ISSUE BRIEF

The Role and Relevance of Rankings in Higher Education Policymaking

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Executive Summary

Debates over the use of college rankings are often framed in binaries: ardent advocates versus outright rejectionists, rankers versus rankees. But the American higher education landscape is complex, and so too should be our discussions of rankings. Moreover, the policymaking process is simultaneously intricate and predictable—information is processed and evaluated, subjected to the judgments of policymakers, shaped to support hardened policy positions, and ultimately used to justify the outcomes of an inherently political process. College rankings are part of the information policymakers may consider as they usher higher education policy through this complex process. Yet limited information exists on the role college rankings might play in policymaking for postsecondary education, and few suggestions have been offered for how policymakers could use college rankings to support and advance public policy goals.

This brief provides an overview of national postsecondary assessment efforts and notes the similarities and differences these approaches have taken in comparison to college rankings, presents several examples of the inclusion of college rankings in state government assessment efforts, highlights key findings, and makes recommendations for enhancing the policy relevance of college rankings. Key findings and recommendations are drawn from a review of the literature on college rankings and postsecondary government accountability systems, and from interviews with individuals from federal and state government agencies, trade associations, and other groups.

Key Findings

A durable fixture in the marketplace of information on colleges, rankings inform public notions of college quality.

College rankings are one way stakeholders of higher education obtain information on institutions and construct notions of educational quality. The rise in popularity of rankings and their durability are the result of several conditions, including increased student mobility, institutional use of rankings in promotional campaigns and decision-making, and the use of rankings in international discussions of assessment, accountability, and quality assurance efforts.

Data limitations restrict the usefulness of college rankings to policymakers.

The usefulness of college rankings is limited by the availability of credible and comparable data indicators. In some instances, particularly at the state level, policymakers may find that data compiled by their own jurisdiction through student unit record systems paint a more comprehensive picture of the successes and challenges of higher education than data used in the construction of ranking schemes.

The structure of rankings limits the transference of information relevant to policy.

Ordinal rankings and benchmarking dilute the relevance of information policymakers derive from college rankings. Presenting information in this way might be appropriate to assess how institutions are doing comparatively, but it is of limited use in crafting answers to questions important to policymakers such as "Are we producing the educational outcomes we desire?", "Are students learning?", and "What improvements have resulted from policy changes?"

Rankings have the potential to shift institutional behaviors in ways that may negatively affect policy goals.

Rankings create incentives for institutions to take actions designed to improve their positions. This reactivity creates conditions in which institutions respond to the concept of educational quality embedded in rankings, which is not always aligned with public policy goals, particularly in the areas of equity and diversity.

Recommendations

Prior to using college rankings in the construction of public policy, policymakers need to consider the effects rankings can have on institutional behaviors, definitions of educational quality, and postsecondary equity outcomes. In support of these goals, the following recommendations are offered:

Take precautions to ensure that college rankings are used as only as part of overall system assessment efforts and not as a stand alone evaluation of colleges.

If policymakers are to use college rankings as part of assessment systems, they must be careful to do so as part of comprehensive efforts designed to improve institutional performance toward public policy goals. Although rankings can serve as one metric for assessing institutional progress, policymakers should only use them as part of a larger feedback loop that leads to desired changes in institutional actions and policy. Using rankings as stand alone measures of institutional success seldom serves public policy goals.

Support the collection of data that can be used to craft more policy-relevant college rankings, including providing funds to higher education institutions to widely implement and publish the results of student learning assessments.

To be more relevant to policymakers, college rankings need to rely on indicators that reflect policy priorities and capture the skills that make students competitive and productive in a modern technological economy. Focusing on student learning

outcomes is one way rankings could become more relevant to policymakers, and policy efforts should support the development and implementation of instruments to collect meaningful learning outcome data.

Leverage public attention to college rankings to shape general notions of college quality and advance equity goals.

Policymakers should leverage the attention paid to college rankings to shape public discussions of educational quality to advance equity goals, an increasingly important undertaking given shifting demographic patterns and the need to better serve students of color, adult learners, and low-income populations to reach national educational attainment goals.

Introduction

In the past decade, a consensus has emerged on a renewed public agenda for higher education in the United States. Diverse groups encompassing America's social landscape—including government actors, business interests, community organizations, foundations, and educational institutions—have articulated a common purpose for higher education: to increase quality, affordability, and production in the higher education pipeline, and to do so without significant new injections of public resources. To achieve these goals, the collection and dissemination of information on colleges[1] is important to benchmark progress toward policy goals, assess college quality, and inform stakeholders about the complexity of the higher education enterprise.

College rankings are one form of information about higher education. Rankings transmit simplified information on colleges to consumers, stimulate competition between institutions, and influence institutional policy. When they are designed with a clear purpose, constructed on reliable data, and developed with transparent and appropriate methodologies, college rankings hold the promise of increasing salience of college quality to wide and diverse audiences.

The use of college rankings, however, has not been without controversy as stakeholders of higher education have clashed over definitions of educational quality, how rankings can best capture quality, and the role rankings should play in shaping policy and institutional practice. College rankings have received significant attention in the popular press and academic journals, in policymaking circles, and in the higher education community. The discourse has typically focused on the strengths and weaknesses of rankings, possible revisions to the methods employed to construct rankings, and the use of rankings in the areas such as institutional promotion and college choice.

