

**THE BLOG**

Reaming College Rankings

By Marty Kaplan

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Scores of American college presidents kicked *U.S. News & World Report's* annual college rankings in the nuts this week; this follows the wedgie delivered to the magazine by a dozen college presidents last month.

A quarter-century ago, *U.S. Snooze*, as it was once known, devised a brilliant marketing strategy to escape its own somnolent reputation as the reading matter of choice in mid-western dental waiting rooms: it would become the premier ranker of the reputations of the nation's colleges and universities. By devising a kind of *Consumer Reports* for higher education, the magazine not only solved its own branding problem; it also created a cash cow for the company. And speaking of cows, until now America's colleges and universities have been remarkably bovine in their acquiescence to this system.

The problem with *U.S. News's* college rankings isn't that institutions of higher education shouldn't be held accountable for the quality of services they provide. With prices approaching \$50,000 a year at some places, it's perfectly reasonable for families to wonder whether the brand name they're purchasing - a prestigious merit badge to monetize in the job marketplace - also delivers a decent education. The problem is that the fierce competition among colleges to raise their rankings torques the priorities of colleges toward the criteria that *U.S. News* uses. "Leadership" is a quality routinely invoked in academia, but when it comes to exerting educational leadership - meaning, for example, an institution's bravely deciding for itself how to define and measure excellence - American higher education has since 1983 been largely content to outsource that job to a for-profit magazine's monopoly cottage industry.

Example: The *U.S. News* formula rewards colleges with smaller class size, which creates pressure from administrators to get rid of large lecture courses, no matter how popular they are. There's nothing wrong with intimate learning settings, but who says there's no magic to be had in a packed lecture hall where an intellectual giant holds hundreds of people rapt?

Example: Many colleges have become slaves to SAT scores and high school GPAs - not because admissions officers think they're such reliable indicators of intelligence or achievement, but because *U.S. News* weights them so heavily. Despite lip service to diversity and individuality, it is more difficult than ever to make a successful case for admitting a dazzling but academically eccentric kid whose so-so numbers pull down the average and jeopardize a school's *U.S. News* ranking.

Example: In its formula, *U.S. News* uses the percentage of a class's alumni who give money to their college as a proxy for student satisfaction with their education. The actual size of a donation doesn't matter, nor the reason (football pride?) for their gift. A college that games this system — say, offering graduating senior ten dollars, coupled with a request to “check this box, pledge two dollars a year to your alma mater, and for the next five years you'll be automatically enrolled in your alumni association” — may not swell its endowment, but it could boost its ranking.

Example: A big part of the ranking is the peer assessment survey sent to top university officials around the country. To maintain that this beauty contest actually deserves the 25 percent of the ranking it determines, here's what you have to believe: University presidents, provosts and deans of admissions filling out the survey do not down-rank their competitors. They make their decisions based not on gossip, buzz, or the glossy brochures and packages of press clips that their peers clog their in-boxes with, but rather on hard evidence of where - from “marginal” to “distinguished” - their competitors should be ranked. And when they really don't know what to say about another school, they're scrupulous about saying “don't know” rather than, say, crappy.

Example: Acceptance rate. The more “selective” a school you are, the smaller percentage of applying students you take, the better your ranking. Boosting your marketing budget in order to boost your applicant pool - no matter how unlikely it is that these newly-enticed applicants will be admitted - is a smart *U.S. News* move. So is offering second-semester, rather than fall, admission to a chunk of potential freshmen; since winter admits don't count in the *U.S. News* formula, your institution's selectivity will go up if you force some kids wait until January.

So this week, when an association of 80 liberal arts college presidents, including Barnard, Sarah Lawrence and Kenyon, announced that a majority of them would no longer participate in the *U.S. News* annual survey, and that they would fashion their own way to collect and report common data, it was bad news for the magazine, but good news for families. It's also good news for American higher education, some of whose institutions may now become less timid about accepting the quirky applicant, less nuts about generating journalistic puff pieces, and more bold about declaring (and living up to) unique educational missions that don't derive from focus groups.

Disclaimer: I am an alumnus of two splendid American institutions of higher education, and I work at a third, also splendid, university. I write here as an individual, expressing my own views, and not in any capacity as an official representative. I make no claim that any of these institutions succumbs to any of the knuckleheaded practices described above, and I nourish the hope that they privately share some of the dissatisfactions with the *U.S. News* methodology which I've expressed here. Anyway, don't listen to me; listen to the grouching by college presidents themselves, here and here and here.

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