



Notes from the Dismal Science:

JUST HOW GOOD IS OAKLAND UNIVERSITY?

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It wasn't long ago that I called an administrator's office at OU, got put on hold, and listened to a commercial message touting our university. The message described us as being a nationally ranked doctoral granting university located on a beautiful campus. I knew that every word in OU's commercial was true. However, what it omitted was the fact that of those universities to be ranked nationally, ours is ranked last, or more precisely we are in the lowest, 4th, category.

In my view, there is no dishonor in being ranked last; in fact, we were only recently moved up to the doctoral granting category, and what could be more natural than to start at square one. I have met many people, however, who seem unwilling to accept that square one is where we are. Recognizing that we are not yet excellent is a necessary stimulus to progress, while the biggest obstacle to progress for anyone is to believe like Bill Waterson's cartoon character, Calvin, when asked what would be his New Year's resolutions: ". . . why should I change, I'm perfect the way I am?" This attitude is probably an expression of the self-esteem religion that invaded education years ago coupled with our perpetual indoctrination by the output of Madison Avenue. While it is American as apple pie, it is sim-

ply wrong-headed for us. A favorite columnist of mine discovered this quotation on a related theme; though it isn't directly about universities, you will see the connection: "To become a good writer, you must first become a bad writer and then continue to improve."

But, suppose that we want to improve, should our goal be to move up from the 4th tier in *US News*' rankings, say to the 3rd or even the 2nd? The thrust of this essay is to persuade the reader that the best answer is "No"; there are better goals to aspire to. The overall *US News* college ranking, and others like it, thrive by creating the illusion of objectivity and relevance, neither of which in reality can be sustained. You may still disagree, but to understand my reasoning consider the next scenario.

Suppose a high school senior, let me call him Senior, on considering his college options first ranked his options by examining several attributes of each college. And having weighted each attribute by how much he valued it, he then ranks the colleges by the resulting weighted sum. For example, the college attributes of interest to him may have included: 1) average freshman retention rate; 2) graduation rate; 3) % classes with fewer than 20 students; 4) % faculty who are full time; 5) freshman who are in the top 10% of their high school class; 6) average alumni giving rate; 7) peer assessment score; 8) predicted graduation rate; 9) overperformance (+) and underperformance (-); 10) % classes with 50 or more students; 11) SAT/ACT 25th to 75th percentile; and 12) acceptance rate.

When experts do this kind of thing, they might first standardize the attributes to the zero-one interval and set appropriate arithmetic rules for the weights assigned to the attributes. It's true that a real life Senior may not pick these particular attributes and may not do these calculations on paper, but there is a point to explaining that he logically could have.

The point is that Senior (and his parents) only makes sense to us if they value the college attributes according to their own hearts and minds. Why would they invite total strangers to value colleges for them? How can we assume that

there could ever be a common set of values, that is weights, for everyone? Colleges are at least as varied in shapes and purposes as the various kinds and examples of clothes in a big department store. If I walked into Target and a *US News* agent handed me a single, overall ranking of each type and example of the clothes items in the store, would I pay any attention to it? Suppose his top ranked items were all parkas and I had come to buy a sweater?

Allow me to make an analytical aside about this problem in the above paragraph. The problem is essentially the same as the Impossibility Theorems originated by Kenneth Arrow. Translating his language into our current issue, Arrow asked whether the varied personal college rankings of Senior and the thousands of other college bound high schoolers could be combined by some process to produce an objective, common ranking suitable for all without becoming 1) dictatorial, 2) illogical, or 3) arbitrarily limiting the whose preferences or what sort of preferences are to count. He showed that this is impossible.

As a philosophical aside, notice if you will that the impossibility argument is not a mere mathematical abstraction. We humans have an urge to rank everything and we like there to be a clear winner. We compare faculty within a department or university, and we rank cities, races, states, countries, baseball players and movie stars. Most of the resulting effort is a waste of time. For example, which is the best city, Toronto or Detroit? Toronto may excel in low unemployment and downtown investment, but Detroit might excel in diverse cultural activities and in original music. The message of Impossibility theorems is that the task of finding some “true” and “objective” comparison is futile; people will differ on the weights they attach to these attributes. Nevertheless, we are human and we will argue about such things. If you share my lack of enthusiasm for such arguments, you may, like me, see the humor in the online Onion lampoon newspaper’s T-shirts for sale which claim: “My Local Area Sports Team is Superior to Your Local Area Sports Team.”

