Clemson, USC among 'best values'

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The struggle of many South Carolina families to afford rising college tuition may seem at odds with a new Kiplinger magazine report listing three of the state's universities in the nation's 100 best public college values.

Clemson University is ranked 34th for in-state students and 36th for non-residents, according to the report released Tuesday.

The University of South Carolina is ranked 57th for in-state students and 67th for non-residents. The College of Charleston is ranked 61st for in-state and 59th for non-residents.

Of the three, Charleston had the highest total annual cost for in-state students and Clemson had the highest total annual cost for non-residents.

The ranking is based on academic quality, cost and financial aid, according to Kiplinger. Analysis of academic quality includes SAT or ACT scores, admission and retention rates, student-faculty ratios, and four- and six-year graduation rates.

Kiplinger computes the total annual in-state cost — before any financial aid — to be $20,986 at Clemson, $19,144 at USC and $21,019 at Charleston. The number includes tuition, mandatory fees, room and board, and books, according to Kiplinger's formula.

With need-based grants factored in, Kiplinger computes the annual cost for in-state students after need-based financial aid to be $17,649 at Clemson, $14,117 at USC and $17,846 at Charleston.

Average debt after graduation, for all in-state and non-resident borrowers, is $17,882 at Clemson, $21,811 at USC and $20,541 at Charleston, according to Kiplinger.

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Even as the three universities are recognized as values, the cost of higher education for South Carolinians has risen sharply, along with concern that the increases will limit the ability of many bright high school graduates to attend college.

Currently tuition and mandatory fees — not including add-ons of room, board and books that Kiplinger included — total $12,668 a year for in-state students at Clemson and $28,826 for non-residents, compared to $8,886 in-state and $18,510 for non-residents in the fall of 2005.

"Low- to moderate-income students are being squeezed the most," said Mark Kantrowitz, publisher of finaid.org. "Parents are getting increasingly sensitive to the bottom line of college and the return on investment."

Kantrowitz links "a significant decline" in college affordability nationally with the recession and unemployment. State revenues are down, budgets have been slashed and cuts to higher education have been met by tuition increases to fill the gap.

The three South Carolina universities are recognizing the financial challenges facing families, leaders said.

College of Charleston trustees "recognized the difficult financial times for South Carolina families. We were the only public university in South Carolina that did not increase in-state tuition for the current year," said college President P. George Benson.

"When we last raised tuition in 2010, we dedicated $3 million from that tuition increase to financial aid for our students," Benson said.

USC, which increased tuition 3.9 percent last year, "is committed" to keeping tuition "as affordable as possible," said Scott Verzyl, associate vice president for enrollment management and executive director of undergraduate admissions.

"We have programs for low-income students, like the Gamecock Guarantee, to help students pay for college as well as minimize their student loan debt."

Also, programs like USC Connect help students integrate in- and out-of-class experiences into not "just a collection of credits" but a "series of related endeavors that help them gain a broader perspective" and add value to their experience, Verzyl said.

At Clemson, where tuition rose 3.8 percent for the current 2011-12 academic year, the lowest increase there in 10 years, President Jim Barker said cost effectiveness and value are "so scrutinized" in the current economic climate.

The struggle many families face to afford college is "something we are going to be very mindful of," said Cathy Sams, a Clemson spokeswoman.

Clemson shifted this year to a new strategic plan that seeks alternate revenue streams and internal re-allocations to augment the traditional pillars of tuition and state funding.

"We've got to make sure we're continuing to provide the quality and relevant education people are looking for," Sams said.

Barker told GreenvilleOnline.com that he anticipates no further cuts to higher education in the new budget year.

It's news that many hope could translate into another year of low or no tuition increases, although it's far too early in the budget process for predictions.

Barker said his optimism "is due to the willingness of all" of the state's public universities to work with Gov. Nikki Haley on a state funding formula for higher education based on accountability.

Rob Godfrey, a spokesman for Haley, said the governor "has been working with higher ed leaders on accountability-based higher education funding formula reform, and those conversations are ongoing. It's something she looks forward to talking more about in the coming weeks."

Early last year, Haley called for a formula that includes graduation rates, in-state students, job placement after graduation, contributions to economic development and serving under-represented populations. Additionally over the course of the past year the schools are posting their spending online.

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