Consideration of how rankings might influence and interact with government policymaking efforts is notably absent from the discourse. Limited information exists on the role college rankings might play in postsecondary education policymaking, and few suggestions have been made for how policymakers might use rankings to support and advance public policy goals. This lack of dialogue may be a result of the quandary college rankings present to policymakers. On one hand, rankings are popular with the public, provide a means of sorting colleges on a national and increasingly international scale, and support an expansion of uniform data collection and reporting strategies—all factors that hold currency in postsecondary education policy

[1] For the sake of brevity, the term "college" is generally used to refer to institutions of postsecondary education.

environment. On the other hand, existing college rankings cover only a limited portion of the higher education landscape, have the potential to incentivize behaviors that run counter to public policy goals, and are based on educational inputs at a time when educational outcomes are of increasing importance to policymakers.

This brief builds on previous and ongoing research and programming undertaken by the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) in the areas of accountability and college rankings.[2] The brief begins with a review the broad landscape of college rankings and postsecondary assessment systems. Following sections present examples of the inclusion of college rankings in state government assessment efforts, highlight key findings, and make recommendations for enhancing the policy relevance of college rankings. Key findings and recommendations are drawn from a review of the literature on college rankings and postsecondary government accountability systems and from interviews with individuals from federal and state government agencies, trade associations, and other groups.

[2] For example, see "Making Accountability Work: Community Colleges and Statewide Higher Education Accountability Systems" (2006) and "Impact of College Rankings on Institutional Decision Making: Four-Country Case Study" (2009). Additional resources on rankings are available from IHEP's Ranking System Clearinghouse at www.ihep.org/Research/rankingsystemsclearinghouse.cfm.

Policymaking, Postsecondary Assessment, and College Rankings

Over the past several decades, government entities, trade associations, and postsecondary institutions have established and implemented numerous measurement and assessment systems to capture information on inputs and outputs in the higher education sector. These efforts have generated vast amounts of data that construct and reflect notions of educational quality, and inform the public and policymakers on various aspects of postsecondary education.

The continued demand for data on the higher education sector reflects a larger movement in U.S. political institutions toward evidenced-based policymaking. In this type of policymaking, decisions are informed by analysis using sound and transparent data to help identify issues, inform policy choices and program design, monitor policy implementation, and forecast future conditions and public needs (Scott 2005; Urban Institute 2008).

College rankings and postsecondary assessment/accountability efforts are two areas in which social measurements of higher education are used to communicate educational quality to broad audiences. The results of these ranking systems and assessment efforts hold particular currency for policymakers who seek data-driven information on which to base their decisions. Although this brief focuses on college rankings, a review of the national postsecondary assessment landscape is instructive. These assessment efforts specifically avoid explicit rankings of colleges; instead, they focus on issues of access, cost, affordability, quality of the student experience, and transparency, with aims to provide loosely comparable information to varying stakeholders (State Higher Education Executive Officers 2005; U.S. Department of Education 2006). Several recent and ongoing efforts have shaped conversations on assessment and accountability at the national level.

U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education

As significant investors in higher education, federal policymakers maintain considerable interest in ensuring that colleges are accountable for public funds. Quality, transparency, and program assessment have developed as key elements of a public accountability agenda in higher education.

In 2005–06, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) led a national dialogue on assessment and accountability by establishing the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Spellings Commission). The formation of the bipartisan commission demonstrated renewed federal interest in the quality of the nation's colleges. The commission, which was composed of leaders in academia, business, and philanthropy, was charged with examining the accessibility, affordability, accountability, and quality of American higher education (ED 2006). The commission—at times controversial—released a final report outlining key findings and recommendations intended to make American higher education "more nimble, more efficient, and more effective" (ED 2006, p. xiii).

A central point of the report was a concern about the lack of comparable college-to-college information, particularly in the

area of student learning outcomes. While it avoided the topic of ranking institutions, the commission did note that "parents and students have no solid evidence, comparable across institutions, of how much students learn in colleges or whether they learn more at one college than another" (ED 2006, p. 14). To address this perceived information void, the commission made a number of recommendations regarding assessment of institutional activities and student learning outcomes. To support the development of assessment metrics, the ED awarded a $2.45 million grant to a consortium of three higher education associations through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (ED 2007).[3] The consortium was to develop valid and reliable measures to assess student achievement in higher education to inform students and families, policymakers, and institutions about colleges' ability to produce an educated citizenry prepared to compete in the global marketplace (ED 2007).

The Spellings Commission's focus on assessment of institutional effectiveness pushed the issue onto the broader public policy stage and created an expectation that colleges should provide evidence of institutional effectiveness in ways that could be quantitatively measured and clearly reported. However, there was no explicit intent in the commission's work to generate a competitive ranking of colleges on any one or set of measurements.

In response to the environment created by the commission's work, and motivated in part by the possibility of a mandated federal regulatory framework, different sectors of the higher education community have designed distinct approaches for disseminating information to stakeholders of postsecondary education—approaches that have similarly avoided ranking colleges.

Voluntary System of Accountability Program

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) program is a collaborative effort involving four-year public postsecondary institutions represented by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), and the public higher education community. Conceptualized in 2006, the VSA is designed to improve understanding of how public four-year colleges and universities operate through the compilation of loosely comparable information on each participating institution (Shulenburger, Mehaffy, & Keller 2008). Institutions must elect to be part of the VSA project.

