

How Clemson worked the rankings list

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"Wow, think her bosses at Clemson knew she was giving that talk?" one audience member said to another as they walked out of Catherine Watt's presentation about her university's approach to the *U.S. News* college rankings at the Association for Institutional Research, a group of campus number crunchers and self-described wonks.

Higher education's love-hate relationship with college rankings was on full display at the association's annual forum last week in Atlanta, but Watt's session revealed more than any other the extent to which the rankings, for all the protestations to the contrary, influence colleges' behavior. Watt, the former institutional researcher and now a professor at Clemson University, laid bare in a way that is usually left to the imagination the steps that Clemson has rather brazenly taken since 2001 to move from 38th to 22nd in *U.S. News'* ranking of public research universities.

This was no accident. When president James F. Barker took over the South Carolina institution in 2001, he vowed in his initial interview to move Clemson into the top 20 (a distinction that many research universities covet, but few can achieve, given that most of those already in the top 20 aren't eager to relinquish their spots). Although many people on the campus were skeptical, Clemson has pursued the goal 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."

That statement was among the first at Watt's session that provoked murmurs of discomfort from the audience — there would be many more as she described the various steps Clemson had taken to alter its profile in order to improve its *U.S. News* standing. Watt, director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, subtly made clear her own discomfort with Clemson's approach.

The easiest moves, she said, revolved around class size: Clemson has significantly increased the proportion of its classes with 20 or fewer students, one key *U.S. News* indicator of a strong student experience. While Clemson has always had comparatively small class sizes for a public land-grant university, it has focused, Watt said, trying to bump sections with between 21 and 25 students down to 18 or 19, but letting a class with 50 rise to 70. "Two or three students here and there, what a difference it can make," she said. "It's manipulation around the edges."

Clemson responded the next day to the firestorm. In a written statement and in an interview, Cathy Sams, the university's chief public affairs officer, took strong exception to Watt's presentation — although she mostly offered alternative explanations for the reduced class sizes and other outcomes rather than evidence to challenge Watt's assertions.

"While we have publicly stated our goal of a Top 20 ranking," Sams said in a written statement, "we have repeatedly stressed that we use the criteria as indicators of quality improvement and view a ranking as the byproduct, not the objective."

What's tricky for Clemson, Sams acknowledged, is that university officials cannot with a straight face say that the rankings do not matter to them; the Top 20 goal has been the centerpiece of president Barker's administration. And the data that Watt presented do not lie: Clemson has, for instance, seen the number and proportion of its undergraduate classes with 10 to 19 students rise to 790 and 32.8 percent, respectively, in 2008, from 356 and 18.8 percent in 2004, while the comparable figures for classes of 20-29 have fallen to 360 (15 percent) in 2008 from 591 (31.2 percent) in 2004.

Clemson has also transformed its admissions standards, more or less ceasing to admit full-time, first-time undergraduates who are not in the top third of their high school classes, and constantly reassessing its SAT average throughout the admissions cycle, Watt said in her controversial presentation, so that admissions officials know whether they "have to increase the SAT score in the next round" of students.

Bringing about other changes has been harder, Watt continued, as she described what she called the "more questionable aspects of what we've done." To actual gasps from some members of the audience, Watt said that Clemson officials, in filling out the reputational survey form for presidents, "rates all programs other than Clemson below

average," to make the university look better. "And I'm confident my president is not the only one who does that," Watt said.

The university's statement of rebuttal was largely silent on this, Watt's most explosive accusation. But in a follow-up interview, Sams, the spokeswoman, said: "All I can tell you is that I talked to all three of the individuals who fill out the survey, and they said, 'That does not happen, that is not true.' They were deeply offended."

Taken together, the changes have had an impact on numerous *U.S. News* indicators: The proportion of freshmen who were in the top 10 percent of their high school class has risen to 42 from 34 percent; student to faculty ratio has dropped to 14:1 from 16:1; the retention rate of freshmen has climbed to 89 from 82 percent and the graduation rate to 78 from 72 percent. And as those last few results show, Watt said, many of the changes Clemson has made have helped students.

But many of the administrators and data analysts in the audience were clearly troubled by Watt's description of Clemson's approach, especially as she pointed out that the university has grown more exclusive (fewer than 10 percent of its undergraduates are first-generation college students) and has "favored merit over access in a poor state," sending tuitions rising.

"We have been criticized for not fulfilling the mission of a public land-grant institution," Watt said. But "we have gotten really good press. We have walked the fine line between illegal, unethical, and really interesting."

"How can you possibly justify doing that?" one attendee asked Watt.

"To do anything else is not an option," she said.

"You mean you're just following orders?" the questioner asked.

"Yes."

Watt admitted at several points in the presentation that she was trying to contain her own "cynicism" about her institution's approach, but she also recounted a comment that a colleague had made to her at breakfast Tuesday, when they were discussing her upcoming session and Clemson's aggressive approach to rising in the rankings.

"People don't have this as their official vision," she quoted her colleague as saying, "but by God it's their unofficial vision."

Doug Lederman is editor of Inside Higher Ed, an online magazine. This piece is condensed from two articles he wrote on the topic for his publication. Read the originals at tinyurl.com/onafw4.

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