Meredith Davis, College of Design, North Carolina State University, USA

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Can College Rankings Be Believed?

Abstract The article summarizes literature on college and university rankings worldwide and the strategies used by various ranking organizations, including those of government and popular media. It traces the history of national and global rankings, indicators used by ranking systems, and the effect of rankings on academic programs and their institutions. Although ranking systems employ diverse criteria and most weight certain indicators over others, there is considerable skepticism that most actually measure educational quality. At the same time, students and their families increasingly consult these evaluations when making college decisions, and sponsors of faculty research consider reputation when forming academic partnerships. While there are serious concerns regarding the validity of ranking institutions when so little data can support differences between one institution and another, college rankings appear to be here to stay.

Keywords
College rankings
University rankings
Global rankings
Higher education assessment
Ranking systems
Program evaluation

Received October 31, 2016
Accepted November 27, 2016

Email
Meredith Davis
(corresponding author)
meredith_davis@ncsu.edu

http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2016.11.002

Fewer things raise the hackles of faculty in higher education like the periodic ranking of colleges and universities. Popular media and government agency ratings of the relative quality of institutions and individual academic programs appear arbitrary, uninformed by rigorous research, and symptomatic of misplaced administrative values. To academics, it is as though the hard work of building programs that meet students' educational needs, generating significant contributions to disciplinary knowledge, and serving the interests of professions has been reduced to an ordinal position on a list, without a meaningful explanation of what distinguishes one institution from the next. Faculty members are skeptical that the data collected actually measure what ranking systems claim, and also that ranking organizations actually verify the accuracy of their published descriptions. As an assessment, college rankings appear neither accountable to commonly understood performance criteria nor actionable in guiding plans for improvement.

So what is the history of such ranking institutions? What criteria and methods inform them? And what do rankings mean for institutions, faculty, and students?

A Brief History of College Rankings

Ellen Hazelkorn's 2015 book *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence* traces the rise of college rankings worldwide. What started in the early twentieth century as an academic exercise – in the absence of common reporting data from colleges and universities – quickly became competition for global reputations.

Hazelkorn[1] attributes the popular rise of college rankings to four drivers of social change:

- Transition to a knowledge-intensive economy;
- Global pursuit of talent;
- Importance of higher education to the economy; and
- Consumerist student attitudes toward higher education.

Transition to a Knowledge Economy

In 1999, management consultant Peter Drucker wrote that in the twentieth century, *production equipment* – the buildings, tools, and raw materials necessary to make something – was the most valuable asset of a company. By contrast, "The most valuable asset of a 21st century institution (whether business or non-business) will be its *knowledge workers* and their *productivity*."[2] Productivity throughout much of history has depended on how hard or how long people worked. Drucker cited Taylorism – a study of each motion taken by a worker and the physical effort and time it took to execute the action – as the historical basis for measuring worker productivity. However, he also expanded the definition to include the *knowledge* it takes to organize workers' motions in productive ways. Drucker described the twenty-first century challenge to make knowledge workers more productive by improving the *quality* not the *quantity* of their work.

Changes to business success indicators reveal ample evidence of the shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. Intellectual property experts at Ocean Tomo estimated that in 1975, 80% of the market value of a company consisted of *tangible assets* – buildings, equipment, and other physical property. Today, 84% of market value in Standard and Poor's 500 consists of *intangible* assets – legal assets such as patents and trade secrets, as well as competitive assets such as workers' knowledge, collaborative activities, and company methodologies.[3] In line with this shift, current indicators measured by college ranking systems also reflect the value society places on intangible assets. Faculty patents, citations, and research recognition have disproportionate influence over other indicators of educational

1 Ellen Hazelkorn, *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

2 Peter F. Drucker, "Knowledge Worker Productivity: The Biggest Challenge," *California Management Review* 41, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 79.

3 Ocean Tomo, "Annual Study of Intangible Asset Market Value from Ocean Tomo, LLC," news release, March 4, 2016, http://www.oceantomo.com/2015/03/04/2015-intangible-asset-market-value-study/.