

Clemson Memos Reveal “Top 20” Obsession

By [fitsnews](#) • on April 23,



2009

Malcolm X’s “By Any Means Necessary” maxim apparently has nothing on Clemson University’s need for national respect.

Already under fire for exorbitant administrative raises, Tigertown was rocked again today by the release of several internal memos that lay bare the school’s naked obsession with becoming a *U.S. News & World Report* “Top 20” University.

And while obsessing over excellence isn’t necessarily a bad thing, the degree to which one news magazine’s ranking criteria appear to have driven almost every decision at Clemson is truly frightening.

Obtained by FITS, these documents show just how methodically school officials broke down the U.S. News’ rankings - and sought to appropriate funds and set other administrative and academic priorities accordingly.

“One of the most important management decisions affecting U.S. News rankings is the allocation of scarce financial resources,” one of the memos states, before concluding that “we will prefer investments that advance multiple inter-related criteria over investments that advance single criteria.”

“Not every expenditure is a Top 20 investment,” the memo continues, “and some expenditures are critical even though they have no direct impact on our U.S. News ranking. We will permit

ourselves to make non-Top 20 investments if they pass scrutiny, but we will not pretend they are advancing our drive for Top 20 status.”

Another memo outlines the involvement of one of Columbia’s most liberal PR firms, Chernoff-Silver - which had day-to-day oversight of the PR campaign associated with the “Top 20” drive. It also details the involvement of one of South Carolina’s top political consultants, Richard Quinn, who along with Chernoff-Silver was responsible for the “legislative effort” associated with the “Top 20” drive.

Conveniently, no mention is made of how much money either Chernoff-Silver or Richard Quinn was to be paid for their efforts - or how much the larger “Top 20” drive absorbed in administrative time and resources.

The memos date as far back as 2001, though, meaning this has been a “daily” obsession for nearly a decade.

According to the 2009 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, Clemson ranked No. 61 among all colleges and universities, and was No. 22 in the nation among public universities.

The University of South Carolina ranked No. 108 among all schools, and was No. 52 in the nation among public universities.

WEB EXTRAS

[*Memo 1*](#)

[*Memo 2*](#)

[*Memo 3*](#)

[*Memo 4*](#)

[*Memo 5*](#)

[*Memo 6*](#)

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***U.S. News* Task Force on Student Selectivity**

Final Report—May 2003

Membership. The *U.S. News* Task Force on Student Selectivity is composed of ten members.

- Robert Barkley—Admissions
- Marvin Carmichael—Financial Aid
- Bonnie Page—Academic Support Center
- Byron Wiley—Access and Equity
- Debra Sparacino—Registrar
- Joy Smith—Student Affairs
- Dave Fleming—Data support
- Bobby McCormick—Sabbatical research on factors behind student success
- John Warner—Retention expert for Department of Defense
- Debbie Jackson—Representing President Barker to monitor progress
- Thornton Kirby—Board of Trustees and the President

Our Charge. Our task force conducted our work based on the following charge:

- *U.S. News* is not the ultimate goal—quality is.
- Nevertheless, we need to understand the *U.S. News* criteria and optimize our performance on the criteria when they are not inconsistent with our goals.
- Task forces represent “off-line” brainstorming.
- Our deliverable: innovative ideas that could help us advance faster than we might otherwise.

The Criteria for Which We Were Responsible. We were assigned the *U.S. News* criteria relating to student selectivity.

- Retention
 - 6 Year Graduation Rate
 - Freshman Retention
- Student Selectivity
 - SAT or ACT scores
 - Proportion of freshmen who graduate in top 10% of high school class
 - Acceptance Rate
 - Yield Rate
- Graduation Rate Performance

Our Approach. We spent considerable time understanding the above criteria, and we formulated a number of recommendations. We have organized them into two groups—those designed to increase retention and/or graduation, and those designed to increase

student selectivity. We recommend these for additional study, not necessarily for adoption.

Our Recommendations for Retention and Graduation. Retention and graduation rates are heavily weighted in the overall *U.S. News* rankings. They are so heavily weighted, in fact, that only academic reputation is worth more. Whereas academic reputation is worth 25% of the overall score, retention and graduation rates are worth 20% of the score. When graduation rate performance is added, the combined package is worth 25%—the equivalent of academic reputation. The importance of this weighting cannot be overstated. **While we commonly focus on academic reputation as the major driver of our *U.S. News* ranking, graduation rates (which reflect retention rates) are worth just as much to our ranking.** A compelling argument can be made that we have more control over retention and graduation rates than we do academic reputation. Whether or not this is true, graduation and retention rates deserve the same focused attention as academic reputation since they are worth the same to our ranking.

