

*Technology and University Rankings:
A New Tool for Indiana University-Bloomington*

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The U.S. News and World Report Rankings, the Princeton Review, Kiplinger ratings, all of these ranking organizations have their own metrics, polling techniques, and areas of focus. For many years as a professor I did not pay attention to these rankings. It was obvious to many people in academia, both administrators and faculty, that these rankings were often fickle and at times arbitrary; they were based on unscientific methods that left more questions than they tended to answer. However, in more recent years it has become increasingly apparent that we must pay attention to these rankings. We must pay them mind not because they are accurate, or because each different rank presents a clearly defined difference, but because others pay attention to these rankings. Rankings are vital in understanding the higher education landscape not because of the validity or scientific rigor but because they are important tools for recruitment, institutional stability and the career outlook of our students.

When I would speak to alumni, faculty, and other stakeholders as chair of the MBA program at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, I became gradually more aware of how important rankings are for a program and a university. Even though these rankings are often capricious and practically impossible to predict from year-to-year, many stakeholders found them invaluable tools in assessing the performance of Indiana University. Alumni would contact my colleagues and me asking why the MBA program's rankings had changed. We would be contacted by donors concerned about how our rankings compared to other universities' rankings. These rankings are not important because they show concrete data about schools, but because they carry with them, however unwarranted, an amount of prestige that no other metric carries. Both prospective students and teachers pay attention to rankings as important aspects in the recruitment process. Prospective students will seek out schools that are high in the rankings and tend to avoid and ignore schools of lower rankings. Thus, it is of utmost importance to pay attention to these rankings not because they show real and tangible differences between schools, but because they are important factors in recruitment of students.

Not only are they important recruitment tools, but they also can affect institutions financially. Some—but not all—companies choose what schools to donate to based on the school's ranking. Additionally, many companies will only recruit graduates from top-ranked schools. Not because a graduate from a school ranked twenty is significantly more prepared for work in their field than a graduate from a school ranked twenty-one, but simply because the rankings are a facile demarcation that can easily be used to differentiate between one graduate and another.

Furthermore, the number of organizations and media who conduct rankings seem to have increased quickly over the years. In fact, one might say that rankings have become their own industry. These different ranking companies all have different methodologies and metrics; return-on-investment, value added, reputation among peers, and productivity of faculty.

These rankings have become so vital to the identity of some schools that some universities and colleges actively court these ranking organizations. Large amounts of money are spent in order to present schools in the right light, so that ranking companies will rate these schools well. Regardless of the direct utility of this practice, it must be acknowledged as a key component in the identity and internal culture of any college or university.

With all that said, however, with good data for meaningful metrics, rankings can serve a very useful purpose in understanding what a program does well, as well as where it can improve. Recognizing this value, recently, Indiana University-Bloomington has partnered with Academic Analytics to better assess its programs and departments. The objective is not to create rankings merely to determine how we rank among our peers, but to better evaluate our strengths and weaknesses. The Academic Analytics database (AAD), according to their website, enables clients to make “comparisons at a discipline-by-discipline level as well as overall university performance.” These comparisons are largely on four “primary areas of scholarly research accomplishment.” These four areas are:

1. the publication of scholarly work as books and journal articles,
2. citations to published journal articles,
3. research funding by federal agencies, and
4. honorific awards bestowed upon faculty members (“What We Do,” n.d.).

These data are collected on a school level but also on a person-to-person level. This allows for a level of depth that is both exhaustive and complex but with the potential to make better administrative decisions about a program or department.

The information provided through the AAD is useful in multiple ways. It serves a purpose as its own ranking system, allowing the campus to compare a program’s or department’s productivity, awards, and research related metrics with data from other internal units and universities. This information is also useful as a data set that can produce metrics beyond what is found by many rankings organizations.

Advances in technology have enabled the collection and analysis of data in ways that provide for better decision-making and evaluation of programs and departments. The business intelligence techniques utilized by Academic Analytics are one good example of how data can be used as an important tool when using rankings to assist with recruitment of faculty and to ensure graduate success. It must be understood, however, that while these metrics are useful inside of an institution for decision-making and evaluation based on data at the program or department level, they have less utility for comparing campuses or institutions.

Rankings by various media organizations are important for anyone in higher education or wishing to pursue an undergraduate or graduate degree, yet, we must still always be cautious about how we use these types of rankings in decision-making. They must be taken seriously because they are indeed relied upon by many constituents, but we must also consider that these rankings are often inherently fickle, and rankings change from year-to-year in ways that cannot be completely understood using the information presented in rankings publications. On the other hand, given the advances in technology and data collection, it is important for universities to recognize that there are now tools available to create rankings that do provide meaningful information for evaluation and assessment.

Reference

What we do. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.academicanalytics.com/Public/WhatWeDo>