On Higher Education Ranking by the U.S. News & World Report

I do not believe in colleges rankings despite their popularity. In a previous post, I said that the school grading system is not an accurate and reliable measurement to assess student’s learning. I maintain the same position regarding colleges rankings because, in this case, descriptive statistics (mathematical data...) are subjectively weighted and interpreted, and then those interpretations are presented as facts. Ranking educational quality is a complex matter and is not generated by data extracted from a computer software. How could we rank the quality of the education in the same way we do for corporates’ business profits?

Colleges rankings are usually done by many magazines, newspapers and websites. Each one of those has its own criteria and its own formula. The various ranking models mean that experts in higher education disagree about the appropriate formula, and thus rankings are already controversial. In this post, I will consider the U.S. News & World Report that is probably best known for annual higher education rankings. It uses data in seven areas to assess the quality of the education. These areas are: 1- freshmen retention and graduation rate, 2- faculty resources, 3- acceptance rate, 4- financial resources, 5- alumni giving, 6- graduation rate performance, 7- peer assessment. All of the given data above are mathematical and objective except the last one where top college officials rate peer schools’ academic programs. In other terms, college presidents, provosts and deans are asked to rate other institutions’ reputation. The reputation is rated from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The statistics affixed to the program reputation are meant to give the ranking an apparent impartiality.

Ranking a college based on the categories and factors mentioned above is flawed for the following reasons:

1- When the formula (the measures and the percentages of each indicators) change, the rankings change. For example, the U.S. News & World Report’s formula currently gives the category of retention and graduation a weight of 22.5 percent, and the category of graduation performance a weight of 7.5 percent. If those weights change (and they might), that will obviously affect the rankings. The U.S. News survey claims on its website that it constantly changes its methodology in order to improve it.

2- Consequently, while not altering the data, the U.S. News Report presents a biased and an inaccurate report about college academic quality. Sadly, this would result in manipulating applicants’ behavior because, according to a study by the University of Michigan, there is a correlation between college rankings on one hand and students’ decision making when selecting a college on the other hand (Bastedo, Michael N. and Nicholas A. Bowman. "The U.S. News & World Report Colleges Rankings: Modeling Institutional Effects on Organizational Reputation. 2010"). These findings are not surprising, but it is good to support an argument based on a scientific study.

3- Education rankings fall into a perverse system producing a pattern of a certain trap known as the “Success to the Successful”. By ranking, let’s say, the best 25 or 50 colleges, the U.S. News Report automatically excludes colleges that are not on its front page from ever being admitted into the top 25 or 50 list. As a matter of fact, when a college is ranked on the top list, it receives more applications, and when it receives more applications, the acceptance rate becomes low, and when the acceptance rate is low, the college’s reputation increases, and when the college is perceived as
prestigious, it gets into the top list, and when it gets into the top list, it receives more applications, and when it receives more applications, the acceptance rate decreases even more, ... and the loop goes on and on. This reinforcing loop (by systematically advantaging the winners) fuels in fact the “competitive exclusion” because it keeps giving disadvantage to the losers.

4- I question the categories or areas associated with education quality mentioned above (alumni giving, acceptance rate, freshman retention, etc.) because there is not necessarily a close correlation between their score on one hand and the quality of education on another hand. Let’s take the freshmen retention factor. A freshman can be retained because he finds a perfect fit in a certain college, but that doesn’t necessarily imply that the academic quality is high. Could a freshman want to transfer because the curriculum was challenging for him, or because of a reason that has nothing to do with education at all? I can take each of the seven factors weighting in college rankings by the U.S. News ratings and easily challenge its association with education quality.

5- Besides, while some of those seven categories (i.e. faculty resources) are important, the U.S. News methods lack some of the most important measures of academic quality: a strong and a diverse curriculum, a qualified faculty, etc.

6- The ranking reports might backfire against the higher education quality itself when they emphasize their subjective factors weighting on rankings. My assumption is that most of the administrators are working toward improving their college ranking (based on the U.S. News criteria) because it affects its reputation and profitability. This behavior would distract from the academic programs and will, eventually, does a disservice to students.

I strongly believe that higher education institution’s quality and success should be measured by the accomplishment of their unique mission. In other terms, higher education institutions should set their own standards in the academic areas that they chose, they should challenge themselves, and compete within themselves rather than against each other.

As I was sharing this post with a friend, she recommended that I read about Reed College and why it opted out of colleges rankings. I found the information very enlightening as it offers, unlike my post based on personal opinion, facts and a comprehensive analysis about the whole rankings issue. After reading it, I stopped working on my post, and preferred to include the link to Reed College position on rankings. Below is the link. Please read...

https://www.reed.edu/apply/college-rankings.html