

# Mechanical Engineering

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## A Parent's Perspective of UTME



Students sign up for project groups and talk to project leaders at the first Engineers Without Borders meeting, September 3, 2008.

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### Background

I am in the unique position of being both the mother of a former female ME student and an employee in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. I've worked at The University of Texas at Austin for about eight years, and my daughter graduated from the ME department in 2011.

Back in her junior year of high school (2005), she couldn't decide between English and Engineering, and the final choice was literally made as she completed the online application by a coin toss. Then there were so many other concerns—making high enough scores on the SAT, getting the application in on time, thriving in a large university, making it to early morning classes, understanding and completing the class work, being female in a male-dominant environment, and finally actually liking engineering, since she knew very little about it, since she wasn't from an engineering family.

If you're a parent of a college-bound student, you're probably asking yourself the same or similar questions. To ease your mind, things have worked out fine, and most of my concerns turned out to be for naught. Read on.

### Acceptance into the Cockrell School of Engineering



Students study in the newly renovated T Room.

### Related Links

[UT Statistical Handbook Quick Reference Guide](#)
[Engineers Without Borders](#)
[Cockrell School of Engineering \(CSE\) Admissions](#)



in 2011 (the last year available), 73% of UT students are in the top 10% of their high school class ([Statistical Handbook, page 23](#)), so UT admission is guaranteed for them, but not into the college of one's choice. If your child is bright enough to get into the [Cockrell School of Engineering](#), then the admissions committee believes he/she is going to be able to do the work. It isn't easy, even for top students, but it's doable. So if your student works hard, he/she should succeed. Work ethic is key.

## University size

At first the large classes were intimidating, but as the students progress through the initial classes, the classes get smaller and friendlier. They have more and more classes with the same people.

## Can she do it? Female students in engineering

I had three family members tell me that she wouldn't make it through the first semester because of the math, although luckily they didn't tell her that. However, **female students at UT have higher GPAs than males in every college in every undergraduate year.** According to the university's Office of Information Management and Analysis [Statistical Handbook, Table S 25, page 34](#)), **the average GPA for male engineering students was 3.10. For women, it was 3.17.** The assumption that women can't do it simply isn't true.

## Late hours

I worried about her taking morning classes. Ironically, that turned out to be the most valid concern of all. Freshman year she nearly missed an early exam and went to it in her pajamas. She stays up half the night (studying???), but most days she has arranged a schedule that doesn't start too early. Studying into the wee hours of the morning is not unusual. Most of her friends kept similar hours, so if your child emails you at 4 a.m., this should not be cause for alarm.

## Best education for the money

After looking at other engineering universities in Texas and Colorado, it was apparent that The University of Texas at Austin was the most balanced choice in terms of national rankings and budgetary constraints. The Cockrell School's graduate program is currently ranked **#11 nationally** by *U.S. News and World Report*.

## Why higher rankings mean higher salaries

Those high national rankings mean that students are courted by a huge number of prestigious corporations and graduate programs. Make sure your student attends the [Career Fairs in the Fall and Spring](#) so he/she can network with the corporations and find internships. The average starting salary for a Mechanical Engineer in this department in 2013 was **\$69,044**, compared to about \$60,435 for all Mechanical Engineers nationally and \$41,701 (2011) for all college graduates (sources: [Cockrell School of Engineering](#), [CNN Money](#)). The [2013 U.S. Census Report](#)) reported an average salary for mechanical engineers as **\$84,770**, compared to the mean U.S. salary of **\$45,790** in 2013.

Read the college guides such as *The Princeton Review* and the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* for objective comparisons.

### Personal Experience

#### Freshman year: Getting through the first semester

The first semester is the hardest for everyone. College class work is harder than high school. Often there are more people in one intro level class than in the student's entire graduating high school class. Even though she had graduated from a competitive high school, it is still much harder than she expected. Her first roommate only stayed one semester.

#### Being female in a male-dominated environment

Most of the female engineering students in her [Freshman Interest Group \(FIG\)](#) changed majors. But, through the FIG, she met another female engineering student who is now a close friend and working as a civil engineer in Houston. I recommend freshmen women take advantage of the [Women in Engineering Program \(WEP\)](#). I worried a little less by the end of freshman year as she'd done well and was starting to have some fun. Currently 20% of ME students are women, which is one of the highest percentages of female ME students in the country.

