

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: December 1, 2008

Published in Print: December 3, 2008

COMMENTARY

Rating the Rankings

Déjà Vu All Over Again

By Marty Elkins

Last year, the national organization I lead joined a growing list of critics decrying the dubious and hurtful practice of ranking colleges and universities for prospective students. So we were heartened to learn from an item in *Inside Higher Ed* this summer that the percentage of colleges responding to *U.S. News & World Report's* "reputational" survey, the largest piece in its **school-ratings equation**, declined, in just one year, from 51 percent to 46 percent. It's fine with us if *U.S. News* feels anxiety similar to what it causes in others.

That's because we who work as high schools' college counselors are tired of publications putting profit ahead of the personal experiences of the young people in our care. We work hard, in partnership with parents, to help adolescents make the first major decision of their adult lives. These are different kids with different abilities, affinities, backgrounds, resources, and many other considerations to take into account. Given the remarkable range of difference among them, we know that it's simply nonsense, and damaging nonsense, to believe that there exists one and only one No. 1 college, even within the same category of institution, to meet their needs.

Moreover, we know that colleges' boards of trustees too often use rankings as an easy, inexpensive, and totally inappropriate way to judge the performances of their presidents and deans of admissions, leading those professionals to spend time on misleading measurements, rather than classroom quality.

Also troubling—and for us the "déjà vu all over again" factor—is the copycat syndrome wherein other media players decide it's easier to do a simple survey and a set of rankings than to do real reporting and writing on the subtle but profound differences that exist for different young people having different educational experiences at different institutions.

Forgoing the complex in favor of the simple-minded, *The Wall Street Journal* last year committed its own flawed college-ratings fiasco, **which we protested**. More recently, *Forbes magazine* has boldly gone where others have gone before—a place where no quality publication needs to tread. Indeed, we wish more would join *The Atlantic* in realizing its own rankings issues just weren't the direction for a great magazine to take, a realization that led it to stop.

The *Forbes* venture, however, begs for greater scrutiny.

In its misguided attempt to sell more magazines, *Forbes* decided that its criteria for ranking colleges would be the following: alumni appearing in *Who's Who* listings, student Web site evaluations, four-year graduation rates, enrollment-adjusted numbers of students and faculty members receiving

[← Back to Story](#)

**EdWeek
MAPS**

edweek
MAPS

New interactive mapping technology lets you explore high school graduation rates for any school district in the country.

CLICK HERE

major competitive awards, and average four-year accumulated student debt of those borrowing money.

These criteria are all subject to a variety of critiques, but before engaging in itemized scrutiny, let's ask one basic question that goes to an error of omission: Does *Forbes* care if anyone has learned anything at these colleges and universities? Is there any measurement of what students knew when they entered, in relation to what they knew when they graduated? To engage in a bit of business jargon that might be familiar to readers of *Forbes*: Where's the value-added? Such measurements exist, and it's odd that one doesn't see a business publication using them.

In the terms *Forbes* does employ, *Who's Who in America* may be a better publication than *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, but we wonder if those who have taken the time to fill out its form have also purchased the expensive hard-bound book that includes their self-reported achievements. The exercise in publishing narcissism is one thing; another is the probability that, if a college accepts high-octane, achievement-oriented students, it will probably graduate high-octane, achievement-oriented students. For what, precisely, would the college claim institutional credit? Elite in; elite out. What difference has it made? That might be worth knowing.

Student evaluations are closer to our hearts, because we spend most of our days trying to understand and help young people. But we've been around long enough to know that students aren't always the best judges of what they *need*. We know they know what they *want*, and we work between wants and needs most of our days. Thus, we wonder about the usefulness of the Rate My Professors [Web site](#), when its categories for rating are "Easiness," "Helpfulness," "Clarity," and "Hotness." Yes, we see that *Forbes* does some numerical inversions to reverse-credit institutions where professors appear to be academically "Hard." And we note that the magazine does not include the chili-pepper symbol for whether or not a professor is especially attractive—or, in paparazzi parlance, "hot." Even so, did anyone ask students what they learned from these teachers? That might be worth knowing.

Moving on, four-year graduation rates seem quite reasonable. There is far too much emphasis on where one gets in, and not nearly enough on where one stays, thrives, grows, and graduates. So, fair enough. National awards for students and faculty members also appear, at least at first, to be worthy enough. But on reflection, we wonder if those student awards are simply the result of the "elite in, elite out" syndrome mentioned above, as well as the different institutional commitments made to advising, preparing, and recommending potential candidates. Some colleges groom as well as teach. Others just teach.

And that leads us to wonder about those faculty awards. How many of them are given for the recipient's ability to teach? Is there a Nobel Prize in classroom teaching? What did these "helpful," "clear," and award-winning professors impart to their students? Is it valuable knowledge? That might be worth knowing.

Finally, we find the concern over accumulated debt for those not fortunate enough to be "full pays" highly ironic, for two reasons. First, our experience suggests most readers of *Forbes* aren't in the accumulated-debt category, because the folks we meet who have time and interest to read about money and business tend not to need much borrowing in the first place. Second, we would expect that anyone who would take these rankings seriously would be more than willing to borrow whatever it takes to climb this rickety ladder—thereby contributing to lowering the standing of the institution and thus reducing the value of the "investment." Now we're talking free market!

So, in addition to experiencing that feeling of *déjà vu* all over again, we note that our baseball sage, Yogi Berra, also said, "You can observe a lot by watching." What *Forbes* observed is that *U.S. News*

makes a profit this way. Leave it to magazines to make money hyping the anxieties of students and parents. Those of us not trying to sell anyone anything will do our best to clean up another media mess.

Marty Elkins is the executive director of the Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools, in Groton, Mass.

Vol. 28, Issue 14, Pages 30-31