

Boyce life: Why Southern's undergraduate school attracts diverse groups of students

By Aaron Cline Hanbury
and Craig Sanders

Boyce College just brought in one of its highest new spring enrollments ever. The college's total enrollment increased nine percent from the 2011-12 academic year. The number of students around the globe seeking online degrees at Boyce is at an all-time high, contributing to a 23 percent increase from last year — nearly 30 percent since 2010 — giving the school almost 200 Internet-based students. During that same period, Boyce's on-campus enrollment also increased by 15 percent. Boyce's newly introduced seminary track program, which allows students to earn a bachelor's degree and a master of divinity in as few as five years, attracted 12 students in its first year.

This upswing in enrollment also gives Boyce a more diverse student body; these students aren't just from Louisville, Ky., and surrounding states. The college, which is a branch of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, houses students from South Korea, Nepal, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Nigeria, Peru, Singapore and Taiwan, not to mention domestic students from Massachusetts to Hawaii.

The influx of students from around the state, country and world raises a simple question: "Why are these students choosing Boyce College over thousands of other schools?"

So we asked a group of students that very question. And, interestingly, the answers we received followed a pattern.

Money and fame — no, really

Luke Burrow, a freshman from the little city of Waterloo, outside Toronto, Canada, came to Boyce College because of its reputation.

"I'm at Boyce because my pastor went to Southern and he recommended this place very highly," Burrow said. "Also, I'm a big biblical counseling guy. Heath Lambert is here, and that's why I'm here.

"And also, the discount is really good, too."

Freshman Andrew Scibbe enrolled at Boyce for a similar reason. He explained that the importance of the mission of Jesus and the vision of Southern Seminary to fulfill that mission compelled him.

"I'm here because I think there's a mission, there's something to be completed," said Scibbe, a Crown Point, Ind., native. "A mission deserves quality training, and I wanted to come and get trained. I chose Boyce, specifically, because I read their 'We're serious' stuff. We're serious about the same things. The school is serious about the gospel; I'm serious about the gospel. So I figured it'd be a good match.

"Also, they give a pretty sweet discount, which is cool, too."

A first-year Boyce student from Atlanta, Ga., Brandon Baena, told us that he transferred to Boyce from Truett-McConnell College in his home state for simple reasons.

"The reason why I'm here is that Boyce has a really good youth ministry program, and

it's a lot cheaper," said the college sophomore. When we asked about their impetuses for attending Boyce College, our modest sampling of new students told us, with overwhelming consistency, that the reputation of the school and the low tuition costs were the overarching influencers in the decision. The college makes efforts to meet students' expectations of rigorous academics and church-focused professors. But in the course of talking with students and administration in the Boyce community, we discovered that classroom-time isn't the whole story.

To academics and beyond

It's referred to as a "dorm meeting," but this weekly gathering of students at Boyce College is hardly business. On Monday nights, resident students at the college worship together in Heritage Hall with a student-led band and sermons from professors or local pastors. This fellowship continues with organized prayer meetings throughout the week and community outreach projects at various points during the semester.

These activities, and others like them, are central to life at Boyce College. And in a day when many students do college with only a computer screen, these seem like a relic of the academic past, college life fading away into the silicon revolution.

In a recent essay for *InformationWeek Education*, Keith Fowlkes of the University of Virginia's College at Wise reflects on the drastic changes in college education in our technology-focused age.

"Higher education involves much more than the knowledge you learn in class. It's about the development of the whole person: emotionally, socially, intellectually and academically," he writes.

In this essay, Fowlkes suggests that education isn't only about information-transfer. In agreement is Boyce's David "Gunner" Gundersen.

According to Gundersen, the director of student life at Boyce, community life is a vital aspect of a holistic education that he considers just as important as intellectual development.

"When we think about a student's education, we believe that gospel-centered community on campus is not extra-curricular but co-curricular," he said. "The mind and

character of Christ is formed in us through genuine, growing relationships rich in truth and love."

Since assuming his position in fall 2011, he has insisted that Boyce student life resemble a New Testament community. And students appear to buy into his program of tight-knit dorm communities, realizing that things like dorm meetings serve as valuable reminders of student goals both academic and spiritual.

Laura Rodriguez serves as the campus life coordinator in Boyce's student government. Her experience as a student mirrors Gundersen's emphases.

"My fellow students have poured into my life and fought sin with me," Rodriguez said. "They've walked with me, cried with me, rejoiced with me, laughed with me."

