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Regional

How important are those college rankings?

Soon we will be bombarded by press reports about the latest U.S. News and World Report college rankings. The media will concentrate on who is up and who is down in those rankings. All colleges and universities will highlight whatever they think will help them increase their prestige, while those getting bad rankings will try to bury them among other, more positive ones. So, I think it is time to explain the real value of those and other rankings.

The U.S. News and World Report is a weekly magazine founded in 1933 that has become mostly famous for publishing annual rankings of colleges. It has been a digital-only publication since 2010, although the annual “best colleges” guide can be found in print in bookstores and newsstands. This magazine has been publishing their rankings since the 1980s. Since 2014 it entered into the business of ranking postsecondary institutions outside the U.S., an area already dealt with by other publications.

These rankings have become so popular that many other publications such as Washington Monthly and a bunch more have joined the fray of ranking higher education institutions for both general and/or special areas. There have even been moves to create non-commercial, alternate sources of information for prospective students and their families using data from institutions such as the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and the Council of Independent Colleges.

To really understand how those rankings work we need to consider two things: how data is collected and what it is being measured.

Colleges and universities voluntarily submit their

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

data after receiving an annual survey. That is where the problems start. To begin with there have been instances in which some colleges and universities have submitted false data just to improve their rankings. In addition to that, and despite its fame and propaganda value, since the 1990s several institutions have boycotted U.S. News and World Report ranking efforts by refusing to submit data. And that is not because those institutions fear looking bad. Among the institutions boycotting this process are both prestigious liberal arts colleges as well as prominent research institutions, such as Stanford University. What they say is that those rankings are misleading.

The rankings are also based upon opinion surveys of university faculty members and administrators who do not belong to the schools being ranked. There has also been a move among many institutions not to participate in this “reputation survey” which weighs 25 percent in the rankings because they are seen as “beauty contests” and highly subjective.

Although the editors of this magazine have forcefully defended their methodology and results, the question is, how accurate – and useful – are these rankings for prospective students and their families?

First, we all know that the choice of college is a very personal one that does not necessarily relate to the quality of the education being offered. Factors such as cost, name recognition, size, location and the like play

a major role in those decisions and they have very little to do with those rankings. That is why many high school counselors I have spoken to rarely use these rankings to advise students where to go for college. They understand that a lot of personal factors are the ones that will determine what will be the best fit to a particular student.

Another fundamental problem with those rankings is that they create the illusion that they are a fair measure of educational quality. In fact, colleges and universities struggle themselves in measuring the quality of instruction they provide. Web sites of postsecondary institutions are filled with news regarding major (or minor) athletic triumphs, scholarly achievements by the faculty, fundraising successes and construction of new facilities. But they provide little if any hard-data information of how they are doing from a pedagogical viewpoint.

Another issue is that one way to move up in those ranking is by just spending more money in areas that have little to do with the academic activities of the institution, such as improving athletic facilities or offering more athletic scholarships. In other words, you can “buy” your way up into the rankings without effectively improving the quality of education being provided.

Other figures used to rank these institutions, such as the size of endowments or faculty research productivity, are also mostly irrelevant to the quality of instruction, being, therefore, overestimations of their real pedagogical value. Although these rankings measure reputation and average SAT scores of entering students, which says little about the quality of instruc-

tion or how much students will learn when compared with other schools. Also, we are seeing more and more public institutions being measured by factors important to politicians, such as enrollment and graduation rates, which can be very sensitive to factors beyond the control of those institutions, such as demographics and the local or regional economy.

When it comes to the federal agencies there seems to be an overemphasis on factors such as scholarly productivity, mostly because the major funders of those activities are themselves federal agencies.

So why, despite all these shortcomings, is there so much notoriety for these rankings? Many university presidents will say publicly that they believe in them in part due to pressure from trustees, alumni and faculty members. Some boards of trustees even offer bonuses to presidents if they increase the institution’s rankings. It seems that for many of them to go with the flow is easier than to try to educate their constituencies about the realities detailed in this article.

The fundamental question is how well these institutions of higher education will prepare students to be successful as a person and as professionals after college. To that end, students and their parents should ask those potential college destinations questions along those lines and the answers they will receive should be a good indication whether or not those institutions know what they are doing beyond publicity stunts.

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