Dear friends,

I am often asked as to my thinking on the issue of guides and rankings of colleges and universities. Generally my answer over the years has been that we welcome such external assessments and the associated recognition for the excellence of Clark’s programs, while stressing the importance of truly understanding the basis of the rankings and how they map to University priorities and the educational aspirations of families. Over the past year, this issue of “what is being ranked and for what purpose” has taken on renewed significance as part of the debate around cost, access, and the quality of higher education in this country. With higher education at a pivotal moment of change, it is important that we at Clark University state clearly where we stand on the issue of rankings and the associated question of goals and priorities.

Here is a link to guides and rankings of Clark University: clarku.edu/rankings. We are delighted to receive this recognition for the excellence of our academic programs, for the educational experiences available at Clark, and more broadly, for the recognition of a robust “return on education” for life, career, and citizenship. We are confident this acknowledgment is well-earned, and indeed are seeking additional ways to increase the visibility and appreciation for Clark University across the country and around the world. The rankings listed here include recognition of the excellence of our undergraduate programs, as in the guides Colleges that Change Lives, Princeton Review and the Fiske Guide. There is also recognition for the quality of Clark’s graduate programs, including the National Research Council assessment of doctoral programs, and ranking of our AACSB International-accredited Graduate School of Management.

Clark is a great university on the rise. A review of the guides and rankings on this Web page demonstrates that we cannot go far in discussing rankings without recognizing that what is being ranked is a statement about what is being valued. For example, you will see that Clark is identified by U.S. News as a top-ranked “best value” among research universities, a recognition also afforded to Clark by Forbes, Kiplinger and other guides. What distinguishes these best-value rankings is that they combine measures of institutional quality with those of net cost to students. That is, in assessing the value of education, the issue of cost of attendance cannot be ignored. At the same time, it is a reminder that efforts to cut costs that also undermine the excellence of a student’s education is a poor choice.

The question of how institutional quality is assessed in rankings has been especially vexing. The critique is rightly made that most of the well-known rankings are based heavily on input measures of institutional quality, such as the profile of the incoming class of students (selectivity) or the amount of resources spent per student. Outcome measures — direct assessment of the educational results of attending an institution — are for the most part limited to whether a student graduates (graduation rates) and do not contain information about the quality of the education received. Student appreciation of their college experience is typically measured by the percentage of alumni who give annually after graduation. That is, in part, why we invite all our alumni to give annually to the Clark Fund, according to their means, as this directly influences Clark’s reputation in many college rankings.

The responsibility for responding to the need for stronger outcome measures rests with the colleges themselves, and it is a challenge that we at Clark are taking on. As part of our Liberal Education and Effective Practice (LEEP) initiative we are committed to putting in place more robust direct assessments of student learning and of educational outcomes, and to collaborating with external organizations that seek to build these assessments into a next generation of university rankings. As part of LEEP, our intent is to dramatically enhance the college-to-career transition for our students, and we will be looking to document these results one and five years out, and then more generally in terms of the enduring impact of a Clark education on a successful and fulfilling life.

In August of this year, President Obama announced plans to launch a new ranking system to measure college performance and to provide families with information needed to select institutions that offer good return on investment. The ratings will be based on measures of access (percentage of students receiving Pell grants), affordability (tuition net of grants and scholarships, loan debt at the point of graduation), and educational outcomes (graduation rates, graduate earnings, and advanced degrees of college graduates). The motivation behind this new ranking system is to promote change that will make college more affordable for students. This is a critically important goal, as it reflects the historically American values of equal opportunity and education as a societal good. At the same time, we will provide input to the Obama Administration encouraging a focus not only on cost, but also on a vision of educational outcomes that includes intellectual and personal growth that will serve graduates over a lifetime.

As always, I welcome your thoughts and reflections on these comments and thank you for your support of Clark University.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President