

Herald-Journal

Clemson denies 'illegal' moves to bolster Top 20 bid

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Published: Friday, June 5, 2009

The fallout from controversial comments allegedly made by a Clemson University official this week about the school's supposed obsession with gaining a top 20 U.S. News & World Report ranking was the hot topic in higher education circles Thursday.

Catherine Watt, Clemson's former institutional researcher and now a staff member at the university, said at a higher education conference in Atlanta that, in manipulating data sent to the magazine, Clemson "walked the fine line between illegal, unethical and really interesting" in its pursuit of a top-20 ranking, according to reports by magazines Inside Higher Ed and the Chronicle of Higher Education, which covered the event.

A Clemson spokeswoman, who called the allegations in general "outrageous," labeled that comment "utter nonsense," and Watt said in an e-mail Thursday to the Herald-Journal that the "perspective" taken by the two publications is "not accurate."

"I regret comments made that have suggested illegal activity occurs in (Clemson's) pursuit," wrote Watt, now the director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs. "Let me be clear -- there is none. It is the entire education community that faces daily issues of what is 'illegal, unethical or very interesting.'"

Clemson President Jim Barker issued a prepared statement in which he said less than a quarter of the university's 10-year goals it adopted in 2001 to improve quality correspond with U.S. News ranking criteria, and that all 27 of those goals drive decisions.

While the university did acknowledge that it has made public its goal of a top-20 ranking -- Clemson's rank among public universities rose from No. 38 in 2001 to No. 22 in 2008 -- officials said they use the criteria as indicators of quality improvement and view a ranking as a byproduct, not the objective.

"We realize that we stuck our necks out when we adopted the vision statement. Few universities are willing to be quite so public," Cathy Sams, Clemson's chief public affairs officer, said in a written statement.

Watt said she made her 45-minute presentation about strategic planning to 35 other professionals at the annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research. According to Inside Higher Ed, Watt said Clemson has pursued its top-20 goal "almost single-mindedly," claiming that Watson said the university was seeking to "affect -- I'm hesitating to use the word 'manipulate' -- every possible indicator to the greatest extent possible. It is the thing around which almost everything revolves for the president's office."

Among the accusations allegedly made by Watt were that Clemson, in satisfying U.S. News criteria, has:

--Significantly increased the proportion of its classes of fewer than 20 students -- a key U.S. News indicator of a strong student experience -- by capping many classes at 18 or 19 students while letting others already over the limit grow.

--Transformed its admissions standards by constantly re-assessing its SAT average throughout the admissions cycle, so that admissions officials know whether they have to increase the SAT score in the next round of students.

--Bumped up faculty salaries it reports to U.S. News by about \$20,000, which it has achieved by actually increasing spending (paid for largely through increased tuition) and by altering the way it relays the data to the magazine's editors. Inside Higher Ed claimed Watt said Clemson folded its benefit payments into the average faculty pay figure it reports to U.S. News, requiring the institutional research office to produce several definitions of faculty pay for U.S. News, the American Association of University Professors and other surveys.

Sams countered that claim by saying in her statement, "Institutional research has never, not once, produced duplicate faculty salary reports. We report the same data to U.S. News that we report to the American Association of University Professors. U.S. News includes benefits in faculty salary for Clemson and for every national university they rank -- something that Ms. Watt apparently didn't know."

Meanwhile, local colleges Converse and Wofford -- each of which have been annually included in the U.S. News rankings -- weighed in on the subject.

In general, "Any reputable institution should not allow rankings to drive decisions," said Beth Lancaster, director of communications at Converse. "The quality of the student experience should always be the foremost priority in the decision-making process, and to do otherwise is really to compromise on your mission to serve your students."

Doyle Boggs, executive director of communications and marketing for Wofford, added, "Obviously a nice mention is better than no mention or a bad mention," but "We don't chase the rankings."

Boggs said the subject of college rankings comes down to two issues -- benchmarking and marketing. He said rankings criteria such as average SAT score, number of applications rejected and number of annual alumni gifts don't provide a valuable or even credible measuring stick for benchmarking.

Instead, Boggs said, Wofford prefers to use benchmarks such as the Student Success in College project, in which Wofford was one of 20 colleges of differing missions chosen by the developers of the National Survey of Student Engagement as subjects to study those schools' practices.

"That's the kind of benchmarking we want to do -- not to compare ourselves with other schools, not to use it as propaganda but to really determine what's going on in the classroom and see what we can do to improve," Boggs said.

Perhaps the most controversial claim attributed to Watt's presentation was that Clemson officials, in filling out the peer recognition survey that counts for 25 percent toward a school's U.S. News score, rate all programs other than Clemson below average to make the university look better.

Boggs said Wofford chooses not to participate in the survey, which is filled out by the college president, academic dean and vice president for enrollment management.

In a blog he posted Thursday afternoon in response to the Clemson controversy, Bob Morse, director of data research for U.S. News, said the publication has safeguards in place to prevent strategic voting from affecting results by subtracting a few of the highest and lowest scores from respondents before the results are calculated.

Morse added that the U.S. News rankings are not meant for schools to use as their singular focus.

"U.S. News produces the rankings to provide the public -- in particular, families of college-bound students -- one tool that offers a clear perspective on differences among the options in higher education," Morse wrote.

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