



## Clemson and the College Rankings

June 04, 2009 02:17 PM ET | [Robert Morse](#) | [Permanent Link](#) |

Clemson University is facing both controversy and criticism after [Catherine Watt](#), a director of a research center at Clemson, made a presentation this week at the annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research in Atlanta about the aggressive steps the university has taken to meet its goal of rising in the *U.S. News America's Best Colleges* rankings.

It's no secret that Clemson's goal is to become a [top 20 public research university](#): There's a whole section of the school's website called "[Why Top 20](#)" that explains the rationale behind the goal and what the potential benefits would be for students and the university. (Currently, Clemson ranks 22nd in that "best publics" list, up from 38th in 2001.) Yesterday, Clemson responded to Watt's presentation with [a prepared statement](#) after both [Inside Higher Ed](#) and the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) had articles on her presentation.

I was at the conference and attended Watt's presentation. The most controversial parts were some of the techniques she suggested that Clemson has been using to meet its goal and how open Watt was in discussing the university's strategy publicly. According to her presentation, Clemson took precise steps to improve in some *U.S. News* ranking variables: create more small classes of under 20 students and fewer large classes with 50 or more students, boost the SAT scores and high school class standing of incoming students, increase freshman retention and graduation rates, decrease the student-to-faculty ratio, improve faculty salaries, and more accurately report data. In addition, the presentation implied that Clemson's peer survey respondents gave other universities

they compete against a below average rating, though this claim has been vigorously denied by the school.

*U.S. News* produces the rankings to provide the public—in particular, families of collegebound students—one tool that offers a clear perspective on differences among the options in higher education. We realize we can't control how this information gets used in the higher ed community, but the rankings are not meant to drive the mission or any other strategic goals that a university may be trying to attain. It's up to the Clemson University community to decide whether rising in the college rankings is a goal it ought to pursue.

In terms of the reputation survey, *U.S. News* has safeguards in place to prevent strategic voting from affecting the results. We subtract a few of the highest and lowest scores from respondents before the results are calculated in order to prevent downgrading or upgrading from altering the results. We are confident that such voting practices by respondents are not affecting the results of the reputation survey in any meaningful statistical way.

## **Comments**

[Read all 5 comments about this article](#)

### **Clemson and how you manipulate the system**

Some of the fraud perpetuated by Clemson in order to become top 20 in a magazine is based upon the creative inquiry courses used to create the facade that the number of classes with an enrollment below 20 students has risen at Clemson. Creative inquiry courses are primarily lab or field based courses--student research a prime factor in the creation of these courses. But wait US News and World does not count lab courses in its determination of ranking. Thus a few years ago the 3 credit Creative Inquiry courses were changed from lab credits to lecture credits.

All done by Provost Helms to provide a fraudulent method of increasing the number of lecture courses with an enrollment less than 20 students per course.

Look at the data and note that this change in designation helped in the rankings floating downward toward top 20.

The public also needs to look at senior and junior level major course enrollments. Clemson has allowed many junior and senior level courses to approach enrollments of close to 100 per lecture section.

This is not quality. Seniors should have an experience in these courses that allows discussion and one on one type of interaction. This cannot occur when you are teaching difficult subject material to classes that approach 100 students or more per lecture section.

Also note that labs have degraded in many cases. Lab courses or sections do not fit into the rankings of US News and World. Pack students in with TAs that are not qualified to teach the subject material or cannot speak English and what do you have--not quality.

**SP of SC**

Jun 07, 2009 12:13:02 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

### **Reputation matters**

It's funny how when it comes to high-school teachers, raising salaries and smaller classes are the mantras of choice. But doing this systematically at a university is somehow unethical, sheesh. In college, like it or not, reputation is everything. A great football team and great rankings in US News means your school will attract lots of applicants. While it is true that there are regional schools with great programs, this is luck, coincidence, and ephemeral. Once the program gets going, the good faculty leave for better schools, and that regional program is crappy once more. Instead of whining, we need to either show empirically that somehow having smaller classes with brighter students and faculty alike is not linked to positive outcomes, or accept the fact that some schools are simply better than others.

