

## **Left Behind: The Financial Aid Challenge**

Financial aid, specifically merit-based and need-based scholarships, is an important element of the college selection process for today's students. Samford University recently announced fundraising initiatives that would increase the amount of scholarship funding available to current and prospective students.

In recent extensive interviews with *Seasons*, Provost J. Bradley Creed, Samford's chief academic officer, and Dean R. Philip Kimrey, Samford's chief admission and financial officer, talked about Samford's scholarship program. Because of space constraints, the interviews have been edited for length. The full transcripts of the interviews can be found at [www.samford.edu/news](http://www.samford.edu/news).

### **What is Samford's general philosophy about student scholarships?**

**Creed:** When I arrived at Samford, I was really surprised that we weren't doing more in this area [scholarships]. What we are doing is great, but we must do better. We want to be able to provide resources for qualified and deserving students and to attract the best qualified students to enroll and graduate from Samford. That's basically our philosophy.

**Kimrey:** Our general philosophy is to help the people who need it. . .to help people with financial needs to get here. The whole financial perspective of Samford is that. Samford is a lean operation financially. Our commitment as an institution is to keep costs low, and we do that many ways. The reason we do that is to make it more a little more affordable for the average family to send a student here. The scholarship and financial assistance programs we have address that. We want to help the ones who need it the most. Sometimes that means we must be bold with a family and say "When we look at your financial work sheets, you don't need the assistance. You may think you say you need it. But, when I look at your financial needs you don't need it. If you want it to be easy, you may need to look elsewhere." Sadly for us, sometimes they do choose to go elsewhere. The majority of our funds—scholarships and institutional grants—are for students with financial need. That means, through a financial analysis, we determine those students and families who have the most needs in comparison with others. We're helping those who need it the most.

### **Why is important for a university like Samford to offer merit-based and need-based scholarships?**

**Creed:** We want to accomplish two things. We want to make higher education accessible to qualified students. We also want to attract the most qualified students we can. This fits our mission as a university in that we strive to be the best. Also, many of our constituents in the past would not have been able to come to college without scholarships, and there still those people out there. With the increasing cost of a college education, I think it is

imperative that we raise scholarship funds to make this education available to deserving students.

**Kimrey:** There are a couple of reasons. Contrary to the belief of many, everyone here is not the same. We need to have some students who are financially needy and some students whose families can provide for all their needs. That's the world in which we live. Everyone is not the same. Their experiences are different. The financial aid process at Samford is designed and implemented so that we can have some level of diversity from a financial perspective of the types of students who attend here. We need students who graduate from high schools [of all sizes]. The financial aid process supports the needs of the institution. As the needs of the institution change, the financial aid process will change. If we have more scholarships available, that will help us attract other students or make the loan burden less for freshman students. They would not have to borrow for their first year.

### **How important is a scholarship program to the university's overall academic reputation?**

**Creed:** To have scholarship funds demonstrates that our alumni and friends are committed to supporting this and believe in the goals of the institution. It's one of those benchmarks that you have more funds to help deserving students. It shows that you are able to attract the funding that is a vote of confidence in the university. Also, scholarship funds help us to defray other costs. So, when we're able to have scholarship funds, it defrays expenses that can be used for academic programs that help to increase the reputation of the university.

**Kimrey:** In our society, outstanding performance is rewarded. If you perform well—in business, athletics, whatever—you are rewarded. Central to academic programs, we must have scholarship assistance for outstanding students in order to attract them to Samford. For some, we will get because they want to be at Samford no matter the cost to them. But, there are others who have outstanding offers from other institutions. . .for whom we have to have the financial resources to attract them away from the “bargain” institutions. Reputable academic institutions provide scholarship assistance to students who will succeed in the future, whether that's in graduate school, research, professional training. The expectation is, if you are a worthy academic institution, you will resources to attract the right students.

### **Is it important from an academic perspective for Samford to have academic scholarships available, particularly for specific departments and academic units to offer?**

**Creed:** Yes, it is. Eventually students are going to have to declare a major. If they have an interest in a particular subject and scholarship funds are available, we can help both needy students and provide resources for meritorious students.

**Kimrey:** It is important from a recruiting perspective that students know they are getting a scholarship from a department. It may or may not be as important to that department. Those departments do need more scholarship funds because it is important to recognize students as outstanding juniors or seniors. The downside to a departmental scholarship is that students change majors. If they already have received a scholarship from one department, we have to replace that money from somewhere else because the new major may not have as much or any scholarship help. For parents, the bottom line is important. They just want to see the scholarships and don't always care about the source [of the funds]. It's always a challenge for us in putting together financial aid packages that are the best use of available funds.

**Samford's tuition and total costs generally are competitive in our peer group and sometimes are lower than in our peer group. Why do we need to offer scholarships at all?**

**Creed:** Even though we might be a better buy than our peers, a college education still is a very expensive proposition. There may be students who would never be able to afford to go to a school that charges more than we do, and scholarships make it possible for them to come here and to have the kind of education that Samford provides.

**Kimrey:** The most important reason is to help students. We look at several factors. We want to attract the best and the brightest to come to Samford. Students who are above average academically based on standardized exam scores, high school grade point average, high school courses—however you measure those students who are above average—generally can write a ticket anywhere. They are going to get offers—public and private—to go wherever they might want to go. From a scholarship perspective, they are going to have great offers. So, from a scholarship perspective, we need to be competitive. Secondly, we want to try to help students and families get here. From a marketing perspective, if we can't on the front-end tell a student “you need to look at Samford because . . .,” we need to have those options [scholarships and grants] to help get a student interested. There are many times when a student is interested, but they know they have to have the financial resources to attend Samford. Otherwise, it won't happen.

