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Adding perspective to US higher education rankings

Research Trends Editorial Board

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The value of bibliometric measures



Adding perspective to US higher education rankings

In the United States, higher educational establishments are ranked by several organizations, including publishers, universities and other research institutions. However, in recent years, the *US News and World Report* rankings in particular have come under criticism from the academic community for their failure to accurately represent educational excellence. They often rely on subjective assessments of reputation, and emphasize inputs and resources over what happens on campus.

Many colleges have, as a result, chosen to boycott the ranking schemes. They argue that the work of their institutions is too complex, varied and ephemeral to be reduced to simple output measures, says Alexander McCormick, previously Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and now Director of the National Survey of Student Engagement at Indiana University School of Education (1). Yet according to him, efforts to improve higher education depend on comparative assessment data.

Classification without bias

Without some form of objective assessment of what an institution has to offer, researchers, policymakers, institutional personnel and even prospective students and their parents are left with little to go on when comparing institutes of higher education.

In this respect, the Carnegie Classification meets their needs. Without producing a ranking table of US colleges, the Carnegie Classification compares a broad range of criteria which seek to answer the questions:

1. What is taught?
2. To whom is it taught?
3. In what setting does this teaching take place?

The data produced provide a useful starting point for researchers, policymakers and institutional personnel to perform further qualitative analysis.

Updated criteria add nuance

The Carnegie Classification was developed in 1970 to support research on US higher education, and that continues to be its primary purpose. It classifies all accredited degree-granting colleges and universities in the United States. Carnegie reports were issued in 1973, 1976, 1987, 1994, 2000 and 2005/06.

In response to the growing need for more flexible and representative comparative data, the Carnegie Foundation changed its assessment criteria in 2005, updating its basic analysis and adding a further five all-inclusive classifications: undergraduate instructional program, graduate instructional program, enrolment profile, undergraduate profile, and size and setting. At the same time, it added an elective classification – community engagement – and is piloting another voluntary criterion – undergraduate education – in 2008 (2).

While the basic classification may continue to serve as a key point of reference and analytic tool for many users, McCormick believes the updated classifications will add much-needed texture and nuance.

“Colleges and universities are no longer characterized on the basis of a single view of what they do,” he explains. “For example, a research university’s ‘portrait’ will capture not only its commitment to graduate education, but also the nature of its undergraduate program, the characteristics of its undergraduates, the relative size of undergraduate and graduate populations and the absolute size and residential character of the campus.” (2)

He continues: “As the simple, mutually exclusive terminology of the traditional classification gives way to a richer multidimensional framework, our conception of institutional similarities and differences will necessarily become more nuanced. We believe the added flexibility [of the new classifications], and the responsibility that goes with it, will enhance research and policy development, as well as campus conversations about institutional priorities and distinctiveness.” (2)

For more information on the Carnegie Classifications or to look up an institution, please click [here](#).

References:

(1) McCormick, A. (2007), “First, Do No Harm”, *Carnegie Perspectives*

(2) McCormick, A. (2007), “A New Set of Lenses for Looking at Colleges and Universities”, *Carnegie Perspectives*

See also McCormick, A. (2007), “Hidden in Plain View”, *Inside Higher Ed*.