

Rankings, Institutional Behavior, and College and University Choice

*Framing the National Dialogue on Obama's
Ratings Plan*

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ISSUE BRIEF

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About the American Council on Education

The American Council on Education (ACE) is the nation's most visible and influential higher education association. We represent the presidents of U.S. accredited, degree-granting institutions, which include two- and four-year colleges, private and public universities, and nonprofit and for-profit entities. Our strength lies in our loyal and diverse base of more than 1,800 member institutions, 75 percent of which have been with ACE for over 10 years. That loyalty stands as a testament to the value derived from membership. We convene representatives from all sectors to collectively tackle the toughest higher education challenges, with a focus on improving access and preparing every student to succeed.

About the Higher Education Research Institute

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Its Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. Established in 1966 at ACE, CIRP is now the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions, over 15 million students, and more than 300,000 faculty. CIRP surveys have been administered by HERI since 1973.

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Introduction

The national narrative on higher education over the past many years has been squarely focused on issues of affordability, quality, and accountability, particularly in the federal and state policy arenas. Driving this dialogue are trends that show a steady rise in tuition and fees across all sectors of higher education, persistent state disinvestment, and concern over educational quality and workforce preparation by the public and employers alike. According to The College Board (2013a), over the last 30 years, average tuition and fees at public and private four-year institutions rose 231 percent and 153 percent, respectively. Public two-year tuition and fees rose 164 percent during the same period. Students have borne the brunt of rising costs, contributing to trends in student borrowing that show a full 60 percent of four-year college and university graduates owing \$26,500 on average (The College Board 2013b).

Running parallel to this story of rising costs and student debt are calls for quality assessment within the walls of America's colleges and universities. While the benefits of a postsecondary degree are mostly well understood, particularly in terms of lifetime earnings—65 percent more for college and university graduates than for those with a high school diploma (Baum, Ma, and Payea 2013, 20)—the quality of America's higher education institutions has been called into question for a number of reasons, including low graduation rates, rising student loan defaults, and research showing a critical lack of learning during the college years (Arum and Roksa 2010).

With this backdrop in mind, President Obama has turned his administration's higher education

focus to the performance of colleges and universities. Citing the simultaneous needs to equip more Americans with postsecondary degrees and to keep higher education accessible, Obama's second-term higher education agenda pays particular attention to affordability. Part of his plan is the proposed Postsecondary Institution Ratings System (PIRS), slated for development by the U.S. Department of Education for delivery in the 2015–16 academic year. With an emphasis on ensuring “value,” the department has framed the tool as one that will empower students and families to choose the best college or university for them, and plans to ask Congress to tie Title IV funds to institutional performance in PIRS.

Many in the higher education community still believe that the ratings scheme will nonetheless become a de facto ranking, with negative consequences for the very low-income and other underrepresented students whom the administration is looking to serve.

The merits of President Obama's proposed ratings system have been vigorously debated in Washington and across the country, with critics pointing to data inaccuracies and misuse, incorrect focus on a simplistic form of college and university value, and potential consequences concerning institutional behavior in the years following its rollout. Also problematic is the notion that the same tool can be used both to drive accountability

and offer consumer information when the information needed by policymakers and students is very different. Although the administration has tried to quell fears that its plan will become yet another college and university “ranking,” many in the higher education community still believe that the ratings scheme will nonetheless become a de facto ranking, with negative consequences for the very low-income and other underrepresented students whom the administration is looking to serve.

Obama's affordability agenda in general and proposed ratings plan in particular raise a number

of important questions. Decades after the introduction of now-ubiquitous college and university guidebooks and 30 years after *U.S. News & World Report* (USNWR) released its first controversial rankings—now called *Best Colleges*—just what do we know about American higher education rankings, their use, and their outcomes? Also, what do we know about how low-income students choose which college or university to attend? As will be discussed here, the higher education rankings enterprise has been shown to influence institutional decision making, and in many cases to further stratify America’s already hierarchical system of higher education. There are a number of consequences to rankings-influenced decision making, some of which can be positive, but most of which have negative implications for low-income student access to the nation’s top colleges and universities. Beyond this role of rankings in institutional decision making is their use by students and families in college and university choice making, or the

lack thereof. Based on newly updated data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)—rankings are not a driving factor in student decisions on which institution to attend, and are even less relevant for students from low-income backgrounds. More salient influences include family involvement and encouragement, peer and other networks, and school- and higher education institution-based resources, including those that are semi-customized. Our data and others’ show that for low-income students, location and affordability are driving factors in college and university choice making. The administration’s focus on access and affordability are on target; however, the tools devised may prove ill-suited for students most in need of information. Any rating is only as good as its data, which is another area of concern discussed here. And any tools used by students—especially tools directed toward families with limited sociocultural capital or familiarity with higher education—need to be firmly rooted in solid data.

Overview of President Obama's Proposed Ratings Plan

President Obama's proposed higher education ratings plan is part of a larger set of initiatives—some tangible, some rhetorical—that the administration has rolled out in an attempt to empower students and families as they choose a college or university, and to put pressure on institutions to keep costs low, deliver a high-quality education, and graduate more students. Akin to other tools available on the Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center website (collegecost.ed.gov), the ratings will be made available online and will be folded into the College Scorecard tool, a mechanism designed to assist students and families with their search process.

The administration has cited a number of reasons for its focus on higher education affordability, not the least of which are the doubling of tuition as a share of public college and university revenues since the 1990s, a 58 percent completion rate for full-time students seeking four-year degrees, rising loan default rates, and burdensome student debt (White House 2013). The federal government spends a great deal of money each year—more than \$150 billion—on student financial aid. Given the budget realities facing Washington and an American public that wants government to spend its dollars wisely, policymakers and in this case the current administration are calling for more accountability on the part of colleges and universities.

The Department of Education has specifically been called upon to create a federal ratings system with the higher education “consumer” in mind: students and families. The plan's rollout is slated to occur by the 2015–16 academic year and, according to the Department of Education, will be based upon access, affordability, and outcome measures such as the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants; average tuition, scholarships, and loan debt; transfer and graduation rates; graduate earnings; and

advanced degrees of graduates (U.S. Department of Education 2014b). Just how these points of information will be combined to form a cohesive rating for a given institution is not yet known, but the department has said that it will group (i.e., compare) peer institutions with similar missions.

The administration intends for this first step toward providing more information for consumers to be followed by an attempt to tie aid to institutional performance, such that institutions serving students well (presumably those with high ratings) will receive a disproportionately greater amount of aid via student grants and loans. This is envisioned to take place in 2018. In other words, students attending highly rated institutions will receive more aid in the form of “larger Pell Grants and more affordable student loans” (U.S. Department of Education 2014b) than those attending lower-rated institutions. While the ratings plan can be accomplished in the short term by the Department of Education, tying aid to institutional performance will require congressional action.

