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College Rankings: F

BYLINE: REBECCA F. GOLDIN

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In August U.S. News & World Report's annual rankings of the "best colleges" in America hit newsstands, prompting the usual flurry of news articles about whether the rankings were a true reflection of "the best." Needless to say, faculty members and administrators at hundreds of universities clamored to see their place in the controversial but nonetheless authoritative ranking. I was no exception, as an associate professor at George Mason University (third tier) who received my B.A. from Harvard (No. 2) and my Ph.D. from MIT (No. 4), and did a postdoc at the University of Maryland at College Park (No. 54). While many graduates of these institutions may have reveled in their high marks, lamented a poorer-than-expected ranking, or even (as is the fashion) criticized the many faults of the U.S. News survey, I was distracted by a rival attempt at ranking. For all the complaints lobbed against the U.S. News rankings, this new ranking struck me as even more damaging to higher education.

The Washington Monthly, a small but prestigious political magazine that has served as a proving ground for many of the nation's top journalists, released its second annual rankings, with the intent of measuring "how much a school is benefiting the country."

The magazine certainly shook things up. It ranked South Carolina State University ninth in the nation (before Princeton, Yale, Harvard, and Duke), while U.S. News put South Carolina State in the fourth tier. The California Institute of Technology placed a dismal 109th in The Washington Monthly's ranking, in contrast to its impressive fourth-place position in U.S. News. Texas A&M University at College Station (ranked 60th by U.S. News) moved up to No. 5 in The Washington Monthly.

Was this just a shameless ploy to sell more magazines, or did The Washington Monthly have a point? Were the "best" universities in the nation according to U.S. News actually doing less "for the country" than the top-ranked universities in The Washington Monthly? And what does "for the country" mean, anyway?

The Washington Monthly insists it is "important for taxpayers to know whether their money -- in the form of billions of dollars in research grants and student aid -- is being put to good use." For a while, the teaser on the front page of its Web site read, "How patriotic is your college?"

Reading this, I felt a nervous tick. After all, why should a university be measured by patriotism, or how it benefits the country? Would training foreign students be a disadvantage? Would it count against a university if there were student groups espousing radical political views? Or would "benefit the country" be interpreted as broadly as possible? Would promoting intellectual investigation and academic excellence, or doing scientific and literary research, count as benefiting the county?

With some trepidation, I took a close look at the magazine's ranking methods. Three categories, counting equally, are used to calculate each college's score, which then determine the rankings. Each category has several components, and all of them have serious flaws. Put together, these components don't truly evaluate performance in the large categories they claim to measure, and the score doesn't add up to a convincing assessment of benefit to the country either.

A full one-third of the score comes from "community service," which itself consists of three components: the percentage of students in Army or Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC); the percentage of alumni currently serving in the Peace Corps; and the percentage of those students on Federal Work-Study doing community projects.

The ROTC versus Peace Corps component is problematic. First, ROTC is far more popular than the Peace Corps: There are just over 25,000 Army ROTC cadets, plus another 6,000 or so Navy and Marine Corps cadets, across the United States, while there are fewer than 8,000 Peace Corps volunteers.

Second, the ROTC score is a percentage of students, while the Peace Corps score is a percentage of alumni. Since there are far more alumni than current students, the Peace Corps score is handicapped; in fact, it is so low that it does not differentiate much among universities. It's practically meaningless if the "best" universities have 0.1 percent of alumni working in the Peace Corps and the "worst" have 0 percent. In contrast, the ROTC percentage does vary considerably, and can easily propel one university far above its competitors. At Texas A&M, about 5 percent of students participate in ROTC; at Caltech, none do. (Caltech students who do ROTC through a partnership with the University of Southern California actually count for Southern Cal, not Caltech.)

The magazine devotes another third of the score to what it calls "research." For national universities, that consists of the number of Ph.D.'s awarded in science and engineering, the amount of money spent on research, and the percentage of graduates who go on to do Ph.D.'s (in any subject).

