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BURSTING AT THE SEAMS: AN EXAMINATION OF ENROLLMENT CHANGES
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

by
Carrol Trent Imbler

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2024

Approved by

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ABSTRACT

Carrol Trent Imbler: Bursting at the Seams: An Examination of the Enrollment Changes
at the University of Mississippi
(Under the direction of Jennifer Payne Ethridge)

Enrollment at the University of Mississippi is at an all-time high. As one of the smallest public universities within the Southeastern Conference (SEC), Ole Miss has faced many changes within the past few years because of its growing population. This research answers the question: “How are offices and departments on campus managing their efforts to accommodate an increased number of students?” Through interviews with faculty, staff, and students on campus, I identified multiple departments who had to adjust their usual practices. These include housing, parking and transportation, advising offices within each school, admissions, and other student services. All these factors play a significant part in the success of each student’s experience while attending the University. Increased enrollment can make a difference as one of the main selling points of Ole Miss: getting the SEC collegiate experience on a compact campus with a smaller undergraduate population. Based on these findings, I recommend ways to help find a middle ground between a growing campus and a campus bursting at the seams so that we can retain students, faculty, and staff, and learn how to adapt the collegiate experience offered at the University of Mississippi to ensure continued success.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“The University is respected, but Ole Miss is loved. The University gives a diploma and regretfully terminates tenure, but one never graduates from Ole Miss.” – Frank E. Everett, Jr.

Frank E. Everett, Jr. received his bachelor’s degree from Ole Miss in 1932 and his law degree in 1934. While at Ole Miss, the Indianola, Mississippi native was named Colonel Rebel (now called Mr. Ole Miss) and elected president of the student body. Ninety years after his graduation from Ole Miss Law School, his words are depicted on the walls of The Gertrude C. Ford Student Union because his message still rings true in the hearts of UM students, alumni, and friends.

Since I was a young child, a large piece of my heart belonged to the University of Mississippi. As a third generation Ole Miss student, I have heard stories and many fond memories of time spent at this special campus. When the time came to choose where to attend college, there was no question in my mind on where I would matriculate. I knew I wanted to experience the excitement of an SEC campus all while being in the smaller town of Oxford. The University offers extensive networking opportunities, a large alumni network, and resources at my fingertips. In my sophomore year, I decided to get more involved on campus by volunteering with the Office of Admissions and gain student leadership experience. Through my time as an Ole Miss Ambassador and Orientation Leader, I have seen the growing efforts to recruit the best students to Ole Miss. Now, as a

senior, dramatic enrollment increases have become even more prevalent in the eyes of students, faculty, and staff.

As an Orientation Leader, we welcomed the largest freshman class to campus in 2022. To accommodate this larger incoming class, additional orientation leaders were hired as well as additional orientation sessions were added to the schedule. As I continued to lead tours as an Ole Miss Ambassador, I noticed the scheduling of more and more ambassadors to give tours per day. The more visitors we have, the more ambassadors are assigned to guide families around campus and educate them about our institution. It is the expectation for each ambassador to give two tours per week but that is completely dependent on the number of visitors. Once I and fellow ambassadors began giving consistent weekly tours on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, historically the least popular days of the week for visits, chatter surrounding this number of visits began within the students.

Additionally, I began to notice other changes in organizations across campus. As a member of the Greek community, there is no denying how many more participants in formal recruitment there have been in the past two recruitment cycles. In my sorority, we took a pledge class in August of 2022 of 197 women. This past fall: 242 women were extended an invitation to pledge. Such an increase in each chapter's pledge class came from the increase in the number of women participating in formal recruitment. As a result of the total women going through the recruitment process, the overall Panhellenic total changes. This means the median number of all house's membership increased by 15%. As a past member of my sorority's executive board, current leaders have approached me for advice when managing that number of students. Some questioned if these women

would have the chance to develop relationships and enjoy their experience based on the overcrowding and lack of space and resources they are able to provide. Furthermore, as I looked around campus, due to my personal relationships with various staff members and organizational involvement, I began to recognize just how impactful the enrollment changes had become.

The purpose of this research is to identify the implications departments on campus are facing as enrollment numbers continue to climb, and what can be done to prepare students and staff. By conducting interviews with department heads, student leaders, and administrative staff, I hope to identify the advantages and areas of growth that need additional attention to ensure the best collegiate experience and continued success.

This research will delve into a topic that is prevalent to the University of Mississippi as well as many of its comparable counterparts. The goal is to avoid reactive behaviors and, in turn, have specific plans of action and knowledge of the effects on campus should enrollment numbers continue to grow in future terms.

Research Question

My research question is: How are offices and departments on campus managing their efforts to accommodate an increased number of students? I can hypothesize that due to the large increase of student population since fall of 2021 along with lingering discomfort from the coronavirus pandemic, campus departments need additional resources and continued guidance on how to accommodate the increased growth that is occurring on campus.

At the beginning of my thesis, I currently have background knowledge of both Admissions and campus resource departments due to my involvement in both throughout

my four years in college. I am pursuing this research to bring light to this topic in a peaceful manner and offer personalized recommendations to the University of Mississippi so that our reputation is retained, and students and staff continue to create the Ole Miss experience that is expected of students when they decide to attend our institution.

This thesis includes the following sections: Background, Literature Review, Discovery, Recommendations, and Conclusions. The Background section will give an overview of the University of Mississippi, specifically a brief history, the effects of operating as a state institution, and changes being implemented for better functionality in the admissions sector of campus. The Literature Review will discuss recent studies that give insight into universities that are facing what is known as the ‘enrollment cliff’ and the effects of COVID-19. Furthermore, it will discuss the well-being and support considerations of students and staff during these changing times. The Discovery chapter will highlight the methodology used in this study, mostly focusing on firsthand perspective and accounts from current employees. Also, this chapter will explore these acquired accounts through a comparison across departments and offices on campus. Next, the Conclusion and Recommendations sections include a discussion of the results, along with their implications, and how to mitigate some of the factors that are identified through recommendations to the University administration, faculty, and staff. Finally, there will be an overview on how this topic can be further developed in later research dependent on future enrollment changes.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

This section will give a brief background of the University of Mississippi and outline how the Board of Trustees for the Institute of Higher Learning (IHL) plays a role in setting requirements for public state institutions. Furthermore, it will discuss the University of Mississippi's addition of the Office of Enrollment Management in 2021 and what its structure entails. The admissions process and regulations surrounding it will also be discussed.

The University of Mississippi

For one hundred and seventy-five years, the University of Mississippi has served as the Flagship university in the state of Mississippi. Setting the standard for public higher education in the state began when the Mississippi Legislature chartered the university on February 24, 1844, and four years later, admitting its first eighty students in 1848. Sitting in the town of Oxford, named after the University of Oxford in Oxford, England, are sixteen academic divisions which include nationally recognized schools of accountancy, law, and pharmacy, a major medical school, and an honors college. The well-known nickname of the University stems from the title of the student yearbook from 1898. Since then, the names of Ole Miss and the University of Mississippi have remained synonymous. The University of Mississippi prides itself on its ability to give its students, faculty, and staff the best of both worlds: resources and experiences of a large institution in an environment of a small institution.

Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning

In 1943, a Constitutional amendment to the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 granted the creation of the Board of Trustees of the State Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL). The board would be composed of twelve members appointed by the Governor of Mississippi to provide management and control of Mississippi's system of eight public universities. These universities include Alcorn State University, Delta State University, Jackson State University, Mississippi State University, Wynbridge State University of Mississippi (formerly the Mississippi University for Women), Mississippi Valley State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Southern Mississippi.

The Board of Trustees' main responsibilities are policy and financial oversight for the Mississippi public universities of higher learning. One of these policies include setting the Admission Standards and Freshman Admission Requirements for University system institutions. Per the IHL Board of Trustees Policies and Bylaws, students graduating from high school and entering a public institution of higher learning must complete the 'College Preparatory Curriculum.' The curriculum includes a specific number of courses to be completed in the major subject areas of English, mathematics, science, social studies, arts, advanced electives, and technology or computer science (IHL Policies and Bylaws, 2023). A student's College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) grade point average (GPA) is then calculated on a 4.0 scale. From there, full admission will be granted to all Mississippi state residents who meet one of the following:

1. All students completing the College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) with a minimum of a 3.20 high school GPA on the CPC; or

2. All students completing the College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) with (a) a minimum of a 2.50 high school GPA on the CPC or a class rank in the top 50%, and (b) a score of 16 or higher on the ACT; or
3. All students completing the College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) with (a) a minimum of a 2.00 high school GPA on the CPC and (b) a score of 18 or higher on the ACT: or
4. All students satisfying the NCAA Division I standards for student athletes who are “full-qualifiers” or “academic redshirts”.

As listed on the University of Mississippi Office of Admissions webpage, nonresident students must meet the above Mississippi criteria and from there are evaluated for admission based on their standardized test score, grade point average, availability of seats in the incoming class, and rigor of high school curriculum. It is also important to note that the University of Mississippi is not requiring a standardized test score, such as the ACT or SAT, for admission, but they denote their importance for scholarships, some aid programs, and for academic placement. Additionally, the Mississippi IHL Policies and Bylaws of 2023 allow institutions to make appropriate admissions decisions for those qualified non-resident applications when “the anticipated enrollment will exceed the institution’s capacity to adequately serve all prospective students.” This policy serves as the University of Mississippi’s only option as a way to make decisions regarding nonresident students.

