



A Message from the President, Michael M. Holland

RANKING: AN ACCREDITOR'S NIGHTMARE

The ranking of colleges and universities has been around for over 3 decades. The US News and World Report began its ranking of colleges and universities in 1983. Since then, there have been others which have gotten into the game of ranking institutions and even specialized programs within institutions of higher learning. Further, there are over 100 government agencies and for-profit organizations which provide some sort of ranking for universities and colleges around the world.

The American public has grown dependent on comparisons and statistics. We cannot watch a game of sport, a political event, search the shelves for groceries or appliances without looking for a comparison – some sort of numerical method to guide our decision of which can of corn to purchase or which oil-changing service to use. Purchase a TV without some sort of guide to the best – silly thought!

Since I have been involved with ACCE, over 25 years, ranking of our programs has been a topic. Several approaches have been submitted and discussed. In the wisdom of the collection of academics, the concept has not been implemented and for the right reasons – how can anyone say there is a #1 with so many variables involved at both the program and the institution level: urban vs. rural; research vs. teaching; private vs. public; large vs. small.

CHEA, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation occasionally writes about ranking. Its perspective, which includes a global view, is that ranking is impossible and though the public and the world want an easy answer, ranking is not the solution. Published rankings from whatever source, with so many different elements that “judge” quality of education, have motivated some higher education institutions to reshape their operations, causing some positive and many perverse outcomes.

To improve their “rank,” universities refocus resources to:

- increase the research-type faculty, sacrificing education of the students;
- putting more emphasis on master and/or PhD students, some to the extent of ignoring the undergraduate students and reducing their numbers just to increase the ratio;
- focus on getting into the “Top 20” at whatever expense to the faculty, students, facilities, to jump ahead of someone else. Remember, that is a zero-sum game that requires someone to drop a place for another to get into the group!

Some say ranking is in the public interest. There are less college counseling resources being provided, so the public must educate themselves; the internet has created more active consumers who are looking for an easy answer; illuminating some elements of accountable expectations and requirements.



In 2012, President Obama and the Education Secretary Arne Duncan (replaced by John King, Jr. in 2015) introduced the concept of the federal government ranking higher education institutions to influence how federal funds are distributed. The idea was fought by about every element of academia, including CHEA; the federal government gave up the idea and revised its action to creating a National Score Card by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). As with many government programs, this “report card” provides such complex and misleading information, it has little use by anyone. This proves the concept is impossible and dangerous given to anyone, including our federal government.
<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>

The collective strengths are our programs’ diversity – the variety of focuses of the many programs, each with its own personality, with the ability to serve the program and institution’s community, mission and purpose. The diversity with the choice of residential, heavy, commercial, marine – whatever serves the program’s stakeholders without the ultimate distortion that ranking brings.

Many articles have been written about this topic. Here are a couple: “The New Yorker” – www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/14/the-order-of-things and a CHEA publication - http://www.cheainternational.org/members/protected/pdf/CIQG_Policy_Brief_Vol-4.pdf

Both of these publications have interesting points to make about ranking – and both show how impossible it is to make a ranking effort meaningful for everyone.

All these elements and many more impact each institution and therefore the program.

Though there will continue to be third-party efforts to create a ranked standing of programs, it is irresponsible for an accreditor to create an internal standing of its accredited programs. We should understand the differences and celebrate them. Through accreditation, we have established a set of minimum, high-level standards against which programs are evaluated. Once a program has reached the status of accreditation – meeting the high standards – all accredited programs within that accreditor are of equal status. Yes, they are different and yes, they are all of a high quality and should be recognized as such and nothing else.

Sadly, ranking is here to stay; the controversy will continue.