Of the measures cited as likely for inclusion in the ratings plan, most are already available for public view on the department's aforementioned College Affordability and Transparency Center website. The College Scorecard provides net prices,¹ graduation rates, loan default rates, and median borrowing estimates. It also provides changes in net price (e.g., whether an institution's price has risen or fallen over a period of years). And the College Affordability and Transparency List tool provides a mechanism for consumers to compare 1,878 institutions on a number of cost characteristics. Examples include highest and lowest tuition and fees, net price, and highest and lowest changes in these costs. Data not yet provided by the department, but named as likely measures for the ratings plan, are graduate earnings, advanced degrees earned by graduates, and alumni satisfaction.

¹ Net price is defined by the Department of Education as the average price of attendance paid by full-time, first-time students after grants and scholarships have been accounted for (U.S. Department of Education 2014a).

Data Challenges of the Proposed Plan

While there have been a number of criticisms of the proposed ratings plan, several of which are discussed here, some of the most salient concerns rest in the use and misuse of data to inform the plan's measures. As stated in a letter submitted by the American Council on Education (ACE) (Broad 2014, 2) on behalf of 23 other organizations representing higher education, there is "unanimous agreement that any tool designed to be useful to students and parents in their college search should be grounded in reliable and valid data, and presented with the appropriate context to accurately reflect institutional performance." Certainly any tool used to inform education policy must stand up to the same standard.

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Use and Misuse of Data

The Department of Education will most likely draw completion and retention data used for the proposed ratings from its own Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The limitations of IPEDS, which is based on self-reported data from institutions, have been widely acknowledged and deserve further discussion here. Most importantly, completion and retention rate data drawn from IPEDS in particular reflect a narrow proportion of today's student body, in that the system tracks only first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking undergraduates. This profile does not take into account the country's 6.7 million part-time undergraduates (Aud et al. 2013), nor those students who delayed enrollment or are returning to higher education after time away from their studies.

This means that measures such as graduation and retention rates are unreflective not only of America's student body, but of its colleges and universities as well. In short, community colleges and many four-year comprehensive and minority-serving institutions—institutions that serve the majority of part-time and other nontraditional students—are wholly misrepresented in IPEDS as a result of data limitations. Larger concerns with IPEDS stem from

the data's reliance on static forms of inputs and outputs that fail to measure institutional quality or how well a given institution is doing in educating an often academically diverse student body.

Also keeping in mind the Department of Education's planned use of graduation, retention, and default rates as cornerstone measures for PIRS, there is an inaccurate and incomplete picture of institutional performance in the department's data. Firstly, graduation and retention rates characterize students who transfer from one institution to

another as "dropouts," regardless of whether they ultimately completed a degree. Second, in 2012, among the roughly 4,500 Title IV participating institutions with undergraduate degree programs, six-year graduation rate and retention rate data were not

provided for 475 and 126 institutions, respectively, and missing data elements are not evenly distributed across all types of institutions.

Concerns about data accuracy are not limited to IPEDS. Overall default rate, a key proxy for higher education affordability, is least problematic where a significant number of students borrow money for college, but for institutions where few students borrow, the default rate is misleading. In fiscal 2011, one California community college with 12,300 students had a two-year cohort default rate of 33.3 percent. While this number is high, in actuality it represents just one student; the college only had three borrowers since fiscal 2009 who entered repayment, one of whom defaulted. Even with such a small number of borrowers, the outcomes can be consequential.

For institutions with fewer than 30 borrowers entering repayment, a three-year average rate is applied, as was the case for 260 institutions (mostly community colleges) in fiscal 2011. At institutions where students take out multiple loans—which is not uncommon—institutions' default rate may be inflated by the double counting of students who default on more than

one loan. Finally, default rates do not always represent institution-specific data. In fiscal 2011, for example, the default rate of 868 institutions (mostly private for-profit institutions) was based on aggregate information. That is, one rate was calculated for a grouping of affiliated institutions, resulting in an inability to assess institution-specific performance.

Peer Groups and Formulas

In addition to the limitations of using federal data to construct a ratings system, there is widespread concern about the department's plan to rate colleges and universities alongside other comparable institutions through the establishment of "peer groups." It is important to state that across the higher education community, there is absolutely no agreement about or norm for how such groups should be constructed.

While the department has not yet revealed its strategy, officials have referenced simplistic categories based on institutional designations it currently uses. To cite an example raised in the

mentioned letter submitted to the Department of Education by ACE and others, the department may attempt to compare community colleges in California and Florida with those in New Hampshire and Vermont. The realities behind the groupings are that California and Florida have very low tuition levels due to generous state support when compared with the latter two, which consequently have substantially higher tuition levels. In the context of "value" and "affordability," this puts the colleges in New Hampshire and Vermont at a clear disadvantage for a fiscal reality that is outside of their control. The same would apply for four-year public institutions in these states.

No matter how the exercise of peer groupings is approached, there is inherent danger in classifying whole sectors or even subsectors of institutions that may look similar on their face but may experience very different realities in terms of resources,

populations served, and commitment to these populations. As the Association of American Universities recently pointed out in its letter to the Department of Education, "no classification system captures features such as whether the institution is committed to need-blind admissions or to providing institutional grant aid to meet full demonstrated need of eligible students" (Rawlings 2013, 3). Sustained institutional practice and execution of mission are exceedingly difficult to narrow down. One can imagine implications for institutional behavior driven by how colleges and universities are grouped year to year and a given institution's desire to move out of one grouping and into another.

A final concern rests with how the department may ultimately formulate the ratings. In its current

form, value, according to the administration, is a blend of institutional attributes in the areas of access, outcomes, and affordability. While these areas are worthy of attention, caution comes with the reality that the department will be in

the position to assign a "weight" to measures that ultimately make up each of these areas—a "value" judgment all its own, and a dangerous exercise given the relationship between the ratings' leading measures. Pell Grant recipients have lower graduation rates (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance 2013) and low-income students have been shown to take on greater amounts of student debt (The College Board 2013b). Hillman (2013) found that institutions serving higher proportions of Pell Grant recipients have significantly higher odds of facing federal sanctions for having more than a 30 percent cohort default rate. Instead of strengthening the picture of institutional performance, taken together, such measures may wash out the full picture. Further, a brief misstep in judgment by the department of what "matters" most has the potential to greatly harm institutions and the students they serve.

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College and University Rankings and Their Implications

While the Obama administration and its many spokespersons have been adamant that the proposed ratings plan will not be a “ranking,” there are nonetheless concerns in the higher education community that the line between the two is a blurry one. As one stakeholder expressed it simply, “If you can rate something, you can rank it.” The truth is that higher education has a love-hate relationship with college and university rankings. While some students and families may find rankings useful, most educators will tell you that rankings are at their best a starting point in the college and university search process, and at their worst, they are a poorly devised distraction. Yet rankings are coveted by the vast majority of institutions, and are known to drive institutional behavior, with a number of unintended consequences.