The University of Mississippi Office of Enrollment Management

In 2019, the University of Mississippi experienced the third consecutive year of falling enrollment. As a result, Provost Noel Wilkin commissioned a review of the

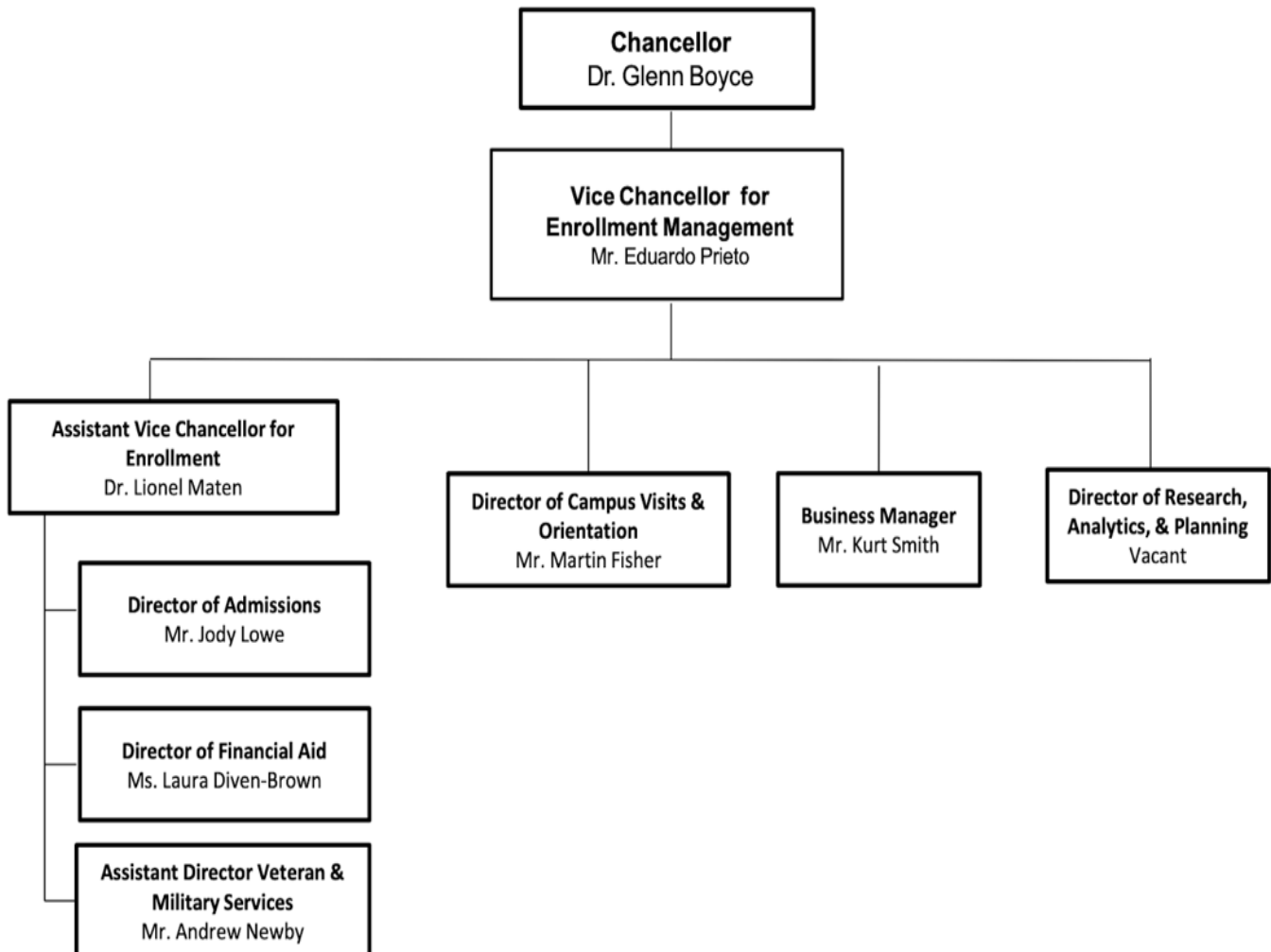
University of Mississippi admissions functions. Alongside Chancellor Glenn Boyce, Ole Miss began the implementation of several recommendations from that review. One of the largest recommendations combined the Financial Aid and Undergraduate Admissions offices into the creation of the Office of Enrollment Management. According to an email from Chancellor Boyce, among the Chancellor's 3 Things to Know, the goal of this office will be to "show greater evidence of value for the cost of attendance before committing to enroll."

Charged to lead this new office, Eduardo Prieto was named Vice Chancellor for the Office of Enrollment Management. In this role, Prieto will be responsible for designing and implementing the university's master enrollment strategy, incorporating recruitment plans and strategic enrollment initiatives, and leading financial aid optimization efforts. His experience of over twenty years in higher education from various fields will prepare him to welcome back-to-back-to-back new freshman classes at the University of Mississippi.

With the rearrangement of offices on campus, came the revision of the University of Mississippi Organization Chart for the Oxford Campus, categorically the Division of Enrollment Management. Below is the current structure of leadership within the new office departments, all the way up to the Chancellor as of July 2023.

FIGURE 1

**The University of Mississippi
Organization Chart for the Oxford Campus
Division of Enrollment Management**



Updated: July 2023

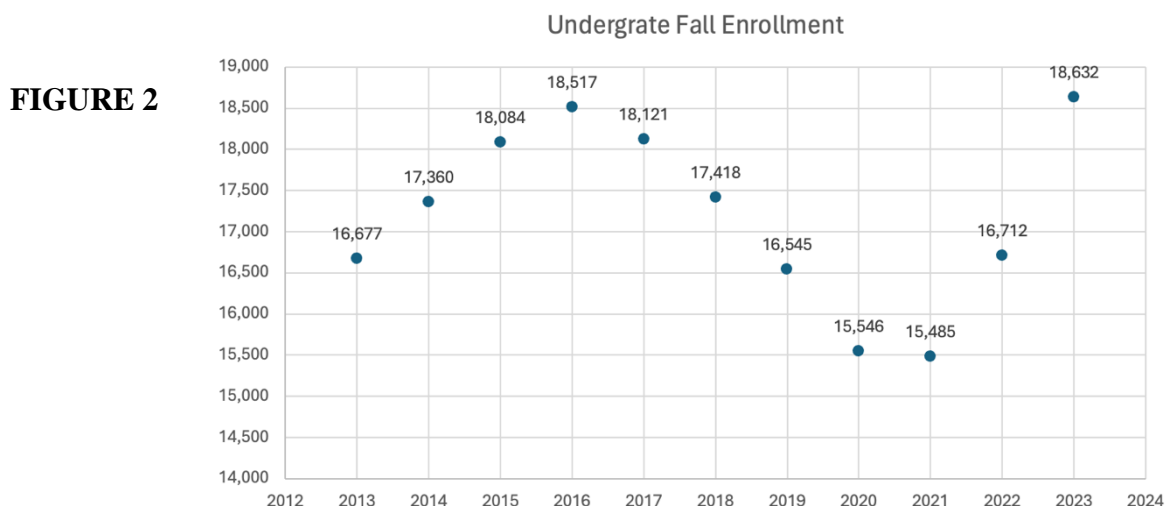
CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

When examining enrollment changes at the University of Mississippi, it is important to consider the pre-existing literature on the matter. As the University of Mississippi's enrollment has skyrocketed, enrollment at many colleges and universities across the United States is declining. These discussions are referred to as the "Higher Education Enrollment Cliff." Additionally, there are unique exceptions with enrollment rates because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These are important factors to examine when determining the reasoning behind enrollment changes.

Higher education has been a desired good in America since the first institution of higher education, Harvard College, was chartered in the English colonies in 1636. The Gilded Age brought forth commercial and industry growth in addition to being known as the "Age of the University" which blossomed the undergraduate collegiate opportunity (Happenings Magazine, 2019). The mid 19th century saw a growth in college building especially in liberal arts college including the founding of the University of Mississippi in 1848. The University of Mississippi, commonly referred to as Ole Miss, is the state of Mississippi's oldest university, a public institution, and largest by enrollment. It was not until between the First and Second World Wars that college enrollment surged. Interestingly, the years of the Great Depression did not affect college enrollment. However, the Depression did push institutions to "reduce budgets and seek out business and industrial projects for their faculty". These initiatives would lay the groundwork for external projects to continue and become "sponsored by the private sector and federal government" (Happenings Magazine, 2019).

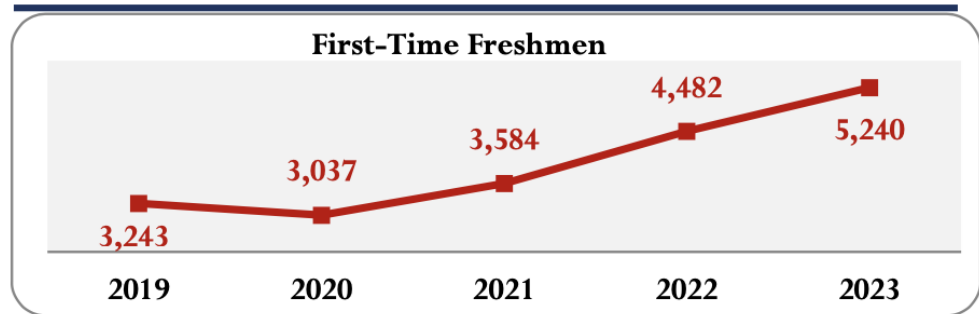
Through this discovery, it is important to keep in mind the effects of the Great Depression on American industry and compare it to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. While different in their foundations, financial and viral, they drastically affected the operations and view of the traditional collegiate experience.

As mentioned before, the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented time for colleges and transformed their daily operations in several ways. Traditional in-person classes were forced to a remote format and the future course modality would be forever changed. The Covid-19 pandemic would be the college's first enrollment major detriment to the college's typical enrollment numbers since the 2007-2008 Global Recession. From the National Center of Education Statistics, fall of 2021 undergraduate enrollment in “degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States was 15.4 million students, 3 percent lower than in fall 2020.” The pandemic commotion was a continuation of the downward trend in undergraduate enrollment. Ole Miss' undergraduate total enrollment during that same time frame decreased from 15,546 students in the fall of 2020 to 15,485 in fall of 2021 (UM Mini Fact Book, 2020-2021, 2021-2022).



