

Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the rest take a back seat to Clemson ... Clemson's president says

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COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Move over Harvard, Yale, Princeton — and every other college. Asked to rate other universities for the influential U.S. News & World Report rankings, Clemson University President James Barker put his institution on top.

It might sound like the kind of cheerleading to be expected from a college president. But Barker's votes in the peer review portion of the rankings — which account for 25 percent of a college's score — appeared to at least partly validate some reported claims last week by a staff member portraying Clemson as consumed with moving up the table.

Documents released by Clemson show Barker gave his own university a "strong" rating in the peer review survey portion of the rankings. But he gave no other university that high a mark. He ranked half the undergraduate universities in the magazine's survey as "marginal," according to copies of his survey provided to The Associated Press (he responded 'don't know' for 21 unnamed schools).

On Tuesday, Barker stood by the ranking he gave the university, which is No. 61 overall in the magazine's latest table of national universities.

"I believe the total undergraduate experience at Clemson is why I ranked Clemson where I did," Barker said in a telephone interview, arguing the school's "in-classroom, out-of-classroom, college-town experience," tops all others in the nation.

In a presentation last week, Catherine Watt, Clemson's former director of institutional research, reportedly told a national conference that Clemson officials rate other schools below average to make their own school look better.

She later appeared to back away from comments reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

Clemson last week called the reported statements "outrageous." The university denied that "all decisions at Clemson are driven by rankings" and denied reporting faculty salary data differently to U.S. News. The "insinuation of unethical behavior crosses the line," the university's statement said.

While it's widely suspected that officials at some ambitious colleges have been less than forthright in their reviews of rivals, it's impossible to say. The magazine does not make the individual survey responses public. The magazine maintains such gamesmanship wouldn't work

anyway. Some universities refuse to participate in such surveys, saying they question the methodology.

In releasing the surveys completed by Clemson administrators, the university showed they had not all voted the same way or ranked every college "below average."

But they also showed that Barker, in his own survey, put Clemson alone at the top.

The documents did not show precisely how he voted on what schools, but Clemson was the only "strong" vote he gave in the national universities category — which includes famous public institutions like the Universities of California and Virginia as well as the private universities of the Ivy League.

The content of Barker's survey was first reported Tuesday by The Greenville News and Inside Higher Ed.

Barker insisted his approach could not skew the survey. "You can't game these rankings," he said.

The magazine has faced persistent criticism that its rankings encourage colleges to game the system by shifting resources to rise in the standings and even voting strategically to undermine rivals. But it also denies a single voter like Barker can have any effect.

Robert Morse, the magazine's director of data research, referred a request for comment to a blog post where he describes "safeguards in place to prevent strategic voting from affecting the results."

The magazine, Morse wrote, subtracts some of the highest and lowest scores from respondents.

"We are confident that such voting practices by respondents are not affecting the results of the reputation survey in any meaningful statistical way," he said.

Watt, who remains at the university as director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute, reportedly said Clemson manipulated class sizes, artificially boosted faculty salary data and gave rival schools low grades in the rankings' peer reputation survey.

She later said the reports had missed the point of her presentation: a "discussion about a successful strategic planning effort."

The university acknowledged it has worked to improve in the influential rankings. Clemson jumped from No. 38 among public universities in 2001 to No. 22 in 2008 — an unusually quick ascent considering the rankings typically change little from year to year.

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