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Rankings can be bad for colleges' health

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.

In previous columns I have reported how a number of external factors, such as funding, demographics, politics and the like have been hurting higher education. In many other cases – overblown athletic programs, misguided marketing, and plain bad leadership – the injuries have been self-inflicted. To these cases we can now add the race for the rankings.

I have argued in this column in the past that rankings like the ones by U.S. News & World Report and its copycats make little sense. To begin with, many of the things they claim to measure, such as athletics, facilities, and “reputation,” have nothing to do with the quality of the education students receive. Besides, improvement in all those areas costs money, money that could be used to actually improve the quality of the education for the students or the productivity of the faculty. In the last few months, a new case emerged that demonstrates how these rankings are built on very shaky ground, and furthers the reasons why we should ignore them.

Temple University is a public (formerly private) institution located in Philadelphia. It has had a distinguished history since its founding in 1888, and currently serves about 80,000 students. For some time now, the school has appeared obsessed with improving its rankings. Until the beginning of this year, they were ranked 118 in the nation by U.S. News. Yet, in the last few months a number of incidents have placed its reputation in serious danger.

Just two weeks ago we learned that Moshe Porat, dean of Temple's Fox School of Business, resigned after the university discovered that multiple programs in its business school had misreported data to U.S. News. Curiously that program had been ranked No. 1 by the magazine for the last four years, including 2018. Temple not only lied about statistics of the Master in Business Administration (MBA) program, but also about the entire school. After the scandal was brought up in the national media, U.S. News reclassified the program as “unranked.”

Because of the allegations of misreporting, Temple hired the law firm Jones Day, which issued a report showing that the business school had inflated metrics, including the number of entrants who had provided GMAT scores, the average undergraduate GPA of new students, how many offers of admission it had extended, and how much debt its students had incurred related to their M.B.A., global M.B.A., part-time M.B.A., master of science in human-resource management, and master of science in digital innovation in marketing programs.

Interestingly enough, the falsification of data was discovered after some Temple employees disclosed to U.S. News that the university had inflated the data they had provided previously.

This shows the vulnerability and unreliability of all the data used by the magazine. Not only are they based on self-reporting (and we don't know how many other cheaters are out there), but the magazine has no way to verify the accuracy of most of the data they receive, which feed the algorithm they use to rank programs.

Because of this and many other issues, an increasing number of colleges and universities refuse to provide any data to U.S. News, and the magazine has shown how unscientific and vindictive it can be.

One of the schools that refuse to provide data is Reed College, a good quality private liberal arts institution in Oregon. They stopped providing data in 1995 and asked the magazine to simply omit Reed from its listings. According to an article published in *The Atlantic* in 2005 that was authored by Colin Diver, former Reed president, the editors of U.S. News, “arbitrarily assigned the lowest possible value to each of Reed's missing variables, with the result being that Reed dropped in one year from the second quartile to the bottom quartile. After the predictable outcry, U.S. News purportedly began to rank Reed based on information available from other sources. In subsequent years that procedure usually placed the college somewhere in the middle of the second quartile, with a footnote stating that we ‘refused to fill out the U.S. News statistical survey,’ and claiming to base

the ranking on data from published sources. But since much of the information needed to complete the magazine's ranking algorithm is unpublished, one can only guess how the editors arrive at a value.”

Temple and the magazine may be facing more than public shame for these practices. We also learned through *The Wall Street Journal* that the federal government began an investigation into Temple's use of deceptive marketing practices to recruit students to its online M.B.A. program.

The Department of Education's investigative unit is looking at whether federal student loans and grants from taxpayer dollars have been improperly used to fund school programs, or if students were misled when deciding where to attend. In the past, the department has obligated colleges found guilty of these kinds of violations with reimbursing student tuition costs and paying steep fines (sometimes in the millions of dollars). They decided to investigate after an online M.B.A. student had filed a lawsuit alleging that Fox School administrators had engaged in fraud

and deceptive business practice. The Pennsylvania attorney general is also investigating.

The question is, when will colleges and universities stop playing the rankings game? Once I asked that question to some higher education chief executives and the said that they couldn't, citing issues of “pride,” “marketing value,” and/or “because the board says so.”

One of the functions of college presidents is to educate their constituencies—including their board of trustees and donors – on the realities of higher education. The sham concerning “rankings” should be no exception. They may encounter some resistance, including from their marketing departments, but the reality is that by participating in unscientific surveys for rankings, their prestige will suffer severely in the long run.

It is time for the leadership of institutions of higher education to show some vision and courage.

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