Even if we were to agree that science and engineering Ph.D.'s are "better for the country" than doctorates in English or the liberal arts, why is the number important, rather than the ratio of Ph.D.'s per faculty member? In terms of pure numbers, Texas A&M -- with as many as 350 Ph.D.'s awarded last year in the sciences and engineering, and more than 1,700 tenured and tenure-track faculty members -- clearly beats Caltech, with 177 doctorates awarded among its 286-person faculty. Yet Caltech awarded more than one Ph.D. for every two faculty members, while Texas A&M awarded about one Ph.D. for every five faculty members, suggesting that faculty members are much more active in advising students at Caltech than at Texas A&M. Counting numbers of Ph.D.'s without regard to faculty size automatically benefits large universities. Similarly, counting research dollars spent will favor large budgets, regardless of what proportion of the budget is used for research.

The third portion of the score attempts to measure "social mobility." It favors universities with many students on Pell Grants and higher-than-expected graduation rates for the student body. Unfortunately, it doesn't take into account other aspects of "social mobility," such as how widespread financial aid is, or how much educational value one gets per tuition dollar. If we want to measure how well universities promote access to students who do not traditionally have the opportunity for a college education, we need to address difficult issues about how universities structure their finances and their admissions. Pell Grants tell a very small part of this story.

What can we conclude about The Washington Monthly's attempt to reconfigure the rankings race?

First, it elevates colleges based on simplistic measurements that are embarrassingly naïve, hiding a bias toward colleges with high ROTC numbers behind its community-service score, and toward large universities behind its research score. All three of the magazine's scoring categories are sorely misrepresented. Hardly anyone would argue that community service is reasonably represented by the Peace Corps, ROTC, and work-study community projects. Similarly, research cannot be measured with a yardstick hugely biased toward larger universities. And social mobility cannot be boiled down to Pell Grants.

The Washington Monthly is not alone in coming under criticism for its ranking methods. Many faculty members and

administrators have criticized U.S. News for its methods and impact on universities. But The Washington Monthly's agenda strikes me as being pernicious. Measuring (and ranking) universities' patriotism and "benefit to the country" is like ranking banks by how much money they give to charity. The Washington Monthly's goal posts are not the main mission of (most) universities, nor my own as a professor.

Furthermore, the magazine's rhetoric veils a frightening (but popular) point of view. No longer are academic excellence, the advancement of human knowledge, and the preservation and proliferation of ideas sufficient reasons for a university to exist -- or sufficient demonstration of benefit to the country. By claiming to measure patriotism, The Washington Monthly garners an immediate base of popular support, useful in the world of demand-driven journalism.

We should be wary of the possibility that patriotism may become a standard marker of a good university; by attempting to do well by this rubric, we may sacrifice our mission, which is above all excellence in teaching and scholarship. And before anyone argues that no one cares how The Washington Monthly ranks universities, take a look at the Web sites of those that placed well. Many of them are touting their new status.

As with the U.S. News rankings, administrators will certainly attempt to increase their institutions' rankings in The Washington Monthly; after all, universities are dependent on tuition dollars, and the flow of tuition dollars is affected by popular rankings. To raise their rankings, will universities encourage ROTC participation? Will they take resources from the arts and redirect them toward the sciences? More generally, what do universities sacrifice when they become beholden to popular notions of what a university should do?

As The Washington Monthly puts it, "Princeton receives millions of dollars in federal research grants. Does it deserve them? What has Princeton done for us lately?" While the grants may have been for research in biology, neuroscience, mathematics, art, history, and much more, the magazine's score doesn't count the resulting contribution to society. Instead it weighs the fact that the university had only 27 ROTC cadets last year. It ranked No. 1 in U.S. News, and 43rd in The Washington Monthly.

Rebecca F. **Goldin** is an associate professor of mathematical sciences at George Mason University. She is also research director at the Statistical Assessment Service, a nonprofit media-watchdog group affiliated with George Mason.

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