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Demonstrating Quality in Higher Education

Conference Proceeding

Theme IV: Ranking and the Consumer Perspective

Chair: Thomas M. Rocco, PhD

Presentations:

Mr. Bruce G. Hammond, former editor, Fiske Guide to Colleges, Director of Counseling at Sandia Preparatory School

Summary:

“Ranking and US Higher Education, Lessons and Pitfalls”

In keeping with an older, liberal arts model of American higher education, most ambitious students seek a prestigious institution with which to affiliate rather than faculty and curricular strengths in a particular major or course of study. Parents tend to reinforce this kind of selection standard. Hence, rankings seem to have a greater force in America than in most other western nations.

Rankings are similar to standings in collegiate sports leagues. Indeed, they are often linked, partially due to the size and wealth of the universities that can afford to be both selective in admissions and able to field superior teams. Rankings also reinforce admission selectivity as the primary criterion by which the public and universities themselves tend to judge academic excellence. It is the character of the students who choose to apply and who are admitted that determines whether a university ranks in the top tier.

On the other hand, the real strength of American higher education as assessed through its accreditation system is that the institutions are judged not by a single criterion or set of factors and they are not expected to measure up to a single standard. The extraordinary achievement of American higher education is its diversity of mission and objectives and an accreditation system that allows for great diversity. This diversity is exactly what almost all ranking schemes do not take account of, since they act more or less as a patronizing bureaucracy, implicitly dictating values and standards.

Students are unique individuals, whose needs are likely to be met differently by different kinds of institutions. Any meaningful assessment of higher education must, therefore, hinge on the delivery of both educational and support services that include mentoring of

students for successful learning in the academy. Rankings just do not take account of these factors.

Here are some suggestions for determining whether universities should be thought to achieve a level of quality worthy of the students who are seeking admission to them:

1. how does the institution balance research with teaching of undergraduate students. Do the research activities of the faculty directly benefit the students? How does the research that faculty members must do to get tenure complement or enrich their teaching and how does it engage their undergraduate students?
2. How does the university or college actively foster teaching and learning? Are there faculty development activities concerned with the educational process? Is there a faculty forum, for example, about students' learning?
3. How does the university link the academic environment, the more or less insulated world of teaching and learning, with the rest of the world the students will experience? Does the university build bridges between its campus and the world of work through internships, career development for students, study abroad opportunities, fellowships, and similar placements.

Rankings almost never take account of these kinds of services that support student learning and make student success after graduation more likely. This is why rankings are largely a diversion from what should be their essential purpose: helping students understand how a university will best help them to become better learners. Rankings seem to promise aspiring university or college students that they will be helped in making sound judgments about where to apply for admission. Instead, rankings tend to undermine the advances that institutions are making as they work out their missions and goals and strive to assess their outcomes in accord with accreditation standards; the rankings ignore the most important factors that make a university a good choice for a particular student in favor of easy to list public relations items.

Mr. Martin Ince, Freelance journalist, Times Higher Education Supplement, media consultant, author of 8 books on science and related topics, researcher for the "Teaching and Learning Program."

Summary:

"Are Rankings Relevant?"

Of course they are. In the United Kingdom rankings are commonplace, not only for universities but also for schools, hospitals, railway companies, and many other public and private services.

Certainly, also, rankings are politically contentious and they may be used to attack people for political reasons, no matter that they are doing their best. For example, in one instance, an English hospital lost all its "stars" in a ranking scheme to the delight of its

professional staff and to the chagrin of its management, who lost their bonuses. Yes, ranking can expose weaknesses that the public should know about but they may also form part of a more general culture of target setting, which is hostile to creative achievement.

More generally, rankings are part of a consumer culture in which people want to know more than they used to about what they are buying or paying for. Seen in that light, they are a little more benign. Certainly, this applies to universities and as they cost more to attend, the importance of rankings will grow in the UK and Europe as it already has in the US.

Already in Britain, league tables very important; the “rich list” has taken on great interest and has spawned many spin-offs. Importantly, if a ranking is to succeed in a newspaper, there must be a large number of people who want to read it. The total of college goers in Britain has increased from fewer than 10% of high school graduates, to over 40% now, and it is expected to increase further. Since there are more universities and many more students, there are also many more parents worrying about where to send their children, not knowing for sure how to make such judgments. This is therefore a business opportunity for publishers and a service to the public.

Various publications do their own ranking and use their own criteria. Most rank the whole institution rather than particular programs of study and they use factors such as selectivity, student accommodation, and library spending to establish rank. There is an attempt to list at least the major areas of study available, since these too are growing significantly in Britain. Journalism, for example, did not even exist as a department in Britain but now there are multiple options for an aspiring student. Fortunately for British papers, there is a Higher Education Statistics Agency, gathering data constantly on universities and these data provide the grist for the ranking mills. In many other developed countries, some ranking system has been developed, usually less elaborated than in the US or the UK.