**The estimated actual cost of educating a student at Samford is about \$25,000 per year, but we have published total costs – tuition, room and board – as about \$19,500 for the 2004-05 academic year. Does that mean that every student automatically is receiving a \$6,000 scholarship?**

**Kimrey:** That is a legitimate way of looking at the costs, but those are not real dollars to people. That goes back to the whole concept of tuition discounting. Should we say the actual is \$25,000, and you automatically are receiving a \$6,000 scholarship? People are looking for real money—something in their pockets. That's the real tragedy, in my opinion, of all the state subsidies such as the Hope Scholarship in Georgia and others. You are subsidizing people that don't need help [because everyone qualifies regardless of

need.] Then, they bring that to our doorstep and say “can you match this?” The vast majority of families with whom we work tell us that Samford clearly is their first choice—of the student and of the parent. They want to be here, but they need some help. For some families, that’s \$2,000. For others, that may be \$12,000. We just don’t have the resources to provide help to every family at their level of expectation. That is why the process must work and why financial assistance funding from other sources is important.

**What do we say to those constituents that tell us “unless you can offer me scholarships, I am not going to be able to attend Samford?”**

**Creed:** We would like to attract the best qualified students possible. We clarify that by saying that we are not in the business of buying students. I think part of the strength of Samford is not just in getting as many qualified students as we can to the detriment of others, but taking qualified students who will benefit from the kind of education we have to offer. Therefore, we have to balance between merit and need but obviously the more scholarship funds we raise, the most merit-based and need-based scholarships we have to offer.

**Kimrey:** I can take two approaches. If they truly are saying “we need assistance,” then we try to explain our process and that we do not make immediate decisions that can tell them how much we might have to offer. We have a process where we try to evaluate their financial perspective and do what we can to try to help them. There are other students who are just “shopping.” They are not looking for a great deal, they are just looking for something free. Typically, we tell those students and their parents that they will not find that at Samford. We stress that we are the best option out there, but it will not be free.

**Is it possible that some students would do better at other institutions because of a lack of scholarships available for them at Samford?**

**Creed:** I don’t believe that part of it. I go back to my original contention: if we don’t have the kind of scholarship support that other schools have, then we’re not able to resource and attract the kind of students we would like to have. So, for some, if they really want to go to Samford but there’s more scholarship money and it lowers the tuition at another place, it may place an economic burden on the student that they wouldn’t otherwise have. But, they have to look at the overall cost before making a decision.

**Kimrey:** I’m not sure I would answer yes to that. We emphasize the spiritual context of our institution in the recruiting process and the financial process. For many families, this is an adventure in faith. We say to them up-front, “you many not know how it is going to fit together, but it is important that you find the best place for your student. Once you find that place, if it is Samford, we will work with you to have an understanding of how to finance it.” Typically that will include loans for many families. That’s when many families will determine that they do not want to be burdened with that debt when the student graduates. We also try to help them understand that Samford’s perspective will be

drastically different from almost any other institution in which they would be interested or where they might apply. Our goal is to keep tuition low, so we will keep tuition discounting low. We do not run a sale, where we say everyone upfront gets 10 or 15 percent off. At most private institutions, that's going to be more than 35 percent. Unfortunately there are plenty of private colleges that will discount [tuition and costs] more than 60 percent for their freshman class just to get the students. Samford is not going to do that.

### **Why does Samford not offer annual scholarships to all Alabama Baptist students who want to attend Samford?**

**Creed:** The \$5 million we receive annually from Alabama Baptists is important to us, but we provide much more than that in student aid. Of course, we offer scholarships to *all* ministerial students. About 80 percent of Samford's undergraduate students receive some form of financial aid and about one-half of our undergraduate students are Baptist. So, it would be fair to say that Samford offers more than double in financial aid what we receive annually from the Alabama State Baptist Convention (see box).

**Kimrey:** We do offer some level of assistance. We have a \$750 scholarship for the freshman year only. It's called the Earl Potts Scholarship.\* If you are an Alabama Baptist, active in a church, and that is documented by the church, you receive this scholarship for the freshman year.

### **Why is it important for Samford to raise additional scholarship funds from donors?**

**Kimrey:** I think of the verse in the Bible that says "To whom much is given, much is required"\* first and foremost. Most of us in the United States have much more than others have. Donors should understand that they can significantly impact a student's life or a family's life by providing scholarship assistance so that a student can attend Samford who otherwise might have to attend somewhere else. It goes back to the first choice concept. When parents visit the campus with their student, they say . . ."This is the kind of place where I'd like to be. I really hope our (son or daughter) can attend here." But, we [Samford] have to have the resources to make that happen, and donors can help to make that happen.

### **Why is it important for Samford graduates to help with scholarship funds?**

**Kimrey:** Interestingly, some graduates will say "Samford didn't provide me with scholarships or *enough* scholarships, so the student loans I'm paying back now are my contribution to the University." To me, that is short-sighted. I do think that, by comparison to what other students are getting to go other places—although it's not always "real money"—the perception among some is that "Samford didn't want me because they didn't provide enough assistance for me to go here" without it being a hardship. For some students it *is* a hardship, but they gladly take that on. But there are

others who feel that they deserve for it to be easy. That's not Samford's philosophy. If more graduates will help with scholarship funds, it *will* make it easier in the future but Samford never is going to be free or financially easy.

\* R. Earl Potts is executive director emeritus of the Alabama State Baptist Convention.

\* Luke 12:48b