New Digs

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A&M physics looks forward to a new space -- with lots of extras

By Kara Bounds-Socol

While Texas A&M’s fall semester has yet to begin, physics department faculty members already look forward to January. If plans stay on schedule, that’s when they will start teaching in two new buildings designed solely for their academic field.

George P. Mitchell '40

The department has grown tremendously -- resulting in classes, offices and laboratories spread far and wide across campus -- so the new buildings are a big deal.
The two adjoining buildings are the George P. and Cynthia Woods Mitchell Institute for Fundamental Physics and the George P. Mitchell ’40 Physics Building. Together, they will provide more than 197,000 square feet of floor space, allowing enough room for a department that has grown from 45 to 70 faculty members over the last decade. And further increases in research personnel are expected in coming years.

The new buildings allow professors to more easily drop in on students working in laboratories because the labs are in the same building as their offices rather than a 12-minute walk across campus. Another bonus: The department has its own public lecture hall for events. And with hands-on exhibits, a rooftop garden and a giant pendulum, the physics buildings will be just plain cool. (View more details here.)

The $82.5 million buildings would not exist without a $35 million gift from Cynthia and George P. Mitchell ’40. In all, the Mitchells have given or pledged roughly $59 million to the Texas A&M Foundation to support Texas A&M physics. Other significant gifts to the A&M Foundation from donors such as the Heep Foundation, Dr. Charles R. Munnerlyn ’62 and the Ed Rachal Foundation have accelerated the growth of Texas A&M physics in areas ranging from student enrollment to research capabilities to international stature. The addition of an astronomy program, an important field at all top-ranked universities, has been crucial to that growth.

Dr. Edward Fry, physics department head and the Mitchell Chair for Experimental Physics, said a side benefit of the university’s attention to the department has been an upsurge in faculty morale. Physics faculty members recently have given hundreds of thousands of dollars to support their program.

To contribute to an endowed chair being established in the name of retired physics professor Dr. Nelson M. Duller through the Texas A&M Foundation, contact Dr. Edward Fry at (979) 845-1910. He hopes to raise $1 million for the chair, and until Oct. 31, an anonymous donor will match $100,000 of donations.

To support physics and other Texas A&M science programs, contact Jack O’Brien at the Texas A&M Foundation: (409) 741-4030.

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