6-1-2002

Class Action

Furman University

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol45/iss2/5

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This fall's freshman class is the most selective, most diverse and, on paper, the strongest group academically to enroll at Furman.

The 730 students who make up the Class of 2006 were chosen from 3,868 applicants, marking the fifth time in seven years that the university set a record for applications. Furman accepted 2,282 students, or 59 percent of the pool, tying for the lowest percentage in university history. By comparison, in 1996 Furman received 2,785 applications and accepted 2,327 students.

For 2002-03, applications were received from students in 45 states and 37 countries. While applications from South Carolina and Georgia remained strong, the university saw a significant rise in interest from North Carolina (a 20 percent increase) as well as from Alabama, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey and Texas.

The group includes 48 valedictorians, 24 salutatorians and 25 student body presidents. More than 70 percent finished in the top 10 percent of their class, and 56 percent of the new students are women.

Outside of academics, the class has its share of accomplished individuals, including:
- Ten lawn service owners.
- Five black belts in karate.
- Three harpists.
- A washboard player.
- A novelist.
- Owner of a computer consulting company.
- An artist whose work has been displayed in Bulgaria and Greece.
- A member of the national champion clogging and Irish dancing team, the Universal Studios Hip Hop Dancing Contest winner, and a World Jazz Dance Congress Silver Award winner.

Clearly, Furman has recruited yet another group replete with top-flight academic ability, leadership skills and assorted other talents. More important, perhaps, is that once students arrive at Furman, they tend to stay: the retention rate is 94 percent.

Furman magazine asked Benny Walker '71, vice president for enrollment, and Woody O’Cain, director of admissions, to comment on the recruiting process and on the reasons behind the surge in interest among prospective students. They also discuss some of the issues, challenges and concerns that Furman and other private liberal arts colleges will face in the next few years.

Walker has worked in admissions and financial aid at Furman since he graduated. O’Cain, a graduate of Erskine College, came to Furman in 1998 and is a veteran of 15 years in admissions work.
In recent years, applications for admission to Furman have risen to record levels. To what do you ascribe this success?

WALKER: In addition to the abundance of 18-year-olds looking for a college, Furman’s growing reputation and name recognition have led to more applicants. Our improved facilities, the significant accomplishments of our students and faculty, and an aggressive marketing program in which we combine direct mail, strong publications and extensive use of the Internet have helped us build our reputation and create an increased awareness of Furman with the general public. Our ongoing strategy of personal contact with prospective students, which has always been a trademark of the Furman recruiting process, has also contributed to our record applications.

O’CAIN: The Admissions Office has an approach to recruitment called Prospect Management, which focuses on converting inquirers into applicants. In other words, we put more of our emphasis on cultivating students’ interest before they apply, rather than after.

Deciding where to apply to college is a very rational decision. You find schools that have the things you are looking for in terms of size, location, programs, distance from home, student body make-up, etc. Then you apply. But actually selecting a college is an emotional decision. We cannot make Furman “feel right” to students. That has to happen on its own, usually when they visit campus.

We concentrate our efforts on identifying, early in the process, those students who show interest in Furman and who appear most likely to apply for admission. We also focus on students who can bring something special to the university, whether for their talent in academics, the arts, athletics, or whatever. Our desire is to get those students to apply, thereby increasing the yield rate of inquirer (or prospect) to applicant. Then we follow up personally with the help of current students, faculty, staff and alumni, offering assistance in helping prospective students through the admissions process.

We divide our recruitment areas into territories, with each territory assigned to an admissions staff counselor. All contact with students in a specific territory is coordinated through the assigned counselor, thus ensuring continuity of communication. Prospective students get to know their territorial recruiter. They build a relationship that can often make the difference in a student’s decision to attend Furman.

Furman is not the only college experiencing record applications. Some experts attribute the increased interest in attending college to demographics, as Benny mentioned. The children of the baby boom generation have come of age and are applying to colleges in near record numbers. What is distinctive about Furman’s recent gains?

WALKER: We have been successful in attracting students with stronger academic credentials and from an expanded geographical base. For example, we are receiving applications from more students in the Midwest and Southwest, and this has a snowball effect: when students from those areas know about us, they spread the word to their friends, with the result that even more students from those areas are likely to apply.

In addition, while there are more 18-year-olds in the market for college, the competition among selective colleges is fierce and the economy is fragile. We have been successful in positioning Furman as a value-added higher-education experience and have shown that it is worth the price we charge.

