

Ranking shouldn't be the focus

Independent Mail
Sunday, June 7, 2009

Catherine Watt's presentation at the annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research in Atlanta probably wasn't received quite the way the director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson University anticipated.

What most in the audience likely thought would be a routine discussion of national ranking efforts by U.S. colleges and universities, with emphasis on methods Watts said Clemson used to rise from No. 38 on U.S. News and World Reports' list to No. 22, became the talk of the forum.

And not in a positive way. Especially to university officials.

Calls by our reporter to Watt, who is based at the university's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, were referred to Cathy Sams, Clemson's chief public affairs officer. But earlier in the day, Watt told some Upstate reporters that her remarks were taken out of context and blown out of proportion. She also told The Associated Press that the reports about her remarks in Inside Higher Ed "missed the point of the presentation."

She regrets, she told AP, "any suggestion of illegal activity."

We can't speak to her claim of being misquoted, as we were not in attendance at the forum. But it is not rare that someone whose words have provoked varying degrees of concern — even outrage — will fall back on "I was misquoted." We will, however, give her the benefit of the doubt, because we also don't know the reporter involved from Inside Higher Ed, a Web-based operation. (For the record, Inside Higher Ed is standing by its report and its reporter.)

And granted, it's difficult to see how "We have walked the fine line between illegal, unethical and really interesting," as Watt was quoted in both Inside Higher Ed and the more-familiar Chronicle of Higher Education, can be misinterpreted.

On behalf of the university, Sams issued a rebuttal to each of Watt's points. It covered several areas of Clemson's quest for a top 20 ranking in U.S. News and World Report, but also listed numerous other actions taken that have no bearing on the rankings yet benefit both the university's reputation and what it can offer students.

Watt seemed concerned that Clemson takes only the top students, and Sams acknowledged that "does benefit us in the rankings. But what's wrong with attracting good students and keeping more of our top students in state?"

And if, to some South Carolinians, too many of Clemson's "best and brightest" are not in-state residents, it is unfair to lay that fully at the feet of Clemson's standards. One audience member's comment on Watt's presentation gave us pause. He (or perhaps she, the report wasn't clear) was concerned about Clemson's efforts to improve its standing and wondered why such steps, as presented by Watt, were taken. "You had a perfectly good institution," the individual said. That sounds too much like our state's constitutional mandate for a "minimally adequate" public school education. And that's certainly not the attitude we need to have about any level of education in this ever-changing and expanding world.

Early in his tenure as Clemson's president, Jim Barker made it clear, both in his words and in his actions, that he wanted Clemson to be more than "a perfectly good institution," that his goal was not just to move Clemson into national prominence but to create a national reputation for a degree from the institution, a move that would help the university but even more importantly, Clemson students, past, present and future.

In Clemson's official response, Barker said that in 2001 the university adopted 27 goals to improve quality "and those goals are driving decisions. About a half-dozen of those goals correspond with U.S. News ranking criteria. The majority do not."

Words we recall from a long-ago meeting with Barker were repeated in his statement: "As long as we continue to focus on students and academic quality, the rankings will take care of themselves."

Do the rankings really matter? Those universities who haven't risen in them will certainly say they do not. We're not certain they are worth the effort, especially considering that the merest hint of "massaging" numbers can damage a university's reputation. Rankings certainly should never come at the expense of Clemson's concentration on education, research and public service that was mandated by the institution's founder, Thomas Green Clemson.

The Clemson "family" has had a few spats in past months, primarily over administration salaries. Those wounds are still open. This is no time for squabbles within the ranks on rankings that may help Clemson attract more grant money, surely needed as state support continues to dwindle. Clemson should, however, let this experience be a reminder that its goals for the university must always keep the students in mind, that they are exposed to the best faculty, the most wide-ranging experience.

Ranking in comparison to other institutions is not always relevant as long as graduates and supporters continue to believe in an institution's dedication and viability for decades to come.

But even the No. 1 spot becomes irrelevant if they do not.

© 2006 The Anderson Independent Mail