

Cultural Daily

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Bias of College Rankings Degrades Higher Education

Kathleen Antonia Tarr · Wednesday, August 6th, 2014

One of the many glories after my tedious regular commute to Stanford is the majesty of Memorial Church. I exit the campus shuttle in its direct path, and as sunrise splashes the church's vibrant colors with a palette of its own, the strain of sardine travel eases away. In my reenergized state, before office hours, I row on one of the many new Concept 2 machines and contemplate one day actually attempting the climbing wall. Later, I may have a walking meeting to the Rodin and Papua New Guinea sculpture gardens or lunch at the state-of-the-art Science and Engineering Quad or quietly read in The Bender Room, a bright, posh space with a view of the Main Quad and hills beyond from the fifth floor of the Green Library.

The myriad tourists are a daily reminder that I am not the only person who sees how gorgeous Stanford is. Even in my days as a student-athlete from rival Berkeley, I could not ignore the campus's beauty. Cal was lovely enough, however, and I appreciated the comparative price tag of my alma mater; Stanford's current tuition is over \$14,000 a quarter. Besides, my concern as a graduating high school student was academic reputation, and although Stanford may attain a higher score in the [US News & World Report college rankings](#) than the University of California, Berkeley, both are understood to be academically rigorous; I still was accepted to Harvard Law School "despite" my degree from Cal. Quite frankly, these two Bay Area institutions work so closely together, it's hard to understand how they can be ranked disparately, Stanford at 5 and Berkeley at 20.

How *US News* calculates the rankings seems to offer some insight. It stands out that 22.5 percent of the formula is weighted toward "undergraduate academic reputation" based in large part on "the opinions of those in a position to judge a school's undergraduate academic excellence. The academic peer assessment survey allows top academics – presidents, provosts and deans of admissions – to account for intangibles at peer institutions such as faculty dedication to teaching." In other words, the rankings are in large part based upon bias.

While popular media is invested in researchers' conclusions about students' roles in the increasing costs of higher education – studies concluding that students raise costs because of their interest in amenities, either a preference that is broad-based (concern for academic quality confined to high-achieving students) or of lowest and highest-income students for whom expenses are readily compensated through loans, grants, or current wealth – few are discussing the inherent inequality of rankings that are no doubt tied to student preferences and the monetary investment in maintaining those rankings.

If, for example, I am one of the “top academics” who is charged with assessing the academic excellence of Stanford and Berkeley, might I be influenced by the serenity I experience from Stanford’s amenities or the gritty city streets around Berkeley’s campus? Am I influenced by perceptions of private and public universities? Many educated people still perceive private institutions as higher quality regardless of any other information known. Do peer institutions employ colleagues and friends? Do I perceive faculty as dedicated to teaching even though I know many spend most of their hours furthering the research that secures their tenure? Do I consider student grades to reflect actual work? Am I aware of grade inflation and policies permitting students to withdraw from courses if they don’t like the grade they are getting? What do I think of such policies?

To be fair, I do not know the exact questions US News asks “top academics” or how staff identify who is at the “top.” However, reputations frequently reinforce themselves. There is no requirement that they be based in fact. The danger in permitting rankings to be based so heavily upon reputation is the same as relying upon any opinion as truth. Conclusions may be sound, but more often than not when so many variables are in play, they are not only inaccurate but also can be far afield of reality. While the concern for the rising cost of higher education is well founded, ignoring the mechanisms of college rankings in favor of the role of amenities is another method by which we place more superficial concerns over academic ones.

Sources:

Robert Morse and Sam Flanigan. US News & World Report, “[How U.S. News Calculated the 2014 Best Colleges Rankings](#)” (September 9, 2013).

Kim McGrath. Newswise, “[Study Shows Reputation Affects College Choice More Than Campus Amenities](#)” (July 10, 2013).

Jacob, McCall, Stange. College as Country Club: Do Colleges Cater to Students’ Preferences for Consumption? (January 17, 2013).

Photo of Memorial Church by the author.

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