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The rankings debate

Americans love rankings. From athletic teams to restaurants, golf courses to travel destinations, we want to know who is on top. This obsession erupts each year when *U.S. News & World Report* releases its annual college rankings with a fanfare usually reserved for Hollywood movie premieres.

The "America's Best Colleges" issue always creates a brief buzz across the nation. But the "one-size-fits-all" rankings are more misleading than beneficial. Institutions of higher education are so different in size and scope, in purpose and aspiration, in financial resources and student demography, that they defy all-encompassing assessments. A school that is appropriate for one student's interests and aptitudes may not be well suited for another, a fact obscured by the *U.S. News* ordinal rankings.

The weaknesses of the magazine's rankings formula are well documented. Kevin Carey, author of a report commissioned by Education Sector, a non-profit think tank, concludes that 95 percent of *U.S. News* variables focus on three factors:

"fame, wealth, and exclusivity." The highest ranked colleges boast the largest endowments, charge the highest tuition and admit the fewest students.

Much of the data *U.S. News* uses is submitted by colleges and universities, and numerous reports have revealed how some institutions manipulate the numbers. For example, the magazine's emphasis on admissions selectivity encourages schools to increase their total applications (and the number of applicants denied admission) solely as a means of boosting their rankings.

In addition, the most heavily weighted element (25 percent) of the rankings formula is also the most subjective: the reputation of a college as judged by the "impressions" of the presidents, deans and admissions directors at its peer institutions. In Furman's case, we are asked by *U.S. News* each year to "rank" 214 colleges, many of which we know little or nothing about. Thus the "reputational survey" is essentially a guessing game.

Complaints about the *U.S. News* rankings reached a crescendo in June, when approximately 80 members of the Annapolis Group, an association of national liberal arts colleges, announced that they would no longer participate in the reputational component of the

survey. Furman is among the schools that will no longer "rank" their peers. The group also decided to create an alternative assessment model to provide prospective students and their parents with more meaningful information.

I recently served as chair of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), which represents nearly 1,000 private colleges and universities. One of NAICU's primary projects is the creation of an on-line database that will allow prospective students to examine 50 different statistics about a particular college.

The database will be launched this fall and will include information that Furman and other colleges have published on their Web sites for years, such as the number of accepted students who enroll, graduation rates, and average net tuition. Furman

also provides data about the quality of interactions between students and faculty members, student satisfaction with their educational experience, and the percentage

of graduates who enroll in graduate and professional schools.

In some respects Furman has benefited from the publicity generated by the *U.S. News* rankings. We have consistently been ranked in the top 50 national liberal arts institutions and have been the top-rated private school in South Carolina. In coming years, the rankings of Furman and other colleges that no longer fill out the reputational survey for *U.S. News* may drop. But we believe that providing prospective students with more meaningful information is a much more important goal.

The quality of a college is not primarily a function of how much it spends, how many applicants it rejects or even its historic reputation. It is instead the result of the dedication, energy and creativity of the institution's faculty and staff — and the vitality of its students. Such factors are measured best by asking current students and recent alumni to assess the actual quality of their instruction and advising, the impact of their relationships on campus, and the influence of their extracurricular activities and experiences.

That is what Furman is measuring and reporting — and what we are always seeking to improve.

— DAVID E. SHI, *President*

