Auburn ranks fifth among public institutions in U.S. for National Merit Scholars

A new national report ranks Auburn University fifth out of 126 public institutions in the enrollment of National Merit Scholars. The university is third in the Southeastern Conference and 16th overall out of 343 public and private institutions where these scholars are enrolled.

The numbers come from the just-released 2009-10 National Merit Scholarship Corporation Annual Report.

Auburn enrolled 134 new scholars this summer and fall, which more than doubles last year’s number of 64. Auburn moved up from fourth in the SEC and 34th overall last year.

“This achievement reflects an ongoing commitment by Auburn University to enroll some of the most outstanding students our state and nation have to offer,” said Velda Rooker, director of university scholarships in Auburn’s Office of Enrollment Services. “We are pleased that so many accomplished students recognize this commitment, along with the quality of Auburn’s faculty and nationally ranked programs, and have chosen to become part of the Auburn family.”

Auburn’s 134 National Merit Scholars are from 20 states and are enrolled in nine of Auburn’s 10 undergraduate colleges and schools.

The report also provides rankings for National Achievement Scholars numbers. Auburn is ranked number two among 77 public institutions that enroll these scholars, and is ranked number three in the SEC, and 13th overall of 189 institutions.

National report gives Auburn high marks as supportive campus

Auburn students give the university high marks as a supportive campus in a newly released national survey, which also provides evidence that Auburn freshmen are becoming more studious and more active learners.

The results are among findings in the 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement, a nationwide measure of students’ involvement in their education. Drew Clark, director of Institutional Research and Assessment at Auburn, said the survey is the leading national source of information on how students spend their time, how involved they are in proven learning practices and to what extent they consider themselves challenged and supported by their university.

Clark said the NSSE helps the university measure how well it is doing in teaching and student services. Over the long-term, NSSE data provide valuable information for use in academic planning and development of support services, he added.

The National Survey of Student Engagement collects information on how much time freshmen and seniors devote to study and how else they spend their time. The survey also gathers data on the kinds of intellectual activities their classes require; how much contact they have with faculty members; how often they take advantage of enrichment activities such as study abroad, service learning or student government; how they grade their own progress in terms of knowledge and skill; and how satisfied they are with their educational experience.

The NSSE study does provide comparisons among institutions but in a context more suitable for academic enhancement than the data produced by U.S. News & World Report and similar publications, Clark said. The latter are commercial publications that are targeted more toward parents, potential students and buyers of publications than toward faculty and academic planners.

The NSSE analysis provides a general picture of the institution’s level of academic challenge, its encouragement of active and collaborative learning and student-faculty interaction and the extent to which it provides enriching campus environment.

The results are based on responses of a survey in spring 2010 among freshmen and seniors. Results were compared between groups, over a trend line since 2006, against national norms and against Auburn’s peer group of 61 institutions classified as research institutions by the Carnegie Foundation.

NSSE results are summarized in five benchmark scores. In 2010, Auburn freshmen measured slightly below the average of the peer group (52 vs. 54) on the benchmark for level of academic challenge, statistically even on measures of active learning, student-faculty interaction and enriching experience and above the peer group (66 vs. 62) on the supportive campus environment benchmark.

Auburn seniors also rated the institution slightly lower than the peer group in terms of academic challenge (55 vs. 57), tied for enriching experiences, and ahead in the other benchmark categories. In all cases, however, students at Auburn and elsewhere were rating their own institution against an idea of perfection, not against peer institutions.

– Carol Nelson

– Roy Summerford

Proud American
College of Liberal Arts Dean Anna Gramberg waves the American flag at a Feb. 1 ceremony at the federal courthouse in Montgomery at which she officially became an American citizen. A native of Germany, Gramberg joined the college’s Foreign Languages and Literatures faculty in 1993 with a Ph.D. from Michigan State University and has served as dean since 2005. She now has dual citizenship in Germany and the United States. “I did not make a grand decision to stay when I came here,” she recalled. “It’s a big step to move from one culture to another, and I just let it happen. I fell completely in love with the country.”
Spirit of Excellence

Auburn University Human Resources has announced Spirit of Excellence winners for October, recognizing four staff members for outstanding service to the university. October’s recipients were, from left, Jessica Holley of International Education, Scott Tisdale of Information System Services, Ellen McManus of the College of Human Sciences and, not pictured, Larry Pitts of Agricultural Land and Resource Management.