1. The best way to increase freshman retention rates and 6-year graduation rates would be to determine with absolute certainty which students are not likely to persist until graduation and begin working with them at the beginning of their freshman year. Since this is not possible, we recommend the next best step—study historical data and identify common characteristics of students who leave Clemson prior to graduation. If patterns emerge (such as graduation from certain high schools, participation in fraternities or sororities, lack of financial aid, participation in athletics, high SAT with low class rank, etc.), then we can use this to intervene early with students who share those characteristics.

Bobby McCormick and John Warner of the John Walker Department of Economics have agreed to conduct a study of the causes of attrition among Clemson students over time. Cathy Sams and Debbie Jackson have agreed to conduct a targeted survey of students who have left based on the results of the McCormick/Warner study. And finally, the Office of Assessment will conduct the National Student Engagement (NSE) Survey this year. The NSE survey will shed a great deal of light on student preferences and concerns, some of which is likely to illuminate retention issues.

2. The task force identified several academic “choke points,” or common obstacles to success in the freshman year. Two such choke points are Math 106 and Math 108, both of which result in a high number of D’s, F’s, and W’s. Several recommendations were directed at these academic choke points.
 - Continue using placement exams to ensure students are ready for challenging courses;
 - Focus more attention on learning styles, and try to match teaching styles to learning styles in the most challenging courses;

- Identify “master teachers” and assign them to teach the most difficult courses; and
 - Continue supplemental instruction in challenging courses.
3. Reduce the number of credit hours required to graduate by restructuring curricula. This would have an immediate and positive effect on four-year graduation rates.
 4. Examine ways to better match students to majors and intervene earlier if possible. We currently involve freshmen in the Proact program during their second semester if they earn less than a 2.0 after the fall semester. Could we identify these students earlier? Earlier action here could improve retention rates and ultimately graduation rates.
 5. Advertise and make available to all new freshmen CU 101, University Success Skills. Involve student-oriented faculty in teaching CU 101. This course is a proven retention tool for freshmen.
 6. Follow up with students who do not return to school after the freshman year to determine why. For example, Furman University interviews the roommate of students who do not return to find out why. The interview is done by an R.A. as soon as possible after the student leaves or doesn't return for the next semester. Knowing exactly why students are leaving is the only way to pinpoint any changes that could be made to increase the retention rate.
 7. Focus on freshman retention rates in specific majors, such as Engineering, and design new efforts to prevent attrition. The following recommendations are directed specifically at improving the retention rate for Engineering majors.
 - A strengthened summer program for 10th graders interested in engineering that is project oriented.
 - An interview by Clemson engineering alumnus after student is accepted into the Engineering program.
 - Expand supplemental instruction to include more courses such as Physics.
 - Better educate students who choose Engineering as to what is involved. Perhaps develop a web site that explicitly and realistically describes what is involved in the courses required for an engineering major, what each discipline is and what they do. Include a hands-on project in each discipline very early in the curriculum.

8. Study the impact of participation in fraternities and sororities on freshman retention and 6-year graduation rates.
9. Focus more attention on whether every freshman admitted to Clemson has a plan for funding the four years of college. (This would help avoid foreseeable financial crises.)

Our Recommendations for Student Selectivity. Student selectivity is measured by four criteria worth 15% of the total *U.S. News* ranking. The four criteria are: SAT scores of entering freshmen (worth 6%); the percentage of freshman who were ranked in the top ten percent of their high school class (worth 5.25%); acceptance rate (worth 2.25%); and yield rate (worth 1.5%).

1. Revise the admission process from a rolling system to a single acceptance date system. This will allow the Director of Admissions to achieve the greatest possible score on selectivity measures while also addressing diversity of the class.
2. Budget tuition waivers and maximize their utility in recruiting top applicants.
3. Increase unrestricted funds available for recruiting scholarships (merit-based as well as need-based).

U.S. News Task Force on Student Selectivity

March 2003 Report

PRESENT: Thornton Kirby, Robert Barkley, Marvin Carmichael, Bonnie Page, Debra Sparacino, Cathy Sams, Bobby McCormick, Dave Fleming, Byron Wiley, Catherine Watt, John Warner, and Debbie Jackson

Our February 12th meeting was dedicated to better understanding the *U.S. News* criteria relating directly to retention and graduation.

Debra Sparacino presented a paper drafted by her work group—Dave Fleming, Bobby McCormick, Bonnie Page, and John Warner. That report is attached.

In response to questions and discussion, Robert Barkley presented an overview of legacy admissions activity for Fall 2002. That overview is also attached.

The Task Force members discussed the following questions.

