

Clemson official: School manipulated rankings

By Justin Pope, Associated Press (from USA TODAY 6/7/2009)

A rogue Clemson University staffer has accused the South Carolina school of manipulating its U.S. News & World Report ranking — reviving a debate over what critics call the pernicious influence of the magazine's annual college ratings.

Among the steps reportedly alleged by Catherine Watt, who until 2006 headed Clemson's institutional research office: Clemson manipulated class sizes, artificially boosted faculty salary data and gave rival schools low grades in the rankings' peer reputation survey, which counts for 25% of the score.

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Watt said Thursday that reports on her remarks had missed the point of her presentation to a conference and that she regretted any suggestion of illegal activity. Meanwhile, the university denied several of the allegations, but acknowledged it aims to improve in the influential rankings. Clemson jumped from No. 38 among public universities in 2001 to No. 22 in 2008 — an unusually quick ascent considering the rankings typically change little from year to year.

"It's very shortsighted. It's misguided and it's educationally damaging," Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy and a prominent rankings critic, said of the allegations.

"Colleges have been 'rank-steering,' — driving under the influence of the rankings," he said. "We've seen over the years a shifting of resources to influence ranks."

Watt's comments came Tuesday in Atlanta at a meeting of the Association for Institutional Research — usually a staid venue for arcane discussions about data collection. However, Watt dropped a bombshell that stunned the audience, detailing Clemson's single-minded pursuit to become a Top 20 public research university, according to reports from The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed, which covered the conference.

Watt, now director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson's Strom Thurmond Institute, described practices many rankings critics believe are common, but rarely acknowledge. Clemson, she said, "walked a fine line between illegal, unethical and really interesting."

U.S. News & World Report, for instance, takes into account how many classes a university has with fewer than 20 students and those with more than 50. Clemson, Watt reportedly said, capped many classes at 18 or 19 students, while letting others already over the limit grow. The 2004 edition of the rankings reported 22% of Clemson classes had fewer than 20 students; last year it reported 48% did.

Most explosively, she reportedly claimed Clemson officials ranked other institutions as "below average" in the magazine's peer reputation survey. She reportedly later clarified that Clemson administrators had not been told to do that, but their surveys "had that effect."

Clemson issued a three-page response that didn't name Watt but called the reported statements "outrageous." The university denied that "all decisions at Clemson are driven by rankings" and denied reporting faculty salary data differently to U.S. News. The "insinuation of unethical behavior crosses the line," the statement said.

The statement did not address Watt's reported statements about the peer surveys, but Chief Public Affairs Officer Cathy Sams said by telephone Thursday she had spoken with the three officials who participate in the survey and had "not found any evidence of that."

In an e-mail to The Associated Press on Thursday, Watt wrote she had no "full comment" but criticized the published descriptions of her comments. She added: "The strategic efforts to decrease class size and increase full-time faculty have only built upon an already excellent experience for our students."

Sams, the university spokeswoman, said Clemson remains committed to its stated goal of becoming a Top-20 ranked institution.

"The notion that there's this day-to-day obsession (with rankings) is simply not true," she said. "The fact we use that as one of our benchmarks for improvement is something we're very comfortable with."

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