

Numbers show Clemson leader voted other schools lower in survey

By John Staed
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CLEMSON UNIVERSITY — A U.S. News & World Report survey of colleges filled out by Clemson President James Barker shows that he ranked Clemson above all other national public universities in 2008, and over all but two others in 2009.

The survey shows that Barker voted for Clemson in the “strong” category in 2008, the only vote he placed in that category. In 2009, he voted for three schools in the “strong” category, including Clemson.

He did not vote for any school in a higher category, “distinguished,” either year.

Although the names of the schools were redacted in the survey report that was released to news media, they included national public and private universities, among them Harvard, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Yale and the University of California at Berkeley.

The peer review part of the rankings account for 25 percent of the U.S. News scoring of colleges.

The information supports a Clemson professor’s assertion that the president ranked other schools’ lower than the university. Catherine Watt made the statement at a meeting of the Association for Institutional Research in Atlanta last week.

Watt, director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson’s Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, said during the meeting that Clemson “rates all programs other than Clemson below average.”

She also said that in reporting financing information, Clemson uses “multiple definitions to figure out where we can move things around to make them look best.”

The university last week responded that the statements were “outrageous” and that Clemson has benefited from its goal to move up in the rankings with smaller classes, more faculty and better pay, among other achievements.

The magazine uses the college officials’ ratings as part of its annual rankings of American colleges and universities. The guide is a popular seller for the magazine.

Barker has said that Clemson's goal is to move to the top 20 of U.S. News rankings; it is now ranked 22nd. It ranked 38 in 2001.

Other ratings that presidents and provosts fill out include "distinguished," the highest; "good," which comes after "strong"; "adequate"; "marginal"; and "don't know."

The university also supplied ratings by the provost, Doris Helms, dating to 2005, but only had 2008 and 2009 ratings by Barker. Helms' ratings were spread more evenly among the colleges. In 2008, she rated Clemson as "strong," one of 22 she gave that rating.

Clemson spokeswoman Cathy Sams said the university did not save Barker's old ratings sheets.

"He didn't keep them," Sams said. "It was just a matter of filling out the survey and sending it back. We didn't have a complete set of documents."

Barker released a statement on Tuesday highlighting the school's successes, including smaller class sizes, a new Phi Beta Kappa (honor society) chapter, higher graduation rates and retention rates.

"We have not manipulated ourselves to this position; we have worked ourselves to this position," Barker said.

"There will never be a plan that has 100 percent support," he said. "There will always be critics. However, I will not apologize for believing that Clemson is the best undergraduate school in America."

Sams, in an e-mail, said Barker was on a flight for a round of development meetings and not immediately available for an interview.

But in comments to Inside Higher Ed on Monday, Barker said his charge was to measure the academic quality of undergraduate programs.

"I believe Clemson does that better than anyone," he told the magazine. "That's why my ranking is where it is."

Watts was not available to comment.

Watts has said some of her comments at the meeting were taken out of context.

Lloyd Thacker, author of the book "College Unranked," said some college presidents are given financial incentives to increase rankings.

"I'm not shocked," Thacker said of the Clemson report. "I'm disappointed. There are presidents hired by trustees with the mandate to raise their rank."

Thacker, a college admissions officer for nearly 30 years before he quit, said higher education must move away from the ranking race.

“We’ve seen in this country the shifting of resources from the educational enterprise to a rank steering enterprise ... with no educational benefit,” he said.

Clemson Board of Trustees Chairman Bill Hendrix was out of town and not available to comment, according to a board secretary.

Robert Morse, director of data research for U.S. News, said earlier that it was obvious that Clemson has improved in retention of freshmen, its graduation rate and class sizes.

Watt’s contention that Clemson has massaged its data or focused its policies to meet certain U.S. News criteria was not something Morse said he could comment on.

But he said Watt, unlike most universities, “was willing to talk about something that other universities do.”

“We didn’t produce ... (the guide) so that college presidents use them for management purposes,” he said.

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