For participating institutions, data are presented in the form of standardized five-page Web-based College Portraits.[4] Each portrait contains basic information in three general categories: consumer information, student experiences and perceptions of the college experience, and student learning outcomes. Institutions are required to provide data in all categories, but they have a four-year lag period from the start date of their participation to meet this requirement. The VSA is an effort by a large sector of the higher education community to report information on three critical areas in a comparable form (Shulenburger et al. 2008). By design, the project does not rank institutions on any individual or set of indicators.

[3] The consortium consisted of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).

[4] To see these portraits, go to www.collegeportraits.org.

University and College Accountability Network

Similar in intent to the VSA, the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) is an initiative to provide higher education stakeholders with information on private four-year colleges and universities. Sponsored by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities—whose members include the nation's nearly 800 private colleges—U-CAN was launched in 2007 in response to federal and state government calls for greater transparency in information (U-CAN 2009).

U-CAN provides a Web-based interface through which users can search profiles of institutions from a selection of data points[5]. The profiles include information about admissions, academics, student demographics, graduation rates, common fields of study, institutional accreditation, faculty information, class size, tuition and fee trends, price of attendance, financial aid, campus housing, student life, and campus safety. In addition to this basic information, U-CAN profiles report institutional data on average total loan amounts at graduation, undergraduate class-size breakdowns, and net tuition price. U-CAN aspires to be holistic in its representation of institutions, providing key statistical data complemented by narrative descriptions and subject-specific links to relevant institutional Web pages (U-CAN 2009).

U-CAN and the VSA differ in one important aspect—the latter reports on student learning outcomes and the student experience. Institutions that participate in the VSA are required to report student learning outcome information on one of three standardized examinations: the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP); the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA); or the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP). Data on student experiences are reported from one of four surveys on student engagement, including the widely used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). U-CAN does not require similar information to be reported in its institutional Web profiles. Despite the VSA making efforts to report student learning outcomes, the usefulness of the data is somewhat limited. Institutions may report outcomes using any one of several measuring instruments, so comparability across institutions is difficult. Debate is ongoing regarding the appropriateness of comparing college-to-college outcomes of student learning and engagement (Kuh 2007), but the lack of widespread uniformity in measuring instruments to-date makes this a moot point.

The VSA and U-CAN initiatives exemplify the response of the higher education sector to calls from stakeholders for clear and comparable information on the college experience and student learning. The two programs do not report information on institutions in ways that would permit rankings to be generated on any single measurement point or group of points, but rather focusing on providing transparent information on individual institutions.

Measuring Up—National Report Card on Higher Education

Taking a different tack, the *Measuring Up* series has focused on the U.S. state as the unit of analysis, generating direct grading metrics to facilitate comparisons. Since 2000, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education has prepared report cards on postsecondary education performance in each of the 50 states and for the nation as a whole. These report cards, published in the biannual *Measuring Up* report, grade each state and the nation on performance indicators that evaluate the states' ability to provide educational opportunities beyond high school through the bachelor's degree. The intent of the report cards is to provide the general public with informa-

[5] To see these portraits, go to www.ucan-network.org.

tion on state-by-state performance and to challenge states to improve their performance (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2008).

Performance is measured across six categories: preparation, participation, affordability, completion, benefits, and learning. Grades result from a multistep procedure that includes selecting indicators for each category, weighting each indicator according to its importance, identifying the third-highest performing state for benchmarking purposes, converting raw scores to indexes on the basis of the benchmark, and assigning letter grades based on accumulated index scores. This process produces grades for each state in each category and shows performance relative to other states.[6] Grades for "learning" have not been issued because of the lack of uniform and comparable indicators. According to the authors of *Measuring Up*, "All states receive an 'incomplete' in Learning because there are not sufficient data to allow meaningful state-by-state comparisons" (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2008). Each state's report card offers a detailed synopsis of strengths and weaknesses, summary information, and grade changes over time.

Although not an overt ranking, the *Measuring Up* series does evaluate states on a set of common indicators in a way that is easily understandable by end-users. It may not be explicitly clear what a "B" in affordability means or what the experiential difference between a "B" and a "C" would be at a postsecondary institution; but people understand that a "B" is somehow better than a "C"—a simple understanding that is lacking in the more nuanced state or institutional information presented in other assessments. Moreover, the comparability of grades across states fits into the narrative of competitiveness that underlies much of the political debate around postsecondary policy issues; particularly the desire to be recognized by constituents' and economic interest alike as providing quality postsecondary education.

Reviewing the national higher education assessment landscape illustrates a trend toward assessing college quality and facilitating general comparisons across similar institutions. Federal and state governments, the postsecondary education community, and the non-profit sector have each advanced various systems to measure institutional performance and convey information on higher education to the public. However, there is an absence of government or postsecondary sector systems that directly rank institutions. Filling this void, third-party college rankings have become viable instruments for sorting postsecondary institutions and providing some level of information about college quality to policymakers and the wider public.

[6] A description of this method of computing state grades is available at http://measuringup2008.highereducation.org/print/technical_guide.pdf.