Planning under way to replace Sewell Hall, old OIT buildings

Sewell Hall, which served for decades as Auburn’s athletic dorm, could give way to a new student residence hall in the style of the Village residence complex by the fall of 2012, following action Feb. 4 by the Auburn University Board of Trustees.

The board, meeting at Auburn Montgomery, gave fast-track status to planning for a new residence hall on the Sewell Hall site and a parking facility on the opposite corner of Donahue Drive and Samford Avenue, on a site now occupied by the Office of Information Technology, which is moving to a new, larger facility north of Lem Morrison Drive.

The expedited status will enable university planners to move forward rapidly with the projects, combining several planning steps and potentially making the buildings available for use at least a year sooner than otherwise.

The project is limited at present to the schematic design phase; after that, the board will review the project’s budget, funding plan and site plan before giving the go-ahead or putting a hold on construction.

The architectural firm of Goodwyn, Mills, Cawood of Birmingham was hired as design consultants, and Harbert International of Birmingham will serve as construction managers. Both had been selected following screenings for an initial plan to renovate Sewell.

The proposed replacement of Sewell Hall followed a previous meeting at which the board had asked campus planners to rethink the renovation project in order to help meet the demand for more modern student housing, as well as more accommodations on campus. The addition of a new parking facility, which includes a bus transfer station, is part of an ongoing program to upgrade parking facilities and ease student access to the core of campus via Tiger Transit.

Sewell Hall, built in 1962, served for about three decades as Auburn’s athletic dorm, until the NCAA ended the use of athletic dorms by its member schools in the 1990s. Since then, Sewell Hall residents have included non-athletes, and athletes have been mixed with non-athletes in other campus housing. The proposed facility would more than double the current building’s capacity to 300 or 400 residents.

– Roy Summerford

Auburn senior receives coveted scholarship for Cambridge study

Auburn senior David Harris has been awarded a prestigious Gates Cambridge scholarship, a full-cost award for full-time graduate study and research at the University of Cambridge in England.

Harris, who will graduate in May, holds a 3.97 grade point average and is a senior in chemical engineering. He interviewed for the scholarship in New York last weekend and was one of 30 students out of 90 finalists chosen for the scholarship. He plans to pursue a master’s degree in advanced chemical engineering at Cambridge.

“The chance to study at Cambridge is really a dream come true,” said Harris. “Studying abroad at one of the oldest and most famous universities in the world will be an incredibly rewarding experience. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to interview for the scholarship last week in New York, and I was pleasantly surprised to hear the good news so quickly.”

The scholarship program is funded by Bill and Melinda Gates through the Gates Cambridge Trust. Eighty to 100 students throughout the world receive the scholarships each year since the program began in 2000.

“David Harris is, without question, one of the best of the best, an absolute role model for a fine, well-rounded young man, one who, even at his young age, is vitally aware of who he is, where he comes from and where he would like to go, both personally and professionally,” said Auburn Honors College Director Jim Hansen.

Gates Cambridge Scholarships are awarded on the basis of four criteria: intellectual ability; leadership capacity; a desire to use their knowledge to contribute to society throughout the world by providing service to their communities and applying their talents and knowledge to improve the lives of others; and demonstrating a good fit between the applicant’s abilities and aspirations to the graduate program.

– Margaret Ann Killam

Campus Calendar

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 11

FILM AND DISCUSSION “Citizen Kane,” 4 p.m., Multicultural Center Reading Room, Student Center 1330; part of the Watch and Learn Series

GUEST ARTIST RECITAL Nicole Agostino, piano, 7:30 p.m., Goodwin Recital Hall

CONCERT Auburn Symphonic Band and Auburn Jazz Band, Auburn High School Performing Arts Center

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15

INDEPENDENT FILM “Abel Raises Cain,” 6 p.m., Jule Collins Smith Museum, part of the Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16

CHAMBER MUSIC St. Lawrence String Quartet, 7:30 p.m., Goodwin Music Hall

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 17

UNIVERSITY THEATRE “The Light in the Plaza,” 7:30 p.m., Telfair Peet Theatre; also Feb. 18-19 and Feb. 23-26 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, Feb. 20 at 2:30 p.m.

