A Study on The Influences of the U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges Rankings on Policy and Decision-Making at Southern Comprehensive Colleges

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Abstract
For over a century, colleges and universities have been the subjects of numerous attempts to provide a ranking system for use by the general public. These rankings have examined a variety of indicators in an attempt to determine quality. Everything from the accomplishments of graduates in the workforce, their success on entering graduate schools, and the reputation of institutions among their peers, have all been examined at one time or another in an attempt to measure quality.

Public demand for a ranking system is evidenced by the millions of dollars spent each year on rankings. Publishers are eager to provide a product to fill the demand. Since 1983, US News and World Reports has been the dominant producer of college rankings.

How are colleges responding to the rankings? The purpose of this study is to determine how college presidents perceive the rankings and how their institutions use their rank. The specific research questions for this study are:

1. How are institutions in the study marketing, publicizing and using their rankings by USNWR and is there any significant variance in how institutions use the rankings or respond to the rankings when examined by institutional ranking by USNWR?

2. What policy changes and decisions have been made in an attempt to improve an institution's ranking?

3. Are there differences in the perceived validity of the rankings by presidents at southern comprehensive colleges and universities when examined by the institution's ranking by USNWR, public vs. private status, or length of service as a college president?

This study surveyed the presidents of the 105 colleges and universities identified by US News as peer institutions in the Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's-South category of the 2004 America's Best Colleges rankings. The category includes both public and private institutions from the following twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The research indicated that presidents of Tier 1 institutions were more likely to indicate...
that they promoted their rank to different constituencies than presidents in any other tier group. Tier 1 presidents were also more likely to state that the US News rankings were valid and accurate than presidents in any other tier group. While the presidents of Tier 2, 3, and 4 institutions were more likely to criticize the rankings, they also felt that the rankings were important to many of their constituencies. These presidents were also in agreement that a good ranking was beneficial to their institutions.

This study highlights the need for dialogue in higher education about quality. Specifically, administrators should have conversations on their campuses about how quality is defined in relation to mission and purpose.

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