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Sailing Aggies get an assist

Students get ride on California ship

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Texas A&M University-Galveston students enrolled in the Texas Maritime Academy generally set sail during the summers aboard the Texas Clipper. They travel the seas as they learn to navigate and pilot the large vessel - and others whose helms they might take one day.

But since last year, the sea Aggies have been setting sail with students from the California Maritime Academy because a new ship issued to the Texas program isn't ready to shove off, a university spokeswoman said.

The Texas Maritime Academy in late 2005 received a former Navy vessel stretching 527 feet that needed \$30 million in renovations before it could be used as a classroom, the spokeswoman said.

"We, of course, would be delighted if our ship was up and running right at this moment," A&M-Galveston spokeswoman Karen Bigley said. "But that's just not reality at this time." The Galveston campus has about 1,550 students, about 225 of whom are enrolled in the Texas Maritime Academy.

The academy is one of six coastal maritime academies in the country and the only one on the Gulf Coast, she said. All maritime graduates must earn a bachelor's degree, meet U.S. Coast Guard requirements and pass licensing exams.

Bigley said ships are assigned to the three schools by the U.S. Department of Transportation Maritime Administration. The first Texas Clipper was used for more than 30 years, while the second was used from 1996 through 2005, she said.

The academy is now on its third ship, which previously was used as a naval vessel in both Great Britain and the U.S., she said.

"What the Navy uses a ship for and what we will are different," Bigley said. "We've got to actually make some conversions for safety."

Wood decking must be removed, steep ladder wells must be modified and classrooms must be built into the ship, she said. That work takes money that the Galveston campus still is trying to accumulate, she said.

Hurricane Katrina also delayed the project, she said. After the ship was delivered in Galveston, it almost immediately was deployed to New Orleans to help in recovery efforts. The ship, Bigley said, housed evacuees temporarily.

Maritime students generally take their first, or sophomore, cruise during the summer before their sophomore year. A second, or junior, cruise aboard a commercial vessel, tanker or cargo ship takes place the following summer.

Students participate in a final, more advanced senior cruise during the summer before their senior year, Bigley said.

But the delays in conversion aren't preventing students from going on their scheduled cruises, she stressed. This summer, 117 students and three faculty members have been sailing with the California Maritime Academy, which offers a similar curriculum. The same arrangement was in place last summer, she said.

"They're having a fabulous cruise out there," she said.