

8-4-2008

President's Weekly Perspective, 2008_08_04

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Recommended Citation

Schmidly, David. "President's Weekly Perspective, 2008_08_04." (2008). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/schmidly_papers/104

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Monday Morning Message - August 4, 2008

Good morning.

I was pleased this week to learn that for the second year in a row, UNM has been named one of the nation's best institutions for undergraduate education by The Princeton Review. Only the top 15 percent of America's more than 2,500 four-year colleges are included in the Review, and I was especially happy with some of the student comments that are contained in the two-page review of UNM in this year's edition:

- "UNM offers a strong academic community with all of its many research opportunities [for] a bargain price."
- "Even if you don't know what you want, you are bound to find something that you love."
- "UNM has students from all walks of life"... "With many Hispanic, Native American, Anglo and other students," UNM is "extremely diverse."

I was troubled, however, by the assessment of our students in giving low grades to the faculty, particularly for accessibility. I happen to believe we have an excellent learning environment and a superb faculty, but this is the second time in as many years that students responding to the Princeton Review survey have voiced these concerns.

It's possible that the small number of students involved may not be statistically reliable (the average sample per school surveyed is just 325 individuals), and we conduct ongoing surveys that we believe better assess our students' views. In any event, I know our faculty will be redoubling efforts to make students more aware of the access they provide through office hours, e-mail, and other opportunities for interaction.

For students, more aid is on the way. All of us should be delighted by last week's action in Congress reauthorizing the Higher Education Act. The legislation, which President Bush has promised to sign, will come as a welcome relief to our students by increasing maximum Pell Grant amounts, simplifying financial aid forms and making college more transparent.

Among the changes I'm most happy about:

- Increasing maximum Pell Grant amounts from the current \$4,800 to \$6,000 in 2009 and \$8,000 in 2014
- Keeping tuition low by requiring the U.S. Department of Education to publish data on college costs (UNM continues to be one of America's best values in higher education)
- Simplifying financial aid forms, cutting the current 8-page form (with 108 questions) down to just 2 pages, with only 44 questions
- Requiring schools to notify students immediately of emergency situations on campus, a reaction to the incidents at Virginia Tech (once again, UNM is ahead of the curve, with notification systems already in place)

Together with the improvements previously enacted to the GI Bill, college students have fared very well in this Congress.

Have a great week!

David J. Schmidly