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## Some question Clemson's means in seeking top 20 end

By John Staed  
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CLEMSON UNIVERSITY — When Clemson University's president ranked his school ahead of Harvard and other top colleges in a magazine's annual college survey, it put the school in the national headlines.

And drew criticism.

James Barker said he believes the undergraduate experience at Clemson is the best in the nation, and that was the reason for his rating Clemson as the only school worthy of a "strong" rating in 2008 in the U.S. News & World Report college survey of administrators.

Others, including a Clemson professor who once helped with the school's data for the survey, said Clemson focuses on the data needed to help the school move up in the U.S. News & World Report's annual college rankings. Clemson's goal is to rise into the top 20 of the list by 2011. Clemson, now 22nd, has jumped in the U.S. News rankings from No. 38 in 2001.

The professor, Catherine Watt, is director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs. Her comments June 2 at the Association for Institutional Research meeting set off a firestorm at Clemson and elsewhere about rankings.

Watt said Clemson tried to "affect – I'm hesitating to use the word manipulate – every possible indicator to the greatest extent possible" in terms of U.S. News college ranking data, according to a report from Inside Higher Ed. Watt has since said some of her comments were taken out of context.

"It's simply not true that all decisions at Clemson are driven by rankings," Clemson fired back in a statement. "It is true that over the past 10 years Clemson has invested in faculty resources, student academic support and faculty salaries, all of which may contribute to improved rankings."

But making rankings a university's goal is the wrong message, says one critic.

"It distorts the way education is portrayed, perceived and pursued not only by students and parents, but also by trustees," said Lloyd Thatcher, author of the book "College Unranked" and a former college admissions officer.

"We shouldn't be selling education as a product to students as consumers," Thatcher said. "There's no such thing as one best college."

Robert Morse, director of data research for U.S. News, said Watt was stating publicly what a lot of

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colleges and schools may be saying privately: that rankings are important, and schools do pay attention to the data.

“I think that at Clemson the difference was ... that she was willing to talk about something publicly that other universities do,” Morse said. “They set a goal of improving in U.S. News rankings ... and manage toward that in making other improvements. Other universities around the country do that.”

At Anderson University, several rankings are listed on its Web site, including “Top Tier of U.S. News & World Report’s America’s Best Colleges.”

Susan Wooten, Anderson University’s associate provost, said rankings are only one tool to be used in choosing a college, but “of course externally, they do have a public relations function. That’s why so many of us put them on our Web sites.”

“I think, the overwhelming majority, the only colleges not paying a lot of attention (to rankings) are the elite liberal arts colleges, and they are choosing not to participate (in college rankings),” Wooten said.

Companies like U.S. News simply pull those schools’ data from the U.S. Department of Education Web site to get the statistics, she said.

Wooten calls the U.S. News rankings “a reasonable measurement, but it’s only one measure of value and quality.”

“I think these (rankings) are just one piece of a puzzle in trying to decide the quality of an institution ... and the nature of campus culture,” Wooten said. “There’s a lot that can’t be communicated statistically.”

The Princeton Review publishes guides to colleges but takes a different tack. It uses student surveys to tell other students and prospective students what they experienced at a particular college.

“The difference between Princeton Review and those of our competitors is ours is based on surveys of students,” said Harriet Brand, director of public relations. “We survey 120,000 students with 65 questions.”

The questions “have to do with their opinions of the classes, food on campus, dorms, social life, drug use, alcohol use, popularity of fraternities and sororities, how good are the sports on campus – competitively and intramural – religious atmosphere, acceptance of gay culture” and more, Brand said.

Princeton Review gave Clemson a wide variety of rankings, include No. 1 for “happiest students” and for “Jock Schools (popularity of sports, intercollegiate and intramural and of frats)”; No. 2 for town-gown relations; No. 6 for best quality of life; No. 7 for best athletic facilities and “students pack the stadiums”; No. 9 for best career/job placement services; and No. 20 for “school runs like butter (administration gets high marks).”

Relying on student opinion can’t give you a good picture of a college, said Thacker, who also is founder of the Education Conservancy, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to overhauling college admissions practices.

“A student doesn’t know what’s best (while) in college,” Thacker said. “Did you?”

Students and parents have to start somewhere, though, Wooten said.

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“There are literally hundreds of books that go into more depth than U.S. News rankings,” she said. “But it’s the one that gets the most press.”

Clemson officials have said their first goal is students, and that rankings are a byproduct of their success in a number of areas, including student retention, smaller classes, better student performance, more investment in faculty and development of academic centers for student success.

“The primary factor influencing those investment decisions is the desire to help students succeed and stay on track for graduation, not rankings,” according to a statement from chief public affairs officer Cathy Sams.

School officials also point out that they have done more with less. In 2000, the state appropriation to the school was \$167.5 million, or nearly 40 percent of Clemson’s total revenues. In fall 2009, the state appropriation will be \$124.2 million, or less than 20 percent of the total budget. That’s the reason behind continued tuition increases, according to a statement.

“The Top 20 mission has allowed the university to focus on everything academic,” according to an e-mail from Anand Gramopadhye, professor and chairman of industrial engineering. “Nothing wrong in being extremely focused on desirable student outcomes.”

U.S. News’ Morse said if a school decides to pursue a ranking, it’s not really the magazine’s business.

“Is that a good thing ... to be higher up on the pecking order of universities?” he said. “That’s not something U.S. News can decide.”

Author and Education Conservancy founder Thacker was more critical.

“When a college manages its image to make rankings, they are selling their institutional soul,” he said. “They (rankings) imply a precision and authority simply not supported by the data.”

Barker, in a statement, said Clemson adopted a 10-year set of 27 goals to improve quality “and those goals are driving decisions at Clemson.”

Most of the goals don’t factor into Clemson’s U.S. News ranking, he said.

“I have frequently said that as long as we continue to focus on students and academic quality, the rankings will take care of themselves,” Barker said. “And that has been the case.”



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