black students and students of color who relayed their struggles with finances and visibility on campus, McCloud was once again determined to do something. Specifically, she wanted to establish a scholarship for minority students that would provide recipients with both financial assistance and mentors who could identify with their experiences.

In her research, McCloud discovered the FEA scholarship program. From 1999 to 2020, FEA scholarships were exclusively awarded to Aggies attending Texas A&M's College Station campus. Soon after the program expanded to include scholarships for Galveston Campus students, McCloud established the first FEA scholarship for Sea Aggies—the RISE FEA scholarship, named for its intention to help students rise above their circumstances.

When funded, the RISE FEA will meaningfully reduce the financial burden for incoming freshmen from historically disadvantaged groups, allowing them to focus on their studies and overall wellness. Under McCloud's guidance, the scholarship criteria assigns recipients to a minority faculty or staff mentor, mandates that they volunteer for a university diversity, equity and inclusion initiative, and encourages them to mentor other recipients.

Mentorship is integral to the scholarship because, despite McCloud's seemingly self-reliant nature, she credits almost all her success to others. "I think back on my life and all the challenges I overcame," she said. "I didn't make it happen by myself, you know. It was all of the people that God put in my path who helped me along the way." For her, progress is hard-fought but not as complicated as it might seem. Often, all it takes is an open ear, an open heart, and the willingness to make real change, one life at a time.