State Assessment Approaches and College Rankings

Rankings offer one way to reduce the asymmetry of information between higher education institutions and sector stakeholders. The popularity of rankings suggests that despite the proliferation of information about colleges provided by government assessment efforts, institutions themselves, and various third parties, stakeholders gravitate toward systems that provide some interpretation of the information. Although they are often criticized for arbitrary weighting and unsubstantiated definitions of "quality," rankings provide the public at least some information in an easily digestible format.

Because notions of educational quality depend on many inputs and outputs, it is a difficult concept to capture. Nonetheless, general demands for social measurements and specific calls for hard information on the quality of higher education have led to the development of college rankings by a variety of public and private sources in a national and increasingly international context. Appendix A describes several ranking systems available in the marketplace, highlighting their methodologies and data sources.

Determining whether and how policymakers, particularly at the state level, use college rankings in the decision-making process is difficult. Because of the simplicity with which rankings transmit notions of educational quality, there would seem to be a great temptation for policymakers to use rankings as a proxy to see how one jurisdiction's higher education sector compares to others. And because governments act in a competitive marketplace to attract high-quality students and educationally driven economic growth, incentives exist for policymakers to seek to have postsecondary education in their state be recognized as "the best." However, although it is conceivable that rankings would appeal to state policymakers, the interviews and analysis undertaken for this brief revealed little in the way of direct use of rankings in policy formation, although it was revealed that policymakers are being exposed to college rankings in various ways. The following section draws on the experiences of three states to illustrate how college rankings have been folded into comprehensive government assessment efforts, increasing the salience of college rankings with policymakers and suggesting at least a marginal impact of rankings in the policy process.

Minnesota

Minnesota has a well-developed, comprehensive set of postsecondary education goals designed to support economic and civic development (Minnesota Office of Higher Education 2009). Goals for postsecondary education in the state are outlined in the annual *Minnesota Measures* report, compiled by the Minnesota Office of Higher Education and delivered to the legislature, governor, and general public. The report is intended to help Minnesota policymakers assess the goals and effectiveness of higher education in the state (Minnesota Office of Higher Education 2009).

TABLE 1

Minnesota Measures Presentation of Rankings

Newsweek ranked the University of Minnesota 30th internationally among research institutions in 2007.	China's Institute of Higher Education at Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranked the University of Minnesota 28th internationally among the top 100 research institutions in 2008. This was an improvement from 33rd in 2007 and rankings in the low 30s in previous reports.	The *London Times Higher Education Supplement* ranked the University of Minnesota 87th in 2008. This was an improvement from 142 in 2007 and 187 in 2006. The ranking methodology for this report is broader than that used in other studies.

SOURCE: WWW.OHE.STATE.MN.US/PDF/MINNESOTAMEASURES2009.PDF

Minnesota Measures uses various indicators to report on the functioning of the state's public postsecondary institutions. Among them is an indicator designed to assess the University of Minnesota governing board's goal to be "among the top three public research universities in the world" (Minnesota Office of Higher Education 2009, p. 54). Progress toward this goal is measured primarily by the institution's position on several ranking metrics, with an emphasis on the Center for Measuring University Performance's "Top American Research Universities" rankings. The report outlines the criteria used to rank the institutions and discusses the placement of the University of Minnesota in the overall ranking. Noting the domestic tilt of the "Top American Research Universities" rankings, the report also includes the University of Minnesota's ranking on several international ranking systems, such as those compiled by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the *London Times Higher Education Supplement*, *Newsweek*, the G-factor International University Rankings, and Webometrics. **TABLE 1** provides an example of how ranking information is reported in *Minnesota Measures*.

Contextual information is lacking on how the rankings are developed, the audience for which each ranking is intended, and the methodology used to create the ranking. Readers of the Minnesota report must determine for themselves the relevance of these measurements to state policy goals beyond the objective of having a globally recognized public research university. Including rankings in the report allows state policymakers to see how state institutions rank in comparison with

similar institutions. This information may be of limited policy relevance, however, due to a lack of discussion on how a ranking placement impacts state policy goals.

Indiana

In 2007, Indiana's Commission for Higher Education (ICHE) articulated specific initiatives and recommendations to support state development goals (ICHE 2007). Goals were established in six key areas: college completion, affordability, preparation, community college, major research universities, and accountability. In establishing goals for major research universities in the public system, the ICHE encouraged institutions to develop strategies to move toward becoming top national research universities.

The state identifies college ranking systems as one method of validating institutional progress toward the policy goal of developing top research universities (ICHE 2008). Ranking systems mentioned in the ICHE's report include "Top American Universities" from the Center for Measuring University Performance; the "Academic Ranking of World Universities" produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University; and "America's Best Colleges," produced by *U.S. News & World Report (USNWR)*. These ranking systems were selected because of their popularity with the general public and or the academic community, the consistent format in which they are published, and the wide range of metrics used in compiling them (ICHE 2008).

Rankings are presented in graphical format for Purdue University, Indiana University, and identified peer institutions, with limited contextual information on the methods used to create the rankings. The ICHE explicitly states that it intends to monitor the rankings with the goal of "moving our major research universities to higher levels in the rankings" (ICHE 2008, p. 6). This suggests that the metrics used to develop the rankings are important for both institutional leaders and state decision makers to consider in the development of institutional and state policy. As with Minnesota, the lack of contextual discussion on methodology and the purpose of the rankings limits the policy relevance of the information presented in the report.