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The Rise of Rankings

In his paper *Method or Madness? Inside the USNWR College Rankings*, Ehrenberg (2003, 2) lays out well the proliferation of rankings in the United States as an outgrowth of dramatic changes in the market structure of higher education over the last many decades. Among other factors, student mobility across state lines, dramatic differences in students’ preparation for higher education, and the growing use of standardized test scores in college and university admissions contributed to an increasingly competitive marketplace for institutions looking to enroll the country’s highest achieving students. Talented students—especially those from affluent backgrounds—are also selective and increasingly savvy about choosing which institution to attend. Families are attuned to the earnings gap between high school and college and university graduates, and to what is known as the “earnings premium” of attending elite institutions.

Enter the now ubiquitous college and university rankings—a signal of worth to families, the public at large, and to institutions themselves. Prominent rankings include those by *USNWR*, *Princeton Review*, *Newsweek*, *Forbes*, and *Washington Monthly*. The *Washington Monthly* ranking is especially interesting in that it aims to identify institutions that serve the public good through measures of social mobility, research, and service.

In late 2013, the magazine also released “Best-Bang-for-the-Buck Colleges”—a small (just 349 institutions) list of colleges and universities that according to the magazine “do the best job of helping nonwealthy students attain marketable degrees at affordable prices” (Kelchen 2013, paragraph 4). Less sophisticated (in formula) but credible for institutions serving large numbers of minority students are rankings such as *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*’s “Top 100 Producers of Minority Degrees.”

While not discussed in this brief, it is worth noting that rankings are not just a U.S. phenomenon. Quite the opposite: As Marginson (2009) points out, most countries with large higher education systems engage in rankings of some sort; although it should be noted that U.S. rankings are uniquely presented and utilized as a consumer tool. Depending on the higher education context of the country in question, entities responsible for rankings range from magazines and newspapers, universities, and professional associations to ministries of education, grants councils, and accrediting agencies. The last decade has further seen a rise in “global” rankings—efforts to compare universities across national lines. Examples of prominent global rankings are those by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the United Kingdom’s *The Times Higher Education* magazine, and Leiden University’s Centre for Science and Technology Studies in the Netherlands, each of which is heavily focused on institutional

research productivity. Another is the anticipated U-Multirank, which will publish its inaugural list of institutions this year with a focus on teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and regional engagement (Redden 2013).

Utility and Implications of Rankings

While it is difficult to boil down the general construction of rankings given the array of products in the marketplace, Marguerite Clarke (2002, 446) of the World Bank provides a useful overview. In an attempt to signal academic quality, the measurements used by ranking systems typically fall into three broad categories: student achievement, faculty accomplishments, and institutional academic resources. Clarke proposes that such measures can then be analyzed through a framework of “inputs-
processes-outputs.”

“Inputs” often correspond to incoming student test scores or institutional resources (e.g., a library), while “outputs” apply to measures such as graduation rate or employment outcomes. Least easily defined are the “processes” measures, for example, teaching quality. Such measures are assigned a weight or level of importance and are then combined to produce an overall score, indicating the position of a given college or university within a larger universe of institutions.

The most salient example of a U.S. ranking system—for its visibility and influence—is the *USNWR’s Best Colleges*, published annually in September. Measures used in the 2014 *USNWR* ranking include undergraduate academic reputation (22.5 percent of the score), retention (22.5

percent), faculty resources (20 percent), student selectivity (12.5 percent), financial resources (10 percent), graduation rate performance² (7.5 percent), and alumni giving rate (5 percent). All of these measures are composite values, meaning that each consists of several weighted components in and of themselves.

As a number of educators have pointed out, the usefulness of what Clarke (2002) calls a “weight and sum approach” is limited for reasons of validity, reliability, and comparability. Simply put, the measures used in rankings are nowhere near

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comprehensive and are often based on faulty data and assumptions, not to mention the misguided notion that a comprehensive measure of institutional quality is even possible. Rankings further come under fire for placing a high value on the characteristics of incoming students as opposed to educational quality once students are on campus. Value is also placed on institutional spending

and not on the effectiveness or efficiency with which institutions allocate resources. As Kelchen and Harris (n.d., 4) point out, the popular rankings “reflect an underlying assumption that good colleges are those that attract academically talented and wealthy students, rather than those whose instructional and other programs are of high quality and help students graduate.”

Yet perhaps the greatest criticism of American rankings, if not all national and global rankings, is their influence on institutional behavior. In short: rankings matter. They influence institutions’ strategic positioning and planning, staffing and organization, quality assurance, resource allocation and fundraising, and admissions and financial aid (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2009, 1). Although rankings have been attributed to some

2 Graduation rate performance is based on the difference between predicted and actual graduation rates for individual institutions after controlling for spending and student characteristics (Morse and Flanigan 2013).

positive improvements on campuses, including improved teaching and learning practices and cross-institutional collaboration (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2009), they are more often criticized for inciting institutional behavior that further stratifies an already hierarchical system of higher education. As the evidence below suggests, this translates to unintended, negative consequences for the very students that our nation's colleges and universities aim to serve, particularly for low-income and other underrepresented student populations.

Admissions Behavior and Institutional Selectivity

While the field is awash with entities of various dispositions working to inform the public on just which institutions students should attend, the bulk of national attention and scholarship on rankings remains focused on the *USNWR Best Colleges* publication.

Much of the research on the implications of the *USNWR* rankings for students focuses on how the rankings influence the college and university admissions process in ways that reinforce institutional selectivity to the detriment of student access.

Although its weight in the *USNWR* rankings formula is just 12.5 percent, selectivity is seen as perhaps the largest contributing factor to an institution's rank given its strong statistical relationship to the heavyweight measures of retention and graduation rates and academic reputation (Pascarella et al. 2006; Webster 2001). That's because the nation's highest-ability students, who are often quite affluent (The College Board 2013c), are also those that tend to persist and graduate as well as drive an institution's reputation.

The role of selectivity turns out to be self-perpetuating. As institutions become more selective and move up in rank, the very nature of their move results in increasingly selective behavior.

Bowman and Bastedo (2009) examined the admissions behavior of the *USNWR* "top 50" national universities displayed on the coveted front page of the magazine's print edition between the years 1997 and 2004. After moving into the top 50, these institutions saw a 3.6 percentage point decrease in acceptance rate and a 2.3 percentage point increase in the proportion of admitted high school students who graduated in the top 10 percent of their class. The "top 50" liberal arts colleges also had lower acceptance rates (a 5.7 percentage point decrease).

