
PROLOGUE

Down from the ivory tower and into the marketplace

If memory serves—and it doesn't always these days—no one representing the University of Oklahoma even suggested that I attend this august institution, much less recruited me. There were no hurt feelings involved, however, because no one in my high school was recruited by any college or university—unless you count a couple of wrestlers who went to Oklahoma A&M. (Yes, Virginia, it was quite a few years ago.)

But unenlightened self-selection is little known in higher education today. Market forces are at work here as in every other aspect of life. Increased enrollments translate into tuition dollars and, where the head-count formulas are applied, more state support. The high school student with a respectable score on the ACT or SAT has only to indicate an interest to be bombarded with glossy brochures, personal letters and “college nights” with the recruiters. They are phoned by alumni, entertained by alumni clubs and invited to tour the campus, even spend the weekend.

The academic elite among them—the National Merit Scholars and their equivalents—are savoring the heady recruiting experience previously reserved for the athletic superstars. They virtually can write their own tickets, which in state universities means full-boat, four-year scholarships. The schools most successful in attracting the Merit scholars—and the University of Oklahoma is one of the best—are not reticent about advertising the fact. The presence of these scholars enhances the institution's reputation and raises the level of teaching and learning in the classroom; on the points-of-pride list, Merit scholars rank right behind multi-

million-dollar research contracts and endowed faculty chairs.

The problem with success in recruiting the most academically gifted—and talking about it—is that others may assume that none but the above need apply. Thankfully, this is not the case at OU. The 118 National Merit, 28 National Achievement and nine National Hispanic Scholars in the fall '92 freshman class are enough to rank OU nationally but represent only 6.4 percent of all freshmen. The total 400 Merit scholars on the Norman campus in the fall were less than two percent of the total fall enrollment of 21,860. Even the Honors Program is not the exclusive domain of the Merit scholars. In defiance of the standardized test scores, many of our students hit their stride in college, not high school.

To be sure, prior preparation for college is taking on new meaning. Entrance requirements are on the rise for the state's two comprehensive universities, dictated by the desire of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education to upgrade the quality of instruction and eliminate costly remedial courses. OU President Richard Van Horn even talks of capping enrollment if state budget problems result in substantive cuts in appropriations. For good or evil, in higher education at least, the once-sacred notion of an individual's right to fail appears to have gone the way of the “Gentlemanly C.”

The pursuit of excellence notwithstanding, the University of Oklahoma always has been composed of students of varied talents and abilities, even before there were recruiters to seek them out. May it ever be so.

—CJB