#### Sophomore year was easier

[Freshmen Interest Groups](#)

[WEP Freshmen Interest Groups](#)

[Career Expo](#)

[Women in Engineering Program](#)

[U.S. Census Report, Engineering Salaries \(2013\)](#)

[U.S. Census Report, Mean Salaries \(2013\)](#)

[U.S. News and World Report Rankings](#)

[The Princeton Review](#)

[Fiske Guide to Colleges](#)

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### Important Undergraduate Links

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### Helpful Links

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[The University of Texas at Austin Student Home](#)

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By sophomore year, she had learned to navigate in this massive university and was starting to revel in it. She and her friends had now learned what they have to do to succeed in engineering. They developed study partners and better study habits. But they also had a lot of fun. There were music festivals like [ACL](#) and [Lollapalooza](#), spring break on the beach, summer trips to visit school friends, and an [Engineers Without Borders \(EWB\)](#) trip, where she began to understand the importance of her career choice. Even in a faltering economy, she was able to get an energy-centered engineering internship in Austin, which was wonderful for her.

Hers isn't a typical coed college experience since most of her friends are male, but it has been fun and she's happy. I quit worrying about her social life in such a male-dominant environment. It became a non-issue. This was a tremendous relief to me as a parent, as it was my biggest concern initially.

### The junior year (updated in August 2009)

By the junior year, students seem to mature into young adults. There's a marked difference between freshmen/sophomores and upperclassmen. The older students have become accustomed to the study regiment. The classes get more difficult, but their confidence and maturity has grown so much by this time, that they take it in stride much better. My daughter and her friends became even more involved in their extra-curricular activities. She was able to go to Panama to work with an indigenous tribe to assess their antiquated water system, and make plans for how to improve it.

The students told me [ME](#), of all the engineering majors, has the friendliest people in the department. They told the Class of 1959 Alumni that when they were here visiting in the spring, and the alumni enjoyed that immensely. Of course, they agreed with the students and said it was the same when they were here.

### The first senior year (updated in June 2010)

Since my daughter transferred from another engineering department, and decided to pursue a minor, she wasn't able to graduate in four years, which is the case with many engineering students.

Her social life remained much like it have been earlier, but she seems to spend most of her free time with other [ME](#) students. As [ME](#) students have done for decades, they hung out at [The Posse East](#), a restaurant and sports bar behind the building. They fixed their cars, traveled some, socialized and enjoyed Austin in their free time.

At 22, they started to contemplate life past graduation. She's interested in a career that ties mechanical engineering to public policy and worked for her faculty advisor in green energy policy. The seniors work with faculty advisors who help them plan their career moves or select graduate programs.

In the fall, the seniors begin taking the K and J ([PROCEED](#)) classes, where they do "real-world" engineering work for clients who interface with them during the semester. The students work in teams on the semester-long projects. This final stretch is the most labor-intensive the students will complete as undergraduates.



*Graduation, May 29, 2011, receiving the BSME from Dean Fenves.*

### Second senior year (updated May 31, 2011): From Academia to Industry

It seemed like the day would never come, but on May 20, she and about 1,000 other engineering students crossed the stage, shook hands with Dean Fenves, and became official graduates of the Cockrell School of Engineering. The past year was filled mainly with research work, and the K project during the last

semester. She received offers from two large oil companies in Houston (an excellent opportunity for a young engineer interested in green energy), and eagerly accepted the offer from [National Oilwell Varco](#) to join 19 other new hires in their Next Generation

rotational training program. Most of the students have either been accepted to graduate school or are heading into industry, with many going to Houston or staying in Austin. So do we parents get to take a vacation now?

## Graduate School (updated April 23, 2013)

After two years in the oil industry, she decided to complete her education by enrolling in a graduate program in environmental policy at the University of Michigan in the fall of 2013.

## Jobs, Internships and Undergraduate Research Assistant Positions

As a freshman, she kept her high school waitress job. Undergraduate advisors advise against more than 10 hours per week freshman year, and often less depending on the student's class schedule. That turned out to be sage advice. She initially thought she would be able to work more, but found out rather quickly, she couldn't. Engineering requires a lot of study time. Students who *must* work more hours are allowed to take fewer engineering classes to accommodate their work schedules. As a sophomore, she didn't work so she was able to spend more time on her extra-curricular activities. As a junior, she was able to save some money from her internship, as it paid relatively well. Like many students, she lined up two campus jobs for the first senior year as they are easy for students—no driving, flexible scheduling and far more convenient. In the second senior year, she held one job as an [undergraduate research assistant](#). She learned a lot about energy and research, had some papers published, presented a research poster at a conference, attended several engineering conferences, and was asked to present her research to professional engineers at a job interview. That position turned out to be extremely beneficial. It was a nice bridge between academia and the corporate world.

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