Clemson breaks into Top 20 list

U.S. News puts schoo in five-way tie for 20

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Clemson University was only a hundredth of a point away from making U.S. News & World Report's list of Top 20 public universities last year, so on fourth and an inch, it wouldn't be denied again.

Clemson broke through Tuesday into the rarefied realm it had been striving to reach for 15 years — achieving a goal that had been lauded by some as a national benchmark and criticized by others as a misguided way to focus a university's energies.

On Tuesday, though, it was all about celebration, as the university's overall ranking as an institution achieved the distinction of being ranked higher than its venerable football team was in the polls.

The University of South Carolina ranked No. 55.

"To be ranked among the nation's top public universities is a tribute to the hard work and dedication of our faculty, staff, students and trustees and the support of our alumni, donors, friends and volunteers," Clemson President James P. Clements said.

"I congratulate the entire Clemson family on this well-deserved recognition, especially President Emeritus Jim Barker, who started us on this path 15 years ago."

Barker, who led the university to the edge of the promised land but left it to Clements to enter in, has said it wasn't so much the ranking in itself that was important but that the criteria the magazine was using to judge schools matched where Clemson wanted to go.

Barker had aimed Clemson's sights on the Top 20 early in his presidency but left office in January just shy that elusive goal, at No. 21.

Clemson has been in the top 25 for the past seven years.

"The goal has always been about making Clemson a better university and increasing the value of a Clemson degree," Barker said. "We knew that if we focused on our students, the rankings would take care of themselves.

"The credit for this recognition belongs to the students, faculty, staff, alumni and the board of trustees of Clemson University."

Clemson was in a five-way tie for No. 20 with Purdue, the University of Georgia, the University of Maryland

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and the University of Pittsburgh.

The magazine noted Clemson's "exceptional teaching" as being a factor in it having among the highest retention and graduation rates among public universities in the country.

"Exceptional teaching is also why Clemson continues to attract an increasingly talented student body," it said. "In 2013, more than half of the entering freshmen were ranked in the Top 10 percent of their high school classes, and the freshman class averaged 1246 on the critical reading and math sections of the SAT."

The university also ranked eighth on the list of "up-and-coming schools" that have made "the most promising and innovative changes in academics, faculty, students, campus or facilities," and it was recognized as one of 11 institutions in the nation for making writing a priority at all levels and across the curriculum.

"This ranking is a testament to the quality and diversity of the Clemson educational experience — the high quality of its students, faculty and programs," said Anand Gramopadhye, dean of the College of Engineering and Science.

"It's great that South Carolina citizens now have a Top 20 school in their backyard. We owe it to the citizens of this great state."

Clemson ranked 31st in undergraduate engineering programs and 50th in undergraduate business programs.

"It's significant to be recognized as one of the nation's Top 20 universities," said Robert Barkley, director of undergraduate admissions at Clemson. "This academic ranking, along with the quality of the Clemson experience in and out of the classroom, are reasons that interest in Clemson is at an all-time high among students throughout South Carolina, and around the nation."

Kelly Smith, the immediate past president of the Faculty Senate said, "I think this is a major achievement that everyone in the Clemson community can be truly proud of. It represents an enormous amount of effort and dedication by everyone."

Jim Oswald, a 1984 graduate in electrical engineering and industrial management and an employee with the city of Clemson, said the city and university's good relationship through the Joint City-University Advisory Board and the International Town and Gown Association, should be acknowledged for helping the university hit the top 20.

"Both contribute greatly to the cultures of Clemson and Clemson," he said.

Some Clemson alumni say the ranking, while increasing the value of a Clemson diploma, does little to help graduates who can't find a job.

Others said it indicates the university's progress but that U.S. News & World Report has become less important a measuring stick than it was when Clemson embarked on this quest.

"The key here isn't the end of the road, but the journey," said alumnus Adam Wickliffe.

"Clemson has improved along this journey, ensuring its spot as the state's top university for undergraduate education. Reaching the Top 20 now is simply recognition of progress along the journey."