

The Post and Courier

Clemson's rankings fixation

Sunday, June 7, 2009

Eight years ago, Clemson University President James Barker launched a 10-year plan for the school to break into the top 20 of U.S. News and World Report's annual rankings of America's public research universities. Though that seemed to many a far-fetched target for a school then ranked No. 38, it's now within reach, with the school up to No. 22. But as Clemson's ranking has climbed, so have fears that a fixation over it has warped the university's perspective — and policies. Candid remarks by a Clemson research official at an academic conference in Atlanta this week heighten those concerns.

As reported by Diane Knich in Thursday's Post and Courier, Catherine Watt, director of the Alliance for Research on Higher Education at Clemson, told professional counterparts that many decisions at the university have been made with the U.S. News rankings in mind. She said Clemson, when documenting financial data, even runs "multiple definitions to figure out where we can move things around to make them look best."

Clemson's not the only school that wants to look its best in college rankings. Ms. Watt said the school had not falsified any documents or done anything else illegal in seeking higher standing. President Barker, in a written response to the controversy, pointed out that while about "a half dozen" of the 27 quality-improvement goals he set "correspond with U.S. News ranking criteria, the majority do not." Also, some of the decisions cited by Ms. Watt, including boosts in admissions standards and faculty pay and reductions in class size, clearly enhance not just Clemson's ranking but its academic performance.

Still, a growing number of schools, including Furman, have dropped out of the rankings process in recent years, citing its inherent flaws. Those include gaming of the system by some schools.

And Clemson clearly has been pushing hard — apparently too hard — on the rankings front. As a result of those toughened entrance requirements, Clemson now rejects many home-state students it once would have accepted — a dubious shift for a state school in South Carolina, long mired near the bottom nationally in K-12 education.

Another factor that puts Clemson beyond the reach of many in-state students: It still

has the highest undergraduate tuition of any public university in South Carolina.

As Ms. Watt put it: "I'm concerned that in a poor state, we aren't doing enough to address the access needs of poor students."

Clemson should address that and other concerns stemming from its pursuit of rankings goals — and find a better balance between its push for a better academic reputation and its obligations to our state.

Copyright © 1995 - 2009 Evening Post Publishing Co..