Meredith (2004) and Monks and Ehrenberg (1999) found similar results, namely the relationship between improving in the rankings and a lower acceptance rate and higher SAT scores of the next entering class, as well as a decrease in the amount of financial aid awarded to students. When aid is awarded, for many institutions seeking upward movement in the rankings, it comes in the form

of merit aid, prioritizing performance over financial need (Clarke 2007, 62).

While *USNWR* is not solely responsible for the selective admissions processes of elite institutions, it is a contributing factor and reinforces the unfortunate reality that these

schools are also the least accessible to minority and low-income students, even when students' academic merit and preparation meet admissions requirements (Carnevale and Rose 2004; Pallais and Turner 2006). There is also evidence that high-ability, low-income students do not apply to selective schools at the same rate as high-ability, high-income students (Hoxby and Avery 2013). The proportion of white and affluent students attending highly selective institutions has been increasing in the past several decades, while African American, Hispanic, and lower-income students are more likely to attend less selective four-year institutions and community colleges (Astin and Oseguera 2004; Carnevale and Strohl 2010).

USNWR and other rankings that pay credence to institutional selectivity reinforce the stratification of institutions, and more importantly, of students.

Teranishi et al. (2004) concluded that student socioeconomic status is a strong factor in students' predisposition to pursue higher education, search for colleges and universities, and actually enroll. The accessibility gap demonstrates that even though American higher education has made great strides in increasing access, the equity of opportunity for low-income students to attend the nation's most selective institutions remains dire (Astin and Oseguera 2004). In this way, *USNWR* and other rankings that pay credence to institutional selectivity reinforce the stratification of institutions, and more importantly, of students.

Implications for Obama's Proposed Ratings Plan

The Department of Education is not attempting to replicate the *USNWR* or other prominent national college and university rankings. Such rankings in fact measure a very different set of things, such as incoming students' test scores, faculty resources, research productivity, institutional endowments, alumni giving, and reputation as derived from surveys of college and university presidents and high school guidance counselors. Foreseeable overlap between national rankings and the Obama plan are so far limited to graduation rate (used by the majority of rankings), Pell Grant recipients (e.g., *Washington Monthly*), and information on student debt (e.g., *Forbes*), financial aid (e.g., *Princeton Review*) and postgraduate success (e.g., *Forbes*). While there is some dispute over the value of certain measures such as graduate earnings, most would agree that information on financial aid, student debt, and graduation rate should be available to students and families.

Indeed, data availability on its surface is not problematic; it is the data *reality* that causes concern. As previously discussed, in the case of Obama's proposed ratings plan, information on graduation rate, for example, is derived from IPEDS, which is based solely on first-time, full-time undergraduates.

Furthermore, the data do not address the academic profiles of incoming students, meaning there is no accounting for the educational paths of one student who enters higher education fully prepared and another who needs remediation in one or more subjects. Institutions serving low-income students whose academic profiles are less "traditional" (e.g., attending part time, attending multiple institutions, and having gaps between attendance) will be under-rewarded even if they are doing a great job at educating their population. Also lacking is recognition of program-specific versus institution-wide performance. That is, the Department of Education's ratings would necessarily gloss over stellar performance by a given department in favor of aggregate institutional measures.

Other examples of possible measures given by the administration are currently nonexistent among federal datasets, such as the important measure

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of transfer rates. And there is an inaccurate picture of both graduation and retention rates given the number of institutions that have missing data in these categories. Earnings

data are collected by the Internal Revenue Service and Social Security Administration, yet a chief concern with these data is the disproportionate average wage across professions. That is, without proper consideration, institutions graduating more future teachers, social workers, and other public servants could be penalized given the lower wages these occupations garner.

All of this, of course, is predicated on the assumption that the judgment of the federal government as it concerns the "value" of a given college or university is a fair or even valid one. There is a difference between *USNWR* making a judgment on what students and families should be concerned with and what the federal government deems important, particularly when federal funds are tied to such judgment, as has been proposed by the administration.

Another important question concerns the evolution of the ratings system and the Department of Education's ability to regularly adjust the formulas. When viewed as not measuring the right things, profit-driven ranking schemes are nimble and can make adjustments from year to year. It is questionable whether the federal government could be so nimble, even while it is likely that the department would receive similar pressure from policymakers seeking to use the ratings to inform decision making—a contradiction of their use for consumer information. This last point cannot be understated—in creating a ratings system that seeks to inform student choice making *and* policy making, the department is at once attempting to serve two competing masters. Different stakeholders have different uses for data and are driven by different

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needs and incentives. Measures for fiscal accountability should be different from measures for student choice.

Yet beyond the data concerns presented here and elsewhere in this brief, relevant in their own right, is the basic premise of the rankings enterprise: A

federal ratings system, just like national rankings, will undoubtedly drive institutional behavior, especially if ultimately tied to federal funding as has been proposed by the current administration. An open question is whether this behavior will trend in a positive direction. Even if well-intentioned, institutions will be put in the

position to make hard decisions about what it will take to earn a higher rating. If the current rankings environment offers any lessons, the rating system may reinforce institutional hierarchy, with similar consequences.

How Do Students Choose Colleges and Universities?

As is the case with any major life decision that individuals face, the process of choosing a college or university to attend is inherently complex. The rich body of research on the economic, sociological, and psychological factors that shape the choice making process articulates an interrelated set of factors specific to a given student and the characteristics of his or her choice set of institutions. College and university choice theory (known in the education research literature as “college choice theory”) contends that the process is multistage (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989) and that students select institutions based on the influence of student- and institutional-level characteristics (Chapman 1981).

Commonly addressed student characteristics include socioeconomic status, academic ability, race and ethnicity, parental education, students’ perceptions of college and university cost and financial aid, academic preparation, career aspirations, and advice of significant individuals such as parents, peers, teachers, and high school counselors (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Teranishi et al. 2004; Lipman Hearne 2009). Institutional characteristics include location, price, size, and type (e.g., two- or four-year; public or private) as well as perceived reputation, quality, and usefulness of information as provided online or via college and university

