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CLEMSON

Magazine rankings rule, says official

Published statements 'outrageous,' school says

BY DIANE KNICH
The Post and Courier

A Clemson University research official shocked a group of academic researchers at a conference in Atlanta this week when she spoke candidly about how the university deliberately reports data and makes decisions to boost its ranking in U.S. News & World Report.

Popular higher education publications The Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed reported Wednesday that Catherine Watt, director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson,

made remarks about how the university focuses much of its attention and resources trying to reach President James Barker's goal of landing a spot among the magazine's top 20 public research universities.

It has reduced class size, increased faculty salaries and raised admission standards, which are all factors that could increase rank, the publications reported. They also reported that Watt said when reporting financial information, the university runs "multiple definitions to figure out where we can move things around to make them look best" in the rankings.

In a prepared statement Wednesday, Clemson officials called the published statements "outrageous" and said nobody at the university has engaged in unethical behavior to boost rankings.

Barker in 2001 set the goal to reach the top 20, according to the statement, but the university's improved ranking is a "by product" of overall improved quality. The university ranked 38th when Barker set the goal. It has since moved up to 22nd.

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Clemson official: School's ranking crucial

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Watt, Clemson's former director of institutional research, said she made the remarks in a presentation at the annual forum of the Association for Institutional Research on how Clemson used strategic management techniques to boost its magazine rankings. She said the point of the presentation was to demonstrate how Clemson set a goal, then put in the resources and effort necessary to accomplish it.

She said that nobody at Clemson has falsified any documents or done anything illegal. The university simply does all it can to earn as high a ranking as possible, she said, and that all universities trying to move up in the rankings use similar strategies.

Personally, she said, she has concerns about the nation-

wide emphasis on magazine rankings. And because she was among peers, she said, she freely conveyed those concerns in the course of her presentation.

Watt, like a growing number of higher education leaders nationwide, said, "It's not a secret that I don't agree with the power we give the magazine rankings." Such a push could be especially harmful in South Carolina, she said. "I'm concerned that in a poor state, we aren't doing enough to address the access needs of poor students."

One of her most controversial comments, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education, was that some Clemson officials purposely rated other schools below average on a reputation survey, presumably so Clemson would be ranked higher. The reputation survey,

which is based on ratings from administrators at peer institutions, makes up 25 percent of a school's score.

Watt said she made the comment only to make the point that institutions don't have control over the reputation survey, so they should focus their efforts on things they can change. That's the strategy Clemson embraced and it has worked for the university, she said. She also said that many of the things the university does to boost its ranking, such as reduce class sizes, actually do benefit students.

The reputation survey, which is completely subjective, was one of the things that pushed Furman University President David Shi to become "disgusted by the mania over rankings." In 2007, Shi became a strong South Carolina voice opposed to universities' em-

phasis on magazine rankings. He was one of about 80 private college presidents nationwide who decided to no longer participate in the ranking process.

Shi said Wednesday the university hasn't had any negative consequences for removing itself from the process. "We continue to believe that the rankings mania distorts the actual integrity and quality of the college search and selection process," he said. At the same time, university officials think it's important to provide prospective students and their families with as much information as possible about a college. Furman does its best to make such information available in other ways, he said.

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