

## Researcher Offers Unusually Candid Description of University's Effort to Rise in Rankings

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Clemson University is run in an almost single-minded direction, with nearly all policies driven by how they will help the land-grant institution rise in U.S. News & World Report's rankings, according to a university official whose candid comments stirred debate among conference-goers here on Tuesday.

Clemson has doubled its tuition this decade, manipulated class sizes, and even sought to downgrade the academic reputations of other institutions when answering surveys, all in an attempt to meet the goal of pushing the university into the ranks of the top-20 public research institutions, said Catherine E. Watt, the former director of institutional research at Clemson.

In terms of the rankings, the strategy has worked. Clemson was 38th among public research universities in the magazine's 2001 rankings, she said. In 2008, it had risen to 22nd.

Ms. Watt, who is now director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education, part of the university's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, spoke at a session at the annual conference of the Association for Institutional Research, which concludes here today.

University representatives could not be reached for comment late Tuesday, after Ms. Watt's afternoon session.

The U.S. News rankings are built on seven basic categories meant to measure the quality of colleges and universities, including academic reputation, financial resources, and graduation rates. Academic reputation, which is determined by surveying officials at institutions about how they rate other universities, carries the greatest weight in the rankings formula, accounting for 25 percent of the total.

While many institutions pay close attention to the rankings, Ms. Watt's description of the methods used by Clemson was startling in its bluntness and for how pervasively she said the rankings figure in every decision made by administrators.

Robert Morse, who directs the rankings for U.S. News and is attending the meeting, said after the session that her comments probably gave public voice to conversations held privately at many universities about how to rise in the rankings.

## **Vision and a Goal**

In her presentation, Ms. Watt said that Clemson's president since 1999, James F. Barker, had established in 2001 the goal of reaching the top 20. Soon thereafter, the university adopted a policy to "affect every possible indicator to the greatest extent possible," she said.

"Clemson has a specific, year-directed vision," said Ms. Watt. "I can promise you, everyone on the Clemson campus can tell you what the campus vision is. Every president's speech starts with the ranking; every policy starts there. Like it or not, you always know where you stand."

For example, the university has doubled its tuition since 2001, she said, reasoning that the extra proceeds could be dumped into the academic budget and used to reduce student-faculty ratios, one of the criteria used by U.S. News. When course sections had 21 to 23 students in them, administrators ordered that more sections be opened to reduce the class size to 19 students or less, she said. The percentage of courses with fewer than 20 students is another of the criteria used in the magazine's rankings.

Conversely, if a course was looking as if it would have more than 50 students, Clemson administrators would simply let it continue to grow. "Any class over 50 may as well grow larger," she said. "There wasn't much containment there."

The percentage of courses with more than 50 students is also a factor in the rankings. But Clemson decided to direct its resources toward reducing the percentage of classes under 20 students, she said, and didn't worry about the number of classes with more than 50.

In the magazine's academic-reputation surveys, Ms. Watt said, administrators rated all institutions other than Clemson as below average.

Following the session, Ms. Watt clarified that administrators had not been directed to deride the reputations of other institutions as far as she knew, but she said, "I saw copies of a couple of surveys myself that had that effect."

Faculty salaries are another factor in the rankings. Ms. Watt said Clemson attempted to inflate its faculty salaries by including the value of benefits.

Mr. Morse later clarified, however, that Clemson was supposed to be including the value of benefits all along, and had previously been misreporting salary information.

## **Nervous Response**

People attending the session seemed stunned by some of Ms. Watt's comments. The presentation was met with gasps, guffaws, nervous laughter, and incredulity. "You're pandering," said one audience member. "What are you trying to accomplish? How does this help the students?" said another. "How can you justify doing it?" asked another.

"Well, to do anything else is not an option," said Ms. Watt. "It's just that frank."

And the strategy has had positive effects for students, she said. They have smaller classes and have more professors in classrooms, rather than teaching assistants. The six-year graduation rate, another factor measured by U.S. News, has increased from 72 percent to 78 percent this decade, possibly in part because of the increased attention to academic resources, Ms. Watt said.

“Clemson has always had a happy, loyal student body,” she said. “It still is, and, by some measures, it’s even happier today.”

However, the university is probably guilty of neglecting its mission, she said. “We have favored merit over access in a poor state,” she said. “We are more elite, more white, more privileged.”

But in measuring the tradeoffs, the university has not wavered from the policy, she said.

“We have been criticized for not fulfilling the mission of a public land-grant institution,” she said. “On the other hand, we have gotten really good press. We have walked the fine line between illegal, unethical, and really interesting.”

Following her presentation, Ms. Watt said she had left the institutional research office, in part, because of her objections to the direction the university had taken.

Mr. Morse, of U.S. News, said, “We don’t want our rankings to drive the mission of a university.”

The rankings, he said, “are meant for prospective students and their parents as a means of measuring college quality and fit. They are not meant for presidents as a means of proving their administrative capabilities.”

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