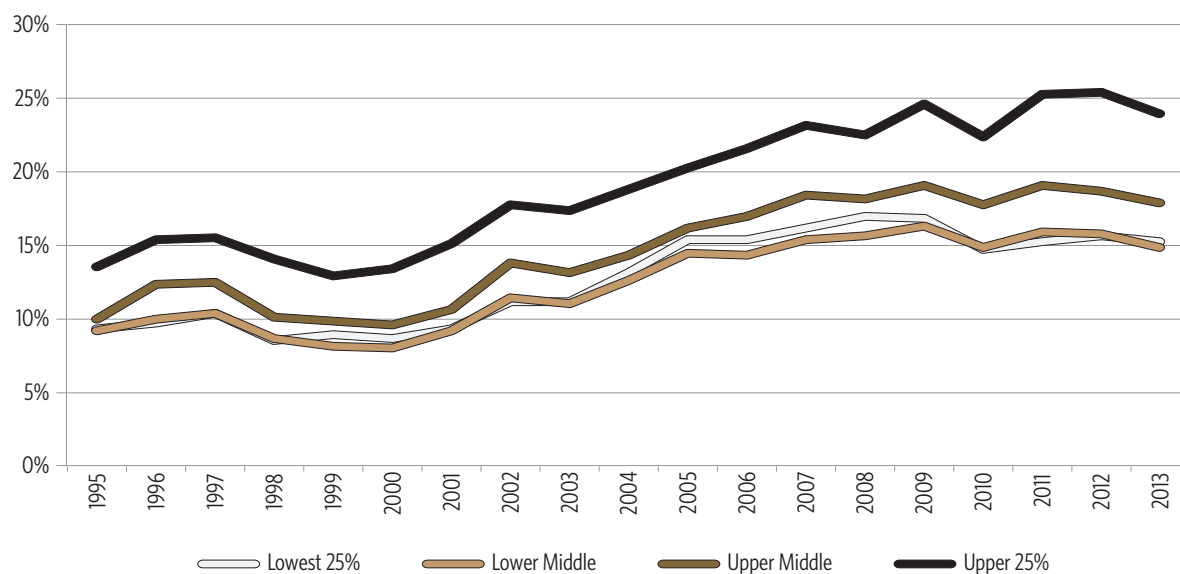
materials, guidebooks, and ranking publications (Choy and Ottinger 1998; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989; Long 2004). In short, different students select different institutions for different reasons.

The Role of Rankings in College and University Choice Making

How do national college and university rankings factor into the choice process for students from different backgrounds? One of the most comprehensive analyses on the influence of college and university rankings comes from a 1998 study using data from the 1995 CIRP Freshman Survey of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a national survey conducted by HERI. Findings suggest that students reporting rankings as important in their choice process are more likely to be Asian American, to have parents who attended a college or university, or to be from high-income families (McDonough et al. 1998). The study further reveals that these students file proportionately more college and university applications and tend to live away from home while attending their institution of choice. They are also more likely to be high achieving, solicit advice from high school teachers and private counselors, and choose highly selective institutions. In short, these students are the nation’s top talent and are likely to aspire to and attend the

“College choice,” defined by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989, 234), is “a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training.”

Figure 1. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Magazine Rankings as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by Income Quartile



Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

USNWR “top 50,” or similar institutions.

Recent trend data from HERI³ shed further light on the role of rankings across the spectrum of students’ family income. When freshman students in 2013 were asked about the influence of rankings in national magazines on their choice of institution, the percentage of students indicating that rankings were “very important” ranges from 15 percent to 24 percent, with a 9 percent gap between low- and lower-middle-income and high-income students⁴

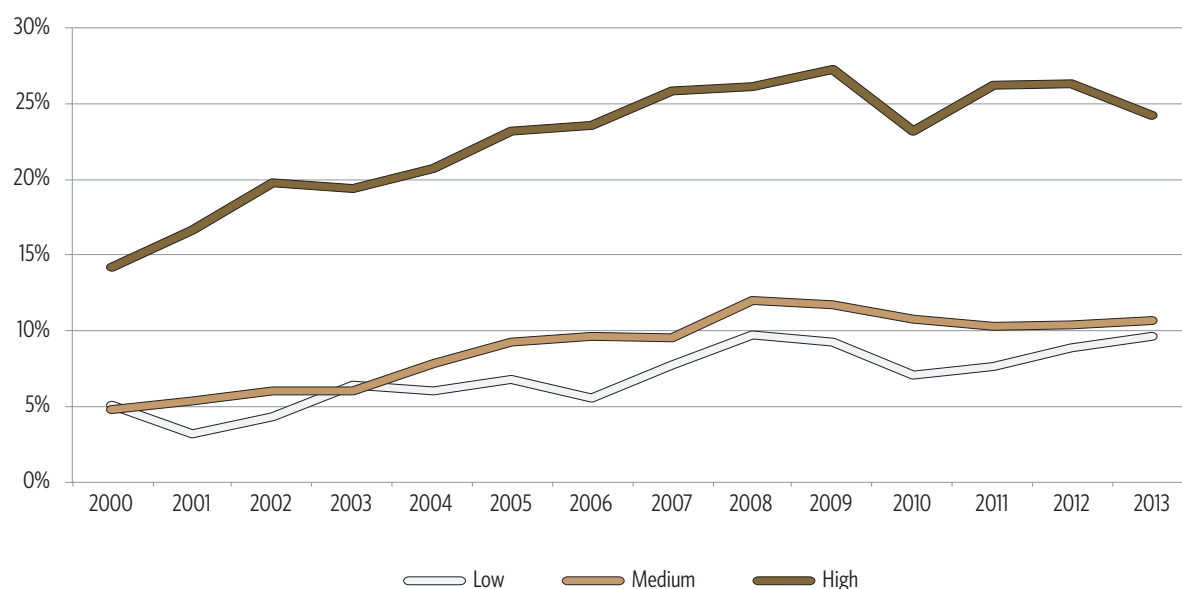
(Figure 1). As Figure 1 depicts, the role of rankings in college and university choice has grown over time, which is not surprising given the changing higher education marketplace described in the preceding section; yet, the gap in their importance to students from low- versus high-income backgrounds has widened in recent years.

Not surprisingly, the gap has grown wide for students attending highly selective institutions (24 percent) versus those attending institutions of

3 Data presented here are from HERI’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. Weighted data represent the population of the more than 1.5 million first-time, full-time students who started their higher education at a four-year institution in the fall of each data year presented. For more on HERI and its methodology, see www.heri.ucla.edu.

4 CIRP Freshman Survey respondents have a set of discrete options from which to identify their parents’ income range. Rather than put these income ranges in constant dollars over the last 48 years, staff at HERI created income quartiles based on the representation of students’ self-reports of their parents’ income. These income quartiles were adjusted yearly so that roughly 25 percent of respondents in each survey year fell into each income quartile. For the 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey, income quartiles were divided as follows: Lowest quartile: below \$40,000; second quartile: \$40,000 to \$74,999; third quartile: \$75,000 to \$149,999; top quartile: \$150,000 or higher. All data from all years of the CIRP Freshman Survey are weighted to represent the population of incoming first-time, full-time undergraduates for that particular year.

Figure 2. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Magazine Rankings as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by Selectivity Level of Chosen College



Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

medium (11 percent) and low (10 percent) selectivity (Figure 2). Even among the 70 percent of high-achieving students in Lipman Hearne’s (2009) study who used college and university ranking magazines, only half found them influential in making enrollment decisions. More significant sources for students included parents, college and university websites, campus tours, friends, and high school teachers or counselors.