The Times Higher Education Supplement is international in scope, because there are about two million students studying outside their home countries, growing at 10% per year. The THES has a significant market because there are few sources of information helping these students and their families make judgments about what institutions in which nations are best for them. Our newspaper has both credibility and reaches international markets, and we assured that the Supplement would be truly international and understandable by our readers. Importantly, after analyzing the data collected and the opinions of hundreds of research active academics in about 500 institutions, THES found that excellence was not limited to the US and UK but could be found in universities in 29 countries. Among the somewhat surprising results are that Australia is quite well regarded around the world, but continental European universities do less well in these rankings.

The THES rankings do admit of misunderstandings and there are some inherent biases that might be better controlled in the future and we are working to make the whole

process more inclusive of data the universities themselves consider relevant, without overly expanding the data tables to a point of confusion for the readers.

Rankings are not only relevant, but they are increasing in importance and interest. Online access is making them even more available to the world at large. They will not go away. Rankings are here to stay and universities will have to learn to live with them.

Mr. Jimmy Leach, Executive Editor, Guardian Unlimited, and Editor of the annual Guardian University Guide.

Summary:

“Measuring Quality in Higher Education: What Business is it of Newspapers?”

The Guardian has deliberately chosen to put its university rankings on the web rather than in print format and to make them subject-based in contrast to other rankings that consider only the whole university. The research data were compiled by a division of Brunel University in collaboration with the Guardian. Across the 47 subject headings, the Guardian uses 7 criteria: teaching quality, staff-student ratio, spending per student, job prospects after graduation, value added by the institution, admissions standards, and inclusiveness of under-represented groups. This year the Guide also provided information on bursaries and scholarships to take effect in 2006.

While Oxford and Cambridge, not surprisingly, came out on top, followed by the London-based universities, there were some surprises, especially in particular subjects. Warwick, for example, came in first in media studies and Liverpool first in materials engineering.

Importantly, the Guardian allows users to manipulate scores, to weight values according to their own interests and to create their own ratings; readers can also view universities within their own peer group, as it were, by viewing only those universities that admit students with qualifications similar to the reader's. In addition to this personalization of the data, the internet continues to evolve in ways that allow users to be more active than before, so that web sites are less important than search engines and blogs.

Since people do not have to visit the Guardian site to find our rankings and since the Guardian no longer “owns” the personalized form of rankings, we are losing control of the data and how people are using it. How we should deal with this is the challenge. Policing and correcting original source data and the rankings themselves are two factors.

The newspapers and the reading public both must know that the old model of publishing a list of winners and losers is at an end. Printing is not the end of the process. The ability to personalize the data means that the Guardian rankings are a default, not a permanent setting. How this will evolve is uncertain and how we deal with it is a challenge for both on-line and off-line producers.

Mr. Jacob D. Leibenluft, editor-in-chief of the Yale Daily News, supervising publication of the News' Insiders' Guide to the Colleges.

Summary:

“Life at the Top: the Impact of Rankings and Competitiveness on Applicants and Students at America’s top Universities”

College rankings in the United States, in particular that of the U.S. News and World Report, have grown in prominence during the past two decades. While the precise impact of these rankings may not be clear, they appear to be both a cause and effect of increased competition for spots at America’s top universities. In addition, while rankings are filling a clear need in the marketplace for higher education in the US, they have not yet been designed in a way to best serve the interests of students or the universities themselves.

For students, the advent of rankings has resulted in many applications to colleges that would not have been considered before. And rankings have also contributed to an increasingly stressful environment for high schoolers applying for colleges, as more and more of them place a priority on gaining acceptance into schools with the best reputation. In addition, the structure of American rankings – and the U.S. News and World Report’s, most notably – appears at odds with the principles that American students are encouraged to follow in finding the best “fit” for them in college.

Rankings also appear to have an impact on university behavior. To some extent, this has been a positive development, as schools have been forced to release more data about their admissions and graduation rates. Likewise, rankings have helped encourage schools to compete to offer better instruction, facilities and financial aid. But rankings and the ranking culture have also created perverse incentives to tailor behavior towards improving performance on a narrow set of measurements.

Finally, three conclusions about the future of college rankings in the United States:

- 1) **The problem with the U.S. admissions process is not competition, but the fact that the competition is not directed towards the right ends.** While students should compete with one another for the best universities and universities should compete for the best students, that competition should be more specific and structured. It makes little sense for a talented history student to go to the No.1-ranked school overall if its history department is weak. Unless competition is more finely tailored to the needs of students, it will produce mixed results.
- 2) **The current rankings system will not disappear without an alternative.** Desire of students and parents for tools that can help them simplify the college admission process is clear. Regardless of how poorly the current rankings are designed, existing tools will continue to maintain their popularity until families feel they have another option that will serve them better.

- 3) **The higher education community can take the lead in reform if it wishes.**
If colleges feel the current ranking system is unsatisfactory, they can take the initiative in spurring the creation of a new system – not least because they control much of the information necessary for rankings. Colleges and universities have an interest in creating a more effective ranking system, but if they continue to remain on the sidelines, there is little hope for improvement.