
PROLOGUE

Recruiting Classes 1998: A saga of dueling press releases

Ranking college recruiting classes has become a regular cottage industry. Attention from the print media and televised updates might be expected, but as annual signing days approach, self-styled experts find even more imaginative outlets for their keen analyses. Newsletters circulate through the mail; email inboxes overflow; fax machines run hot. Everyone, it seems, wants to know who counted coup in the race for the blue-chippers.

Thus it always has been in the era of modern, big-time college athletics. But now, wonder of wonders, a new wrinkle has emerged in the recruiting wars. Universities and colleges are competing as diligently for scholars as for quarterbacks and point guards, and they herald their successes with as much elation.

The freshmen of 1998 give the University of Oklahoma plenty to talk—and crow—about, in the most decorous manner, of course. First, there are a lot of them—unofficially 3,181, the second-largest freshman class ever at OU. Second, they come with exceptional credentials, making this group of entering students the most highly ranked in University or state history. As a whole, they average a record 24.5 on the ACT (36 is perfect)—and gains in the special scholars categories are even more impressive.

Much has been written over the past few years about OU's extraordinary, continuing success in attracting National Merit Scholars. Less well known is the category of Oklahoma Regents Scholars, a program that recognizes the top one-half of one percent of Oklahoma high school graduates. Non-residents also can qualify by virtue of their standings in national comprehensive tests such as

the ACT or the SAT. The University of Oklahoma set a new record for attracting these academic superstars by enrolling 251, including 162 in-state students.

The next four schools attracting the largest number of Oklahoma Regents Scholars are Oklahoma State University, with 70 (65 in-state); the University of Tulsa, with 24 (all in-state); Oklahoma Baptist University, with 13 (10 in-state); and Oral Roberts University, with six (four in-state).

In addition, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education named as Chancellor's Scholars the top four Oklahoma high school graduates. All four of these outstanding state students for 1998 enrolled at the University of Oklahoma for the fall semester.

The University's reputation as the place of choice for National Merit Scholars remains intact as well. Since 1991, OU has ranked in the top 10 among both public and private institutions in the number of National Merits enrolled, most recently ranking second only to Harvard among all universities in the number of National Merit Scholars per capita. Add to the 152 National Merits in the new freshman class the 28 National Hispanic Scholars and eight National Achievement Scholars, and OU, with a total of 198, places first per capita among all comprehensive public universities.

Leaving the freshmen for just a moment, two of OU's individual colleges also have achieved academic milestones. Nationally among public colleges of engineering, OU ranks in the top three in the number of National Merit Scholars alone and in the total of all three categories of National Scholars. Down Asp Avenue in the

Michael F. Price College of Business, entering MBA students rank in the top 18 percent nationally in terms of average GMAT scores, topping 600 for the first time by rising from 580 last year to 602 for 1998.

Admittedly, standardized tests are indicators rather than guarantees of future success, but unfortunately no better measurement tool has been devised to answer the needs of admission officers, scholarship committees and a public enamored of national rankings. So just what do these numbers mean—and why should we care?

To use former OU President Bill Banowsky's favorite analogy, a rising tide raises all ships. Outstanding students attract an outstanding faculty and vice versa. Together they enhance the reputation of the University—and of the state. Their presence draws research contracts, promotes economic development, encourages private support from individuals, corporations and foundations—and makes us feel good about ourselves.

Of course, the danger in trumpeting recruiting successes among the super-scholars lies in giving the impression that only the extraordinarily gifted need apply. This is not and never should be the case at OU. As impressive as the numbers of OU's National and Regents Scholars may be, together they are less than one-seventh of the freshmen class. And when they cross the enrollment line, they must prove themselves all over again—just like every other new student.

Perhaps this is not the stuff of press releases, but the real story at the University of Oklahoma is that the bar is being raised for all its students, top to bottom. —CJB