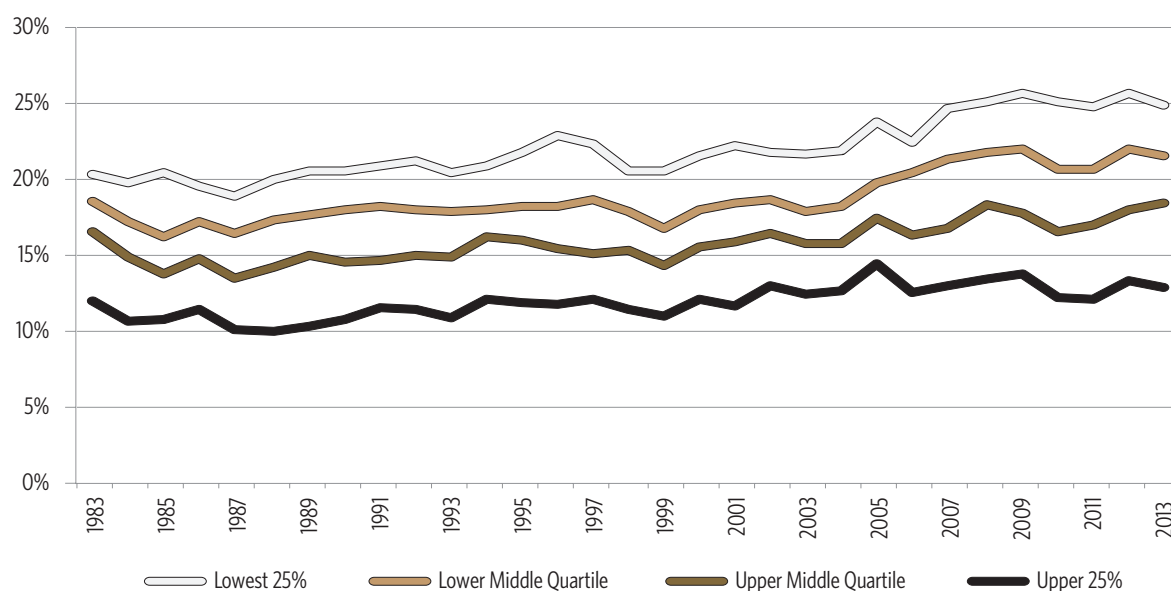
Given the frenzy over national rankings, including *USNWR*’s, and the consequences for institutional behavior and student access, we (the authors) are certainly not the first to wonder whether the laser focus on rankings by institutions is warranted. As an old saying goes, institutions seem to be “preaching to the choir”—speaking to a narrow band of students at a time when national educational priorities are much broader in scope.

Important Influences in College and University Choice Making

Having established the comparative irrelevance of national rankings to the choice process, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds, we now explore some of the more salient factors in choice decisions. Given the established national need to ensure that low-income students are enrolling in institutions that will meet and encourage their talent and potential, our focus is on those factors that influence college and university choice for low-income populations.

Educational aspirations, parental involvement and encouragement, peer and other networks, and school- and higher education institution-based resources are important influences on students’ enrollment decisions, and low-income students are

Figure 3. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Wanting to Live Close to Home as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by Income Quartile



Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

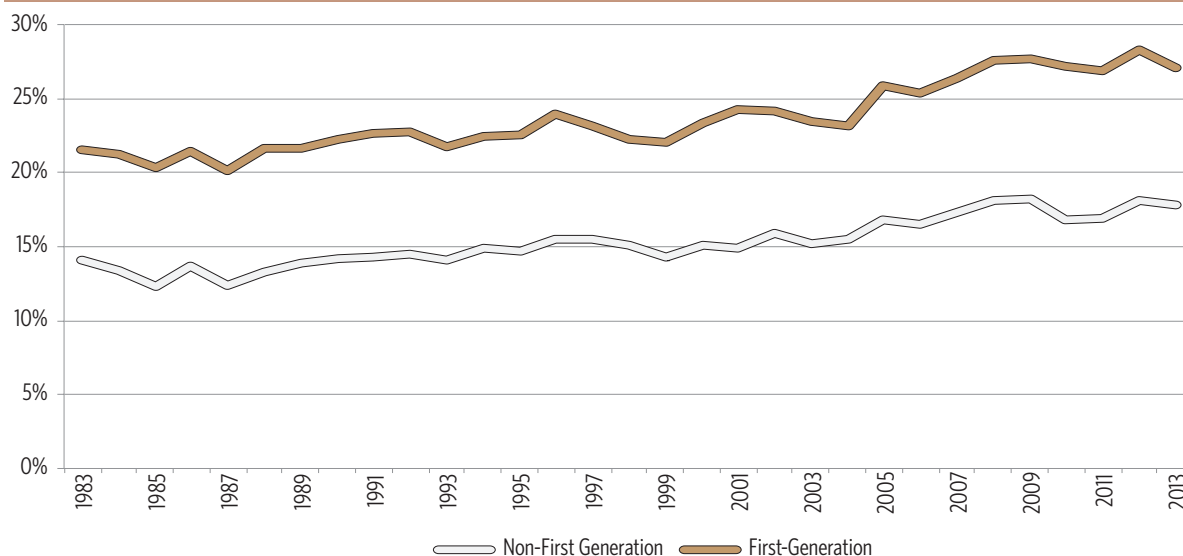
no exception. Research shows that if low-income students receive support from family; have peers planning to attend a four-year institution; and utilize high school counselors, coaches, and college and university representatives and publications/websites, they are more likely to attend a four-year institution than their same-income peers who do not have such support or access to these resources (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001; Engberg and Allen 2011).

Institutional characteristics also influence student choice making, namely the reputation, location, and affordability of an institution (Choy and Ottinger 1998; Radford, Tasoff, and Weko 2009; Saenz et al. 2007). These last two considerations—location and affordability—are viewed differently by students across the income spectrum. As **Figure 3** depicts,

the desire to live close to home has been a consistent factor over the last three decades for students deciding which college or university to attend, but it remains more important in the decision-making process for low-income students who may have financial and/or caretaking responsibilities at home or who may lack resources to move long distances. As the 2013 HERI survey data show, one quarter of low-income students deemed home proximity “very important” in choosing their college or university. Just 13 percent of affluent students reported the same (**Figure 3**).

