Report lists UW-EC among top three UW campuses

By McLean Bennett
Leader-Telegram staff

A Madison-based government watchdog group seems to have validated UW-Eau Claire's official motto of "Excellence" by including it among the state's "most selective UW campuses."

Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance made the same claim about UW-Madison and UW-La Crosse in a report published last week, citing the schools' admission rates, average freshman ACT scores and other factors.

"Madison sort of sits in its own category in terms of selectivity," said Todd Berry, the alliance's president. "... Eau Claire and La Crosse pretty consistently sit in this next tier."

The report studied only four-year UW campuses and did not include two-year UW institutions or state technical colleges.

UW-Eau Claire and UW-La Crosse in fall 2010 rejected nearly a quarter of those who applied, according to the report. Madison accepted about two-thirds of applicants that year.

In the same school year, more than half of first-year students at UW-Eau Claire and UW-La Crosse had graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes, another measure of a school's selectivity. At Madison, more than 90 percent of first-year students ranked among the top quarter of their high school classes.

And all three campuses led the UW System that year in freshman ACT scores. (The ACT is a popular college entrance exam, with a maximum possible score of 36.) The average ACT score of new freshmen at UW-Eau Claire in fall 2010 was 24.4. UW-La Crosse's average ACT was 24.7; UW-Madison, 28.3. The lowest ACT average, 20.8, was at UW-Parkside in Kenosha County.

"We certainly want to maintain a degree of selectivity because, again, that defines the quality of the classroom and the success we have in terms of student graduation rates," UW-Eau Claire Chancellor Brian Levin-Stankevich said Friday.
UW-Eau Claire junior Luke Desilet said he doesn't think getting into the university was too hard. He said he also was accepted at UW-Madison, UW-Oshkosh and Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

"It wasn't difficult for me to get accepted," Desilet said, though he noted, "Not everyone gets in — it's not the easiest."

UW-Stout in Menomonie had more modest figures. The campus, which officially has been designated as Wisconsin's polytechnic university, accepted nearly 90 percent of the students who applied in fall 2010 — among the UW System's highest acceptance rates. And its freshmen that year scored an average of 21.8 on the ACT, the second lowest in the UW System.

UW-Stout spokesman Doug Mell said while ACT scores and other measures of a university's selectivity are worth noting, other things are more important.

"What we really look at at UW-Stout ... is outcomes — what happens to our students when they leave campus," Mell said, noting surveys have shown the vast majority of graduates are working within a year after finishing school.

"A diploma from UW-Stout is tantamount to a guarantee of a good-paying, professional job," Mell said.

UW-Stout outperformed UW-Eau Claire in one area over the past decade, according to the taxpayers alliance: freshman enrollment growth. The alliance report said UW-Stout increased its freshman enrollment by more than 20 percent between 2000 and 2010; UW-Eau Claire, meanwhile, enrolled fewer freshmen in 2010 than it did in 2000.

Declining freshman enrollment has been a problem across the UW System, said Berry, whose organization found that freshman enrollments at four-year UW schools in 2010 were the smallest since 2006.

The report, which is billed as a guide for student applicants to UW campuses and their parents, also compares campuses in other areas, including retention rates, graduation rates and student debt after graduation.

Bennett can be reached at 715-830-5832, 800-236-7077 or mclean.bennett@ecpc.com.

Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance's UW campus comparison: LeaderTelegram.com/links