O’CAIN: The numbers of graduating seniors are up, and many schools across the country have taken advantage of that. But increasing your applications cannot happen solely because there are more students out there. You have to position your institution properly so that students become interested.

What are Furman’s requirements for admission (in terms of standardized tests, academic record, etc.)?

WALKER: We consider the following criteria, in order of importance: quality of courses taken, grades in those courses, standardized test scores (ACT or SAT), extracurricular activities, and quality of the essay submitted with the admissions application. Accepted students average three AP (Advanced Placement) courses.

O’CAIN: Applicants should have completed a strong college preparatory course of study that includes four years of English, algebra I and II, geometry, three years of social studies, at least two years of natural sciences, and at least two years of the same foreign language. Four or more academic credits per year should be in advanced or honors courses. We also look at what percentage of a high school’s previous graduating classes went to four-year colleges.

The incoming freshman class has a grade-point average of 3.62 in academic classes, 3.91 for all courses taken in high school. The average SAT scores for the middle 50 percent of the class fall between 1190 and 1340. The average ACT scores for the middle 50 percent range from 26 to 30.

Why is it important to have higher applications and a lower acceptance rate?

WALKER: Higher applications are important to ensure an adequate and strong pool for our incoming freshman class. Approximately 33 percent of the students we accept decide to attend Furman. Therefore, we need three times the number of applications to acceptances just to ensure that we make a class. Having a large number of applicants raises the level of competition and ultimately allows us to enroll students who are stronger academically. A lower acceptance rate is the result of higher application numbers. It also enhances our reputation for selectivity, which in turn makes us more desirable to strong students in the future.
The percentage of Furman students from South Carolina has averaged 30 percent in recent years. Among Palmetto State residents enrolling this fall are, from left, Michael Jennings of Spartanburg and Elloa Lee and Barrett Matthews, both from Columbia.

O’CAIN: The more selective you are, the more “value” and “prestige” students and parents place on your institution. The more value and prestige they see, the more likely they are to give you strong consideration. And the more selective we become, the more visibility we gain in national college publications and other marketing venues — and the more attractive we become to the top students.

How has the development of the World Wide Web affected recruiting?

WALKER: We now have more prospective students contacting us via the Web and e-mail than by any other means. We are receiving thousands of hits on our Web site each week. We have developed an award-winning Admissions site, EngageFurman.com, that not only provides detailed admission and financial aid information but also provides video clips of students and faculty, frequently updated campus pictures, and journals from freshmen who recount their experiences in and out of the classroom. This interactive Web site has enticed prospective students to revisit often — and to learn more about Furman each time they connect. It is a great enhancement to recruiting and is becoming the core of our outreach efforts.

O’CAIN: Students and parents are using the Web more and more in everything they do, including finding a college. If your Web site is exciting, dynamic and intriguing, so is your university. Even the name, World Wide Web, tells you that you have the opportunity to reach anyone almost immediately. And with the recent expansion of our recruiting efforts both nationally and internationally, the Web has been vital in attracting interest from an increasingly diverse group of students.

How can Furman further strengthen its applicant pool?

WALKER: We must continue to increase our exposure across the country. The more material that people receive from us, the more they visit our Web site, the more times they read about our athletic or academic accomplishments, and the more times that our faculty and alumni receive national recognition, the greater the understanding and appreciation for Furman. The stronger the recognition and reputation, the more applicants we will attract.

O’CAIN: The Web and the ability to respond instantly through e-mail are great. But as long as we use technology to complement our communication efforts, rather than to replace them, then our marketing efforts will have continued success. Students and especially parents still appreciate the personal touch. Nothing replaces the old-fashioned phone call or handwritten note.
Who are Furman's primary competitors in recruiting students? To what other institutions do our applicants apply?

WALKER: We cross with a number of private institutions and honors colleges at state institutions. The great preponderance of our applicants have a strong interest in a small to medium-sized liberal arts college.

O'CAIN: Our strongest competitors outside the state are Wake Forest, Vanderbilt, Emory, Davidson, University of North Carolina, University of Georgia, Tulane, Richmond, Washington & Lee, Rhodes, University of the South and Duke. In state, our top competitors are University of South Carolina, Clemson and Wofford.

The Hartness Welcome Center (HWC), with its beautiful reception area and high-tech wizardry, offers prospective students a dazzling introduction to Furman. Are these kinds of showplaces the trend among colleges these days?