Students who are the first in their family to attend a college or university are more likely to come from lower-income backgrounds, and show a similar pattern when compared with non-first-generation

Figure 4. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Wanting to Live Close to Home as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by First-Generation-to-College Status



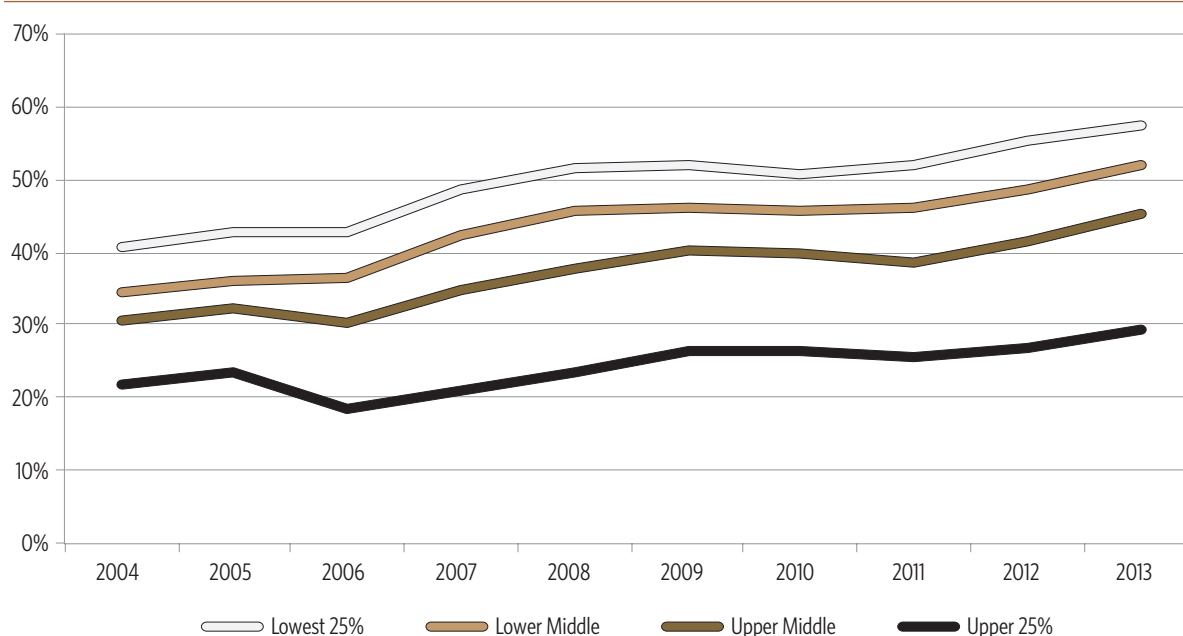
Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

students (**Figure 4**). For both groups (low-income and first generation), a sensitivity to living near home jumped at the height of the economic recession in 2008, and again in 2012.

A similar trend exists for the roles of cost and receipt of financial aid in students’ choice of a

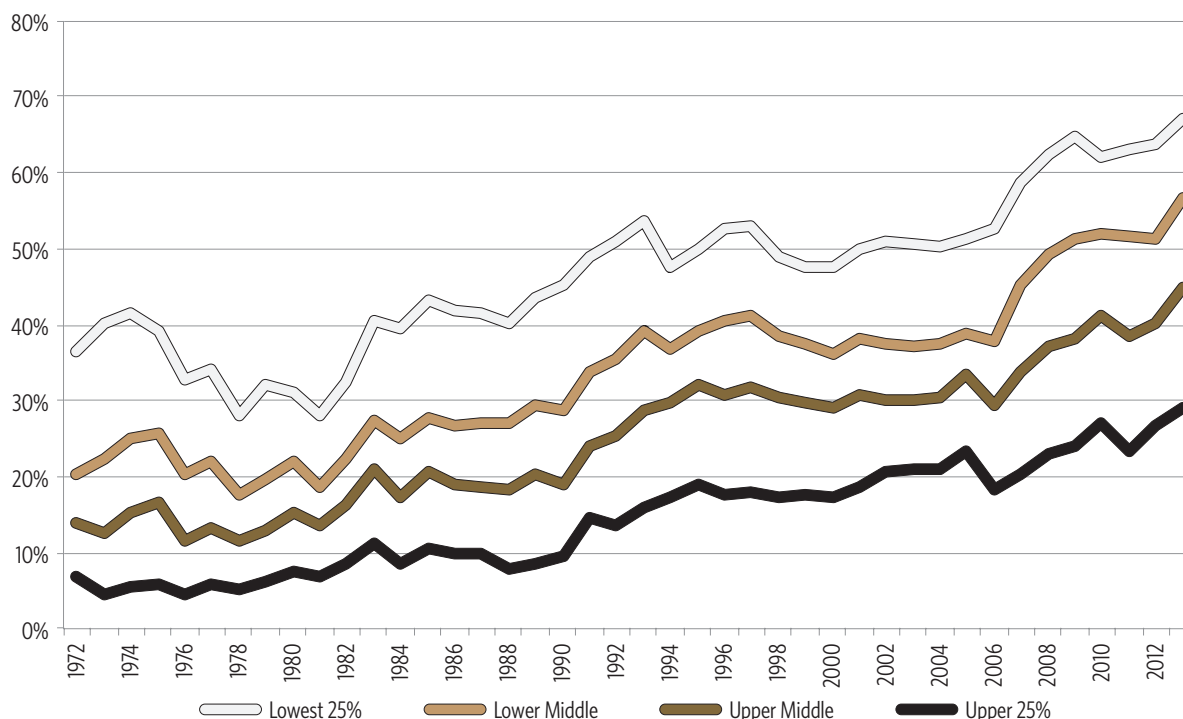
college or university. Low-income students indicate cost as “very important” twice as often as do students from higher-income backgrounds. In other words, the cost of their chosen institution becomes less and less influential in students’ decision making as family income increases (**Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Cost of Institution as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by Income Quartile



Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

Figure 6. Percentage of Freshmen Indicating Receipt of Financial Aid as “Very Important” in Choosing Their College, by Income Quartile



Source: Higher Education Research Institute Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey.

Unfortunately, Paulsen and St. John (2002) found that low-income minority students, who are highly sensitive to cost, may be unaware of financial aid. Despite their tendency to attend institutions with lower tuition and fees, their ability to afford and therefore persist becomes constrained. Some students and families simply lack an understanding of the cost of a higher education, of financial aid in relation to college and university costs, and of the long-term benefits of attending one institution over another (Perna 2006; Grodsky and Jones 2007). More recent research suggests that qualified low-income students make decisions based on their financial circumstances and not their achievement, because they are either ill-informed about opportunities to attend a college or university or

have sociocultural barriers preventing them from applying to selective institutions (Hoxby and Avery 2013).

The HERI data show that the difference across income lines for the role of financial aid in the choice process is, not surprisingly, wide between the lowest- and highest-income students. In 2013, the majority of low-income and lower-middle income students cited financial aid as very important in their choice (67 and 57 percent, respectively), compared with 29 percent of the most affluent students surveyed (**Figure 6**). These findings are reinforced by a recent Gallup poll showing that low-income Americans are more sensitive to tuition than their higher-income peers (Calderon and Sidhu 2013).