While these numbers do not hold a large determining factor in the overall enrollment change, the freshman enrollment numbers during this time show the decrease in new students choosing to enroll in college overall. Freshman enrolled at Ole Miss in 2020 were 3,037 while freshman enrollment in 2021 were 3,584 (UM Mini Fact Book, 2020-2021, 2021-2022). The pandemic seemed to affect new students more during the year of 2020 than it did students already starting their degree progress. Another factor to consider is returning students having to transition to a new class structure midway through the spring semester of 2020 while a hybrid college experience would be brand new for the incoming freshman class.

FIGURE 3 **FIVE YEAR NEW FRESHMEN TRENDS**



Because of enrollment decreasing across the country, colleges began creating strategic plans of action to regain undergraduate student enrollment where they were pre-pandemic. If not, many institutions will likely continue down the enrollment cliff.

A New Normal in Education

During the pandemic, many colleges and universities stopped requiring one of the two most widely recognized standardized tests used in the college admissions process: the ACT and SAT. During the pandemic, it was difficult for people to get to designated

testing centers as well as test in a safe environment. To this day, it is still unclear if they will return to testing requirements in the future.

The University of Mississippi remains test optional but do strongly encourage incoming students to take the test and submit a score as it is important for scholarships, some aid programs, and for academic placement in a student's chosen degree path. For one student in Texas, studying and taking the SAT was "just something we had to do" (Hoover, 2021). "Although nearly three-quarters of four-year colleges have stopped requiring the ACT and SAT, an age-old belief system nourishes the notion that scores on those exams have great meaning," (Hoover, 2021). This change would uproot a century long tradition that students had been hearing since their youth.

As many institutions move into a post-Covid era, students' anxiety continues to be high regarding admissions requirements because many schools have adopted their own form of what it means to be test optional. One University of Virginia associate dean of admissions wishes more colleges would be transparent in explaining how a college reviews an application. This is as prevalent as before for many applicants who perceive that the rules of admissions just became less clear-cut.

Correspondingly, two scholars, Angela Farmer from Mississippi State University, and Jonathan Wai from the University of Arkansas, gathered to discuss what this test optional implementation could mean for students' chances of getting into the college of their choice. When asked if required college entrance exams have helped or hurt in the past, both Farmer and Wai gave similar answers. Farmer referenced her time as a high school administrator in a small, rural community in southern Illinois. She had many talented students get rejected by selective universities all because their high schools did

not have the resources needed to present a picture of their students as well as a less competitive rigor index. In this situation, she explains, test-optional colleges may find themselves “considering a wider variety of students than when they relied more on standardized test scores,” (Farmer, 2020). Wai agreed and expanded on the prediction that test scores give institutions an indication on how well students will perform in college and beyond. For example, Bowdoin College located in Brunswick, Maine has been test-optional since 1969. An educational researcher studied Bowdoin’s class of 1999 and found that “those who did not submit their SAT scores did worse during their first year of college than those who submitted their scores,” (Farmer, 2020). Therefore, standardized test scores would have been useful for admissions officers to consider when admitting students.

Lastly, the two professionals dive into the change in admissions that test-optional schools may face. Farmer expresses that students are being given more opportunities, but there is a growing recognition that standardized tests favor students from wealthier backgrounds. The Netflix documentary, *Operation Varsity Blues: The College Admissions Scandal*, gives further insight to the extremes taken by parents with affluent backgrounds. But those with less opportunity to gain expensive prep materials or hire coaches, can shift their focus to other criteria. Additional research shows test-optional policies may increase the number of freshman applicants, and in turn, find students who end up enrolling who may not have applied otherwise. No matter a college’s policy on standardized test scores, schools must figure out and learn to adapt to the effect their policy is having on their new and prospective students and on their caliber of education.

One of the many effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the move to online education. The benefits, challenges, and strategies have all been continuing issues of debate in higher education during and post pandemic. A study completed in Nepal gathered information of 280 students and faculty across five universities. It was conducted to try and fully understand both the student and teacher perspectives regarding online education. The survey utilized in the study used 15 traits regarding both positive benefits and negative consequences of online education. The survey also asked the importance of 10 distinct traits that make for an effective online teacher. From the survey, 84.6% of participants found online education to be beneficial in promoting online research, 84.4% found online education to increase overall global connectedness with differing peoples and cultures, 76.9% of participants found online courses increased their independence in learning (Paudel, 2021). However, the study found that participants find online education exacerbates issues with time-management skills and exposes distinct disparities in technological skills amongst both students and faculty as well as highlighting the distinct need for widespread and reliable internet in all areas of the country. As a result of the combination of both benefits and challenges posed by this new learning environment, Nepalese students and faculty agreed on a desire to utilize a mixed learning system, using both in person and online instruction to maximize the efficiency of classroom instruction following the pandemic.

In a similar situation, certain strain has been placed on college professors around the world because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the mainstream perception of such strain focuses on the effects of having to teach young adults within an online format, professors are facing even greater strain outside of the workplace. 50% of married college

professors are said to get a divorce, particularly those who teach entirely in isolation (Reeley, 2016). From this same group, professors may garner significant physical and mental health issues. As the demand for online education increases and the desire to achieve a four-year degree becomes more available to students, such considerations will be prevalent for faculty and staff of those institutions.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, professors with garnered respect and esteem have found themselves transformed into a state of fatigue often from the case of significantly larger workloads. As professors are pushed to be sound in their primary field of study now coupled with the expectations to be skilled from a technological perspective, such newfound expectations place incredible stress on professors. To teach in a different modality, publish, and service on committees may lead to strains in both personal and professional lifestyles. For many professors, teaching online for such enduring period could result in incredible psychological stress. Many found safety in the social interactions and comradery of the in-person classroom while the online instruction fails to supplement such interactions. Both psychological and mental health challenges can persist in such an environment, resulting in the need for profound change in the educational system with potent validation and support from university faculty, staff, and administration. Recognition of professors as true professionals will help curb this trend, and they may continue to suffer until profound change is made. As a few professors brave the risk of telling their personal struggles due to the change in lifestyle, it is realized by university administrators that the resources being provided to students in this difficult time are as much needed for faculty and staff as well.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCOVERY

To gain a well-rounded perspective, I utilized two rounds of interviews to answer the question, “How are offices and departments on campus managing their efforts to accommodate an increased number of students?” My interview resources were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in November 2023, before I began conducting any of my research.

All interviewees were divided into two groups: those who work directly with students and those who hold an administrative role at the University. Interviewees were asked the same set of questions with exceptions being made depending on their specific office or department.

The purpose of the first round of interviews was to gain an insight from those working day-to-day with students at the University of Mississippi, specifically from academic advisors, student leaders, and organizational advisors. The second round of interviews focused on the administrative perspective of enrollment growth and campus departments’ adaptation. A comparison was then made among varying perspectives.

All interviews were conducted successfully in person and garnered results over a three-month period in Spring 2024. Furthermore, the results are separated dependent on the department they reside in via the University of Mississippi organizational chart.

Ole Miss Alumni Association

Throughout his 36 years at the University of Mississippi, Clay Cavett who serves as the Associate Director of Alumni Affairs for the Ole Miss Alumni Association has

served under the direction of four Chancellors. Currently, Dr. Glenn Boyce has assumed the position of Chancellor since 2019. Cavett compares him to arguably one of the greatest to ever do the job.

Robert Khayat served the University of Mississippi as the 15th Chancellor from 1995 to 2009. Throughout his tenure, he arranged for the gift of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College to be established as well as a chapter of the prestigious honor society, Phi Beta Kappa. Additionally, Khayat brought in research and development grants of over \$100 million and increased enrollment at the University by 43% (Khayat, 2019). Similarly, under Chancellor Boyce's leadership, freshman enrollment is setting record numbers. He also has promoted economic development on campus with the university's largest single construction project on the Oxford campus, the Jim and Thomas Duff Center for Science and Technology Innovation, set to be completed in August 2024.

Although it can be difficult to compare Chancellor's from different generations and societal expectations, Cavett considers Boyce and Khayat to be "cut from the same cloth." "Both men, I consider to be visionaries for Ole Miss and the state of Mississippi. We are in the perfect storm right about now" (C. Cavett, February 2024).

Cavett continues by sharing how the Alumni Association is reaping the benefits from increased enrollment. When students are enjoying their time at Ole Miss, through all we have to offer, they are more likely to stay connected and give back down the road. There are more alumni clubs in cities across the United States than ever before.

"We have alumni all over the country that want to be connected with other Rebels," Cavett says.

As a result of growing physically by the number of members, the Alumni Association has had to adjust for various special events and begin planning for the future. A part of the Now and Ever Capital Campaign, the Alumni Association will undergo a \$30 million expansion to satisfy their growing staff, expand meeting spaces, and serve as a welcome center for those entering campus.

Office of Campus Visits and Orientation Programs

With the addition of the Office of Enrollment Management at the University of Mississippi came the separation of the Office of Campus Visits and Orientation Programs from the Office of Admissions. Martin Fisher has been working for the University of Mississippi for the past twelve years since he graduated in 2011. He experienced this office transition first-hand while serving as the Director of Campus Visits and Orientation Programs. His role could be defined as the bookends to the enrollment process.

The first half of his role is to recruit students. Through the continual assessment and improvements of campus visits and visit days, Martin and his team saw more than 30,000 campus visitors for the first time this past academic year and are on track to increase that number at the conclusion of this academic year. A major part of the campus visits office is the Ole Miss Ambassadors. This is a group of approximately 120 students who volunteer their time to give two tours a week as well as assist with fall and spring visit days. The students are trained and educated on the University of Mississippi, but Fisher makes it a priority to have students implement their own personal touch to their campus tours and communication with families that allow students to see themselves at Ole Miss

The other half of his job comes after students commit to the University of Mississippi. This means welcoming them when they decide to come here and “successfully, handing them off” to the University through orientation programming, Fisher says (M. Fisher, March 2024).

