

## **How Samford Recruits**

*While Becoming More National in Scope, the University Still Seeks Solid Core from Alabama*

Samford University welcomed one of the largest classes in history for the fall 2007 semester. With 730 freshmen expected, the university is nearing its present capacity for an entering class. But, even with large numbers, the admission process remains very intense and competitive, especially for a privately funded university.

In recent extensive interviews with Seasons, Samford President Andrew Westmoreland and Dean R. Philip Kimrey, the university's chief admission and financial aid officer, talked about the admission process. The version that appeared in Seasons was edited to meet space limitations. Following is the full transcript of those interviews.

### **What are the key factors that attract students to Samford?**

**Kimrey:** We are a university with strong academic offerings. We have the liberal arts core, but we offer professional studies. The Christian context is important. It is real here, you see it in all we do and in our values orientation. Non-Baptist students can fit in well here.

The overall campus is important – not just the beauty of the campus, but the way we function. Time and again I get notes and comments from students and parents who visit about the friendliness and helpfulness of the campus. We all understand that, but we want to help folks see and experience what a great place this is.

### **What are the strategic things that Samford does to recruit students?**

**Kimrey:** Admission is like sales. You do the things that have been successful, but you always are looking for new ways. Today, many students gather their information from the Web rather than contacting the schools first, as they used to do.

We do high school visits. We do church visits. We offer workshops at selected high schools. We do local and regional college fairs. We offer campus visits – both individual and large events such as Preview Days. We do all the things that would be considered staples. We try to personalize the process as much as possible to meet the needs of the prospective student. We do more and more electronic communication because that is what attracts today's student.

**Does Samford have a program designed to reach legacies (students who already have some tie to the university through a family member)?**

**Kimrey:** We do track that information. About 30 percent of the fall 2007 class has some previous connection to the university through a parent or other family member. That percentage has been consistent for several years, and I'm pleased that we have that percentage. We are always excited when multiple generations from a family choose Samford because that further validates the value of a Samford degree.

**Are there plans to increase the undergraduate student population?**

**Westmoreland:** The strategic planning process that has been underway for several months includes strategic enrollment management. Through this process, we will set enrollment targets for the university as a whole and for specific program areas and then work to ensure that we have the right resources to meet those goals. We have determined that our capacity for an incoming freshman class is about 725-750 students – in the range of what we anticipate for fall 2007. Although the final goals will emerge through the planning process, an enrollment of about 5,000 – or approximately 500 more than we've had in recent years – would be our optimum. Most of that growth would come at the undergraduate level.

**Kimrey:** We continue to review where we are going with admission – the right mix of students for Samford by gender, geographic region, major, etc. Our expectation is that over the next few years we will stay about 750 in the incoming freshman class. That we can accommodate with existing facilities and services.

**Can Samford meet those goals within existing admission parameters?**

**Westmoreland:** If we can continue to recruit a freshman class in the 725-750 range and maintain our present retention rates with upperclassmen, then we can meet those goals. We want appropriate numbers, but it also is important to have the right students and the right mix of student population – demographically.

**Kimrey:** We can accommodate a freshman class of 725-750 each year with existing facilities and services.

**Is Samford trying to strengthen admission parameters?**

**Westmoreland:** Any changes would be made thoughtfully and carefully as part of the planning process and in harmony with trustee and faculty expectations. Any changes would be made over time, but I believe that rising standards will be a byproduct of the overall enrollment management process as we set goals for the student recruitment process. Through that process we will be able to clearly see where we are and where we might be able to do better.

**Kimrey:** We have a holistic approach to admission. We look first at academic performance. That is the best predictor of academic success at Samford. If a student doesn't make their grades at Samford, they cannot to enroll. We look at test scores. We look at overall [grade point average]. Most importantly, we're looking at rigor of curriculum. What courses did a student take – advance placement, honors and others? Those are the types of courses that will prepare them for the Samford classroom. Those kids that are not prepared usually don't stay here.

This holistic approach allows us to address the needs of the student and the needs of the institution. There may be some students who have lower test scores but they have something to contribute, and there are indicators that the student can offer something to the campus community and can graduate on time.

**Samford is becoming more regional and even national in scope as students come from a larger geographic reach. How does this affect the admission process?**

**Kimrey:** In fall 2007, about 74 percent of the incoming freshman will be from Alabama and contiguous states. Some of that is because the class is larger. But, that percentage is shrinking as students come from further distances. We are trying to intentionally expand where those distances markers will be. Where can we go? What are we learning from those areas where we are getting more students?

In many of the distance pockets, it initially may be because of one or two schools, but we know that the students from those schools go to several churches. We try to link the school base with the church base to broaden our reach to other schools.

Some people, unfortunately, still have the stigma of what Birmingham was, not what Birmingham is today. But, with the academic offerings Samford provides and the intern and job opportunities in this area, Birmingham is a vibrant choice if people will consider it.