Institutional Quality

Although depicted in most college and university rankings and often talked about in education policy circles, institutional quality is a less tangible institutional characteristic. As Long (2004, 275) notes, “growing quality competition between colleges and the popularity of college rankings appears to suggest that quality plays an important role in the college choice of students.” Yet relatively little research exists on quality as a factor for students when selecting an institution. Moreover, it is unclear how quality is or should be defined. Popular indicators used to denote quality in college and university rankings include SAT scores, student-faculty ratio, instructional expenditures per student, degree completion rates, and return on investment (Long 2004; Monks and Ehrenberg 1999; DeAngelo et al. 2011). While some research suggests students tend to factor in graduates’ labor market outcomes in their choice of institution (Higher Education Research Institute 2007), other survey data suggest that individuals do not typically consider graduation rates and average student debt as fundamental information (Calderson and Sidhu 2013; Hagelskamp, Schleifer, and DiStasi 2013). Measures such as graduation rate may also be more important to some students than to others. Research by Radford, Tasoff, and Weko (2009) shows that graduation rate matters most for beginning students attending private four-year institutions than for those attending public four-year and two-year institutions.

A Note on Two-Year Institutions and Choice

The discussion up to this point has focused on students choosing and attending four-year institutions, partly because there is very little research on the choice process for students who enroll in two-year institutions. This is an important research gap in that low-income students are disproportionately enrolled in the latter as well as in for-profit institutions (Social Science Research Council n.d.; Radford, Tasoff, and Weko 2009; Baum and Payea 2004; Baum, Ma, and Payea 2013) and are likely to apply to only one institution. Of the research that

does exist on students who choose two-year institutions, findings show that location and affordability are significant considerations.

Less of a consideration is reputation as measured by program, faculty, or school attributes (Radford, Tasoff, and Weko 2009). Engberg and Allen (2011, 801) found that low-income students enrolled in two-year institutions tended to have “fewer aspirational influences, less frequent parental encouragement, less-involved parents, greater numbers of peers with two-year college plans, and lower usage of counselors, college representatives, and college publications/websites.” In examining the role of parents in their child’s selection of community colleges, Bers (2005) found that parents can play a significant role. More than 75 percent of parents surveyed assisted their child by gathering information on the community college through their print materials and talking with professionals at high schools and friends or family members.

Implications for Obama’s Proposed Ratings Plan

For an administration concerned about higher education access for low-income students, the focus on affordability is on target. The college and university choice literature is consistent on the matter of cost, financial aid, and overall perceptions of affordability for students from underserved backgrounds. Yet given low-income students’ minimal use of college and university rankings—perhaps the resource most analogous to the planned ratings system—it is unclear just how instructive the ratings tool will be in its proposed form. Further, the tool may be a nonstarter for students choosing an institution close to home, which is a considerable factor in college and university choice for lower-income students who may have very few options. Particularly for students living in rural areas, there may in fact be only one college or university option.

Certainly when it comes to simplistic measures such as graduation rate, their use is not only questionable in terms of importance in student choice making—they also fail to address the fundamental

issue of quality. While it may still be the case that students would not pay strict attention to comprehensive quality markers, policymakers and institutional leaders are certainly interested in quality-focused measures and outcomes. As college and university presidents and enrollment managers will tell you, they have much less control over inputs and outputs than they do over educational experiences.

Hence the widespread movement toward better measurements of educational quality and student learning through efforts such as the Voluntary Framework for Accountability by the American

Association of Community Colleges; the Student Achievement Measure project of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities; the University & College Accountability Network initiative implemented by the National Association

of Independent Colleges and Universities; the Collegiate Learning Assessment by the Council for Aid to Education; and university-based surveys such as those deployed by HERI and Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research. While all

outcome measures have their own limitations, the above are more thoughtful and comprehensive in approach than are measures that make up national college and university rankings.

Beyond quality transparency is the need for transparency on college and university cost information, as well as the need to deliver such information to students and families making choice decisions. A concern is that while the ratings tool is well intentioned, it will go unseen by most students, especially in low-income communities, where information on higher education is already veiled and where high-touch personal interaction is needed

A concern is that while the ratings tool is well intentioned, it will go unseen by most students, especially in low-income communities.

to deliver information to students. Given what we know about pre-college and -university interventions in underserved communities, personal guidance and semi-customized information is far superior to traditional, static sources

of information (Hoxby and Turner 2013). Even the simplest approach—such as a letter grade for a given institution's performance—can be misunderstood without proper guidance and a broader informational context.

Conclusion

In an ideal world, families and students would have the information needed to make good choices; that is, they would choose institutions that are a “good fit,” are affordable, and will provide a high-quality education leading to positive outcomes such as a good job, civic engagement, and overall well-being. Of course, every single one of these constructs—fit, affordability, quality, and educational outcomes—is hotly debated and difficult to measure. The administration’s attempt to identify institutions that serve students well through a rating system based on measures of access, affordability, and student outcomes is well-intentioned but poorly devised. Also misplaced is the attempt to simultaneously inform policy and consumer choice through one tool.

As discussed here, formulating and executing a system to rate higher education institutions is not only wrought with complexity—it is impossible to do so responsibly at the federal level given the currently available data. Further problematic are implications for institutional behavior as demonstrated by the literature on national college and university rankings, particularly as it concerns their role in further stratifying an already hierarchal system of higher education with negative consequences for low-income students.

We also shed light on the way in which low-income students ultimately choose an institution to attend. The scholarly community, including the Higher Education Research Institute, through its new data presented here, has shown that low-income students don’t rely on national rankings when making choice decisions, and that they choose colleges and universities based on factors irrelevant to a ratings scheme. For the students that the administration is rightly the most concerned about—namely low-income students—timely information, resource

sharing, and hands-on guidance will be far superior to static information sources that rely on the individual to seek them out.

The goal of the administration both to advance institutional accountability and enhance consumer access to information is problematic given the difference in interest and thus measurement between what students and families find useful for choice making and what public officials deem important for policymaking. As Campbell (2013, 27) recently put it, “No assessment can serve two masters. That is, assessments of educational quality serve several possible audiences, including policy-makers, institutions, and the public. Each of these masters has different objectives, needs, resources, and power.” The same is true of assessments of value, affordability, and many other attributes aimed at expressing the extent to which our nation’s higher education system is serving students to their full potential.

Perhaps the most useful outcome of the Department of Education’s postsecondary ratings proposal is the national support for a more realistic framework for action to ensure that America’s system of higher education strengthens its resolve to increase access for low-income students; keep its costs in line with what families can realistically pay; and ensure that its offerings are of broad use in the workforce, civic engagement, and in life. We are at a particular point in history where the possibilities are great for innovations in data use and in measurement to address the goals most important to the administration and to institutions and their educators. Solidifying that aim—to innovate in the face of a rapidly changing educational and economic landscape—is worthy of our time and of our attention. Let’s spend both wisely.

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