

College rankings debate flares

Universities say ratings guide consumers

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A Clemson University administrator's reported description of how the school made class size and admissions decisions to improve its place in magazine rankings has once again stirred debate about their importance.

While some liberal arts colleges have refused to participate in the ranking system — arguing that the rankings are arbitrary and misleading — many see them as an imperfect but essential way of telling students and parents what they have to offer.

“Right or wrong, it's an important consumer guide,” said Ray Barclay, College of Charleston's vice president for institutional research. “It's huge.”

Prior to his time at College of Charleston, Barclay said he worked with parents and students to help them make college choices.

College rankings, he said, are “a resource tool that parents would have in their hip pocket.”

At the College of Charleston, Barclay said he spends about a tenth of his time working on data for the rankings.

Much of the data, he said, would be collected for other purposes even if it weren't used for the rankings.

William T. Moore, USC's vice president for academic affairs and planning, agreed.

USC, like the College of Charleston, Clemson and other colleges and university, keeps data on class size, retention and graduation rates.

“Of course we measure and track that,” Moore said. “We should.”

That, however, is where USC stops, he said.

“We do not manage to the rankings,” he said. “We do not.”

In U.S. News and World Report's 2009 rankings of public, national universities, Clemson ranked No. 22. USC was ranked No. 52.

Clemson President James Barker made earning a top 20 ranking a priority when he became president a decade ago.

During his tenure, Clemson has climbed 16 spots on the U.S. News list.

Clemson has been unusually direct in stating as its vision having a university ranked in the top 20.

"We realize that we stuck our necks out when we adopted the vision statement," Cathy Sams, Clemson's chief public affairs officer, wrote in a statement about the school's efforts. "Few universities are willing to be quite so public. It makes us an easy target for a misinformation campaign."

Sams' statement was written in response to the reported comments of Catherine Watt, who handled rankings data for Clemson when she served as vice president for institutional research.

Watt raised eyebrows at a conference in Atlanta last week with a blunt description of how single-minded the university has been about the rankings.

She was reported to have said the school allowed some classes to grow beyond 50 students so others could have fewer than 20 students, a cutoff that is looked upon favorably by U.S. News.

Watt said she raised the possibility of school officials ranking other universities lower than Clemson to point out how rigid the "reputation" portion of U.S. News' ranking system has become.

Two news organizations that closely follow higher education reported that Watt did not raise that issue as a hypothetical. Instead, they reported, Watt said she had seen Clemson surveys that showed other schools ranked lower.

Those reports, which Watt said were based on comments that were taken out of context, were seen by some higher education officials as an unusually frank look at how a school could make small changes to help itself in the rankings.

Could the data be manipulated so a school could improve its position in the rankings?

"There are some things that can be gamed, I suppose, but that's not what we do," Barclay said, adding that he does not believe it is common for college officials to rank other schools lower in surveys so their own school shines by comparison.

"I've never heard of anyone doing that," Barclay said. "I don't think anybody would think there is something to be gained by that. And then there is the integrity question."

Colleges and universities are ranked by a variety of organizations, including magazines like Forbes and U.S. News and foundations like Carnegie.

USC's Web site notes the university is one of only 23 in the country to be recognized by the Carnegie Foundations for "very high research activity" and "curricular engagement, outreach, and partnerships."

The top ranking of USC's Moore School of Business from U.S. News is also prominently displayed on the university's Web site.

Barker's section of Clemson's Web site notes the school's rise in U.S. News' rankings.

Joining the response to Watt's reported comments last week, Barker said: "In 2001, we adopted a set of 10-year goals — 27 in all — to improve quality, and those goals are driving decisions at Clemson. About a half-dozen of these goals correspond with U.S. News ranking criteria. The majority do not. You'll find goals related to public service, collaboration, diversity, the campus environment, even athletics, none of which are factors in U.S. News rankings. But they are important to Clemson."

It is more difficult than it was a decade ago for students to be admitted to Clemson, a fact that is a point of concern for some who believe public universities in South Carolina should be more accessible to students from this state.

Watt was reported to have said in Atlanta that Clemson has "favored merit over access in a poor state."

Sams described a circular set of factors regarding the academic profile of the university's students.

"It is true that the quality of the student body has climbed, which contributes to the rankings," she said. "But the reason is that over the past 10 years, applications to Clemson have doubled while enrollment has been held steady. This rise in applications is a direct result of improved academic reputation, because the students who come to Clemson could go anywhere, and they have high expectations for quality."

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