

## **A decade in Barker's shoes at Clemson University**

By John Staed

Saturday, December 5, 2009

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY — It's hard to get Clemson University President James Barker to put together a top 10 list of his 10 years in office.

In a way, though, he's already done it, but you need to double the number.

The day Barker interviewed for — and got — the job as president, 20 became the number Clemson started striving for in a popular magazine ranking for public universities.

That relentless push has brought the university a lot of publicity, brought Barker both accolades and criticism, and driven much of the school's focus for the past 10 years. The latest ranking by U.S. News & World Report put Clemson at 22nd among national public universities in the United States.

Considering the school was 39th in 2001, that's a pretty big jump. Barker said he began paying attention to the rankings before the president's job was offered to him and found the criteria aligned with qualities of a good university — things such as smaller class sizes, good student-teacher ratios and high graduation rates.

While the top-20 ranking still eludes Clemson, the changes the university made to get there have made the school better and continue to pay off, Barker said. Numbers of applications for undergraduate slots continue to set records, more alumni are giving, and the school recently received the largest grant in its history.

Heady days for a former school of architecture dean. But they are bookended by not so pleasant memories, too: A Faculty Senate resolution criticizing "disproportionate" administrative salaries, calls for his resignation by a former professor, and a state budget crisis that Barker said was the worst in 60 years at Clemson and forced first-ever staff furloughs. The budget cuts resulted in a loss of more than \$45 million in state and foundation funding, and hundreds of university positions were cut, mostly through attrition.

Barker reaches his anniversary on Dec. 6 at a time when colleges' presidents, like football coaches, find their tenures don't usually last a full decade. But Barker said the job to him wasn't "a steppingstone" when he took it.

When he arrived at Clemson, Barker said, there had been five presidents in 15 years, and there was a need for consistent leadership.

Since then, he's focused on the goals of reaching the top-20 ranking, adding value to the institution, and making sure Clemson remains, well, Clemson, he said.

"It wasn't about chasing a ranking, it was about substantive change in the intellectual environment of campus," he said.

His days start at 5 a.m., when he exercises, catches up on the news and is off to work. At the end of the day, there may be receptions, dinners or other functions. By the end of the week, roughly 80 work hours later, he's done, he said.

Still, he calls it "the best job in the world." But becoming president meant he faced a learning curve on matters he had not dealt with before, such as coaches' contracts, legal issues, the university's public service activities land-grant mission and dealing with the General Assembly in Columbia.

Clemson's recent successes, such as landing a wind turbine technology grant of \$98 million, its largest grant award ever, are part of a long-term effort that came out of task forces and planning, Barker said. Clemson faculty and staff looked at areas that the university does well in and could best succeed in and then went to work from there, he said.

Those areas include advanced materials; automotive transportation and technology; biotechnology and biomedical sciences; family and community living; general education; information and communications technology; leadership and entrepreneurship; and sustainable environments.

"What you are seeing is a very calculated focus on these eight subject areas," he said.

After holding 52 meetings with all departments at the school, he said, "What emerged was this list, which says this is the territory where we have genuine strengths and the state has genuine economic opportunities in (state-funded) clusters."

The list of eight areas was crafted, Barker said, to make sure that departments are linked together to provide collaboration across disciplines.

"Some of that collaborative spirit has come from that," he said.

While Clemson hasn't hit home runs in every area, the school has some notable successes from the list: the Clemson University International Center for Automotive Research, which drew a visit from the U.S. energy secretary last week; the Advanced Materials Center in Anderson County; the Clemson University Restoration Institute in Charleston, home to its new wind turbine grant; several university-generated patents; tech startups in areas such as nanotechnology; and more.

"There's a lot going on, but it is a rifle shot into each of those eight areas," Barker said. "It's not a shotgun blast."

Clemson needs to play a major role in the economic development of South Carolina, Barker said.