**Jean Jeudi of AL**

Jun 05, 2009 15:06:39 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

## **It really happens**

USNWR claims that it has safe guards against the manipulation of data, but that does not matter. The methodology is easy to crack. Once someone knows it, it is easy to shift a few numbers here and there to increase your ranking. Or, just give them false numbers. How do I know? I used to work for a 4-year selective public. While that institution did not manipulate the numbers, I knew many colleagues at other institutions that did. At conferences, some people even joked about it over drinks, shrugging off the lack of accountability and the fact that no one could ever get in trouble for doing this - USNWR does not have a police force to come and arrest us! It doesn't matter.

What does matter is what a complete waste of time and resources these rankings are. Do you really expect voters to have an accurate picture of the quality of an institution based on "reputation," two totally different and opposing constructs to begin with anyway. Harvard, for instance, has a good reputation but is low quality. Take the entering freshman class and put them in a boot camp for four years and they'll turn out alright. Harvard doesn't educate students; it just doesn't mess the students they get up. A non-selective institution, on the other hand, may have a low reputation, but will take students without the advantages of wealth, private tutors and high schools, and SAT summer camps and produce someone who is learned and makes a significant contribution to society. Impact is quality - not reputation.

If I were a parent, I would place no value on these rankings because 1) they are simply not an accurate measure of quality and 2) many colleges simply manipulate or give false information. The real question, however, should not rest with the college, but should rest with USNWR's integrity as a publication - how can one ethically support this system?

**PS of MO**

Jun 05, 2009 11:37:33 AM [\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

## **Proverbial Iceberg Tip**

The hallways and faculty inboxes here at Clemson are buzzing. With shock and outrage? Not even close. Sure, most faculty here are appalled at the obsessive and ethically questionable quest for the Top 20. The news stories coming out just aren't news to us. The buzz around here is about how much more of this mess will get a public airing. Classes capped at 19 to improve ratings? That's only half the story; the other half is that since class size data is only taken in the fall semester, all those classes go back to 25 to 30 in the Spring. The thing is, none of this is news to us. We've been beaten down by the Top 20 mantra since President Barker took office. If Barker and Provost Helms want to claim Top 20 is only one of many objectives, I suppose that's a good PR strategy. It also would hold up in court as technically true (depending on what your definition of 'is' is). Here in the offices of Clemson University we know better. We have ridiculously underfunded and poorly managed doctoral programs created solely to impact rankings; we have a Provost on a mission to continually lower the number of general education requirements specifically to raise retention rates; we have...well, let's just see how much of this iceberg is going to emerge from the depths.

**Assistant Professor at Shame University of SC**

Jun 05, 2009 09:34:10 AM [\[permalink\]](#) [\[report comment\]](#)

## **No surprises: parents beware of rankings**

The brouhaha about Clemson seeking the top 20 status is no surprise to us in academe. Having taught at regionally excellent comprehensive universities, I know all the games that are played to make things look good on surveys. Quality is more related to the programs the student is pursuing rather than the university as whole, although they both contribute to a well rounded graduate. What parents need to do to assure that their child will get an excellent education is visit the school their child is considering and talk to a range of faculty in their areas of interest. It doesn't require a high tuition school to add incredible potential to a student's future. It requires dedicated faculty who care about imparting the skills, knowledge, and motivation each student needs for his or her

continued interest in learning and developing after college. That is not going to show in snapshots of class size, peer reputation among administrators, and even retention rates (which often depend on who is admitted). If a college faculty is dedicated to educating all who attend, not only the brightest and the best, it will show in the long term success of those graduates. Importantly, never underestimate the importance of your child really desiring to attend a particular college as a motivating factor for success. Make sure your kids are ready and motivated to go to college. Meet faculty. Then talk to new and earlier graduates (and even current students who are less objective) about their educational experiences at the college and how it helped them grow as person. If you think more personalized attention will be needed for your child, make sure the college has that help in place. A student's success can also be assisted greatly by just one or (I hope) more faculty on campus showing a genuine interest in the student's performance. Your child should find a mentor on campus! Most students don't bother or are too shy or insecure to try. A parent visiting with a child prior to enrollment might foster those relationships being built once the student is attending.

**MH in CA of CA**

Jun 05, 2009 13:55:46 PM [[permalink](#)] [[report comment](#)]

**[Read all 5 comments about this article](#)**

*Your comment will be posted immediately, unless it is spam or contains profanity. For more information, please see our [Comments FAQ](#). **Recent Posts**[Archive](#)*