A significant portion of this spiritual formation emphasis takes place in dormitories with students who live on campus at Boyce College. And this emphasis extends also to the classrooms. Students with whom we talked said their professors enrich their hearts just as much as their minds.

Amelia Crider, a new student, thought she'd minister to those around her in the context of a "normal" job. Boyce College changed that.

"I've wanted to counsel for a long time — when I was in middle school, I realized I wanted to be a counselor," she said. "But I thought I'd counsel in the workplace, so that I could be a graphic designer. And then when my dad came to Boyce, I started taking classes here, and I realized that I should get my counseling degree and then pursue ministry.

"The college has changed a lot of my views on things, and helped me spiritually."

Rodriguez said: "I have grown just as much interacting with my professors as I have with my studies. There's so much spiritual support here."

Part of that spiritual support comes from professors like Dave DeKlavon, who is also an associate dean at the college. He and his wife, Jan, serve as hall parents for Dikaios, which is a student group that includes male and female dorms. The couple also hosts campus-wide events, and are known as "Boyce parents."

"We know that students at Boyce go



through times of discouragement," DeKlavon said. "By caring for them, we hope to encourage them and open a door for them to talk with us."

The DeKlavons pray for the students weekly and spend time with the students individually over lunch. This pastoral role supplements Dave's academic responsibilities, enhancing the education of his students by modeling before them a mature Christian life.

Said Gundersen: "In an age of digital convenience, we don't forget the power of learning in community."

The effectiveness of this "power" was evident in our conversations with students.

With a little help from friends

Out of everything students said when we asked about their experience at Boyce, the common denominators among upperclass-

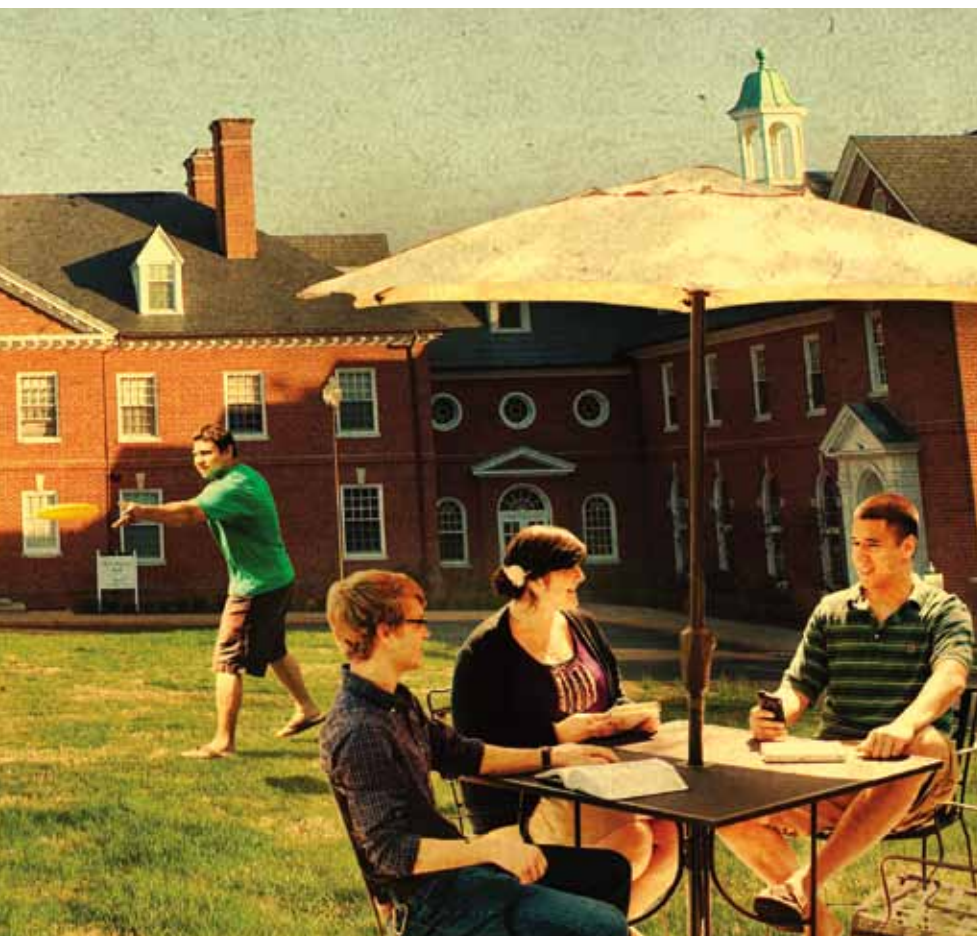
men were "professors" and "community" — and many of them used these exact words.