WALKER: They are. However, we believe that we have set the standard at Furman. Hartness is the perfect combination of location (at the front of the campus, beside the administration building), size and technology. Welcome centers should be the living room of the university, and Hartness serves that purpose. As the competition for students increases, more colleges are developing state-of-the-art welcome centers. We believe that we are ahead of the curve.

O'CAIN: The Hartness Welcome Center has been a huge addition to our recruiting efforts. While the Admissions Office did quite well for many years operating from the lower level of the Earle Infirmary, the HWC is a jewel and definitely has the "wow factor" that we wanted. Our goal is for our campus visitors to have the best experience possible. Even for those students who are not a good match for Furman, we want them to walk away impressed with their on-campus experience. The HWC begins their experience in a very positive and impressive way.

How does Furman distinguish between who's "right" for the university and who's "not," especially considering that interviews with prospective applicants are primarily informational? What makes an applicant stand out on paper? Do the members of the Admissions Committee emerge from their meetings beaten and bloodied?

WALKER: The Admissions Committee, which consists of six faculty, two staff, two students and the director of admissions, sets the guidelines used in evaluating applicants. We look carefully at activities and essays to gain insight into the applicants as individuals. In addition, our admissions counselors have met many of the students and often add comments to an applicant's file that may help the committee understand how students "fit" with Furman and what they may be able to contribute to the life of the university. When we get down to the final admits, staff and committee members agonize over the nuances of an application as they try to envision how an applicant will do at Furman. When all is said and done, committee members return to their normal activities knowing that they have given each applicant close scrutiny.

O'CAIN: Our admissions process is very thorough and fair. Becoming more competitive is also painful because you have to choose among so many students that would likely do very well here. The decisions we make as a staff and with the assistance of the Admissions Committee are often difficult. But we know we are making the best decision for Furman, and that is our ultimate goal.

In 1981-82, a freshman entering Furman as a full-time resident student paid $6,948. In 2002-03, the same student would pay $26,928. Even though Furman is still considered a “bargain” compared to many national liberal arts colleges, how can the university avoid pricing itself beyond many students’ means? What strategies must it employ to continue to attract well-rounded, balanced classes?

WALKER: This is something we work on constantly. We are attacking the affordability issue in two ways. First, we are doing all we can to keep our cost increases to a minimum. For 2002-03, we increased costs 5.6 percent. We are working to keep our expenses low and to build our endowment, which provides subsidy for our operational costs. We continue to expand our financial aid resources so that we can discount the cost for students who are unable to pay the full price. We want students to focus on "net cost" and not sticker price. If we can contain expenses and build our financial aid, we believe that Furman will remain affordable for all who are qualified to attend. That is our goal.
Some prestigious schools (the University of California and University of North Carolina, to name two) are considering abolishing the SAT and other standardized tests as a requirement for admission. Other schools (Bates) have made standardized tests "optional," meaning students are not required to submit test scores with their application.

Where does Furman stand on the value of the SAT? Is the test biased against females, the less affluent or minority students, as has been claimed? Does it measure intelligence rather than knowledge or learning? Is it a fair predictor of a student's college success? What about the suggestion that colleges require more SAT II tests, which apply to individual subjects?

WALKER: We do require the SAT (or ACT) and see it as a complement to a student's academic record. The name was changed from the Scholastic Aptitude Test to Scholastic Achievement Test eight years ago and now is more of a measure of knowledge attained than a pure measure of aptitude. Because Furman has students from 48 states and more than 1,100 high schools, standardized tests provide us with comparative ways to measure achievement. Test scores are considered third in our admissions review process, after quality of courses and grades.

The SAT by itself is not a good predictor of success at Furman, but in concert with assessments of courses and grades, we believe it does provide insight into a student's potential for success. We currently do not require SAT II tests unless a student is home-schooled. All students must submit a written essay with their application, and we review the essay for content, style and originality.

In our applicant pool, we have not found that the SAT is biased toward females. We do review the test results of all first-generation college students, students from less affluent schools, and minorities on an individual basis. We tend to put more emphasis on grades for these students.

O'CAIN: Some experts argue that the SAT is a predictor of affluence and nothing else. I disagree. I think it does allow students to show what they have learned. The College Board recently re-evaluated the SAT as a result of the criticism it faced, and the most significant change it made was to incorporate a written essay into the exam, beginning in 2005. This will no doubt help colleges in evaluating the overall ability of applicants.

