

The “Lost Dean”: Charting One’s Course in a World Mapped by Rankings  
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I. Introduction: The non-problem/problem

II. Rankings Are *Not* a Problem

- a. Nothing really important hinges on them—who knows who is 9? 29? 79? 109? Who (besides bloggers, and deans) cares after April 9<sup>th</sup>?
- b. Hierarchy among law schools was not created by USNWR and would not be eliminated if this particular ranking disappeared
- c. Key USNWR factors are not subject to influence by means we can control, or steps most schools are willing to take, even if some schools are willing
- d. Key people (faculty, students, alumni, donors) are getting wise to their limitations, so wait this out
- e. And consider whether they might even offer some information that increase accountability, transparency, and efficiency—among other good ends that a staid, change-averse academy might not pursue without this cattle prod; canny users can glean some useful information from them
- f. Any alternatives to USNWR would present their own problems, own gaming incentives, own distractions, own headaches

III. Rankings *Are* a Problem

- a. Key people do rely on USNWR rankings—perhaps especially applicants—and these rankings are not going away
- b. Schools do respond to them throughout the year—more than an aberrational few—and they encourage behaviors that should cause concern
- c. USNWR rankings are especially problematic because they are so dominant (compare business school rankings), do not minimize distortion of resource allocations, and assign key weightings arbitrarily, even absurdly. Professor Jeff Stake has done an especially thorough job of identifying the more quantifiable problems.

IV. Rankings also may have other, less quantifiable consequences—not a “moral slide”—*please*—but loss of our bearings, and perhaps, even our better selves, because they can:

- ❖ discourage collaboration and collegiality
- ❖ reward “cunning,” and even cheating with no external adverse consequences
- ❖ undermine independent, critical judgments about measuring our programs, our students, and ourselves

- ❖ flatten nuances and inspire less diversification among schools, not to mention less diversity within student bodies
- ❖ pit wildly unequal entities against each other on linear grid
- ❖ encourage commercialization, to uncertain and expensive ends
- ❖ re-vocabularize the academy in ways that are coarse, perhaps, worse
- ❖ impose a pseudo business model on academia that even business does not follow, and that in any event is ill suited for academia
- ❖ diminish importance of big things that still matter, must matter

V. Rankings also may create a new, worrisome measure of decanal competence. After all, metrics do tend to work. If this generation of deans heeds the USNWR metric, what will the “successful” ones among them have contributed? What will their faculties and students have achieved?

VI. Conclusion: Rankings Do Matter! / Of Course, That’s the Point!

Reclaiming April, regaining our bearings, and defying “inevitabilisms.”