Texas

Texas provides another example of how college rankings are being folded into overall state assessment and accountability efforts. The University of Texas (UT) System Board of Regents strategic plan outlines clear expectations—built around six key indicators—for each of the 15 institutions in the state system (UT System 2006).

The strategic plan calls for actions and public investments to increase the quality of the system's institutions. One measurement of quality improvements is college rankings, which are used to track the "progress and impact of these investments—to recruit top faculty and build state-of-the-art research facilities, to enhance technology transfer, to attract and retain a diverse group of students—even though the rankings themselves should not be a strategic goal" (UT System 2008, sec. II.5.17).

Positions in college rankings are included in both individual institution accountability profiles and the overall system report. Rankings are presented in three broad areas—research

TABLE 2

Shanghai Jiao Tong *University Academic Ranking of World Universities 2007/2008*

	INSTITUTION AND PROGRAMS RANK AMONG 500 WORLD UNIVERSITIES	INSTITUTION RANK AMONG 166 AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES
UT Austin	38	29
Engineering/Technology/Computer Sciences	6	
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	29	
Social Sciences	19	
UT Southwestern Medical Center	39	30
Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy	7	
Life and Agricultural Sciences	6	
UT HSC-Houston	151–202 group	71–88 group
Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy	31	
UT M.D. Anderson Cancer Center	151–202 group	71–88 group
Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy	21	
UTHSC-San Antonio	203–304 group	89–117 group
Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy	52–75 group	
UT Medical Branch	203–304 group	89–117 group
Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy	52-75 group	
UT Dallas	305–402 group	118–140 group

SOURCE: WWW.UTSYSTEM.EDU/OSM/ACCOUNTABILITY/2007/ACCOUNTABILITYREPORT07-08.PDF, SECTION II.5.20

productivity, technology transfer, and students—and include brief discussions of how they are compiled and how they should be interpreted (UT System 2008). For example, in discussing *USNWR*'s "America's Best Colleges" rankings, the accountability profiles note that the top schools seldom change and that sustaining a ranking from year to year requires continuous improvement.

The following ranking systems are cited in the UT strategic plan:

- Research productivity: Shanghai Jiao Tong University; National Science Foundation; and the Center for Measuring University Performance.
- Technology transfer: *The Scientist* magazine; U.S. Patent and Trade Office; Milken Institute (biotech patents).
- Student-focused rankings: *U.S. News and World Report*'s "America's Best Colleges" and "America's Best Graduate Schools"; *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*.

TABLE 2 illustrates how outcomes of one international ranking are reported in the overall UT System accountability report.

The inclusion of college rankings into broader assessment efforts in Texas is instructive for several reasons. First, rankings are not used as stand-alone metrics of success or failure but are presented along with broad policy goals and with contextualizing information. By presenting rankings alongside policy goals (e.g., retaining a diverse group of students), the accountability report shows why the ranking is included and what it is intended to convey to policymakers and other constituents. Second, the accountability reports include a number of rankings that capture different elements of the system and present information relevant to specific policy goals. For example, rankings on diversity outcomes are included to demonstrate the system's achievements or challenges in this area. Including several ranking measures reduces the opportunity to game any one ranking for the purpose of state accountability efforts. Third, the rankings include detailed explanations of methods and data used in their computation. This information is important to inform policymakers and others on how rankings are developed and allow them to decide whether the included variables are relevant to policy priorities. Finally, trending information on an institution's position in the rankings is included to ensure that accountability reports are not just a single-year snapshot of performance.

The use of college rankings in assessing higher education in Minnesota, Indiana, and Texas provides state policymakers access to ranking information within a larger assessment framework. The breadth of rankings presented to policymakers, the descriptions of how rankings are tabulated, and efforts to tie the rankings information to state policy goals demonstrate a partial attempt to use college rankings to inform policy development. The direct impact of rankings on policy evaluation and development is difficult to track. However, the presence of college rankings in state assessment reports indicates that they are more likely to be incorporated and have an effect on state processes than has thus far been the case on a national scale.

College Rankings and Policymaking: Key Considerations

College rankings have penetrated the public consciousness as one measure of college quality and may be being used by policymakers who are looking for more information on which to base decisions and gauge the effectiveness of postsecondary education. As discussed in the previous section, several states formally are using college rankings as one tool to evaluate the relative positioning of major research universities, particularly in the international context. Although this limited use may be appropriate, precaution is warranted in expanding the use of college rankings in policymaking. From a review of literature and the interviews conducted for this brief, several key themes emerged relating to the nature of college rankings and their potential impact on the policy process.

Rankings inform public notions of college quality. Rankings of academic quality are not a new phenomenon, although traditionally they were limited to federal and state agencies, academic administrators, and higher education researchers (Stuart 1995). With the development of the *USNWR* college rankings and the subsequent proliferation of rankings from a variety of sources, awareness has spread rapidly among the general public. This awareness has led to the democratization of knowledge about colleges and the higher education sector, as students and families now have access to data and qualitative information that was not publicly tabulated or accessible in the past (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez 1998). The popularity and durability of college rankings are the result of several conditions.

- The increasing mobility of students has created a national higher education marketplace, in which institutions and students seek information on colleges that is at least loosely comparable. The wide and growing income gap between high school graduates and college graduates has raised the stakes for gaining admission to the "best" colleges. And it is not enough for a person to receive a high-quality education; to extract economic value, others must recognize the quality of the degree (Ehrenberg 2005; Frank 2001).

