

***Beyond the SAT: Rethinking Admissions***  
*The Media and College Rankings*  
Richard Vedder

*Presented at Wake Forest University April 16<sup>th</sup> 2009*

In America, success is traditionally measured by accomplishment and performance, rather than by inherited rank and title. Success is measured in various ways –the *Forbes's* 500 Wealthiest Americans, the *Fortune* 500 measuring corporations, the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, MacArthur genius grants and the like. *Consumer Reports* and J.D. Powers tells us who makes the best cars, the NCAA tells us who has the best college basketball team and the Super Bowl tells us the same about professional football. American vocational life is about evaluating people, institutions, goods and services. Colleges and universities also certify academic success and failure, telling us who deserves a baccalaureate degree, and who drops out or graduates with honors. Indeed, they are big time into the student ranking business, and corporate human resource departments sometimes ask prospective workers, “What was your class rank?”

So those opposing the ranking of colleges and the assessment of collegiate performance are fighting a losing battle. It is anti-American to be anti-ranking, since America's economy is all about rankings and performance assessment –General Motors ranks low in the marketplace today because of its managerial mistakes, while Wal-Mart is doing just fine. To be sure, the lack of universally agreed upon criteria to evaluate performance in higher education makes evaluations and rankings of colleges more difficult and debatable, but does not remove the need for them. Rankings do more than fulfill some peculiar American character trait. For most families, other than buying a house, choosing a college is the most important lifetime spending decision. Whether that spending is viewed as investment, consumption or both, it dwarfs major purchases such as automobiles in magnitude. Prospective students want to be able to compare the likely benefits of attendance at a given college to the expected costs. To governments and private donors, knowledge of collegiate performance helps in making resource allocation

decisions. University administrators and trustees should want to know whether they are getting much bang for the bucks expended. More information is better than less.

There are two major problems with rankings today, however, that reduce their usefulness. First, rankers like Bob Morse and me are often frustrated by a lack of good measures of outcomes. Second, variety is the spice of life, and individuals have different tastes and preferences –having a university with a first rate research record may be important to some students or legislators but not others. Graduating debt free may be very important to some, but not to others. Some students may want to attend a college that has lots of inspired professors, but that may be less critical to others. The implicit weights that individuals would assign to various factors that enter into the determination of college performance vary, but the weights used in published rankings are fixed, and are typically arbitrarily determined by the rankers themselves. Thus some international rankings are heavily research oriented because their results are largely looked at by the scholarly and public policy communities, while many American rankings often put more of an emphasis on undergraduate instruction, as they are used as consumer information by student applicants, guidance counselors and the like.

Let me elaborate briefly on these two points. I served on the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, and we strongly urged universities and colleges to provide more consumer information, including measures of the value added by the college to a student's capacity to face adult life. Colleges have resisted gathering or publishing relevant data. Tests like the Collegiate Learning Assessment could be universally used and provide us with measures of changes in learning over the collegiate years by institution, but colleges resist using them in some standardized way. Instruments like the National Survey of Student Engagement or Nessie could provide useful information on how students spend their time, and provide their self-assessment of their learning experience, but most schools using the Nessie are reluctant to fully provide results. Although some positive efforts such as the VSA program have been made to improve transparency by a couple of the university trade associations, the efforts to date have been less than overwhelming. Many college leaders are afraid that their

school will be exposed as being high cost for little value added, and therefore resist providing information. They have fought attempts to allow accreditation agencies to force them to collect and published some uniform and transparent measures of learning. If I were Czar, I would make receipt of public funds by students or institutions dependent on the colleges participating in a program providing this type of information on a uniform basis. Colleges can rejoice that I am neither Czar nor anything resembling it.

A few words are in order about the inherent difficulties of ranking schools, given that opinions differ as to what constitutes excellence and how to measure it. The technology exists that would allow for do it yourself student rankings of colleges. A student who wants to attend schools where graduation in four years is highly probable could weight a graduation rate component in any index very highly, perhaps 40 or 50 percent. Another student might think her graduation is already assured, but what she is really interested in is whether her chance at post-vocational success is high or not. If there is, for example, some measure of median earnings of college graduates 10 years after graduation, this student might want to weight it very highly –say 50 percent in her ranking. The college rankers would provide users with a fairly large data set and allow them to weight each variable according to personal tastes, and then calculate a ranking. There is one such ranking effort underway already in Canada. I am not speaking for *Forbes*, but I think that in addition to the standard rankings that will be published this summer, they may offer a do-it-yourself alternative for the interested reader.

Let me offer a few observations from research on rankings done at the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. First, it is interesting that despite quite different methodologies, alternative rankings often get fairly similar results. Although *US News* and *Forbes* classify schools somewhat differently, there is a 0.63 to 0.70 correlation coefficient of one ranking against the other –pretty high. At the very highest levels, the rankings are similar. Harvard, Yale and Princeton are at the tops on both lists, and among liberal arts colleges schools like Williams and Amherst are similarly ranked at the top.

Second, despite this, however, the criteria used to rank schools do make a difference. *Forbes* is much higher on Cooper Union and Wabash and Centre colleges than *US News*, for example. The University of Southern California, Duke and Dartmouth do much better with *US News* than with *Forbes*.

Third, some critics of rankings rightly note that they can contribute to rising college costs, as schools believe expending more resources can improve rankings. Our research suggests that is somewhat true with the *US News* rankings, which are relatively heavily weighted towards reputation and input based factors, but not so true with the *Forbes* rankings, which are more weighted towards student preferences and outcomes measures.

Fourth, we have been experimenting with some other factors in rankings, heretofore unused by anyone to my knowledge. For example, [payscale.com](https://payscale.com) publishes interesting data on the median earnings of college graduates both right out of college and after ten years. I have been looking at the correlation between those rankings and a ranking using *Who's Who in America* entries, and the two rankings approaches correlate rather highly, but nonetheless there are schools who fare much better using PayScale as a measure of vocational success, including most top engineering schools – Harvey Mudd comes especially to mind.

In short, using what statisticians call sensitivity analysis suggests that changes in variables and their weights usually do not turn lowly ranked schools into highly ranked ones or vice versa, but there are some significant exceptions. Perhaps this adds to the case to eventually moving to a more do-it-yourself approach to college evaluation, allowing individual tastes to be expressed. Any notion that the importance of rankings can be reduced or their impact suppressed, however, is likely to be doomed to failure.

Thank you.