Melissa Hurd, a Lawrenceville, Ga., native who transferred to Boyce from Toccoa Falls College in her home state, said her favorite part of the experience has been Boyce's multidimensional emphases.

"The focus on not being here for academics alone, but for equipping the church and being encouraged to serve the church while we're in school is partly what drew me to Boyce," said the senior. "The community is my favorite part, not just with peers, but the fact that the professors are interested in our lives, having us in their homes and pouring into us spiritually."

Echoing Hurd, Lydia Chipman, a junior from Louisville, said that a community of brothers and sisters in Christ attracted her to Boyce.

"I came to Boyce because I knew several people at Boyce," she said. "I was fed up



with being at a secular school and having to question what I was learning. My family encouraged me to look into Boyce, and so I came to preview day. I went to one class [a worldview class taught by Travis Kerns] and was amazed at his knowledge and how godly the people were here. I wanted to learn more.

“The community of believers who genuinely care for your well-being and the professors investment in students’ lives are my favorite things about Boyce.”

Danielle DeVault, from Knoxville, Tenn., came to Boyce College after studying at the University of Tennessee. She named theological coherence as the driving factor in her coming to Boyce.

“I was at UT and miserable,” said DeVault, who is now a senior. “I knew God was calling me toward a biblical education. Boyce seemed more theologically correct and

headed in a direction I desired. I knew the Reformed theology would influence all areas of study. Boyce was also a cheaper option.”

Like many of her peers, DeVault cites the college’s professors and fellow students as the most impactful aspect of her education.

“Professors who genuinely care about you as a person and your growth in love for Christ that happens both in the classroom and outside the classroom,” she said. “The community has been formational in my growth in the last three years I’ve been here. The intentionality to push students toward heavy involvement in the local church is something that makes Boyce different.”

When we asked senior Jena Timmington to define her experience, she immediately said “professors and community.” She went to a secular school before coming to Southern Seminary’s undergraduate school. There, her

professors didn’t know her name, or “even seem to care” whether or not she was in class. She said the intimacy of a smaller setting filled with believers made her education something valuable beyond academic knowledge.

“Boyce professors know your name,” she said. “They notice when you miss class or if you’re sick, and they know your spiritual condition. They invest in you as an individual and care about you as a whole person.”

Spencer Harmon, who is in his last semester at Boyce, claims that the college’s articulation of the seriousness of local church ministry first attracted him.

“I chose Boyce College because I saw that they felt the weight of ministry more than other colleges,” he said. “Four years later and I would say that they have transferred that weightiness to me and that it lived up to my expectations.”

In our conversations with Boyce College students, we saw that “community” is more than a buzzword; students testify that part of the DNA of the college is a tight-knit, Bible-centered community. The college, like the other three schools that make up the seminary, promotes a world-class faculty of men and women who love the local church and students in the classroom.

And, according to professors Owen Strachan and Denny Burk, the community aspects are palpable.

“What I love about teaching at Boyce is the energy and passion that the students have for the material presented to them,” said Strachan, who is assistant professor of Christian theology and church history. “In particular, the gospel and biblical doctrine as it relates to the Christian worldview and to apologetics. Students at Boyce are passionate about the Word of God, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t want to think and learn and grow as students.”

Burk agreed with Strachan that a consistent characteristic of Boyce College students is academic eagerness married to devotional zeal.

“I continue to be impressed by the spiritual earnestness of my students at the college,” said the associate professor of biblical studies. “They surprise me regularly not only in their knowledge but in their personal devotion and consecration to Christ.”

“Residential education is one of the most powerful ways to grow into the whole person you want to become: full of truth and love, principle and practice, doctrine and delight.”
— Gunner Gundersen

The answer

We set out asking why students from across the country — and even from around the world — keep enrolling at a small Bible college by the Ohio River. The students with whom we talked told us two things: (1) the reputation of the college as “serious about the gospel” appealed to them; and (2) the college’s affordability made their college decision easier.

But we discovered that reputation and money aren’t the whole story.

The college invests in students both intellectually and spiritually. They put the most qualified people possible in classrooms to teach. And, through efforts like Gundersen’s, the school sets up a structure conducive to authentic, Christian community life.

Gundersen said: “Residential education is one of the most powerful ways to grow into the whole person you want to become: full of truth and love, principle and practice, doctrine and delight.”

So we found that students come to Boyce College for the reputation and the money. They stay for the community.

Reporting by Steve Watters and RuthAnne Irvin contributed to this article.