- The use of rankings by postsecondary institutions has contributed to their popularity. Despite the shortcomings of many ranking systems, institutions are concerned about their position and often use rankings in marketing materials to communicate quality and prestige (Ehrenberg 2002). This use of rankings by the institutions suggests to the public that rankings are a reliable source of information in the complex landscape of higher education.

- Rankings are becoming increasingly important in the international context. They are a critical aspect of discussions of

higher education quality internationally, because of global expansion in access to higher education and consumers' desire for information on the quality of colleges around the world (Dill & Soo 2005).

Data limitations restrict the usefulness of college rankings to policymakers.

The compilation of college rankings is limited by the availability of credible and comparable data indicators. The majority of ranking systems rely on nationally comparable input measures (e.g., SAT scores of admitted students, acceptance rates, percentage of students in the top 10 percent of their high school class) and contextual factors (e.g., reputation, alumni giving rates, percentage of professors with a terminal degree in their field). These measures are reported by institutions, drawn from national datasets such as Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), or collected specifically by a rankings publisher.

Policymakers who focus on college rankings run the risk of overlooking more nuanced data that may be available from other sources. Persistence and program completion data are examples of this phenomenon. Many states have constructed student unit record data systems to assess the performance of their public institutions and generate internal assessments of institutional performance (Ewell & Boeke 2006). In some cases, policymakers may find that the data compiled by their own jurisdiction through these data systems paint a more complete picture of the successes and challenges of higher education in their state than that provided by college rankings.

The structure of rankings limits the transference of information relevant to policy.

Ordinal rankings are inherently misleading. Rankings are presented as accurate and valid reflections of the differences among the colleges they rank when they actually ignore some information by design (Stake 2006). Unlike summary scores, rankings imply a consistent magnitude of difference, making institutions appear more or less different in overall quality than they actually are. True differences among closely ranked institutions may be minimal or quite large, but all rankings are presented as having the same magnitude of difference.

For example, according to the most recent iteration of *USNWR*'s ranking of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the difference in measured quality between Spelman (#1) and Morehouse (#3) is greater than the expressed difference between school number 11 and school number 33. In other words, according to the *USNWR* scoring metrics, any two schools between 11th and 33rd place in the ranking are less different in quality than the schools ranked first and third (*USNWR* 2009). Thus, 22 places near the middle third of the rankings represent about the same difference as two places at the top. This dynamic suggests that policymakers should be careful about how they use rankings in their deliberations of differences of educational quality; significant shifts in ranking position may reflect minimally if at all on changes in institutional practice or quality.

Beyond distortions of differences in quality among institutions, rankings suggest that quality is a finite resource by benchmarking

to top-performing institutions. For example, in the *USNWR* rankings institutions are benchmarked to best performers in each category for which data are collected. This approach reports quality in terms of relative performance of higher education institutions. Presenting information in this way may be appropriate to identify how institutions are functioning compared with other institutions, but it is of limited use in crafting answers to policy relevant questions, such as "Are we producing the educational outcomes we desire?" and "What improvements have we made over time based on policy changes?"

Question such as these are critical for policymaking in higher education. Educational outcomes may not be best judged on a relative basis; it is more useful to determine whether outcomes are meeting clearly articulated needs and performance targets. It is of little help to know that colleges in one jurisdiction are doing "better" than those in other jurisdictions without contextualizing the knowledge in policy-relevant ways. An institution's rise in the rankings might reflect improvement resulting from policy changes, or it could just as easily be due to poor performance by former leaders in the rankings. Moreover, position in a ranking reveals limited information on the contributions an institution may be making in support of policy goals. Policymakers need to consider how methodologies and reporting styles can affect the policy relevance of information communicated by rankings.

Rankings have the potential to shift institutional behaviors in ways that may negatively affect public policy goals.

College rankings can encourage schools to become more like what the rankings measure, by imposing a standardized definition of educational quality and creating an incentive to conform to that definition (Espeland & Sauder 2007). Additionally, the kind of data used to construct rankings incentivizes specific institutional behaviors. The inputs in common ranking systems—and the indicators selected to measure them—reflect implicitly value-laden decisions about how to appropriately define educational quality. Thus, when rankings enter government policy deliberations, attention must be paid to ensure definitions of educational quality represented by rankings align with policy goals; access and equity policy are areas where doing so is particularly important.

Most of the indicators used in the construction of college rankings have little to do with policy goals relating to access and equity; they create uniform notions of educational quality and overlook important distinctions in educational preparation, personal experiences, and historical treatment of various student populations in higher education. Policymakers and the public are ill-served by rankings that rely on data indicators that by their nature are exclusionary. Policymakers should take note of the data inputs used to construct rankings and ensure that incentives for an institution to move up the rankings do not run counter to public policy goals, especially in the areas of access and equity.

Conclusions and Recommendations

College rankings are one piece of information available to policymakers as they usher higher education policy through the complex process of policymaking. This brief has provided an overview of national postsecondary assessment efforts and noted the similarities and differences in these approaches to college rankings, presented examples of the inclusion of college rankings in state government assessment efforts, and highlighted key themes for policymakers to consider in appraising the usefulness of college rankings to policymaking.