Having Southwest Airlines as a major carrier into Birmingham has really helped because it makes transportation easier and more affordable from most major markets and geographic areas.

**You've talked about reclaiming Samford's place in Alabama. Exactly what does that mean?**

**Westmoreland:** It means that we need to be intentional in seeking out the best Alabama students and devoting resources to recruit those students. It certainly does not mean that we recruit only Alabama students, but it is important that we are prominent in the minds of Alabama high school students. This is home for us, and we don't want to neglect our own backyard.

**For several years, Samford consistently has had about 1/3 of its incoming class from the state of Alabama. Does that change with this emphasis on “reclaiming” Alabama?**

**Westmoreland:** We want to maintain a solid core group of students from Alabama. We start to lose some of our institutional identity if we don't because Samford was founded in 1841 partly to serve the people of Alabama. If you look at statistics over the last several years, the university has leveled off at about 35 percent of its incoming class from Alabama. For the fall semester (2007), we have an increase of about 20 students from Alabama compared to last year, but the percentage does not change because we have a larger class. I don't anticipate that the percentage will change significantly even if the raw numbers continue to increase as we anticipate they will.

**Who are Samford's primary competitors in the admission process?**

**Kimrey:** In the southeastern United States, depending on where the student is, our main competitor almost always is the flagship public university – Auburn and Alabama, the University of Georgia, the University of Tennessee, etc. In that list also would be some selected private universities – Berry College in Georgia, Furman University, Birmingham-Southern College, Baylor University, Centre College, Millsaps College, Vanderbilt University and others. We do not compete with the regional public institutions.

We get our share of those students. We compete with all those schools for a certain group of students, especially depending on the majors.

**Samford has chosen not to buy large lists for mass mailings as many schools do. Obviously it must be somewhat successful for schools to do that. What is our philosophy behind mailings?**

**Kimrey:** Samford selectively purchases names – not 200,000 or more names like some schools – but maybe 10,000 or so to cover key markets for us in Alabama, Atlanta, Nashville, etc. We will continue to cover those bases but also to widen those circles as resources are available.

What you mail to those students is critical. Sometimes it will be a print piece. In other instances it may be an email, because that can be done without any mailing costs. We can have tandem marketing campaigns aimed at students and their parents.

**You are a parent of a high school student and know what is coming to your prospective college student. Are our materials aimed at the student or the parent or both?**

**Kimrey:** We try to design and target our materials to catch attention quickly. If the student makes a specific inquiry to us, we will send a specialized packet designed to that

student's specific requests or needs. Sometimes we will do things like blast emails that send intentional messages like campus updates such as the new arena, something happening in a specific department or links to certain websites with important information. We can target those messages to a specialized group based on major or geographic region.

### **What approach does Samford take for students who might have special needs?**

**Kimrey:** Some students may have special needs, whether those are learning-related or family-related. Some times we can accommodate those students based on the resources we have, and some times we cannot. We work with the student, but they have to be prepared to be here. Again, the holistic approach to admission comes into play.

### **What do you say to prospective students and their parents who really want to come to Samford but may not be ready?**

**Kimrey:** The first question I ask is "does the *student* really want to be here?" If the student wants to attend Samford and the parents are willing, it will happen. If either the student or the parents are hesitant, our role in admission becomes one of providing information to help them in their decision-making process. For most, the stumbling block is financial. We have limited resources, and unfortunately, many families have not prepared well for sending their children to college. It's a partnership between the university, the student and the parents. We try to help families. We try to make it possible for as many as possible to be here.

Samford is blessed with a sizeable endowment. It's not enough, but we spend every dollar we have to offer on financial aid. We don't hold any back. I encourage families not to eliminate Samford just because they *think* they can't afford it. We do our best to help them make work out a plan to make it possible.

**Westmoreland:** I always encourage parents and students to do their own research. If they do, they will discover what we and many others already know: Samford is a tremendous value in private higher education. Our costs are very reasonable when compared with other, comparable institutions. If you do compare us with state universities on the basis of tuition, there is a significant difference. But, you have to look at overall costs, not just tuition alone. Samford makes no apologies about our price. But, we also know that we must focus on expanding financial aid opportunities through increased endowment. That will help us to attract and retain good students.

### **Samford has decided not to admit provisional student-athletes. Will that practice change in the future, especially with the move to the very competitive Southern Conference in 2008?**

**Westmoreland:** The fact that Samford has been competitive athletically with the quality of student-athletes we recruit demonstrates that making exceptions for provisional students is not necessary for us, and I do not anticipate making a change in that policy. This is something that is important to our board of trustees, our admission staff, our faculty and the larger university community. We don't sacrifice academics for the sake of athletics.

For more information:

[www.samford.edu/admission](http://www.samford.edu/admission)

See also <http://www.samford.edu/pubs/seasons/fall2004.pdf> for a series of stories on Samford's financial aid process.