“Demand has been there,” Fisher explains, “We are trying to balance providing the best experience for people when they come but also managing capacity well enough. These two things do not always align.”

As the office prepares for this summer’s orientation sessions and next fall’s prospective student visits, additional orientation sessions are scheduled to accommodate for the largest expected incoming freshman class. In addition to adding more sessions, capacities per sessions are at an all-time high. One challenge this office has often faced is working within the spaces available to them on campus. This results in necessary creativity and redesign among Fisher and his staff.

As a graduate of the University of Mississippi, Fisher has seen the effects of growth and the opportunities it brings but through his role, he is facing challenges like the rest of campus.

When asked about his opinion on the growth happening on campus, Fisher expressed the expectations he is given through his job but also pointed out realistic effects of the growth.

“Generally, yes, it is a good thing we are growing,” Fisher begins.

“We are now caught up to where we were in 2016, so now we are at the point of figuring out what is our high-water mark. The numbers right now indicate that we have the most of everything we have ever had: the most parking, housing, faculty and staff,

classrooms, and so that would indicate that there is the ability to have more students but that does not mean that there are not challenges along the way,” Fisher conveyed.

As an Ole Miss Ambassador and past Orientation Leader myself, I have seen the growth personally and worked directly with the Office of Campus Visits and Orientation Programs staff members. Mason Tilghman is the Assistant Director of Campus Visits in this office. As he is coming up on finishing his fourth year in this position, he explains the dramatic growth daily campus visits have seen.

When Tilghman first started in this position, the office was staffed by Fisher and Tilghman alone.

“When I first started working here, we were running our daily visits out of the Martindale-Cole building in what was called the small and big living rooms,” Tilghman says. These rooms would accommodate up to 50 people. At the time, this was a manageable load since the rooms were rarely full. “Now, with our collaboration with the Student Union, we host visits out of their space. The room we utilize maxes out at 150 for daily visits, twice a day, and are usually full.” (M. Tilghman, March 2024).

With this attendance, they are forced to set a limit for visitors each day. Even with space restrictions, the demand is still present no matter the time of year. The Ole Miss Ambassadors volunteer their time during the semesters but when school is not in session, the Office of Campus Visits “does not have enough staff to accommodate groups that want to come visit,” says Tilghman. The office can offer payment to student ambassadors during times when the University is not open for regular classes and even scholarship a class at the in-state rate over the summer months. “We are very thankful for those who

are able to stick around and help with tours, but it continues to be a challenge,” (M. Tilghman, March 2024).

A major part of the Ole Miss visit experience is for a student to be able to see themselves on campus as a student. With that in mind, our scheduler of visits tries to keep tour groups with five or less families per ambassador and matching students to ambassadors based on hometown and major. With the Ambassadors being strictly volunteer positions, Tilghman and Fisher give reign to students to give a tour on the traditional tour route but to make it experiential and relatable for students. As the number of visitors grow, so do the number of people in a tour group.

“Even with set caps each day, some families will still call to see if they can come visit, and we do our best to meet those needs,” Tilghman says. “It is the families that do not call and show up anyway that create issues for us.”

Tilghman mentioned a story of a family that arrived to their office at 4:30 PM on a Friday afternoon. All students were gone for the day, thus creating issues with timing for staff members and overall experience for the student. Tilghman mentions how this is happening more and more, but that they have to work with it.

When asked about the potential of hiring additional staff for this office, Tilghman expressed his office’s collaborative efforts and success as one of the smaller teams on campus.

“There are certainly times when we get overwhelmed, and I think any department would say that,” expressed Tilghman.

“When it gets to a point where we are seeing 800-1,000 people a day during Fall Fridays and Saturday visit days are bigger than that, there is only so much you can handle as a team of five,” (M. Tilghman, March 2024)

Tilghman spoke on his desire for this office to get their own space not only to host visit sessions but also for our staff and student ambassadors.

Division of Enrollment Management

As the inaugural Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management at the University of Mississippi, Eduardo Prieto wasted no time setting records and creating change. In less than three years in the role, Prieto has welcomed consecutive largest freshman classes for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, with the University expecting to break the record once again for the 2024-2025 school year.

When speaking with Prieto, he was able to dissect the many parts involved with enrollment management through the comparison of colleges and universities to businesses.

“There is a sticker price which is the theoretical number of what we charge everyone; there is an in-state number and an out-of-state number which is higher. In reality, what everybody pays is most often very different,” Prieto says. The sticker price, referring to the common price of tuition, is more than likely not the exact number that will appear in a student’s bursar account.

This is relevant due to the amount of revenue generated from students’ tuition. There are some students who pay that sticker price but then there are a lot who pay a different price, all of which is based on a combination of things: merit scholarships, state or federal assistance, and more.

“It is the University’s job to try and make sure that the number of all tuition to be collected averages to a certain number as the University is dependent on it to operate,” Prieto added.

As a result of state budgetary restrictions, public colleges and universities across the United States have seen their funding diminish. “Ten to fifteen years ago, the University of Mississippi received about 65-70% of our funding from the state of Mississippi. Today, that number is less than 20%,” (E. Prieto, March 2024).

Prieto gave the example of a business receiving higher marketing costs from their corporate office. When this happens, most businesses are susceptible to passing that additional price onto the customer or consumer of their goods. If schools are receiving less funding from their respective state governments, they must bring in the additional revenue somehow.

Prieto noted how many professionals in academia dislike the use of consumer terminology, but that it is a relevant comparison in the fact that universities and colleges are providing a service to their students.

“What schools commonly do when they get less funding and their costs to operate increase, like most businesses, they are passing it along to the consumer which is usually through tuition increases.” (E. Prieto, March 2024).

When asking about how Ole Miss has maintained operations while not increasing tuition, Prieto explains how he “thinks it is everybody [at the University’s] goal to maintain and make sure we stay affordable,” (E. Prieto, March 2024). “I believe we are one of, if not the school, who has had the lowest tuition percentage increase in the state and within the SEC over the last five years,” (E. Prieto, March 2024).

Going back to the idea of the “sticker price” of tuition, Eduardo expressed his satisfaction of in-state students paying, on average, less than half of the sticker price for tuition. “We are happy and proud we are able to subsidize that for our Mississippi students. On average, our in-state students are paying less than \$5,000 for tuition each year. That is almost unheard of in the country,” (E. Prieto, March 2024).

Prieto brings up the relevance of individuals differing opinions of the number of out-of-state students at the University of Mississippi. One of the reasons the University is able to subsidize in-state students is because of the revenue non-residents bring in. On average, out-of-state students are paying three fourths of the sticker price. Even with non-residents paying more, in many situations, out-of-state tuition at Ole Miss is a much more affordable option than a student choosing to go in-state in their respective states.

When Chancellor Glenn Boyce brought in Eduardo Prieto, his first goal for Prieto was to increase enrollment. Many are unaware of the fact that in 2016-2017, the freshman class at Ole Miss sat at 3,984 students which still ranks as the third largest freshman class in Ole Miss history. Prieto was challenged with growing the University back to where it once was.

“Part of our initiation plan and vision is that we thought we would be at a certain point three to five years out. I think it is safe to say we are at least two to three years ahead of plan, but that is a good situation to be in,” (E. Prieto, March 2024).

Prieto added that “some would say, maybe we have grown too quick, too fast and that might be fair.”

With this in mind, Prieto explains how all enrollment managers or comparable positions from all SEC schools meet at least four times a year. When Prieto initially

arrived, other leaders of schools were eager to share their plans of actions because they did not see Ole Miss as their competitor. Most recently, “they have given us the biggest compliment they can give,” Eduardo said, “they are careful about what they share with us since now they see us as competitors.”

Prieto attributes a major part of our recent success to changing the culture on campus. “A major part of the southern hospitality and culture is that we do not like to boast or brag, and I think that has inhibited us some from a recruitment standpoint,” Eduardo says. With the collaboration of campus partners and especially the marketing and communications teams, we have learned how to tell our story and become comfortable talking about how good we are.

Looking forward, Prieto notes his priority of being good “town and gown” partners. Not only is the University responsible for its growth on campus but also responsible for ensuring the quality of life for everyone that affects. “To not lose cite of what makes us so special,” Eduardo explains, “We do not want to get too big.” Part of the difficult decisions we are having right now includes finding the right size. “It is not as easy as saying a specific number is the perfect undergraduate student size. Think back to the revenue we bring in from tuition,” Prieto explains.

Assuring myself and others on campus, Prieto says, “While we might not have a perfect enrollment number identified, what we do know is that we cannot continue to grow at the same pace we are now. It is probably not sustainable.”

The Center for Student Success and First Year Experience

For the past ten years, the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience has promoted student success through comprehensive, multifaceted, and dynamic

initiatives to ensure a quality collegiate experience for the diverse student population (Turnage, 2023). First-Year Experience serves as an individual unit within the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience, and the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience serves as a department within the Division of Student Affairs.

Rachael Durham serves as the Assistant Director for First-Year Experience within the center and oversees all EDHE 105, 106, and 305 courses which includes the hiring, training, and credentialing of instructors. Within the First-Year Experience unit, a focus has been the EDHE 105 course, the freshman academic orientation course. All students are encouraged to enroll in EDHE 105 to be “welcome[d] to the university, welcome[d] to college introduction and all those things that a new student may need to know or want to know,” Durham said.

In 2013, the University offered 90 sections of the EDHE class. In the fall of 2023, students were offered more than 165 classes, taught by more than 150 instructors (Turnage, 2023). Durham, who has been in her current role since 2014, recently completed her Ed.D. in Education through the University of Mississippi. As a final requirement of the degree, she wrote her dissertation entitled *The University of Mississippi’s First-Year Experience Course: A Quantitative Analysis*. Although her research is primarily focused on the effect of an EDHE course on a student’s retention and GPA, she can identify critical steps to better engage staff to lead these courses as well as the identification of program goals and outcomes by key stakeholders of the Center.