Notably, policymakers need to understand the effects rankings can have on institutional behaviors, publicly constructed notions of educational quality, and equity outcomes. Rankings are likely to remain a fixture of the college information marketplace. Ensuring that policymakers are aware of these potential effects and improving the policy relevance of rankings are worthy endeavors. In support of this effort the following recommendations are offered:

Take precautions to ensure that college rankings are only used as part of overall system assessment efforts and not as a stand-alone evaluation of colleges.
If policymakers are to use college rankings as part of assessment systems, they must be careful to do so as part of comprehensive efforts designed to improve institutional performance toward public policy goals. Although rankings can serve as one metric for assessing institutional progress, policymakers should use them as part of a larger feedback loop that ultimately leads to desired changes in institutional actions and policy creation to support those changes. Using rankings as stand alone measures of institutional success seldom serves public policy goals.

Moreover, using rankings as a stand alone evaluation risks complacency among public officials in jurisdictions with institutions that rank high and creates a temptation to use the rankings as a bludgeon against poorly ranked institutions. Neither approach advances the public agenda of higher education. College rankings can be part of the process of postsecondary policymaking, but policymakers should carefully consider what is being measured, the methods used to create a ranking, and how these factors relate to public policy goals.

Support the collection of data that can be used to craft more policy-relevant college rankings, including providing funds to higher education institutions to widely implement and publish the results of student learning assessments.
To be of more than nominal use to policymakers, college rankings need to rely on indicators that reflect policy priorities and capture the kinds of skills that make students competitive and productive in a modern technological economy. Focusing on student learning outcomes is one way rankings could become more relevant to policymakers.

Because of the limited availability of student learning outcome data, ranking systems do not incorporate these data. Although certain assessment efforts—the VSA, for example—are attempting to more comprehensively capture outcome data, the lack of a single measuring device is problematic. Rankings rely on consistently reported data, so policymakers should financially support efforts to capture educational outcomes in a consistent format. The use of outcome measures—particularly

when presented in terms of value-added scores—in rankings would create an incentive for institutions to focus on improving educational practice rather than chasing notions of quality through exclusivity. Such a focus would help the higher education sector meet public policy goals in the areas of student persistence, completion, and equity.

Leverage public attention to college rankings to shape general notions of college quality and advance equity goals.

Policymakers should leverage the attention paid to college rankings to shape public discussions of educational quality to advance equity goals, an increasingly important undertaking given shifting demographic patterns and the need to better serve students of color, adult learners, and low-income populations to reach national educational attainment goals.

Policymakers have an opportunity to shape public discussions on the effects of rankings on college quality and equity. Currently, the indicators used in the construction of rankings have minimal relevance to policy focusing on access and equity; instead, they reward exclusivity and prestige (Carey 2006). Such indicators convey little information about the educational experiences of adult students, students of color, and low-income populations—groups that postsecondary education must better serve to achieve national goals for educational attainment (Lumina Foundation for Education 2009). Policymakers should be publicly discussing why equity outcomes are important policy goals given the nation's shifting demographic patterns, and how notions of college quality can be reframed to support those goals.

College rankings have the potential to create incentives for institutions to support the educational development of traditionally underserved populations. When quality is defined by indicators that reward exclusivity, institutional innovation to educate underserved student populations more effectively is undervalued. Policymakers have an opportunity to shift conversations about college quality by supporting elements of ranking systems that are relevant and useful to public policy in this area.

Such a deliberative approach is a departure from current practice. Focused efforts will be required to move beyond the simple inclusion of college rankings in assessments toward a public discussion of how rankings affect notions of college quality and educational equity, and how they can be most useful in policymaking. If policymakers are willing to engage in such a process, they can enhance and shift definitions of college quality and shape public understanding in ways that will advance policy agendas.

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Appendix A: Overview of College Ranking Systems

A brief overview of several college ranking systems shows the kinds of ranking information currently available to stakeholders of American higher education. The five ranking systems presented here are "America's Best Colleges" (*U.S. News and World Report*); "100 Best Values in Public and Private Colleges" (*Kiplinger's*); "Top American Research Universities" (Center for Measuring University Performance); "World University Rankings"(*Times Higher Education Supplement*); and "Academic Ranking of World Universities" (Shanghai Jiao Tong University). These five were selected because of their popularity with the public and or the academic community.

U.S. News and World Report: "America's Best Colleges"

Since 1983, *USNWR* has produced undergraduate college rankings under the "America's Best Colleges" banner. This ranking has become popular with the public and has captured the attention of the higher education community, policymakers, academic scholars, and the popular press. Intended to assist students and families in their college choice decisions, the rankings provide numeric rankings based on quantitative measures that cover seven broad categories: peer assessment; graduation and retention rate; faculty resources; student selectivity; financial resources; alumni giving; and, for select institutions, graduation rate performance. Scores for each measure are weighted by the magazine's editors and are analyzed to arrive at a final overall score for each institution. **FIGURE 1** shows the weights assigned to each measurement category for the most recently released rankings. The overall scores are placed in ordinal rank to create the various ranking lists. Undergraduate institutions are ranked in peer categories: national universities, liberal arts colleges, master's-level universities, and baccalaureate colleges. The latter two categories are further subdivided into four geographic regions (*U.S. News and World Report* 2009).