JAZZ CONCERT Auburn Music Faculty, 7:30 p.m., Goodwin Recital Hall

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 18

CONCERT Auburn Concert Band and Auburn Jazz Band, 7:30 p.m., Auburn High School Performing Arts Center

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24

GUEST ARTIST RECITAL Travis Bennett, horn, 7:30 p.m., Goodwin Recital Hall

Next Auburn Report
Presidential fellow’s study of Tuition Waiver program leads to suggestions for improved access, flexibility

A recent study of participation in Auburn University’s Employee Tuition Waiver Program produced several recommendations for changes in the program, which assists Auburn employees seeking to further their education.

Cathy Burdette Pate of Financial Reporting, who conducted the study last fall as Auburn’s 2010 President’s Administrative Fellow, recently submitted her findings to the Office of the President for review. The Administrative and Professional Assembly, which assisted with the study, also received a copy of the report.

David Hennessy, chair of the Administrative and Professional Assembly, said he is encouraged by the findings. “To me, the study shows there are Auburn University employees taking advantage of the waiver as a way to improve their opportunity and career aspirations,” he said. “It could be said that they are reinvesting in Auburn University.”

With responses from 148 of the 200 Auburn employees in the tuition waiver program, Pate found overwhelming support for the program among its participants, who use tuition waivers for up to five credit hours of coursework per semester. Based on their experience, most participants offered suggestions for refining the program and expanding employee participation.

Among the report’s key proposals are:

- Increase the employee discount on textbooks, an oft-cited expense, from the current 10 percent to 20 percent or more at the University Bookstore. With textbooks often exceeding $100 each, many respondents said the cost of texts was a major obstacle to taking classes.
- Consider implementing a tuition waiver for Extension and Research employees across the state to attend other institutions in their area. Pate noted that these university employees are stationed too far away to take classes on campus on a regular basis.
- Establish a process to track the progress of employees who graduate through the program and receive regular feedback from those graduates. Such a system would establish a database for policymakers in the future, she said.
- Increase distance learning and evening classes. The university is developing new ideas to make distance learning more accessible for all students, including employees taking classes. Evening classes are common in the College of Education but remain rare in other colleges and schools.

Among other improvements suggested by employees were recommendations to make information about the program more accessible, actively market the tuition waiver benefit, encourage supervisors to be more supportive of employees taking classes, provide more access for employees registering for core classes, add graduate distance education classes to the waiver, allow the waiver on a mix of hours per semester up to a total of 15 hours per year instead of the current maximum of five hours per semester.

“The employees who will benefit from these suggested improvements are an inspiring group that I would conclude are meeting the objective (of employee development) stated in the strategic plan,” Pate wrote in her report. “On a daily basis, they are attempting to fulfill their professional potential and as a result raising their productivity as well as making a greater contribution to Auburn University.”

Participants also requested that Auburn develop a rewards system or a path toward advancement for those who earn degrees through the program.

Demographic data revealed that participation is highest in the Administrative and Professional Assembly ranks, with 111 members enrolled, primarily in pursuit of master’s and doctoral degrees. Nearly half of all participants in the Tuition Waiver program are enrolled in the College of Education, which offers the most evening courses on campus and several degrees that are beneficial to careers in higher education.

One unexpected finding, Pate said, was a relatively low participation rate at the main campus among employees in the University Staff ranks, where 38 employees are represented, 2.6 percent of those eligible. Non-tenure track faculty also accounted for 38 participants.

University Staff personnel often have less flexibility in scheduling around classes during duty hours and fewer have associate or bachelor’s degrees than employees in the Administrative and Professional ranks, she observed. The challenge of pursuing a bachelor’s degree taking one course a semester can be daunting for anyone, she said, especially if the person has to balance the demands of work, family and school for up to a decade, if not longer.

Further complicating matters for employees seeking a first degree is core curriculum courses are often full by the first day of classes, the earliest that employees can be admitted if they receive a tuition waiver.

However, some do use the program to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Pate cited the case of one employee who had dropped out of high school at age 16, later obtained a GED and in her 40s began her college education. But that staff member took two years of evening courses at a community college in the area before enrolling at Auburn.

Asim Ali, an information technology specialist in the College of Education, has created a webpage at https://sites.auburn.edu/academic/education/employeesAsStudents/SitePages/Home.aspx for persons interested in taking classes through the Tuition Waiver Program.