As the freshman class size has grown, there has been a greater demand for EDHE 105 sections. As of 2019, there were 109 sections of the course taught by 80 instructors.

To keep the course size to a maximum of 25 students per class, center staff like Rachael Durham have turned to anyone on campus who meets required criteria as an option to teach a section of the course. All instructors are required to have a master's degree, preferably in Higher Education and are required to attend training sessions held during the summer before the fall session begins. In terms of compensation for teaching the course, each instructor has the option of personal compensation of \$2,000 per course over the fall semester or an office honorarium of \$500 if they work on campus to use this course to fulfill part of their job requirement of teaching (Durham, 2023). Many individuals' concern or disinterest in teaching the course stems from the compensation offered, or lack thereof.

Since staff members make up the majority of instructors for EDHE 105, they also have other duties within their specific roles that they must tend to, making it difficult to spend additional time dedicated to their voluntary EDHE course. Part of the curriculum for EDHE 105 calls for one-on-one instructor meetings where the instructors sit down with each student to check in throughout the semester. As simple as this may seem, a class of 25 students taking up thirty minutes each is over twelve hours. That is more than an entire working day, not including prior meetings, job responsibilities, or research time.

Durham concludes her dissertation with the hope that administration and stakeholders of the First-Year Program will refocus their goals and outcomes for the EDHE courses. The purpose of teaching this course can be extremely beneficial for faculty to learn more about becoming "student centered" to bring new methods of teaching back to their respective areas of expertise (Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005).

In her role as Assistant Director for First-Year Experience, Durham concludes that the training for the course has diminished due to the short time span to find, hire, and train instructors among their schedules and the undersized two-person administrative team. She hopes they will be able to “catch up or increase staff in the near future” (Durham, 2023).

Sunny Brown is in her seventh year of teaching EDHE 105 at Ole Miss. She serves as the Assistant Director at the Ole Miss Alumni Association and is in her tenth year of advising the Student Alumni Council which serves over one hundred students across campus. While meeting, she expressed her concern that students may be “losing a lot of the engagement factor of the Ole Miss environment” due to changes made as a result of the growing freshman class (S. Brown, February 2024).

“My EDHE classes have never been more than 22-24 students. I had 28 in my class this year,” Brown stated. She noted that four students may not seem like much, but the issues arose when trying to meet with them all individually and trying to create a personal relationship. “It is just not feasible,” Brown said. She continues with a personal experience of a student from her most recent fall section of EDHE 105. Brown came to know a female student who was constantly looking for ways to get plugged in and make more friends. By living at the Quarters, she was living in a one-bedroom apartment. Although there is a common space there, that experience does not compare to walking with a peer back to your residence hall after class or having to walk down the hall to use the restroom. Despite the challenge, Brown is a staff member who genuinely cares about her students and made it a priority to support this student for her to have the Ole Miss experience she knows all too well. At the end of the day, Brown expressed concern on

how living off campus may do a “disservice to the freshman experience Ole Miss offers” (S. Brown, February 2024).

Brown was also able to give insight from her job at the Alumni Association and as a long-time resident of the Oxford community. One of the Alumni Association’s main responsibilities is to plan and executive the 50-year class reunions. She spoke on classes from the 1950s and 1960s classes being so small and interconnected. About the 1970s and 1980s was a spike of growth. As the classes grew, individuals lost touch quickly. “It is interesting to see how even in the 70s, they were learning how to deal with enrollment growth, similar to how we are today,” Brown stated.

In many ways, Brown feels as though Oxford has responded well to the growth. She asked me to reminisce on my memories of coming to Oxford as a young child. We connected about how we both used to tailgate where the Pavilion now stands as well as driving down Jackson Avenue and most all shops and restaurants being locally owned. “This used to be a town that could not have supported a Chick-Fil-A, and now we cannot live without one,” (S. Brown, February 2024). Brown and I concluded our time looking toward the future. Brown who currently has a two-year-old raised questions of where Oxford will be when her little girl is my age.

Health Professions Advising Office

The Health Professions Advising Office (HPAO) at the University of Mississippi is the only full-service office of its kind in the state. The office’s mission is to counsel all University of Mississippi health professions students on available opportunities for a health care career and advise students toward a competitive application. Each of the eight academic advisors within the office specialize in a pre-health track. These tracks include

pre-dentistry, nursing, pre-medical, pre-physician assistant, pre-occupational and physical therapy, pre-veterinary, pre-pharmacy, and pre-optometry.

Meredith Pyle serves as an academic advisor for pre-occupational therapy, pre-physical therapy, athletic training, and chiropractic medicine students. Aside from her daily advising appointments with students, she finds herself completing a lot of programming for the office as well as social media, marketing and communication. Additionally, she teaches Business Communications within the School of Business, EDHE 105 for freshman students, and an applications course for junior students who are applying to Physical Therapy or Occupational Therapy school in the upcoming application cycle.

As an Ole Miss Accountancy graduate herself, she understands the expectation of academic competitiveness as well as the dedication Ole Miss gives to each of their students.

Meredith and I have a personal connection from when I was applying to Ole Miss. As a junior in high school, I was interested in pharmacy school. I applied to our Early Entry Pharmacy program in which Meredith was an advisor at the time. Even being very familiar with the Ole Miss campus and experience, the School of Pharmacy was new to myself and my family. It was people like Meredith who comforted my apprehensions and gave my mother a sense of relief with this unknown territory. I mention this personal connection because Meredith is just one of many faculty and staff members who make an impact on their students daily and are committed to their success even after graduation.

The HPAO office is known across campus for their dedication and execution to student's success, but that does not come without a price.

“We have grown drastically and are still swamped, absolutely swamped all the time. Most of the time, I am taking work home which is hard, but it is all about our students,” Pyle says. “Advising in this particular office is knowing that students are not working on their application in the middle of the day; they are working on it at 8:30 at night. Their questions are time sensitive, so it is a lot of giving out your phone number and knowing you are probably going to get a call or text message at night,” Pyle continues (M. Pyle, March 2024).

With summer orientation being one of the busiest times for the HPAO office, Pyle explains how this time is often filled with hard conversations with students and parents.

The Office of Admissions test-optional policy does not coincide with the policies of individual courses. “A student is told from admissions, the ACT or the SAT is not required, but then they come to us at orientation and are unable to enroll in certain classes,” Pyle says (M. Pyle, February 2024).

No matter their major, all students can be advised by the HPAO office, and the office advises students which courses are required for admission into a health-related professional school. The issues arise when students come to orientation with no standardized test score, thus not being able to register for the required courses. Thus, they must take the prerequisites to the courses they need. Depending on the major track, this could add up to one to two additional semesters to catch up on the requirements on an application. Pyle feels that students may have a score and opt not to submit it which ends up hurting them in the long run. She highly recommends pre-health profession students submit their scores so they can stay on track for graduation and health-related professional school.

School of Business Administration

The School of Business Administration consistently ranks as the second largest school at the University of Mississippi, behind the College of Liberal Arts. Beth Whittington, the Assistant Dean for Student Services and overseer of the School of Business Advising Office, discusses the preparations taken each year and what this rapid growth means for students. When Whittington started in the School of Business nine years ago, there were only three full-time academic advisors. Now, seven advisors advise over 4,757, three of those advisors being added within the last year and a half.

Prior to the past couple of years, the School of Business experienced and expected a gradual growth. Whittington explains that this “quick growth” happening now brings up challenges such as “maintaining the level of support to our students and trying to make predictions for the number of staff needed for the year ahead,” (B. Whittington, March 2024).

A large responsibility held by Whittington is to provide input to department chairs and administration when she sees something that may not be working toward the benefit of students. At course registration time, she may recognize that a specific class is filling up quickly or is already full, so she would be the one to request additional seats or sections of the course. Generally, department chairs can meet those demands but that may require an increase in capacity of an online section of the course or adding another section. With those solutions, the professor of the online course is increasing their workload, and a professor must be found to teach the additional section.

A unique attribute to the Ole Miss School of Business is their requirement of all first-year students to enter as a general business major. According to the School of Business

Academic Catalog, “students must have a minimum GPA of 2.25 on the completion of the first year of the general education core curriculum courses” to declare a specialty major within the school. Whittington shared how this policy may be changing in the near future.

“All students starting out in general business has been challenging because we do not always know a student’s true intention of what major they are interested in,” Whittington said. This causes issues on the advising end because there is a disconnect among students not knowing which courses are required for their major and the office not being prepared with enough spaces for these students.

“Because of this, we are looking at a policy change that would allow student to declare their specialty major when they enter the University,” (B. Whittington, March 2024). The policy change is currently waiting on approval from the Council of Academic Administrators.

While this change will allow the school to better prepare for the number of course offerings and their capacities, the challenge will remain with the influx of students being advised within the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience. Whittington went into more detail about the excessive number of students each School of Business advisor is responsible for advising.

“Our National Academic Advising Association recommends anywhere from 300 to 400 students per advisor. This is our goal of where we would like to be, but it is just a matter of funding and space. As of today, if every advisor within the School of Business had one specific case load of students, there would be over 500 students per advisor,

probably closer to 600 depending on how you do the math,” Whittington noted (B. Whittington, March 2024).

I had the opportunity to speak with my own advisor within the Business School, Mrs. Kim Phillips, and she made additional points that are often not talked about.

“Within the Business School, we send out a pre-advising form for students to complete and return. As an advisor, I am reading over hundreds of these forms on top of meeting with students daily,” Phillips said.

“I also have a large percentage of students who do not come in person but will go back and forth via email for me to essentially advise them online,” Phillips continued. “This results in me spending as much time or more with them than if they filled out the pre-advising form or made an appointment.”

She ended our conversation with praising Mrs. Beth Whittington and all she does for the academic advisors within the School of Business. Phillips names her an “amazing supervisor always having a student’s best interest at the forefront.”

