



So Many Rankings, So Few Measures of Student Learning

BY ANDREA J. LOUGHRY

OUR TRUSTEES HAD LOTS OF QUESTIONS last fall when they read their copies of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and *USA Today*'s listing of the National Survey of Student Engagement. But instead of focusing on our place on the lists, we advanced our discussion to consider some promising and meaningful alternatives.

Our committee on academic affairs and student success asked staff to give us an overview of the issues. We were especially interested to know whether any of the rankings had anything to do with measuring how well students were learning.

Committee members received a report on the criteria and methodology used by more than 13 organizations that rank colleges. We learned that these rankings consider everything from faculty salaries to student ratings of their own schools, to federal survey data on enrollments, tuition prices, and graduation rates.

Some rankings organizations do not reveal their methods, and some use questionable criteria. Indeed, one outfit linked the quality of the institution to the number, size, and health of the squirrel population on campus! In another, the ranking correlates directly to the size of the endowment.

We were given graphs of the University of Tennessee's performance over the last five years using broad institutional rankings from *U.S. News*, the University of Florida's Lombardi Program for measuring research universities, and the Kiplinger.com "best value" college database. We also had become familiar with specific professional school rankings and *Washington Monthly*'s effort to rank colleges and universities by how much they benefit our country in scientific and social research, service learning, and fostering social mobility.

Our committee's conversations produced the following questions for the board: Which rankings do we want to track? How much do we spend to participate in these rankings, and how much time does our institutional research staff spend on this? How closely aligned is our mission with the ranking criteria? Once the rankings are published, what do our administrators do with the results? How does our board use this information for planning?

Perhaps because our discussions of rankings

occurred in the context of the national debate about how to measure student learning, the most pressing question boiled down to this: Do we want public officials to be involved in evaluating educational quality, or should our board be monitoring the efforts of our faculty and staff to work on their own to improve assessment and accountability?

Most folks with whom I have discussed rankings strongly prefer the latter. Hence we were encouraged this fall by the launch of the Voluntary System of Accountability. A partnership between the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the VSA intends to provide comparable, transparent information on the undergraduate experience.

The VSA is not a new data source; rather, it puts existing data in a useable format on the Web. It has three primary elements: consumer information for students and families, current student experiences and perceptions, and learning outcomes (as measured by a variety of broad and narrow tests selected by the institutions).

In a similar vein, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities now offers a Web-based system of learning-outcome measures called University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN).

Time will tell whether these new tools will make a difference. But because the federal government seems more willing than ever to intervene, trustees should take seriously their responsibility to ensure the institution is setting appropriately high standards and measuring student learning in a transparent manner. Measuring student learning must become a part of our public face.

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With the feds poised to impose accountability standards, boards will need to monitor how well institutional leaders are assessing student learning.