How Students and Families Use Rankings for College Selection

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Changes in college admissions

• Rankings growth and proliferation
• Divestment of college counseling function
• Competitive admissions environment
• Commodification of college knowledge
College and University Rankings

• Began almost a century ago, but were little known
• US News World Report’s rankings, first published in 1983, currently dominate rankings
• Annual rankings issue, known as their swimsuit issue, sells 2.3 million copies
• Rankings and guides from 4 publishers generate $15 million/yr in sales revenue

College and University Rankings

• Affect the number of applications received
• Shape admissions policies
• Universities may manipulate reported data
• Methodology changes annually
• Rankings provoke widespread criticism
Divestment of college counseling

- High school counselor ratios are high
  - Recommendation 250:1; National Average 490:1
- High school counselors are overwhelmed
  - Scheduling is more complex
  - Drug/alcohol counseling
  - Students’ personal/emotional needs

Divestment of college counseling

- Admissions officers less focused on helping student find right “fit”
- More concerned with marketing college/university to particular demographics
- Need to fill a class
Competitive Admissions Environment

- Mass access to higher education
- Demographic shifts - more young people
- Higher proportion attending college
- Colleges are not growing or are not growing quickly enough to accommodate students
- Particularly competitive at highly-selectives

Students and parents need:

- Information about college
- Alternative colleges and universities
- Look to private sector information sources
Commodification of college knowledge

- CD’s
- Books
- Guides
- Rankings
- Test preparation
- Private counseling
- College knowledge is packaged and sold

Why use rankings?

- Widely available and inexpensive information
- Determining university quality is difficult; reputation is key
- Need cross-institutional data on alternatives
- Seeking comfort with important, but uncertain decision
- American obsession with rankings
Who uses rankings?

- May be widely utilized because they are inexpensive
- Low income, first generation who need information
- Students seeking highly-selective who need alternatives in a competitive environment - usually high income

Research questions

- What is the profile of students who do and do not use rankings?
- Do non traditional, low income, first generation, commuter students use rankings?
- Does usage rise with family income?
- Do students attending highly selectives use rankings?
Data Source

• CIRP 1995 Freshman survey
• 221,897 first-time, full-time freshman
• 432 four-year institutions
• One survey question asked students about the importance of several factors on college choice; rankings was one factor
• Not important, somewhat important, very important

First stage of analysis

• Grouped freshman by response - NI, SI, VI
• Investigated demographics, high school behaviors, self-concepts, college choice behaviors, and institution type for each group
• Crosstabulations to see if nontraditional, first generation, income groups, and commuters used rankings
Second stage of analysis

- Multivariate analysis of rankings usage
- Factor analysis
- Two logistic regression models
  - Association of student characteristics with rankings use
  - Incorporate institutional measures

What we found

- 60% did not use rankings at all
- 30% said they were somewhat important
- 11% responded that rankings were very important in college choice
Rankings were very important

• Asian-Americans
• College educated families
• High income families (>75K)
• Sought PhD, MD, JD degrees

Rankings were very important

• Asked teachers for advice
• Received A grades in high school
• Rated their academic ability and motivation highly
Rankings were very important

• Planned to live away from home in college
• Expected to be satisfied with college
• Filed high numbers of applications
• Attended private universities and highly selective institutions

Rankings were very important

• Attended college to:
  – Gain a general education
  – Learn more things
  – Become more cultured
  – Improve study skills
Rankings were very important

- Chose college based on:
  - Strong academic reputation
  - Special programs
  - Advice of high school/private counselors
  - Recruited

Rankings were not important

- Nontraditional
- First generation
- Commuters
- Attended lower selectivity schools
Factor analysis in college choice

• Rankings
• Good academic reputation
• Graduates go to top graduate schools
• Graduates get good jobs

More likely to use rankings

• Asian Americans
• Middle and upper class
• Higher degree aspirations
• Apply to many colleges
• Receive advice from teachers and families
More likely to use rankings

• Expect to be satisfied with college
• Concern with paying for college
• Concern with school reputation
• Attend universities/private institutions
• Apply to highly selective colleges

Less likely to use rankings

• Mexican-American
• Attend public four year colleges
• Attend a college within 10 miles of home
Overall - Who uses rankings?

• High SES
• High achieving
• Attend highly selective institutions
• Focus on good academic education
• Focus on good graduate schools
• Focus on professional opportunities

Overall - Who uses rankings?

• Tiny proportion of students
• Students for whom process is most competitive
• Have access to multiple information sources
• Have the most material resources to buy college knowledge
Why use rankings?

• Checking reputations?

• Seeking alternatives?

• Increasing comfort with choices?

Overall - Who is not using rankings?

• Most students
• Low SES students
• Least selective/least competitive
• Fewest information sources
• Least material resources
• Students who need the most information
Access and Equity Concerns

• Divestment of counseling function leaves students without needed information
• Privatized information fills the gap-marketing college knowledge
• Privatized sources are not available to all
• Privatized sources provide information that sells, not information many students need

Closing thoughts

• Rankings feed students’ status obsessions
• Rankings are part of larger privatization of college counseling
• Many students need to know what college is and why it is important to attend
• Colleges need to reach out to the students who need basic information