University of Maine at Farmington ranked Maine’s ‘Best Bang for the Buck’

The liberal arts school was also ranked 14 out of 400 in the northeast in Washington Monthly's annual college guide.

By Amy Calder Staff Writer

To say Chelsey and Shawna Oliver are pleased about the education they are getting at University of Maine at Farmington is an understatement, so when they heard the school was named the top Maine college in Washington Monthly’s 2015 “Best Bang for the Buck” rankings, they weren’t surprised.

“I think that’s great, and I think it’s well deserved,” Chelsey Oliver, 20, said Tuesday. “We got a phone call telling us about it, and we were so excited. We both love Farmington so much.”

Don Osthoff, right middle, stands up and celebrates as University of Maine’s class of 2015 begins commencement ceremonies in Farmington in May. The school was ranked Maine’s “Best Bang for your Buck” Monday by Washington Monthly magazine and 14th nationally. Staff file photo by Michael G. Seamans

The twins from Sidney say they like the fact that they are getting a top-notch education at a cost that won’t require them to spend the rest of their lives paying back college loans.

Not only was it the top Maine school in the list of 100 Washington Monthly named, it also was 14th out of 400 public and private colleges in the Northeast in the publication’s “The Other College Guide: A Roadmap for the Right School for You.” The ranking bumped UMF up from 151st place in just three years.

The annual publication compares more than 1,500 colleges in five geographic regions throughout the U.S. and ranks them on best value based on net price, graduation rate and students’ postgraduate earning ability to pay off their student loans, according to Washington Monthly’s website.

After graduating in 2013 from Messalonskee High School in Oakland, Shawna Oliver enrolled in a private Boston-area college as a way to venture out of her comfort zone, but ended up transferring to UMF her sophomore year. She said she enjoyed attending the private school, but UMF was more community-oriented and intimate — and the price of tuition was more palatable.

“It was $30,000 more expensive per year than UMF,” she said of the out-of-state college. “I kept realizing I’m going to be in trouble paying all that money back.”
The next Maine college in the national rankings is The College of the Atlantic. The Bar Harbor school is ranked No. 48. Other Maine colleges in the top 100 include Colby College in Waterville at No. 55, the University of Maine at No. 93 and Husson University in Bangor at No. 97.

The rankings are based on the three most recent years of data, the release said, and UMF, a liberal arts college that enrolls about 1,800 full-time students, has been ranked in the guide every year since 2010. Maine residents pay $8,352 a year in tuition, and out-of-state residents pay $17,440. Those in the New England Regional Program pay $12,544. Room and board cost $8,970 for all three groups.

The annual net price for all students to attend is $13,388 a year with students with an annual family income below $30,000 paying a net of $13,156; students whose family income is between $30,000 and $75,000 pay a net of $15,869 and students with a net family income above $75,000 pay $18,905, according to Washington Monthly’s ranking chart.

UMF also was recognized in the magazine’s college guide for its contribution to the public good, ranking 52 out of nearly 350 baccalaureate colleges around the U.S., according to a UMF news release. The ranking is based on “helping low-income students attend and graduate from college, producing cutting-edge scholarship and encouraging students to give back to their country,” it says.

“We are thrilled by this recognition,” UMF President Kathryn A. Foster said in the college’s news release about the ranking. “As a premier public liberal arts college, UMF provides a quality, affordable education from curriculum through career. Many of our students are the first in their families to attend college, and we offer a highly-personalized educational experience that helps them be successful on every level.”

The Oliver sisters, who both receive UMF academic scholarships based on their performance in high school, say affordability is only one of the perks of studying at UMF. Chelsey Oliver is double-majoring in secondary mathematics education and mathematics, Shawna in elementary education.

Their grandparents, who also attended UMF, are retired teachers. Shawna said she knew from the time she was a child that she wanted to be an educator.

The sisters cite accessibility to professors, small class size, walkability to downtown Farmington and friendly people who wave to you from their porches as some of the reasons they love the university.

“This place really does feel like a second home,” Shawna Oliver said.

The twins work in the admissions office at UMF as admissions ambassadors who give interested and incoming students tours of the campus. They said they know other graduates who have good teaching jobs.

The Olivers have two other sisters who attended more expensive Maine colleges, and they are still paying back student loans, they said.

“We don’t have anywhere near as big a burden as they do,” Shawna Oliver said.