“I think the efforts that we are making over the next 10 years will be to find new and creative ways of linking intellectual development with our students with the economic development of our state,” he said.

“From day one, that will ... of Thomas Green Clemson says this university is being created to improve the economic condition of the state of South Carolina,” Barker said. “His vision was, ‘I’m going to link intellectual development with economic development.’ “

The school’s student body also has changed, also by design, Barker said.

Its graduation rate has increased to 78 percent in 2008 from 71 percent in 2001; and scores on entering students’ SAT tests have risen to 1130-1320 from 1080-1260 over the same period. Thirty-seven percent of the members of Clemson’s freshman class in 2001 were from the top 10 percent of their high schools, and in 2008 about 52 percent of freshman were from the top 10 percent of their high schools. Nearly half, or 48 percent, of Clemson classes had 20 students or fewer in 2008, while only 23 percent of classes did in 2001, according to information from the university.

That success also has caused controversy. A former Clemson researcher who helped put together the ranking numbers for the university caused a stir this summer when she said during a speech that Clemson made itself look better by selective use of the numbers. Clemson officials denied the claim.

Barker himself got into hot water when it was revealed that one year he ranked other colleges, including Harvard University, below Clemson in the U.S. News and World Report survey of college administrators. Barker said he was basing the ranking on overall quality and still believes Clemson offers a better overall experience for students.

He said other magazine reports — ones that rated Clemson above Ivy League schools in terms of the cost of an education and the salary that alumni earn four years after graduation — indicate the worth of a Clemson degree.

After the Faculty Senate passed a resolution last spring criticizing administrative salaries and a faculty survey included biting comments about the same topic, Barker created an advisory group, including representatives of the staff and faculty, to look at the pay issue.

He said the results have been “eye-opening” to some regarding the ranges of pay at other universities.

He will bring some examples of some salary inequities or salary challenges to the Clemson community, he said.

“Who should we compare ... and what percentage should we set?” he said. “If the market is (at a given level), are we trying to be above that market? Are we trying to be 90 percent of it?”

“So getting that kind of philosophy and policy together is what we’ve been working on. I think we’ll soon have both of those ready to lay out for campus.”

Barker still teaches one class an academic year. He works with about 20 architectural students on looking at “what creates a sense of place.”

“It’s a key barometer for me to talk to the students in a seminar setting, listen to what they have to say, read the papers they write ... and watch how that increasing quality (of students can be seen),” he said.

In a tough economic environment, Barker said, schools with value have started rising to the top of parents’ and students’ lists of educational options, including, of course, Clemson.

“I think the market for higher education is shifting,” he said. “Value and quality are rising to the surface rapidly, which means we have to demonstrate that ... this investment that families are making is well worth it.”

The school has a plan to build more dormitories, as the current ones are filled to capacity, but the plan was revised after the recession and state budget cuts.

Barker said sports play an important part in the Clemson experience, and one of his goals is another national championship in football. Another is a Final Four appearance in basketball.

“The bottom line is people want to feel good about the institution, and that’s (sports) one component of it and one very visible component of it,” Barker said.

Clemson Athletic Director Terry Don Phillips showed “remarkable insight” in recommending Dabo Swinney to replace Tommy Bowden as head football coach, Barker said, by recognizing Swinney’s talent after comparing him to several other candidates across the country.

“How he managed that transition ... in the middle of the season, and how he built his contract (by building in incentives) were the right way to go,” Barker said.

Clemson has distinctive qualities that Barker said he wants to make sure remain. Those include a sense of patriotism, a competitive spirit, a good work ethic, the importance of individuals on campus, civic responsibilities, and students being the center of the university’s mission.

“If we get to the top 20 and we’ve lost those things, then the journey would not have been worth it,” Barker said.

He said he plans to stay as president as long as the trustees agree to let him and eventually return to teaching, his dream job.

“It doesn’t get any easier after 10 years,” he said. “It’s still the same challenges, (but ones) that we didn’t always see them coming.”



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online