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Clemson Steps into a USN&WR Rankings Mess

By Patrick Mattimore

Usually the annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research would generate the kind of non buzz reserved for say, a Washington Nationals baseball game. This past week, however, a presentation by Catherine Watt, a former institutional researcher and now a staff member at Clemson University, shocked attendees at her session. More to the point, the talk, entitled, "Project Management and Lessons in Moving Up the U.S. News Ranks," garnered national attention from groups like Poynter Online's Romenesko website, the leading insider journalistic resource.

According to Inside Higher Ed, a nationally respected source of information for colleges, Watt alleged that Clemson has pursued the goal of improving its USN&WR college ranking "almost single-mindedly, seeking to "affect -- I'm hesitating to use the word 'manipulate,' " Watt said -- "every possible indicator to the greatest extent possible." She added: "It is the thing around which almost everything revolves for the president's office."

Watt told her audience, consisting of mostly academics (and at least one reporter), of specific steps Clemson had taken to pander to USN&WR evaluation criteria including: manipulating class sizes, reworking admissions criteria, increasing faculty salaries and then altering ways that information was reported to USN&WR. Most shockingly, Dr. Watt admitted that Clemson downgraded peer evaluations of sister institutions. Peer evaluations are the single most heavily weighted criteria in the rankings.

As to the morality of Clemson's aggressive approach to improving its ranking, Dr. Watt said, "we have walked the fine line between illegal, unethical, and really interesting."

Apparently.

Thursday, Romenesko's site led with coverage of Dr. Watt's remarks as reported by Inside Higher Ed. Following its initial report, IHE linked both an outline of Dr. Watt's talk as well as a response from Clemson University officials which was sent to both IHE and the Chronicle of Higher Education. Clemson called reports in those outlets "outrageous."

Cathy Sams, Chief Public Affairs Officer from Clemson University wrote in a response to IHE that "(W)hile we have publicly stated our goal of a Top 20 ranking, we have repeatedly stressed that we use the criteria as indicators of quality improvement and view a ranking as the byproduct, not the objective."

In other words, Clemson only follows USN&WR prescriptions because it's in the best interests of the University and its students anyway.

Reactions at the various websites seems to be mixed. Many people who claim Clemson affiliations support the University and question Watt's motives, while those people from other venues seem happy that the seedy side of rankings gamesmanship have finally come to light.

Not everyone at Clemson is buying the "best interest" apologist version of events. One poster at IHE who identified herself as "Untenured at Shame U , Asst. Prof. at Clemson," wrote:
"Classes capped at 19 to improve ratings? That's only half the story; the other half is that since class size data is only taken in the fall semester, all those classes go back to 25 to 30 in the Spring."

A person identifying herself as Dr. Watt wrote IHE to complain that, "I was dismayed to find my comments at an academic meeting taken largely out of context in a recent article," referring to the June 3, IHE story. She went on to write that IHE's "reporter chose to focus on a small aspect of the presentation rather than the whole picture presented."

I disagree with Dr. Watt's contention that her remarks were taken largely out of context. In fact, it is obvious from the outline of her remarks that her presentation largely mirrored what the IHE journalist wrote- what Clemson has done to improve its USN&WR rankings. In her outline, Dr. Watt asks "What factors can be affected to have the greatest impact on an institution's ranking?". She then discusses how Clemson has responded to USN&WR. It's "not a question of if, but of how," she writes.

Whether Dr. Watt anticipated that her remarks would be taken as implicit criticism of Clemson is irrelevant. Whether she could have foreseen that her talk would become the lead story at Poynter Romenesko is also beside the point. The fact is that her admissions about ways in which Clemson games the system were the story, not her conclusions about Clemson's nobility of purpose.

But the real story isn't about Clemson. It's whether colleges should allow themselves to be put into a position where their real master is a magazine.

Since USN&WR first began ranking colleges in the early 1980s, other magazines and books have followed suit. Time and Newsweek now rank schools. Publishers publish guidebooks such as the Princeton Review and Fiske College guides, which purportedly identify the best colleges.

Parents and high school students often become enamored with the college admissions search process. They ask the wrong questions. In fact, they really don't ask questions at all, because they have already bought the "best" lists. Students become most concerned about being picked by colleges, not selecting them. Top students often go to universities, not because of any match with their talents or interests, but because the school was given the best rating by a magazine somewhere.

Universities and colleges have responded. Schools advertise their rankings on Web sites and in promotional mailings. Furthermore, Clemson is certainly not alone in fudging data in order to achieve high rankings. The Wall Street Journal reported in 2007 that colleges and universities are increasingly using math to try to buck a nationwide decline in the percentage of graduates who donate, in hopes of improving their standing with ratings publications and charitable foundations. That's because USN&WR uses "percentages of alumni who contribute to their alma mater" as one of its ranking criteria. One of the ways schools increase percentages of donors is by taking a one-time gift and spreading it out over a number of years. The WSJ provided this example of a college's creative bookkeeping:

"Adrian Jean Kammerer hasn't given Albion College a dime since she graduated in 2004...Yet Albion counted Ms. Kammerer as an alumni donor to the school in 2004, 2005, and 2006. School officials keep her on the donor roll by treating the \$30 she gave as a college senior as a \$6 annual gift for five years." USN&WR has a benign explanation as to why it ranks schools: To help students make one of the most important decisions of their lives.

A cynic might suggest a more compelling interpretation. The college issue is USN&WR best-selling issue of the year. USN&WR has become a driving force in the college admissions industry yet it operates solely out of financial interest.

But ultimately, the larger question is whether the magazine's interest is inimical to the interests of students, their families and the universities I would suggest that it is and that the harm results from something our businesses are very good at: Creating demand and fueling small flames into conflagrations. Our emphases on biggest, best and first are often quantitative measures rather than qualitative ones. The marketing of education has made the packaging, not the product, better. Although no collusion scandal has yet arisen in the rankings industry, it is not hard to imagine the day when a Yale University admissions counselor, for example, offers a college rankings magazine official a bribe to get a higher ranking than, for example, Stanford. The stakes have become too high for colleges to ignore their rankings and the temptations are too great for data gatherers to accept the kinds of payoffs typical of many industries.

It is certainly the prerogative of USN&WR to rank colleges. Universities and colleges are under no obligation however to aid in enriching and certifying USN&WR. For many years Reed College has refused to supply information to USN&WR. Several years ago a group of top-ranked Canadian universities began a boycott of Macleans Magazine, which ranks Canadian universities. If more colleges were to adopt an obstructionist stance towards USN&WR by, for example, broadcasting as a group objections to the rankings or undermining the rankings with funny data, perhaps Americans would see the rankings as the empty shell that they are.

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