No matter what happens with the University’s enrollment in the future, the School of Business expects to see growth and high numbers within their department as usual. Both Phillips and Whittington invest their livelihood into their jobs and all but are hopeful for more support in their office.

Department of Housing

Arguably, the most popular topic for all students at the University of Mississippi and those committed for the next school year falls under the topic of student housing. The Ole Miss campus is home to seven traditional halls, six contemporary halls, two residential colleges, and three apartments, with a fourth apartment option being added for

the 2024-2025 school year. There is no question, the growth of enrollment is a concern for the Department of Housing.

While serving as an Ole Miss Ambassador, we have weekly speakers come to our meetings to inform us with current information and updates surrounding campus. Recently, we were joined by the Graduate Assistant of Marketing, Austin Jones, under the Student Housing Operations office.

One of the most asked questions student ambassadors receive from incoming students and parents is about the housing ‘waitlist’. Beginning in summer of 2022, the student housing department exhausted all available spaces for incoming freshmen students at the time of the housing selection process. As a result, a housing waitlist was created for those students who were waiting to see if and where a spot in a residence hall would open. As a result of last year’s slow-moving waitlist and the lack of spaces that became available, the University was forced to house freshman students in the Quarters of Oxford, an apartment complex located adjacent to the Ole Miss campus. Additionally, resident assistants (RAs), who live on the halls of a residence hall and serve as the responsible party for those students, were given a roommate, triple-bedrooms would be back in use after years of serving as double rooms, and freshman students would be living off-campus despite the freshman living requirement.

As students are working through the changes, so are the RAs in residence halls. The Daily Mississippian Newspaper wrote an article on the effects of housing woes on those who are employed. When Ole Miss welcomed their largest freshman class in August, it also meant the student housing employees welcomed the same number. Move-in days consists of hundreds of students plus friends and family moving a student and all their

belongings into their room. In many halls, there are two to three elevators for the entire building and a narrow set of stairs. Additionally, numerous students are opting for professional room designers to set up their rooms for them. Move-in is described as “hectic” by a Martin Hall RA who states she is “wary about the rising number of students in each building” (Isbell, 2023). This RA would go from having 30 girls on her floor the previous year to 50 girls this year.

Similarly, an RA from Crosby Hall believes “operational changes and increased population has led to several instances of miscommunication between departments, making for frustrating work” (Isabel, 2023). This coming fall, the Student Housing Department plans to employ over 250 residence assistants to work in all residence halls and apartment buildings. With working as an RA being one of the only ways upperclassmen can stay on campus to live, there is a hope for better communication and more advocacy on their behalf.

As the number of freshman students increases, sophomores and upperclassmen began facing a never-before-seen issue: freshman taking spots away from upperclassmen at off-campus housing. The University has been on a declining slope of having space for housing for sophomores and upperclassmen on campus. Jones spoke on how, with the exception of a handful of students with a housing-specific scholarship, on-campus housing would be all freshmen students. Additionally, of the off-campus housing in Oxford, as of the beginning of March, open spaces were sparse.

The largest disconnect comes from the cost of off-campus student housing. Due to the need for approval from the IHL board, specific rates for student housing will not be set for the coming school year until May, so students are forced to choose a place to live

only knowing a range of what it could cost. For example, the Quarters is the apartment style living complex, off campus, where the overflow of freshman were housed this school year. As of March 2024, the Ole Miss Student Housing website posted updated rates of all campus housing options with the notice that all rates are pending IHL approval. A three-bedroom standard apartment at the Quarters is being set at \$5,350 per semester (Rates, 2024). On campus, a double room in contemporary halls cost \$3,591 per semester and a double room in the traditional halls is \$3,067 per semester (Rates, 2024). On top of a 30-55% increase in the cost of housing, the fear of the unknown in price and living is not a feeling students and parents are enjoying during this exciting time in life.

Department of Parking and Transportation

It is often considered a privilege for students to have the option to bring a car to campus. It is even more rare for freshmen to be allowed to bring a vehicle. There is no surprise as enrollment numbers grow, so will the difficulty and limitations of parking spots on campus. The Department of Parking and Transportation (DPT) uses the revenue from parking citations to “repay the bonds on all our parking garages and improve our existing parking assets around campus,” Assistant Director of the Department of Parking and Transportation Matt Davis said (Frost, 2023). During the 2022-2023 school year, Ole Miss collected \$1,314,130.70 in revenue from parking fines (Frost, 2023). By September of 2023, less than a month into the current academic year, the university had collected \$144,705. With this number, DPT is on track to collect similar or larger revenue by the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

Student Body President, Sara Austin Welch, mentions how parking is the most reoccurring complaint she hears from fellow students. She detects students blaming the increased enrollment for issues, such as parking, becoming even more prevalent.

I believe students grumble because there is a lack of parking especially when the DPT admits to selling almost 3,000 more parking passes than there are spaces available for students to park in. There have also been occurrences with students being ticketed for their illegal parking and while the parking official is giving the ticket, they are parked illegally as well. Additionally, the reliability of the Oxford University Transit (OUT) bus system is questionable. Many students who park in Commuter Red or live off campus will ride the OUT bus into campus. A freshman who is living in the Quarters off-campus takes the bus to school.

“The buses are almost never on time. They are two to three minutes late on a good day, and 10 to 15 minutes on a bad day,” Van said. “The longest I’ve had to wait is 25 minutes,” (Fox, Anderson, 2023)

Right now, there is a guarantee that a parking area will be built in conjunction with the new dormitory buildings at the Kincannon Hall site. Although, this parking is looking to be dedicated to on-campus residents while the major issues still arise with commuter lots. It can be frustrating for students to see such large numbers being brought in through parking citations and only residential parking reaping any sort of benefit. There is a high price to pay for new parking whether a garage or surface lot, but there is a plethora of opportunities for these lots to serve multi purposes.

Registered Student Organizations and Their Leadership

When prospective students visit Ole Miss, the first part of their campus tour involves witnessing the “living room of campus” through the Student Union and the excitement happening on the Union Plaza. Through organizations tabling on the Union walk-way to groups handing out free merchandise on the plaza, interacting with student organizations is inevitable. The goal of this is for students to envision themselves partaking in the student life experience. Jordain Lang serves as the Assistant Director of Student Activities for the Ole Miss Student Union Office and spends every day of her job engaging with students and student leaders through the planning and execution of events or programming. The main organizations she advises are the Student Activities Association (SAA) and RebelTHON Dance Marathon, two of the largest student organizations on campus. SAA is made up of five branches, Homecoming, Entertainment, Campus Traditions, Pageants, and Special Events, and provides more than 100 events for students, by students each school year.

To coordinate these opportunities for students, “our budget largely depends on the Student Activity Fee,” Lang says (J. Lang, February 2024). The Student Activity Fee is a five-dollar fee paid by every graduate and undergraduate student at the University of Mississippi through their university tuition. A proposal by the Associated Student Body in Fall 2020 came because of the SAF being estimated to deplete by Fall 2023. It was not until Spring 2022 when the student body of the University of Mississippi voted and passed the revision of an increase to two-dollar per credit hour as the new fee. The revising of the SAF structure was proposed to “better support registered student organizations in their mission to positively affect the student experience” (SAF Proposal, 2020).

Aside from budgetary restraints, Lang expresses how no matter how hard student leaders try, it has always been a challenge to try and engage everyone's interests. "It's very easy to see that there are more students on campus, and they do have a desire to be involved on campus, particularly in student programming." (J. Lang, February 2024). Lang says how she and her student leaders have tried their best to meet the needs in terms of creating programming and opportunities for students to do things on campus that would not require them to necessarily leave the Ole Miss campus. This includes late night programming, mid-day programming, grab-and-go events; all of which are free to students. Even with programming engagement visibly present, Lang acknowledges the challenges she and her office are facing.

The Student Union staff is comprised of seven full time staff members along with numerous Graduate Assistants and student leaders. Despite the growth among enrollment, "our office staff has grown very minimally and responsibilities in general have expanded to meet the needs of students" (J. Lang, February 2024). Aside from the need of hiring additional staff members, Lang points out the usual high turnover in student affairs. These roles often require long hours, late nights, and it is not always sustainable for staff members (J. Lang, February 2024).

Even with its challenges, the Ole Miss student life experience is a major part of a student's overall time while an undergraduate student and Lang sees the importance of such.

"I think there is a really strong common understanding and respect across campus among academia and student affairs," Lang says. "If a student comes into my office, I am never going to tell them to prioritize their social life and their involvement over

grades. In the same way, I know that if a student I work closely with goes to an academic department to be advised, they are going to be asking ‘what are you doing outside of class like for your mental health, where are you involved’. So, I think that mentality on campus is something that the University does well and one reason why we will continue to grow and retain students.”

“If students come here and all they do is go to class and go home, that is not a fulfilling experience and it is not the Ole Miss experience,” (J. Lang, February 2024).

Sara Austin Welch is no stranger to the Ole Miss student experience. Having served as an Ole Miss Ambassador, Orientation Leader, Pi Beta Phi Sorority leadership team, and various roles in the Associated Student Body, she is culminating her Ole Miss experience by serving as the 2023-2024 Associated Student Body President. Within this role, she has had the opportunity to meet with other Southeastern Conference (SEC) Student Body Presidents and collaborate and discuss the growth many SEC schools are also facing. Her position is also unique since she is one of few people on campus who are allowed to see and confront both sides of the enrollment growth. She talked through the behind-the-scenes topics of which many students are unknowing.

“As a student, I feel all the things [other students feel] when we are bursting at the seams. I also am in the room when the numbers are talking about along with expenses and finances, and what we can and cannot do with policies in place,” (S. Welch, March 2024). Welch continues with explaining that no matter what our counterparts in the SEC are doing, not only are we restrained by the IHL Board Policies for all Mississippi public institutions but “logistically, we should not” change our non-resident requirements for admission.

