

Guilford appears on '100 Best Value Colleges' list

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STAFF WRITERS

Guilford was recently placed in the top 100 on the Princeton Review's Best Value Colleges. This annual review selects 50 private colleges and 50 public universities from a pool of 650.

In choosing those on the list, Princeton Review used 30 different criteria in three different categories. The analysis was conducted based on information compiled from institutional data reports and anonymous student surveys from each college.

The categories are academics, cost and financial aid. Guilford was noted for its attention to Quaker values, small and rigorous academic classes, and excellent financial aid packages.

Guilford ranked number 19 for private colleges, placing it just behind Davidson and Duke, who were 13 and 16 respectively.

Since the college's establishment in 1888, Guilford has put Quaker values at the forefront of its curriculum. As the Review notes, Guilford's "Quaker principles of responsibility, equality, respect and social justice engagement" offer a "unique aspect of the college's atmosphere and character."

A large part of Guilford's marketing plan focuses on advertising these Quaker aspects.

"As part of the current strategic plan, adopted in 2005, Guilford affirmed its core values as community, diversity, equality, excellence, integrity, justice and stewardship," said Ty Buckner, director of communications and marketing.

In fact, the mission statement on the school's Web site

states, "Guilford College inspires each student to achieve excellence through an engaging community, rooted in Quaker values, which nurtures creativity and social responsibility."

Senior Nathaniel Larson Coppock, a clerk of the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program (QLSP), disagrees.

"Quakerism is affecting the campus less and less," said Coppock. "From what I can tell, teachers and classes that make Guilford are leaving."

Similar thoughts are shared by Frank Massey, QLSP's gift discernment coordinator.

Massey began his employment at Guilford in fall 2006 and commented that, "The Web site hasn't changed since I've been here, neither has the marketing plan — but campus ministry has never played a huge role in determining the market strategy."

Buckner acknowledges this stagnation and comments that Guilford is "on the cusp" of a new Web site.

"In terms of the Web, we are making changes on a continuing basis that may not be as visible to most viewers," said Buckner. "These include the adding and elimination of pages on the site, updating of information on various pages and some navigation improvements. The redesign that has been proposed would be a major project that would affect all areas of the site including the home page."

"Redesigning takes a year to 18 months," he added, "but visible changes should be seen within this calendar year."

Small class size, the second factor Guilford was noted for, has always been an important tenet of Quaker education. The school's student to faculty ratio is consistently 16 to one.

Vice President of Enrollment Services Randy Doss said,

"We have hired more full-time faculty to ensure small class sizes," even though hiring more faculty members is costly.

"Small class sizes were a definite factor for me," said first-year Amir Moore, "It allows a better, more personal connection with your professor, who actually knows your name."

"Enrollment rates at Guilford have increased each year during the past decade except for one," notes Doss.

This increase is illustrated by last year's spring semester's record-breaking traditional student count of 1,331. Such a continued increase may seem surprising due to current economic conditions. This, as Dean of Students Aaron Fetrow explains, is one of the main reasons he believes Guilford made it onto the list.

"It's not so much that Guilford's changed, but the economic climate has," said Fetrow.

With job rates at an all-time low, people are being more careful with how they spend their money.

As the Review mentions, Guilford students demonstrating a need for financial aid can receive support through a combination of grants, scholarships and work-study positions. In particular, Guilford is one of only 25 schools nationwide that participate in the Bonner Scholars program, which offers reimbursement for service to the greater Greensboro community.

The financial aid discount rate for this year is 43 percent, which means that, on average, for every dollar that a student pays, the school gives back 43 cents in institutionalized aid.

Doss said that while this sort of recognition certainly never hurts, it is not about statistics and reports.

"Happy students are the best marketing tool," said Doss.

RATES

Retention rates show promise for future years

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to 406 (first-year students in 2008) and our retention went up to 80 percent."

Fetrow said that now we have 448 first-years but since the retention numbers are not official yet, we will have to wait to see if the number remains as high. "We retained a small class better," said Fetrow. "And that's always been my argument. That the last 30 or 40 (students) you accept might be the ones who don't stay. That seems like logic, to me — late accepts, those on the waiting list."

Why do retention rates matter?

Both retention and persistence rates are important measurements at tuition-driven institutions such as Guilford where, according to Randy Doss, vice president of enrollment services, currently 88 percent of the school's income is tuition-based. When students withdraw from the College, that income is lost.

