

- 1 Meredith Davis, "Can College Rankings Be Believed?," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2016), 224–25.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 225.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 4 *Ibid.*

## Author's Response

# Making Judgments of Educational Quality

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I thank professors Sharma, Murphy, Zhong, and Gorman for their informative responses to my article. My purpose was to reveal the interpretive challenges presented by college rankings. I leave the onerous task of fixing questionable research practices to people who study this topic in greater depth. And I recognize the difficulty of devising a system that addresses the disciplinary diversity and contexts of thousands of institutions. I applaud the work by Gallup-Purdue and the OECD in publishing targeted research that uncovers important aspects of students' educational experiences and wish these findings were more widely promoted as alternative frameworks for evaluating higher education. Unlike rankings, they are clear in the questions they ask, and they teach readers how to think about choices among institutions.

My primary interest, however, is in how academic programs counter the ambiguous messages of college rankings with information that truly matters in making judgments of educational quality – in particular how design programs represent curricular and research outcomes to the public and shape performance evaluations within their institutions.

### The Data Gap

College rankings claim to differentiate educational opportunities in the absence of comparable reporting data worldwide. While institutions complain about superficiality in ranking snapshots of quality, they are no better at providing information that helps the public reach reasoned conclusions about higher education. The continuing popularity of college rankings,

therefore, depends on this data gap and public inexperience in judging issues that truly contribute to academic excellence.

In a course on teaching design, I ask master's and doctoral students to read the mission statements and web copy from a list of more than twenty anonymous but well-respected design programs, some the very institutions from which they earned their previous degrees. I ask them to speculate on the nature of learning experiences that might support such descriptions. I then reveal the names of the schools and their web addresses for comparison with actual curricula. Finding this information typically involves a very deep dive into the institution's website, searching for course descriptions, curricular displays, faculty biographies, and accounts of student projects.

In almost every case, students are either unable to determine a particular perspective on design and education from top-level descriptions, or cannot find strong correspondences between professed outcomes and the published course of study. Some students don't even recognize their alma maters. Keep in mind these are advanced students who are more skilled than average readers in gleaning nuanced perspectives from narratives about design and design education. For example, students often find:

- Programs whose mission statements commit to a popular focus – sustainability, human-centeredness, or social innovation for example – but don't mention these issues in any of their published course descriptions, or confine study to a single course;
- Programs that promise professional outcomes but offer a liberal arts degree with too few credits in the major for students to be competitive with graduates of professional degree programs;
- Institutions that describe open admissions policies and a robust list of upper-level course offerings but require a second-year screening with no published standards for advancement, which inevitably denies an undisclosed number of students the opportunity to complete the degree; and
- Post-graduate degrees that boast of their research orientation but offer no coursework in research methods.

In other words, institutions tend to write *marketing copy* that appeals to consumerist attitudes rather than mission-appropriate accounts of what they actually produce in graduates and faculty research. While I am not qualified to judge whether similar advertising

practices exist in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, I suspect they do. But in design – where programs vary greatly in their technical, theoretical, and practical orientations – this ambiguity is especially troubling.

To a large extent, therefore, higher education vigorously maintains the very gap that rankings attempt to fill. Colleges and universities argue that college rankings mislead the public but engage in equivalent hyperbole and imprecision that undercut claims of advocacy for alternative indicators of excellence. As Carma Gorman suggests, institutional publications frequently tell readers why an institution is *the best*, rather than why an institution might or might not be *the best for them*. Often absent are:

- Specific admissions and mid-program advancement criteria – beyond test scores and grades – that reflect aptitudes valued by the program;
- Acceptance, retention, and graduation rates that describe the competitiveness of student peers and their likely trajectories through the curriculum;
- Advising practices that support students' progress to degree completion and transition to life after school;
- Hours spent with full-time faculty in specific kinds of work that suggest the relationships valued by students in the Gallup-Purdue study of student satisfaction;
- Detailed project narratives that describe the depth of investigations in which students engage;
- External committees that advise on curricular relevance; and
- Firms where students intern and work after graduation that reflect program emphases and professional competencies.

In addition, program publications rarely explain particular perspectives on disciplines and practices, the curricular logic through which students advance from beginning studies to graduation, or the depth and breadth of relationships between outcomes in the major and competencies developed through general education. In cases where study in the discipline varies under different types of degrees – liberal arts versus professional, undergraduate versus post-graduate, or research- versus practice-oriented doctoral study, for example – little is said regarding purposes and outcomes that allows students to compare programs. *Everyone* claims to produce exceptional design professionals and researchers. This is the information void in which many prospective students and

employers of graduates make judgments about academic programs. It is little wonder that they resort to rankings in the absence of other information.

Disciplinary accreditation and quality assurance reviews assess thresholds of operation and minimum curricular standards, which are usually developed and updated through a consensus-building process. They describe what a good designer needs to know and be able to do, yet most are silent on how to choose among the various educational paths for getting there. These reviews generally include self-studies or curricular proposals by the institution and site visits by peers trained to evaluate programs for later review by a commission. However, specific findings typically remain confidential between the institution and accreditors, and there can be a decade between evaluations during which much can change. Although some accrediting agencies maintain member databases that include enrollment demographics and graduation data, information is not really interpreted for the public.

### Special versus Essential

Peter Murphy makes a good point about the location of design programs within universities (science versus art), inferring that this may have implications for design in the biases of rankings and internal institutional evaluations of quality. In the United States, many industrial design and architecture programs trace their origins to engineering colleges. More recently, a reshuffling of disciplines has moved some design programs out of the fine arts and humanities and into academic units with business, communication, computer science, and engineering.

At the same time, I don't believe the "STEM versus STEAM" argument Murphy makes necessarily boosts attention to creativity and disciplines like design in the priorities of institutions. While I concur with the values that underpin the argument that creative practices deserve a formal place in planning, curriculum, and evaluation, those of us who teach design in research-extensive science and technology universities don't get very far in shifting values by simply naming the discipline in the institution's strategic agenda. And there are serious questions about whether a general education arts requirement – typically enrollment in an art history lecture course, rather than engagement in thinking critically and creatively like an artist or designer – meaningfully impacts the perspectives of most students.

In a counting-and-measuring culture, what university administrators see when they look at art and design programs are:

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