1. Given that nearly 100% of our freshmen predicted GPRs that would allow them to graduate (PGPR>2.0), ***why do nearly 30% of them leave without graduating?***
2. Are we serving the state as a land-grant university in helping to close the educational gap between the well educated and the uneducated in SC?
3. Why is Math 106 such a choke point for student success, and what more can we do to ensure student success in this fundamental class? We recognized that Provost Helms has led a renewed focus on gateway math courses, and efforts such as better placement testing and the Academic Support Center have made a difference already. Our question was what else we could do to support the Provost's leadership here. Ideas:
 - a. Use "master teachers" in freshman math courses
 - b. Study our students' learning styles, and try to better match teaching styles to learning styles
 - c. Establish incentives for faculty who "crack the code" in achieving strong Math 106 performance without reducing academic expectations
4. What other things could we do to have an impact on retention and graduation?
 - a. Try to better match students with their majors
 - b. Intervene earlier in the first semester—don't wait until first semester grades are finalized
 - c. Reduce credit hours required to graduate (Provost Helms' initiative)
 - d. Follow up with students who do not return to school
 - e. Consider an enrollment fee to decrease non-academic attrition

- f. Better marketing and recruitment of top students
- g. Increase unrestricted scholarship funds available to recruit top students

Commentary on use of waivers: In order to recruit top out-of-state students, we need to offer meaningful financial incentives. We do so by waiving out-of-state tuition. This helps us recruit top students, but it hurts Clemson financially because we are foregoing tuition revenue. We therefore become shy about offering additional waivers, which means we are less aggressive in our recruitment of top students. We are making a mistake by effectively charging ourselves for every great out-of-state student we recruit—this paradigm is not sustainable. Instead, we should increase unrestricted scholarship dollars so we can still offer financial incentives while we collect full tuition from all out-of-state students.

We also planned several studies to educate the University's leadership team on retention and graduation issues.

- Study of historical student data to determine what is driving attrition (Bobby McCormick and John Warner)
- Focused survey of students who left Clemson; follow-up study after Bobby and John complete their study (Cathy Sams and Debbie Jackson)
- Analysis of tuition waivers—historical and projected (Marvin Carmichael)
- National Student Engagement Survey planned for 2003 (Debbie Jackson)

Thornton Kirby
Task Force Chair

WHY TOP 20?

Compared to the United States as a whole, states containing top-twenty universities are:

- more urban (84% of population is in metropolitan areas vs. 80%), and states with more than one top university are even more urban (92.5%). (SC data not available)
- have slower rates of population growth (7.3% from 1990-1999 vs. 9.8%), and states with more than one top university grew even more slowly (5.3%). This pattern holds true for the 1980s as well. SC's population grew by 14.0% during the 1990s and 13.1% in the 1980s.
- have higher median household incomes (\$45,509 vs. \$41,994 in 1999), and states with more than one top university have even higher median household incomes (\$46,995). SC's median household income was \$37,082 in 1999.
- have higher per capita personal incomes (\$32,846 vs. 29,760 in 2001), and states with more than one top university have even higher per capita incomes (\$35,163). SC's per capita personal income was \$24,886 in 2001.
- have a higher proportion of college graduates among their populations (26.2% vs. 24.4% in 2000), and states with more than one top university have an even higher incidence of college graduates (28.3%). This holds despite the fact that there is almost no difference between these states and the rest of the country in terms of the proportion of the population with at least a high-school education (about 80% in both cases). In SC college graduates constituted 20.4% of the population in 2000, while high-school graduates were 76% of the population.
- have lower rates of teen pregnancy (10.4% vs. 11.8%) and out-of-wedlock births (32.4% vs. 33.2%) in 2000. In SC those rates are 15.3% and 39.8%, respectively.
- have lower crime rates (3.8% vs. 4.1% in 2000), and states with more than one top university have even lower crime rates (3.5%) despite being more urban. SC's crime rate in the year 2000 was 5.2%.
- have a greater proportion of their labor force in services (32.7% vs. 29.2% in 2000), and states with more than one top university have an even greater proportion of their labor force in services (36.6%). In SC, 26.1% of the labor force was in the service sector in 2000.
- have a greater proportion of their labor force in the high-tech sector (54.9% vs. 51% in 2000), and states with more than one top university have a far greater proportion of their labor force in the high-tech sector (65.5%). By contrast, only 27% of SC's labor force was employed in the high-tech sector in that year.

WHY TOP 20?

These data reveal a pattern that is consistent with studies of the long-run determinants of income and growth. It is well known that cities are a mainspring of growth. Clemson's Curtis Simon has found that those cities that have grown the fastest over a long span of U.S. history are those with the highest initial levels of education. Clemson's Robert Tamura, Scott Baier, and their graduate students have found that differences in their levels of educational attainment are the principal causes of differences in per capita incomes across the states of the United States.