“We [Ole Miss] tell every Mississippi resident if they have the grades, ACT, et cetera. they can come to Ole Miss, despite us making near nothing off Mississippi students,” Welch says.

Looking across the SEC, Welch says that Ole Miss makes it a priority to stay the lowest we can for students with regards to tuition. “If Ole Miss were to ever make a recommendation to the IHL board, I do not believe it would be to halt enrollment – at the end of the day, Ole Miss needs the tuition dollars to operate at its fullest. We could possibly increase the non-resident tuition fees and remain lower than most of our counterparts,” Welch says (S. Welch, March 2024). Welch concludes her thoughts with the reassurance that no matter the current IHL policies or happenings on campus, she and Chancellor Boyce continue to reiterate the importance of the quality of each and every student’s experience.

The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

When Robert Khayat served as the fifteenth Chancellor of the University of Mississippi, he led and watched many of his ideas come to fruition. One of these additions to the University was a “true Honors program/college” which would eventually become the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. Founded in 1997 through an endowment from Jim and Sally Barksdale, the Honors College offers challenging and unique educational opportunities to academically talented students (Boyte, 2023).

Dr. John Samonds has been with the Honors College during the majority of his time at Ole Miss. When he started his role in the Honors College, the initial class of the Honors College were sophomores.

Since 2010, the Honors College has had an increase of almost 50% in the number of applications submitted. Prior to that, if a student applied with at least a 28 on the ACT and a 3.5 unweighted high school GPA, they would be accepted into the Honors College. When the increase of applicants occurred, administration realized they could no longer accept everyone who met those basic qualifications. At this point, the Provost Scholars program was created to help supplement this growth.

Samonds expands, “When you have a university that basically has open enrollment, to have an Honors College turning students down did not seem like a very smart decision. The Provost Scholars program gives some higher end students a bit of a title and some opportunities although it is not as fully developed as the Honors College.”

Since the beginning, the Honors College was tasked with bringing in 10% of the freshman class. This served as the “unofficial requirement,” (J. Samonds, March 2024). The 2023 freshman class of Ole Miss was “somewhere at 5,200 and I think our number settled around 523,” Samonds said. This growth is expected to continue into Fall of 2024 with an estimated freshman class of over 6,000 students.

Samonds explains how he and the other administrative staff of the Honors College have spoken with Provost Noel Wilkin and expressed their concern. “We just cannot go that high to 600 freshman or more,” (J. Samonds, March 2024).

They are aiming to be more in line with Fall 2023 numbers, maybe even reaching to 550 students.

“This gets into the issue of being able to serve those students that we do bring in, not just in offering enough honors courses but having enough faculty to advise capstones,

enough resources, the staff here to support students, study space in the building, so they can enjoy what we see as the perks of being in the Honors College,” Samonds conveyed.

One selling point to students on the Honors College is the limit to how many seats are in each section of an honors course. Each section of a class is limited to around fifteen students. This smaller number encourages student participation and allows for the development of relationships among peers and the professor. A commonality among all freshman honors students is the requirement of Honors 101 and 102. These courses, titled “The Honors Freshman Seminar” is one of the oldest and sustaining traditions. This past year’s growth resulted in Dr. Samonds comparing himself to a “deep sea fisherman” trying to reel in additional faculty to teach the 36 sections of Honors 101 and 102 (J. Samonds, March 2024). In his effort to find teachers for the many sections, there are numerous variables that bring additional challenges. One of these challenges being faculty on a tenure track. Samonds says, “We don’t want to jeopardize their getting tenure by having them take on more than they should. Also, since Honors 101 and 102 are outside of everyone’s disciplines, we do not want to take them away from their publications and additional work.”

Samonds is thankful for the relationships the Honors College has with the department chairs on campus. “Most chairs have been established for quite a while, so they know what we [the Honors College] are looking for and often provide suggestions of people I had not even thought of yet,” (J. Samonds, March 2024).

Although Dr. Samonds has been able to place faculty into teaching positions for Honors courses, one issue that begins to arise is having enough classroom space for this increased number of courses. They do their best to have as many classes as possible in

the Honors College building to offer a sense a place for their students. “One of the things we worry about it, with our growth, how connected do our students feel to the Honors College,” (J. Samonds, March 2024).

As someone who experienced the beginning days of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College to now welcoming their largest classes, Samonds acknowledges the excitement surrounding the growth but also the sense of keeping up. The continued support from the Lyceum, specifically, the Provost’s office, continues to provide guidance and solutions for challenges being faced within the Honors College. As a last example, for years the Honors College only offered honors calculus in a traditional sequence, Calculus I in the fall and Calculus II in the spring. As the number of students with Advanced Placement Score credit or Dual Enrollment credit grew, those students wanted to start with Calculus II in the fall. Now, we are able to offer this off-sequence due to the number of students interested.

Moving forward, student engagement continues to be at the forefront of the Honors College’s mission. The increased number of staff will ensure that no students “slip through the cracks” and that the requirements of all honors students are able to be achieved.

Office of the Provost

My final and overall encompassing interview came from my time with Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Noel Wilkin. His expertise from his twenty-five years at the University and his daily overseeing of numerous departments allow for students, faculty, and staff concerns to be addressed, firsthand. He begins his interview recounting past enrollment histories of the University.

Through fall of 2016, the University of Mississippi was one of the fastest growing institutions in the country. In fall of 2016, the University's overall enrollment plateaued and hit a decline in the freshman enrollment. Then, overall enrollment dropped and would not start to increase again until Fall of 2022. As a result of the plateau of our application pool, Provost Wilkin began to work closely with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs at the time, Brandi Hephner LaBanc, to address and implement action steps to get the University's enrollment back to where it once stood.

"We hired a consultant to look at our scholarship strategy, and our marketing and communication division began looking at how we were marketing our institution and the messages we used to do it. We found out it was all over the map," Provost Wilkin says.

Provost Wilkin began engaging with academic units to work on sealing the deal with students who had been admitted. As a result, the marketing and communications department created their main line strategy which would be timed and targeted to various audiences. The admissions and enrollment began hosting numerous visit day for prospective and admitted students. In addition, the University went from buying 40,000 student names and their contact information for marketing purposes to well over 350,000 names of prospects. Wilkin explains how this was a five-year endeavor and essentially took the five years. He did point out how it was only four years before the University's freshman enrollment numbers were turned, "so we beat the curve for those efforts," Wilkin said. These strategies started back in 2017 and continue through today.

Provost Wilkin continues with the image of college administration to be like a train moving down the track. Each day and decision made is placing a track in front of the train before it gets there. It is vital to recognize the harder items to place: capital

improvements and infrastructure. In terms of the University's most recent growth, Provost Wilkin explained that many individuals are often surprised when he explains how the undergraduate enrollment of 2016 compares to 2023.

“In the Fall of 2023, we have 115 more students on campus, so our growth is really not that big when compared to where we were in Fall of 2016. We have about the same number of faculty, roughly the same number of staff. Where we have felt the pressure from this dramatic increase is because of the freshman class and that freshman live on campus. If you were going to quantify the pressure people feel, it would probably be that.” (N. Wilkin, March 2024)

Provost Wilkin is one of the University of Mississippi's main communicators with the IHL Board of Trustees. He simplifies their role as an approving or regulatory board to approve things we want to do on our campus to ensure that we do not put the state's resources at risk. Wilkin added how he and Ole Miss administrators have more discussion with IHL staff members who then guide the board on what is trying to be done so they can levy a yes or no. It was interesting to me that individuals who are classified as government employees are guiding the board members in their decision-making process.

Another policy set by the IHL Board of Trustees is the policy surrounding standardized test score requirements. There are four options for full admission into any of the eight public Mississippi institutions. The first of which does not require a standardized test score submission. Provost Wilkin expands upon this most recent policy change. “We are in the process of revising those now for a number of reasons. Mainly, to give clarity around the role of ACT/SAT and GPA in the admissions process, and the

predictive natures of those scores for coming to this institution,” (N. Wilkin, March 2024).

Provost Wilkin conveys, “We are not interested in changing the standards for admission to our institution. We have the keys to change people’s lives in a state that needs education in order to build a prosperous future.” He also applauded the University’s continued highly ranking retention and graduation rates. He is confident we should not turn our backs on students we know we can educate as long as the University stays confident that they are able to place the tracks needed for success.

When it comes to the tracks that need to be placed on Ole Miss’ track, Provost Wilkin is an expert due his leadership on the committee who combs through the requests made by each department. “Analytics are completed around the capacities we have for various resources and then we [the committee] convey that to the people who manage areas. Then they tell us what is needed to operate their areas,” Provost explained. The committee will review the budgetary requests and determine what pieces are the most critical to place on the track in combination with the resources that are available in terms of funding.

When compared to 2016, the chatter surrounding campus is not a new feeling to Provost Wilkin. Fall of 2016 was a record-breaking year for enrollment, at the time, which had people talking about resources and amenities on campus. When asked if there was as much noise in 2016 as compared to now, Provost Wilkin responded with “and fewer parking spaces, and fewer buildings, fewer residence halls, but still only 115 less students.” He noted this is “not a new feeling, what is different is behavior,” (N. Wilkin, March 2024).

Parking is an example Provost Wilkin notes. He tells of a personal experience he had with a group of Provost scholars a few years ago. He questioned the group of freshmen students to see how many of them did not bring a car to campus. At the time, 75% would raise their hands. Today, Provost Wilkin says it would probably be closer to 0 to 10% who did not bring a car. It is a proven fact that there are more parking spaces on campus than there were in 2016, but more students are opting to bring a car to campus. Thus, resulting in the selling of more permits.

In an attempt to combat challenges presented on campus, Provost Wilkin speaks of a behavior change that is necessary for moving forward. A criticism Wilkin hears often is from faculty and how few options are available for holding class in specific classrooms or at a certain time.

