Like many Americans, I grew up listening to Paul Harvey’s radio newscasts. I’ve always been a great admirer of his dramatic style, which is at the same time easy to joke about but truly memorable.

So, please indulge me if I imitate his style to announce one of the more significant University news stories last fall.

Page one: The University of Hartford jumped dramatically upward in the U.S. News & World Report rankings of American colleges, moving from the fourth to the third tier among what the magazine calls National Doctoral Universities. This move, the second dramatic improvement in the University’s ranking in the past two years, marks an important advance in the University’s national reputation.

Last year, U.S. News moved the University into the National Doctoral rankings, the top 240 universities that it ranks. This year, the University jumped notably ahead, moving into a tier that includes universities like Arizona State University, Drexel University, and Hofstra University. This is a significant achievement for the University, its students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

And now . . . for the rest of the story. What does this mean? How important is this ranking? What do the rankings measure? What accounts for this improvement?

Answering these questions actually tells you a great deal about U.S. News and how it compiles these rankings. I have a little inside information because in the mid-1980s, when the magazine was changing the rankings from a mere poll to a more statistically sound system, the editors invited me and other university officials to Washington for a day to help them develop a more sophisticated way of evaluating colleges.

Until that time, U.S. News had polled presidents, provosts, and admissions directors, and simply compiled these polls into rankings. This system left much to be desired, since many of us senior administrators really know very little about other universities, especially those outside our region. The result was a skewed system, one that the editors had a hard time defending.

So, U.S. News began to develop a statistical method that it has refined from year to year ever since. In the intervening years, this ranking system has become quite intricate, measuring everything from reputation (how those same presidents, provosts, and admissions directors size up institutions) to graduation rate to average alumni giving rate.

Here is the most important question to ask of these rankings: Do they really measure the quality of an academic institution? My answer to that is straightforward but a little complicated. The U.S. News rankings are data driven and defensible statistically, but they do not add up to a real measure of institutional quality. They measure a variety of things, but they do not add up to a complete picture of a university.

Still, they are influential, not only with students and parents selecting colleges and universities to attend but also with alumni. So I think it is important for you, the University’s alumni and friends, to know how the University stacks up. Where have we improved so rapidly of late? Where do we still need improvement? As you will see, and it may surprise you to know this, you can have a real influence on where we end up in these rankings.

It is important to note that the University does very well in areas that focus on the classroom experience of our students. Our class size is as small as any university’s in the country, and we rank at or near the top in the entire nation in this area. We also do reasonably well in the graduation rates of our students and on those measures that indicate the quality of a student’s experience here. Although we have made some
improvement lately, we need to continue to improve the academic profile of our entering class.

In two areas, though, we do not do as well as we should, and those two areas are places where you can help: peer assessment score and average alumni giving rate. The peer assessment score is an academic reputation survey of presidents, provosts, and admissions directors; the alumni giving rate is the percentage of our alumni who donate to the University.

There are good reasons why we score low in these two areas, and both reflect our relative youth as a university. Reputation always lags reality, and in the higher-education world, that lag is usually as long as 10 years. We in the administration need to work on improving that reputation and alumni giving rate, first by planning and doing good things, but then by promoting them better. There is a natural reticence to this University, and I have set about changing that. We have dozens of great programs, but we need to work smarter and harder in building their national profile.

Here’s where you can help. Overcome that institutional reticence. Don’t be afraid to tell people about the good experiences you had here. Talk about the good things that happen here every single day, both in and out of the classroom. If we combine a smarter media campaign with better word-of-mouth communication, our reputation will rise. And that is still the largest weighting in U.S. News’s ranking, accounting for 25 percent of what the publication measures.

The other measure that needs dramatic improvement is our alumni giving rate, which stands at 7 percent. This ranks us near the bottom of our tier, and it certainly ranks us last among the 12 universities with whom we most commonly compare ourselves.

Those of you who are alumni can effect change here radically by giving a donation annually to your alma mater. It is as simple as that. The size of your gift isn’t of primary importance; it only matters that you give something. This is important whether you graduated in 1958 or 2002. These gifts will certainly help our rankings; more importantly, they will help fund those educational and extracurricular programs that make us one of the most rapidly improving universities in the nation.

So there you have it: a story of rapid improvement in recent years and a clear challenge for how to improve further in the years to come. And the good news is that you can help.

As Paul Harvey would say, “So now you know the rest of the story.”

Walter Harrison

Join Me in Atlanta on March 31

In the coming months, I’ll be traveling the country to talk with alumni outside of Hartford at a series of informal receptions. I’m interested in learning what’s on your mind, and I’d like to update those able to attend on plans unfolding here at the University.

My thanks to Fred Beloin ’79, ’80 and his wife, Brenda, who will graciously open their Marietta, Ga., home for the first of these events. Fred and Brenda will host an evening reception for Atlanta-area alumni on Monday, March 31, and I invite those in the area to save the date for what promises to be a terrific event.

Fred Beloin is a partner in the law firm of Beloin and Associates in Atlanta. A specialist in business litigation, Fred majored in economics and political science, graduating summa cum laude from the College of Arts and Sciences in 1979. He is also a 1980 graduate of the Barney School of Business, where he earned a master’s degree in economics. As an undergraduate, Fred was a member of the men’s basketball team. A native of Farmington, Conn., Fred holds a law degree from the University of Georgia School of Law. He and Brenda have four sons.

I look forward to talking with many of you at the Beloins’ home. Watch for your invitation and plan to join us.