Overview of the PR Campaign
October 11, 2001

Objective: Educate members of the S.C. General Assembly and the public at large concerning the importance of nurturing a Top 20 institution for our state. Technically speaking, we will create a Top 20 "category" in the marketplace, and we will simultaneously promote Clemson as the "brand" that deserves investment to become the state's first Top 20 institution.

Leadership/Oversight: The study group appointed by Chairman Gressette and President Barker will provide leadership and oversight for the PR campaign. The members of the study group are Bill Amick (Chair), Bill Smith and Smyth McKissick, with staff support from Neill Cameron, Cathy Sams, and Thornton Kirby.

Day-to-day Management of the Campaign: On a day-to-day basis, the campaign will be managed by Chernoff-Silver, Richard Quinn, and the Clemson Advancement team. Chernoff-Silver and Richard Quinn will guide the legislative effort and develop messages for the public campaign, while the Advancement team will continue the University's ongoing communication strategy to internal constituents, alumni, and the public.

Messages: All messages will be developed by the principal managers in consultation with the leadership group, and all will be cleared with President Barker and Chairman Gressette before they are disseminated publicly.

Financing: The PR campaign will be financed entirely with private, restricted gifts to the Clemson University Foundation. These gifts will be solicited by members of the Clemson University Board of Trustees. In order to ensure that this PR campaign is not financed with monies that could have gone to support scholarships or reduce tuition, no funds will be committed or expended except the private gifts received expressly for the PR campaign.

Next steps: The PR campaign will be initiated as soon as this overview has been approved by Chairman Gressette, President Barker, the Foundation Board Executive Committee, and the PR campaign leadership group.

Draft

Academic Reputation Plan

Objective

Enhance Clemson's national academic reputation among university presidents, provosts, admission directors and other key academic influencers.

Strategies

1. Conduct a thoughtful, consistent, top-of-the-mountain, content oriented, direct communications program. (Neill and Cathy)
2. Focus our messages on key academic and research "wins" that create a relevant point of difference for Clemson. (Dori, Chris and Cathy)
3. When appropriate, leverage our involvement with students, faculty and staff of other institutions in our messages. (Cathy)
4. Promote "academic stars" by enhancing individual faculty and senior executive's visibility on a national level. (Jim, Dori, Neill, Cathy)
5. Embrace key issues in higher education and take them to national higher education platforms. Initial issues identified are:
 - a. Reorganization- (Jim, Phil, Cathy, Debbie)
 - b. Properly pricing a university- (Neill, Thornton, Bobby, Cathy)
 - c. 21st Century Public Service by land grant institutions. (John K).
 - d. Crisis management. (Neill)
 - e. Winning the public relations battle. (Cathy)
 - f. Effective managing with technology. (?)
 - g. Creating an effective partnership with the state legislature. (Jim)
6. Develop a graduate plan to recruit "top 20" graduate students and place our undergraduates in "top 20" graduate programs. (Dori, Bonnie)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TOP 20

- *U.S. News* rankings are based on 15 specific criteria, and Clemson's ranking will be based **solely** on how we perform on those 15 criteria.
- The most important criterion is Academic Reputation, which accounts for 25% of the total score. Each institution has the ability to **influence** its own Academic Reputation, but no institution can **control** its Academic Reputation score.
- Since 25% of the *U.S. News* score is not subject to institutional control, Clemson must concentrate intently on the remaining 75% in order to increase its ranking.
- Unfortunately, the most heavily weighted criterion is one on which Clemson performs poorly, relative to Top 30 institutions. This fact makes the remaining 14 criteria even more critical. Since our Academic Reputation is well below average among Top 20 institutions, our performance on the other 14 criteria must be well above average if we are to achieve a Top 20 ranking.
- In order for Clemson to become a Top 20 institution by 2011, we will have to manage the 14 criteria effectively **on a daily basis, if necessary**.
- One of the most important management decisions affecting *U.S. News* rankings is the allocation of scarce financial resources. The following principles will guide Clemson's allocation decisions:
 - Clemson has \$500 Million each year to invest toward becoming a Top 20 university.
 - The best investments (in terms of *U.S. News* rankings) are those that have a positive impact on the greatest number of *U.S. News* criteria.
 - We will prefer investments that advance multiple inter-related criteria over investments that advance single criteria. (Not all "Top 20 ideas" are equal—some are better than others.)
 - No investment should be made if an alternative investment would have a positive impact on more criteria.
 - We will encourage each other to think critically about every investment and to propose more effective alternatives when they exist.
 - Not every expenditure is a Top 20 investment, and some expenditures are critical even though they have no direct impact on our *U.S. News* ranking. We will permit ourselves to make non-Top 20 investments if they pass scrutiny, but we will not pretend they are advancing our drive for Top 20 status.