Both measurements clearly have financial implications in terms of tuition, but to those outside of the college, retention rates are more significant. The federal government requires that retention be calculated and use those rates to determine financial aid.

Another reason for the importance of retention rates, according to Fetrow, is that a big part of how the U.S. news magazine ranks colleges is based on retention.

"They look at retention rates of a school to see how good of a school you are," said Fetrow.

However, because persistence measurements encompass the whole of the student body, it is the more holistic approach for the college to measure the student body from year to year.

"Without persistence you can't have re-

tention," said Fetrow. "(Administrators) budget for a 91 percent persistence total. This number was reiterated by the Strategic Long Range Plan. If persistence falls short of that goal, budgeting becomes more difficult."

"If they (students) don't come back in the spring, they're probably not coming back in the fall," said Fetrow. "We watch persistence as an indicator. And then going forward, it's an indicator of graduation rates."

Members of the student body who contribute to persistence but not to retention also do not contribute to the school's graduation rates. Therefore, transfer students who graduate don't contribute to graduation rates.

In high school, your class is referred to by the year you are scheduled to graduate. In college it is referred to by the year you were an incoming freshman.

"The graduation rate for a cohort is measured at the four-year mark, the five-year mark, and the six year mark. The six-year mark has become more the standard nationally," said Fetrow. Members of a given cohort who graduate in five years can still raise the graduation rates for their class.

Is the increase in retention sustainable?

According to Fetrow, we are unsure whether this increase of about 10 percent is sustainable because it has only occurred once; however, the college managed to retain 92 percent of the '09 first-year cohort from fall '09 to spring '10, which suggests that the high retention rates will persist.

"Of course, your fall to spring retention rate will be higher than your fall to fall retention rate," said Thomas Coaxum, former director of institutional research and assessment.

Numerous reasons explain why a student might leave Guilford, and since the recent

retention rate increase is new and possibly fragile, a continued focus on the reasons behind retention loss is relevant.

"Do you know the number one reason that students give for not returning?" said Kent Grumbles, the new director of institutional research and assessment. "It's financial, all over the country. But sometimes, students will say it's financial, when sometimes it's something else."

According to Grumbles, personal reasons are the second most commonly given for not returning, "But, in almost all cases, students continue on. A very high percentage goes to another school, they don't drop out," said Grumbles.

This is exemplified by the case of junior Kirstin Williams, who transferred to Georgia State after completing her first year at Guilford. She said that at Georgia State she "pays for one semester what students at Guilford probably pay for one credit hour." Finances weren't the only reason that Williams gave for transferring. She was unsure of what she wanted to do after she graduated and couldn't foresee graduate school in a future dictated by debt.

"The option of grad school is a possibility now, because, instead of finishing undergraduate \$20,000 in debt, I might be able to afford to continue school," said Williams.

Aside from the financial, "academic dismissal is the number one reason we lose students," said Tammy Alt, associate dean for campus life.

"A school with the quality of students that Guilford has normally would retain more than they do," said Grumbles.

By quality of the students, Grumbles says he means that Guilford is categorized as a selective school.

Guilford's categorization as a selective school means it can exclusively accept

students with better academic credentials (higher high school GPA's and test scores) than a larger state school might.

According to Grumbles, Guilford does not require incoming students to submit their ACT or SAT scores, but many do. Those scores are relatively high, with the average being above 1100. Typically the trend is that the higher the average test score is, the higher the retention rates would be.

There are more students placed on academic probation and academically dismissed at Guilford than at most schools with students of similar academic credentials, such as competitor schools like Albright College, Oglethorpe University and Stonehill College.

Figures provided by the office of the academic dean show that 12 percent of the traditional freshman class and five percent of the total student body were on probation as of Spring 2009. That is up from the seven percent who went on probation a year earlier and slightly worse than the numbers for the previous six years, which averaged about 10 percent. That means in a classroom of 20 students, two will on average be on academic probation.

The discrepancy between higher rates of persistence and lower rates of retention exists "because persistence includes transfers," Doss said. He says that means students "have been to another college before and tend to be older and more mature academically and socially."

For the most part, additional measures in the past two years to raise these rates of persistence and retention, such as the mentor program, the hall directors, and hiring an academic advisor liaison are specifically oriented towards the younger members of the school's traditional student body.