



Professor Accuses Clemson of Manipulating Rankings Data

by : Ron Aiken

It was supposed to be a run-of-the-mill paper at a run-of-the-mill academic conference, a gathering of university information specialists whose issues rarely make the news.

That was, until Catherine Watt, director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute, all but accused her own university of manipulating information the school reports to U.S. News & World Report for the magazine's annual rankings of colleges and universities, to the extent that Clemson's single-minded approach "walked the fine line between illegal, unethical and really interesting."

Watt let forth her bombshell while speaking in Atlanta at a recent annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research.

When Clemson president James Barker took office in 2001, his stated goal was to move Clemson into the top 20 public research universities. At that time Clemson was ranked 38th.

Since then Clemson has shot up to No. 22, a surge that outside observers say is improbable without massive capital investments in new faculty and curriculum overhauls.

University of South Carolina provost Ted Moore says leapfrogging other institutions in the U.S. News rankings is difficult.

"The easy way to move up in perception and rankings is to be a better university," Moore says. "How do you become a better university? Have an aggressive hiring and retention program for new and top faculty and use the highest standards possible for incoming students."

Perhaps most troubling, Watt said that while filling out reputational survey forms, Clemson officials rate "all programs other than Clemson below average" so that Clemson gets bumped up. "And I'm confident my president is not the only one who does that," she said.

Watt's allegations of Clemson's approach, which she characterized as "questionable," also included:

- Reducing as many class sizes below 20 students as possible and putting other students in already oversized sections. "Two or three students here and there, what a difference it can make," Watt said.
- Raising SAT requirements. Watt said Clemson officials constantly reassess the SAT average of the university's incoming freshman class throughout the admissions cycle to determine whether Clemson needs to "increase the SAT score in the next round." She said Clemson no longer accepts students who are not in the top third of their graduating class and in doing so the land-grant school "favors merit over access in a poor state."
- Bumping up faculty salaries reported to U.S. News by about \$20,000 by increasing spending, paid for through tuition hikes, and including benefits. Watt said the university routinely ran "multiple definitions [of salary information] to figure out where we can move things around to make them look best" for U.S. News.

The techniques, reported by both the esteemed Chronicle of Higher Education and the web site Inside Higher Education, sent shockwaves through academia nationwide and was quickly picked up by major daily newspapers in South Carolina as well as The New York Times and the Boston Globe.

Clemson responded with a three-page denial of Watt's allegations, but refused to make the university's reputational surveys public.

"The accusation that Clemson, its staff and administrators have engaged in unethical conduct to achieve a higher ranking is untrue and unfairly disparages the sincere, unwavering and effective efforts of faculty and staff to improve academic quality over the past 10 years," Clemson spokeswoman Cathy Sams said in the denial.

The story was not lost on USC board member Herbert Adams, who has served on the board since 1984. Adams has strong opinions about Clemson's practices under Barker, who recently has come under fire himself for his financial priorities and other issues.

"Before I came on the board and since, USC has always recognized that we have a responsibility first and foremost to the students of this state," Adams says. "Having high rankings are glamorous, but you can't be glamorous and leave the state of South Carolina behind.

"I can tell you that I think [Watt] hit the nail on the head with her remarks. At one time we caught ourselves almost doing what Clemson was doing, manipulating class sizes to get more classes below 20 [students]."

Doing so shortchanges students, as there is a big difference in the quality of education between a 50-student class and a 200-student class, Adams says.

"If you tell people all the time that this is what we want to do [be ranked in the Top 20]," he says, "then they soon forget what's right or wrong in getting that done."

Funny Math?

Below are the factors, and the value U.S. News & World Report places on them, that Clemson University is accused of manipulating in its effort to fare better in the magazine's annual rankings of colleges and universities.

Academic Reputation — 25 percent

Faculty Compensation — 7 percent

Student Selectivity — 6 percent

SAT/ACT Scores — 8 percent

Alumni Giving — 5 percent

Classes with Fewer

Than 20 Students — 6 percent

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