“So I pulled the inventory for the entire university, by hour, for every space that is used as a classroom in our inventory. Then looked for standard meeting patterns: Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Thursday and Thursday. I was able to find available classrooms across all inventory sizes, from 10 seats to well over 100 seats.”

In the Fall of 2023, the busiest time of year by 115 students, Wilkin was able to find a classroom of any size that also met a standard meeting pattern over 1,500 times. This means over 1,500 new sections of classes could be scheduled “without breaking a sweat,” (N. Wilkin, March 2024). Unfortunately, professors are particular and want to meet in a specific room at their chosen times. There may be options at all the popular times, but the available classroom may be a ten-minute walk across campus, or a classroom never used by that professor before. This all comes down to getting information to people to generate behavior.

When asked about the future, Provost Wilkin could not ignore the current growing pains we are experiencing on campus and the options available to administration. He notes a difficulty is the University's freshman living requirement, which is a decision made by Ole Miss, not the IHL Board. One option is to limit or reduce the number of non-resident students admitted ensuring the demand for the overall population of students are met. This was done in 2011 when a non-residential admissions committee was created and chaired by Provost Wilkin and Charlotte Pegues, who is the current Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, both of which worked in the Provost office at the time. This group would review non-resident applications and made admissions decisions based on the qualifications of the students. Provost Wilkin acknowledges its success, and in turn, as growth continued, the threshold for review increased. It was not until 2016, when the largest number of non-residents were put under review, that enrollment plateaued, sparking hesitation for the future.

Because of this experience, there is even more hesitancy surrounding the potential to bring in a similar program of review.

"We do not want to shut the faucets off, but at the same time, we do make choices about the most qualified and most successful students who could come to our institution from non-residency and be successful," Wilkin explains.

Another possibility is to "pull some levers to slow the train down a little bit so there will be time to put the track in place," Wilkin uses to describe the current construction projects happening on campus. For example, the outside contracts made with housing complexes in the Oxford community to combat the freshman housing shortage and create a designated place for upperclassmen.

Lastly, “the other option is we pull the lever of other things that we make decisions about that are our decision to try, for a few years, to get some relief in a particular area,” (N. Wilkin, March 2024).

To conclude, Provost Wilkin is optimistic for the future of the University of Mississippi and has a top priority of building a culture where people feel seen, supported, and helped to achieve their goals. He is confident the use of resources, experts, and predictive analytics will “continue to improve the ability to predict the demand for the educational opportunities available,” (N. Wilkin, March 2024).

CHAPTER FIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my interview findings, I have concluded that there are several factors that are affected by the enrollment changes happening at the University of Mississippi. In order to mitigate these challenges presented by departments and offices, I offer the following recommendations to the University of Mississippi Administration, the Institute of Higher Learning Board of Trustees, and the student body.

Increasing the Number of Faculty and Staff

Based on my interviews, every department I spoke with mentioned their need of more people on their teams. The Health Professions Advising Office's main request is for a recruiter to join their office team. I believe when offices, such as HPAO, have success rates like they do, there can be no denying their importance to students' success. In a similar manner, more students on campus, means more students to advise. A student's academic advisor is one of a few people on campus who will see a student from the beginning of their freshman year up until graduation, many of whom develop a relationship with their advisor. If the School of Business advisors are each advising hundreds of students more than the recommended amount, there are probably similar situations across all academic units. Both of these requests fall under budgetary requests to be made from their various departments. If the number of students continues to climb, there must be a form of relief to these staff members. We cannot afford for the dedicated staff we have on hand to transition from an overpowering workload to a point of burnout within their careers.

Communication and Marketing

One of the main goals of the Marketing and Communications Department at Ole Miss has been to create a consistent branding message of the University of Mississippi. I find that one of the biggest challenges that has come with the enrollment changes on campus lies among the lack of communication from administration to everyone else on campus and their plans for the future of Ole Miss enrollment.

Based on my communication with and among peers, students on campus have the habit of picking up and spreading false or misconstrued information regarding the increased enrollment. While students are encouraged to voice their concerns through the Associated Student Body, the responses to students are often lacking or only brought up behind closed doors. To address this limitation, ASB as well as administration across campus need to find a way to extend their communication with students and provide opportunities for students to be heard. One of the most common ways the Chancellor's Office or other offices located in the Lyceum connect with students is through monthly mass communication emails. There is no sense of comfort when addressing issues, like enrollment, that everyone is feeling. To mitigate these feelings and allow for students to feel heard, I recommend the Lyceum, specifically the Provost's Office, hosting monthly town hall type events. These events can be held in the Student Union and serve as a time for students to ask questions, receive factual information, and leave with a sense of education on the topic of the meeting. I believe everyone from student leaders to newcomers on campus will benefit and allow for false information to decline.

In addition to students' voices being heard, there needs to be a consistent message across the board being presented by faculty and staff. A summit involving various

departments and University administration facilitating could what faculty and staff need to feel that their voices are being heard. I think it is also a fair assumption that the size of some of our departments may result in a lack of communicating needs of every person in the department. A place for professors and staff to be open without the thoughts of being ignored or looked down upon could be just the thing to avoid faculty and staff joining in the rumors of recent changes.

Associated Student Body Housing Committee

While it is important for students to remember that there is no feasible way for many of their concerns to be remedied overnight, their concerns are relevant and will affect their futures at the University of Mississippi. As many students are invested in on-campus housing, I think it is a fair assumption that many of them may not be aware of the new, permanent ASB Housing Committee. Not only will this allow for students to further engage in the University, but this will give them the opportunity to create real change and allow their voices heard. One way this committee will serve the needs of the University is through the collaborative efforts of ASB and the Student Housing Department. For this committee to be a success, I think it would be most beneficial for ASB to conduct the elections of the board. I have been told there is a bit of apprehension from the Housing Department whether the department or ASB should oversee conducting the elections to the committee. It seems to me that ASB is the most knowledgeable when it comes to elections on campus as well as their connection to students interested in the topic of student housing. ASB feels that they are ready to be proactive about the issue and that they have numerous students excited to share their concerns of housing.

Limitations

While my interviews with various levels of leadership, students, and departments on campus were able to identify factors that have resulted from the increased enrollment at the University of Mississippi, it is hard to gather everyone's opinion and every department. We can deduce challenges have arisen as a result of the increased enrollment, specifically in the freshman class size, but I believe that multiple years of research into the changing enrollment would be needed to accurately depict the long-term effects of these changes. While we could predict interviews would present similar knowledge, it is impossible to know before students arrive on campus.

In addition to the lack of research of Ole Miss' enrollment over the most recent years, upon further reflections, I believe my interviewees list could have expanded more deeply into the faculty in departments. I found myself having to be extra careful writing questions that would allow individuals to express their concerns without feeling vulnerable in their roles.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Since its founding, the University of Mississippi has served and presented a degree to hundreds of thousands of individuals. Separated into various schools and departments, the University is committed to developing well-rounded individuals who are committed to scholarship and leadership of others. Each year, a new class of students gets the opportunity to experience and join the Ole Miss family. Over the past twenty years, enrollment has soared higher than ever causing departments on campus to change and adapt to increasing numbers and do so very quickly. On a campus that promotes their student individuality and well-being, it is imperative to delve into the effects and challenges presented to see how the gap of resources and students can be bridged.

The literature shows that there are many preconceived notions concerning an increased enrollment on a University campus, such as limitations on parking, the difficulty of finding a time and classroom to hold class, and a decline to the overall student experience. While my interviews with University administration shows that some of these concerns were proven to be incorrect, the behaviors individuals are presenting are relevant due to the rate of growth that has occurred.

Throughout my two sets of interviews, one meant to hear from those who work with students daily and the other to gain an administrative perspective, I found that there is a disconnect among those who are making decisions and those who are facing the repercussions of the decisions made. Students are in the dark when it comes to the current admissions requirements for resident versus non-resident students and the role of the IHL

Board of Trustees. In turn, after such growth is brought to campus, students are left with questions regarding their opportunities and resources on campus but receiving misinformation. Additionally, faculty and staff have resources not being utilized and in turn, may be jeopardizing the experience of students. As mentioned before, there is a large availability of in-person classrooms yet still an overwhelming number of online courses in place of in-person sections.

While administrators and admissions office staff have a vested interest in expanding the University's enrollment and visibility, it is important for the student body, faculty, and staff to be aware of what is coming as well. Students must engage and adapt to the changes around them to stay on top of the experience they wish to have at Ole Miss. Faculty and staff have superiors who are there to hear concerns and voice those to the Lyceum, but it is a mentality and communication factor that must be figured out. Lastly, the University as well as all those who are affected by it should be aware of the changes to come in the future. The state of Mississippi is set to see the second worst decline of high school graduates in the Southern United States by 2027. After hearing this, many turn to the IHL Board of Trustees, but I think the University of Mississippi needs to have a plan in place for what it will look like if enrollment does decrease. The effects of the growth in 2022 came late in the admissions cycle and very sudden. As much as growth has affected the student, faculty, and staff experience, it can just as well be affected by a decline in numbers.

While this research helped shed some truth on a widely discussed topic, further research should be done to fully understand the effects of these increased freshman class sizes as the current freshman and sophomores. Additionally, this research can be

furthered if the University of Mississippi's enrollment does decline by 2027 and how the growing pains have turned to revenue concerns for individual departments. Each of these recommendations is needed to bridge the gap between faculty, staff, and administrators. Specifically, this research can identify if the University is prepared for what is projected in terms of student life, faculty and staff resources, and budgetary constraints.

Finally, the University of Mississippi continues to have popularity not only because of the academic offerings but because of our student first mentality. I believe this research is relevant for all those involved and touched by the University of Mississippi. To know where we are going, we have to reflect on the past. At Ole Miss, we pride ourselves on giving each student an individualized experience. In order to continue doing what we preach, actions must be taken to support those departments who support our students. We must set a plan into action on how to expand our resources to continue the experience or cut back on the number of students we are trying to serve.

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