Auburn University Human Resources provides a link to additional information about the program and offers information on additional development opportunities on its website, http://www.auburn.edu/administration/human_resources/hrd/index.html.

Pate, who is a member of the Administrative and Professional Assembly’s Professional Development Committee, said her examination of peer institutions showed Auburn to be in about the middle of the group in terms of support for employees in a tuition waiver program and in rate of participation by employees.

Pate said that Auburn is neither lagging or ahead of its peers in either program benefits or participation rates, but some improvements could be made at little or no cost, and increased marketing and improved access could contribute to increased participation.

– Roy Summerford

JCS Museum exhibits works by leading artist of early 20th century

Auburn University’s Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art is presenting the exhibition “Prints by Edvard Munch” through April 30 in the Noel and Kathryn Dickinson Wadsworth Gallery.

Munch, a Norwegian artist who lived from 1863-1944, remains among the most popular and most critically acclaimed artists of that period for his evocative depictions of universal human emotions and experiences – love, attraction, separation and death.

Equally adept in printmaking as in paint, Munch exploited the directness of graphic media to intensify his artistic statements. Munch frequently reworked themes he explored in prior paintings and prints, simplifying forms almost to the point of abstraction and distilling his narrative to pure symbolism.

The Auburn exhibition of select graphic works by Munch – a rare occurrence for the Southeast – is made possible through a loan of prints from a collector whose granddaughter is a student at Auburn. Those works are augmented by prints from the Epstein Family Collection. Included in the JCSM exhibition are some of the artist’s most haunting images: “The Kiss,” “The Dead Mother and Her Child” and “Melancholy III.”

Programming related to the exhibition will include a public lecture by Munch scholar Patricia Gray Berman at 4 p.m. on Feb. 24 in the museum auditorium and “An Evening with Munch,” featuring members of the Departments of Music and Theatre, on April 21.
Campus News Briefs

Eminent Scholar at Auburn presents lectures in Portugal on global finance

James Barth, Lowder Eminent Scholar in Finance in Auburn’s College of Business, presented several invited lectures on the global financial crisis and financial reform in Porto and Lisbon, Portugal, the week of Jan. 31.

Barth, who attended at the invitation of the United States Department of State, also presented “Financial System Regulation: Anarchists or Bankers?” at the IDEFF / European Institute Conference on Feb. 1. IDEFF is a Portuguese acronym for the Institute for Economic, Financial and Fiscal Law.

Recently he also spoke on the regulatory causes of the financial crisis in the United States and offered a new proposal for regulatory reform at the invitation of the U.S. Office of the Comptroller of the Currency in Washington, D.C.

Jule Collins Smith Museum to present independent film ‘Abel Raises Cain’

The Jule Collins Smith Museum of Fine Art will present the latest film in the 2010-11 Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers, “Abel Raises Cain,” at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 15.

Jenny Abel, who produced and directed the film, will be present to discuss it with the audience.

In the film, Abel turns the camera on her father, Alan Abel, a media prankster, who began his career in the late 1950s. His hoaxes were statements on society that made television news.

Faculty of 1000 review service highlights study by Auburn veterinary professor

The international post-publication review service Faculty of 1000, or F1000, has cited a paper published by a research team led by Benson Akingbemi in Auburn’s College of Veterinary Medicine as one of the best recently published research articles available.


On average, 1,500 new evaluations are published each month. The selection of Akingbemi’s work places it in the top 2 percent of all published articles in the biological and medical sciences.

Akingbemi, an associate professor in the Department of Anatomy, Physiology and Pharmacology, studies the effects of environmental toxicants on male reproductive tract development and function. His study of the toxicity of soy-based diets is funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Founded with a membership of 1,000, Faculty of 1000 is now comprised of more than 10,000 experts worldwide who identify and evaluate the most important articles in biology and medical research publications.

Continuing Education class to cover Robert’s Rules of Order next week

The Office of Professional and Continuing Education will offer a class on Robert’s Rules of Order from 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 17.

The class is useful for persons who preside at or participate in board, staff or committee meetings or could find themselves doing so in the future. A mock session will be conducted at which the application of the rules will be tried and tested.

The training will offer assembly rules consisting of eight guidelines for conducting a meeting, and parliamentary procedure for meeting management will be discussed. Call 844-5100 for more information or to register.