If you are new to Impossibility Theorems, you won't be able to judge whether their point is valid without reading their literature; but it is a rich literature. If, in contrast, you are knowledgeable about Arrow's Theorem, you will know that there are dozens of them now. Some claim to be "Possibility Theorems," but more support Arrow's original claim (I find it interesting that Arrow's original version contained a mathematical error that was corrected by later versions). Anyway, the *US News* methods are so transparent that we can see by inspection that the magazine has assumed the role of dictator. In fact, no seniors' preferences appear to count, only the magazine's own.

The *US News* method combines 12 college attributes; for convenience I have pretended that Senior had picked these exact 12; that is, the previous list that I gave as Senior's attribute picks are in fact the *US News*' own. The magazine's weights for these attributes are wholly arbitrary in my view, also in the view of the noted economist, Gary Becker, who comments:

Ordinarily the weighting [in the *US News* rankings] is arbitrary, which makes the final rankings arbitrary.

The magazines method is not just arbitrary; it is also easily manipulated. Becker describes two of the ways:

A common attribute is the ratio of applications to acceptances. Both components of the ratio are manipulable—the number of applications by injecting a random element into acceptances so that students who do not meet the normal admission criteria nevertheless have a chance of admission, which may motivate them to apply; and the number of acceptances by rejecting high-quality applicants who seem almost certain to be accepted by a higher ranking school (Becker Blog, March 2007).

If Becker's administrators seem too underhanded to describe any Admissions personnel you know, consider a manipulation with a reportedly high rate of use. By changing the college SAT submission policy from "Required" to "Optional," colleges "experience" a gain in reportable average SATs by up

to 100 points. The method exploits natural sampling biases. Students who are embarrassed by their low SAT scores are more likely to take the option “not report,” while those proud of their scores are more likely to submit them. The resulting available sample of student SAT scores with its higher average SATs will plausibly allow the college to advance in the rankings.

While I believe that I have made a good case in opposition to overall rankings of colleges, I accept that some readers may wonder if this is just a scribbling of a local academic who bears a grudge against US News. On the contrary, I have good company: Stanford University president, Gerhard Cooper, 1996, in a letter addressed to the editor of *US News*:

As president of a university that is among the top-rated universities, I hope I have the standing to persuade you that much about these rankings—particularly their specious formulas and spurious precision—is utterly misleading.

Amy Graham and Nicholas Thompson writing in the *Washington Monthly* in September 2001:

US News college rankings measure everything but what matters. And most universities don't seem to mind.

The *National Opinion Research Council* (NORC), reporting a thorough assessment of the literature on college rankings in 1997:

(My Paraphrase): They found that colleges had very heterogeneous goals. The literature they assessed failed to develop a viable common measure of college quality. This group agreed that college quality is a multidimensional entity and that no single measure could capture all dimensions.

Inside Higher Ed, June 25, 2007:

The *US News* rankings are not only methodologically flawed; they encourage colleges and universities to engage in dishonest activities.

Let me make it clear that my and others objections to *US News* college rankings are to the *overall* rankings as appear in their publication “America’s Best Colleges.” One remedy is for the magazine to be persuaded by argument to stop publishing those lists. But since they are unlikely to do so, our best remedy is to simply ignore them. Like many other publishing organizations, *US News* also publishes a fat volume, *The Ultimate College Guide*, with much detail on colleges and devoid of overall rankings. Detail can’t hurt, and seniors and parents might find these more useful.

Altogether, what is the answer to the initial question: “Just how good is Oakland University?” I think that the best thing to say was spoken by Gary Russi in his presidential address to faculty on January 31, 2007 in Varner Recital Hall. He said that “Oakland University is a good university . . . can we be great?” These are the right words, we are good. “Good” is only properly assessed in comparison to our mission, which reads: “. . . [To] offer instructional programs of high quality that lead to degrees at the baccalaureate, masters and doctoral levels as well as programs in continuing education.” I always add the unwritten mission: “We are first of all serve our historical clientele, the students from our local three counties by accepting them as they are and taking them to as high an intellectual level as can be done in the time we have them here.” We are “good” at this; we accommodate commuter students (perhaps too much) and expose them to a faculty that participates in the national academic conversation and increasingly to other students from other parts of the world; we also have many gifted alums. But we are not “great.” I don’t recall who first uttered the following sentiment, but we should thank the gods that we have not yet reached the goal of excellence, for otherwise the years ahead would be very dull. I have met many people who I believe have invested in the opportunities needed for Oakland to advance; but I also believe that there are many opportunities waiting to be picked up.