



## Clemson presentation stirs up the rankings debate

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So many interesting developments in higher education, so little time. I often hear that most college-bound students don't obsess over rankings when they're looking for a college. Even so, colleges appear to take them seriously. I'd be interested in knowing whether readers think U.S. News rankings have had a positive influence on higher education. Here's what prompts the question:

Yesterday, the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) (you need to be a subscriber to access the site) and Inside Higher Ed reported on the stunning candor of a Clemson official who explained at an academic conference how the school improved its U.S. News Rankings from 38th among public research universities in 2001 to 22nd last year.

"While many institutions pay close attention to the rankings, (the) description of the methods used by Clemson was startling in its bluntness and for how pervasively ... the rankings figure in every decision made by administrators," wrote the Chronicle's Martin

Van Der Werf. For example, he wrote, "Clemson has doubled its tuition this decade, manipulated class sizes, and even sought to downgrade the academic reputations of other institutions when answering surveys. Here's Inside Higher Ed's [story Wednesday](#), by Doug Lederman, "and his [followup today](#).

[Clemson has not been shy](#) about its aspirations. In 2001, it adopted a goal to become one of the nation's top-20 public research universities.

In a [statement responding to the stories](#), (available on the Poynter Institute website), Clemson president Jim Barker said that, of 27 goals adopted in 2001, about a half-dozen .. correspond with US News ranking criteria. "The majority do not. You'll find goals related to public service, collaboration, diversity, the campus environment, even athletics, none of which are factors in US News rankings. ... I have frequently said that as long as we continue to focus on students and academic quality, the rankings will take care of themselves. And that has been the case."

Cathy Sams, Chief Public Affairs Officer, Clemson University said few university "are willing to be quite so public. "We stuck our necks out. ... It makes us an easy target for a misinformation campaign." Then she laid out her defense.

Inside Higher Ed today observed that the university's statement "is largely silent on (the) most explosive accusation: that Clemson officials, in filling out the reputational survey form for presidents and other top administrators, rate all programs other than Clemson below average, to make the university look better.

So readers, what do you think?

Mary Beth Marklein :*About Me: I have been covering higher education for USA TODAY since 1997. I cover college admissions, college graduation and pretty much everything in between. I've found this profile page to be a handy space to put interesting tidbits I run across that for one reason or another don't find their way into a story. Since starting, the topics have veered in many directions: helicopter parents, graduation, admissions, environmentally friendly campuses. Also: Lists, lots of lists. I welcome your thoughts, story ideas or tips, either in the public comment space here or in private emails. My email address is [mmarklein@usatoday.com](mailto:mmarklein@usatoday.com)*