There's also a growing debate about the fairness and legitimacy of Early Admission or Early Decision policies, in which students may apply early to their first-choice college. If accepted, they are in most cases expected to commit to the institution — and to stick by that commitment. The president of Yale has suggested that Early Decision practices be curtailed, and a recent column in Newsweek called them unfairly discriminatory because they force students to make "premature choices," reduce the chances of those applying under Regular Decision plans, and contribute to "senioritis" (once students know they've been accepted to a college, they stop studying).

What is Furman's position on this issue? And what is Furman's Early Decision policy? What percentage of the incoming class was accepted during Early Decision?

WALKER: Furman has practiced its unique brand of Early Decision for 30 years. Designed for students whose first choice is Furman, it allows flexibility and results in less decision-making pressure. Early Decision candidates apply to Furman by November 15. They receive notification of the admission decision by December 15. Those students who are offered admission have until January 15 to respond to Furman. Students make no commitment to Furman simply by applying and may apply to other schools as long as they are in a position to decide on Furman by January 15. They receive financial aid packages, including scholarship offers, by December 20, if their files are complete.

For many years, Early Decision filled about one-third of the freshman class at Furman. Because we have enjoyed record application numbers five of the last seven years, the percentage of the class accepted during Early Decision has crept up. For

From left, Kate Bauder of Orlando, Fla., Kyle Flanders of Naperville, Ill., and Meredith Cromley of Saluda, S.C., take a break outside the University Center.
2002-03, Early Decision students make up 45 percent of the class. We will scale back Early Decision for fall 2003 to keep more of a balance between Early and Regular Decision and to ensure that we have adequate spaces available for Regular Decision applicants. The goal will be no more than 40 percent of available spaces awarded in Early Decision.

We will continue to have a strong Early Decision program because it allows students for whom Furman is the top choice to complete the decision-making process early. It also allows us to confirm a large segment of our fall class by mid-January.

O'CAIN: Because of the high number of Early Decision acceptances for 2002-03, the competition for the remaining spaces in Regular Decision challenged all of us. We want to ensure that students choose to apply during Early Decision because Furman is their first choice, not because they think it is their only chance for admission, and we want to have space for the student who decides in January that Furman is his or her first choice. Because we will accept fewer students in Early Decision this fall, students similar to those offered Early Decision admission in the last couple of years will be deferred to Regular Decision. But I think Furman has a fair Early Decision program, and students know up front that Regular Decision will be highly competitive.

Along the same lines, how can institutions like Furman work to defuse the mounting pressure among students to be accepted to a "top college?" Or do we want to defuse it?

WALKER: Our costs and academic rigor attract students who want individualized attention, quality facilities and faculty, and a degree that will open doors to their future. The pressure on students to be accepted to top colleges will continue and will always be a part of the goal of top high school students. Our marketing program is designed to attract students who desire the best undergraduate liberal arts education possible.

O'CAIN: From our perspective, competition is good. Being a selective institution means more and more students want to be a part of your school, and that too is good. Students are going to face competition for the rest of their lives, and going through the college admissions process is good preparation.

What trends, challenges and threats do you see Furman and other private colleges confronting over the next five to 10 years?

WALKER: Affordability is number one, with all of its implications — cost containment, institutional financial aid, state and federal financial aid, and the economy. Related to that challenge, especially in Furman's case, is the need for a larger endowment to provide the resources to offer a quality education. We are making good progress toward building diversity in the student body and faculty, but we need to continue to improve in this area. All private colleges are also competing with the growing number of state scholarship programs that often provide free tuition to students attending state colleges and universities.

We have seen both positive and negative results due to the recent political unrest and economic slump. On the positive side, because of these tense times, families are more serious about their college choice and more interested in a campus that is nurturing and safe. We score high in that area. On the negative side, more students are applying for financial aid and their demonstrated need is higher, primarily due to reduced or lost employment. In addition, there is great uncertainty about the financial future of many companies, and this has made families anxious about committing to a $120,000 education.

O'CAIN: Economy. Economy. Economy. Because of the uncertainty of the national economy, and because the majority of our students would likely have a “free” option to attend a state school should they so desire, we must continue to help students recognize the benefits of attending a liberal arts institution like Furman. We must continue to offer the programs and opportunities for which we earn high marks — outstanding instruction and facilities, supportive campus environment, engaged learning opportunities through internships, research, study abroad and service learning — to make sure that students and parents know that they will receive a strong return on their educational investment.