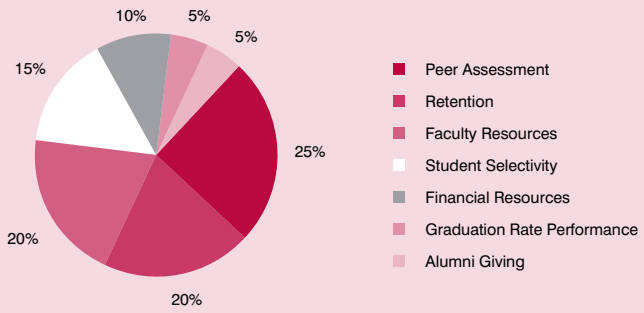
Kiplinger's Magazine: "100 Best Values in Public and Private Colleges"

Kiplinger's ranks select four-year undergraduate institutions in the United States according to the editors' notions of value, producing separate rankings for public and private institutions. The rankings are based on a combination of affordability and perceived academic quality. Key academic indicators used in the rankings include admission rates, first-year student retention rates, student-to-faculty ratios, percentage of first-year class scoring 600 or higher on the verbal and math components of the SAT or scoring 24 or higher on the ACT, and four- and six-year graduation rates. Financial indicators include total cost of attendance, (tuition, mandatory fees, room and board, books) average cost for students with need after subtracting for

FIGURE 1

Undergraduate Ranking Criteria and Weights in *USNWR*'s "America's Best Colleges"

This graph shows the relative weights assigned to each category of indicator for national universities and liberal arts colleges.



SOURCE: WWW.USNEWS.COM/ARTICLES/EDUCATION/BEST-COLLEGES/2009/08/19/METHODOLOGY-UNDERGRADUATE-RANKING-CRITERIA-AND-WEIGHTS.HTML

FIGURE 2

Times Higher Education Supplement World University Rankings Weights

INDICATOR	EXPLANATION	WEIGHTING
Academic Peer Review	Composite score drawn from peer review survey divided into five subject areas.	40%
Employer Review	Score based on received responses to employer survey.	10%
Faculty: Student Ratio	Score based on faculty: student ratio.	20%
Citations per Faculty	Score based on research performance factored against the size of the research body.	20%
International Faculty	Score based on proportion of international faculty.	5%
International Students	Score based on proportion of international students.	5%

SOURCE: WWW.TOPUNIVERSITIES.COM/WORLDUNIVERSITYRANKINGS/METHODOLOGY/SIMPLE_OVERVIEW

grants, average cost for a student without need after subtracting non-need-based grants, average percentage of need met by aid, and average debt accumulated prior to graduation. Rankings are compiled to reflect costs and quality for both in-state and out-of-state students. *Kiplinger's* places more weight (2:1) on academic indicators and breaks ties in the rankings using academic quality scores and average debt at graduation. *Kiplinger's* rankings are noteworthy for their inclusion of at least partial data on college cost indicators, which are notably absent from most college ranking systems (Kiplinger 2009).

Times Higher Education Supplement: "World University Rankings"

The "World University Rankings" are an international comparison of institutions. First released in 2005, the rankings rely on four areas of evaluation including research quality, teaching quality, graduate employability, and international outlook. To represent each of these areas, the publisher assigns weighted indicators based on its opinion of the importance of the criteria and the effectiveness of the indicator to evaluate the measure (*Times Higher Education Supplement* 2008). **FIGURE 2** illustrates the weighting of the indicators used to determine the ranking.

Final institutional scores are compiled by multiplying each indicator score by its weighting factor, adding the resulting figures, and scaling results to the top-performing institution. To be included in the rankings, an institution must apply and be accepted. The most recent list ranks institutions from 1 through 400. Institutions ranked below 400 are listed in alphabetical order (*Times Higher Education Supplement* 2008).

Shanghai Jiao Tong University: "Academic Ranking of World Universities"

Shanghai Jiao Tong University's "Academic Ranking of World Universities" compares information across institutions according to several indicators of academic or research performance, including: alumni and staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, highly cited researchers, articles published in *Nature*

FIGURE 3

Academic Rankings of World Universities: Ranking Weights

CRITERIA	INDICATOR	WEIGHTINGS
Quality of Education	Alumni winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	20%
	Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories	20%
Research Output	Articles published in *Nature* and *Science**	20%
	Articles indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded, and Social Science Citation Index	20%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance	10%

* FOR INSTITUTIONS THAT SPECIALIZE IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES—SUCH AS THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS—THIS INDICATOR IS NOT CONSIDERED, AND ITS WEIGHT IS SHIFTED TO OTHER INDICATORS.
SOURCE: WWW.ARWU.ORG/RANK2008/ARWU2008METHODOLOGY(EN).HTM#M1.

and *Science*, articles indexed in major citation indices, and the per capita academic performance of an institution. For each indicator, the highest scoring institution is assigned a score of 100, and other institutions are calculated as a percentage of the top score. **FIGURE 3** shows the weights assigned to each indicator (Center for World-Class Universities 2008).

These five ranking systems are examples of the types of information available in the marketplace to policymakers and the general public. Each college ranking system has its own aims and purposes, is intended for specific audiences, and reflects its own perspective of what constitutes college quality and how that quality can be appropriately measured. No one ranking system can be considered a "best practice"; rather, each provides a range of information that policymakers and other stakeholders can consider as they develop notions of college quality.

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