Higher Education in the World 6
Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local
8.2. Connecting with Communities vs. Racing for Rankings. Why Community Engagement is a Better Strategy than Seeking Higher Rankings

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Abstract

University administrators are often feverishly preoccupied with domestic and international university rankings. Yet these ratings serve as poor instruments for the vast majority of universities to distinguish themselves or to build their reputations. Ranking agencies tend to measure attributes and indicators that inevitably favour a few, long-dominant universities; where one stands depends upon the performance of others (and thus beyond an individual university’s locus of control); and, except for those in the top few spots, the differentiation is ambiguous at best. This paper offers a brief overview of the issue and argues that, for most institutions, an ambitious campaign of community engagement is likely to produce much greater reputational dividends than the quixotic quest for an advance in the rankings.

Introduction

Rare is the university president who does not feel pressured by the annual round of domestic and international rankings. Wherever one’s institution stands on the Times Higher Education, the QS or the Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Ranking of World Universities, it is tempting to celebrate when that placing improves; and it is almost impossible not to fret when it slips even the tiniest amount. But for all but the most prominent universities, a singular focus on pursuing a higher ranking may be a misguided effort and a distraction from tasks that could both improve the institution and distinguish it more effectively from its competition.

This is not a criticism of the lists themselves or a dismissal of their usefulness in assessing certain qualities. In Canada, Maclean’s, the country’s most prominent news magazine, maintains separate national lists for Medical Doctoral universities and for Comprehensive universities – the latter being a category in which Simon Fraser University (SFU) has ranked first for seven of the last eight years. SFU has been unashamed about leveraging that status wherever possible and appropriate. The arm’s-length assessment of certain attributes and indicators can also be helpful, sometimes revealing weaknesses that require attention or opportunities for improvement.
But for most universities, most of the time, a preoccupation with rankings can be a diversion from the real goal, which is illuminated in a two-part question:

1. What is the best way to engender and promote true quality in education and research; and

2. What is the best mechanism for differentiating a university's offerings to improve its reputation and increase institutional support?

In the vast majority of cases, international rankings fail on both of these criteria, raising two further questions: Where, specifically, do the rankings fail? And, if the goal is excellence and clear differentiation, what mechanisms might work better?

The problem with rankings

No one has ever criticized a hammer for being a hammer; it is an invaluable tool when that is what you need. But it is useless or destructive if used for the wrong purpose, and university rankings can be the same. There are three main problems that make international ratings a poor mechanism for assessing, improving or differentiating any but the top few dozen universities in the world. First, the ratings are based on a basket of indicators that privilege the biggest and wealthiest universities and those of the longest standing. For example, the lists commonly assess research productivity based on the number of peer-reviewed publications, which is entirely legitimate, but extremely difficult to change substantively from year to year, especially when the major players already boast an all but insurmountable advantage. Likewise, the presence of Nobel laureates or other major prize winners; there is little argument that these thought-leaders can act as engines for innovation and creativity and magnets for talent, but it is not practical for institutions out of the top 50 to try to attract and retain a bevy of such intellectual leaders. The dominant universities have resources and momentum, on the basis of which they are almost impossible to dislodge.

The second problem is one of relativity. In any particular year, a university’s standing on the list depends not just on what it achieves, but also on the performance of every other university in its class. That means that many (if not most) of the variables are beyond the control of any one institution in the race. The act of competition can sometimes be inspiring and success in competition can be enormously gratifying, but there is much to lose – and little to gain – by competing blindly, especially when it is impossible to know whether ‘success’ is attributable to high performance in one institution or failure and misfortune in another.

The third ranking weakness becomes more extreme as you go down the list. It is, unquestionably, the sweetest pleasure to be celebrated as number one (and excruciating to be dislodged from that
position, even temporarily). It is fabulous and relevant to be in the top 10, maybe even in the top 50. But what are students, the faculty, the alumni and the would-be donors to conclude when an institution falls, say, from number 223 to number 232? How many more highly talented candidates will rush to a university that has recently moved from number 299 to 291? As an objective measure of relative strength or of relevance in a local market, these rankings are simply not helpful.

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Be the best in the world
Consider, now, a completely different approach, and one that is available to any institution, wherever it sits in the international post-secondary panoply. The goal is not to be judged good or to be found, in any particular year, to be better. The goal is to be great – to identify and promote that at which the institution can be the best in the world.

This is a notion popularized by organizational theorist Jim Collins, initially for businesses in Good to Great (Collins, 2001) and subsequently modified and applied to universities and other social sectors organizations in Good to Great and the Social Sectors (Collins, 2005). Collins promotes what he calls the Hedgehog Concept, in which he urges university leaders to ask themselves three questions: ‘What you are deeply passionate about?'; ‘What you can be the best in the world at?'; and ‘What best drives your resource engine?’

Excusing Collins’ weakness for the dangling participle, he gets to an essential point: the way to greatness lies in finding the single differentiator on which an organization can rise above its competitors. And, in the advanced education world, that differentiator is less likely to lie in the rankings than in the physical communities, or communities of interest, in which the university has formed extraordinary connections, made exceptional contributions, or demonstrated unique expertise.

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Engage, engage, engage
This then is the best argument for engagement – for an institution to reach out courageously and embrace both the resources and challenges of a community that only it can know best. It is not a new notion. Writers and critics have long since dismissed the ivory-tower model, in which academies attempt to hold themselves above the cares and concerns of the outside world. Universities fare best when they understand current issues, when they dedicate their resources to answering societal needs.
This spirit of engagement arises, in part, from a positive desire to serve. The Talloires Network (of which SFU is a member) is an international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education. The Talloires vision reads as follows:

We believe that higher education institutions do not exist in isolation from society, nor from the communities in which they are located. The Talloires Network envisions universities around the world as a vibrant and dynamic force in their societies, incorporating civic engagement and community service into their research and teaching mission (Talloires Network, 2016).

But true engagement is not a one-way relationship, in which universities deign to bestow favours on their communities. Engagement is defined by the process of sharing, through which a university gains as much as it contributes. It increases its own relevance and it becomes more successful at reflecting the character of its community. It also becomes more effective at drawing inspiration from civic sources and at responding more quickly to meet direct and pressing challenges.

The opportunities are wide open for universities to gain recognition for some aspect of community engagement at which they are the best in the world or best in their country. Or if that is too large a canvas on which to compete, there are plenty of reputational benefits for universities to accrue simply by demonstrating their singular strengths in some aspect of engaging the communities they serve. For example, if you cannot establish yourself as the best university in the world at supporting community-based Indigenous research, the opportunity remains for you to establish yourself as the best university within your geographic area at doing so. That kind of expertise – that best-in-class quality, cast globally or locally – is always distinctive and often transferable. That way lies excellence.

There is also a gathering amount of scholarship to attest to the effectiveness of this open, cross-pollinating orientation. For example, a US group has recently completed the second of two surveys of some of the most innovative institutions in that country, attempting to identify the critical components for success. In a new book, Innovation U 2.0: Re-inventing University Roles in a Knowledge Economy the authors and researchers, Drs. Louis Tornatzky and Elaine Rideout (2014), conclude with a set of recommendations for success, the very first of which is to engage, albeit in a business context. The terminology they chose was, ‘Encourage an External, Private Sector Orientation,’ but the overall direction is clear:

“True engagement is not a one-way relationship.

“Engagement is defined by the process of sharing, through which a university gains as much as it contributes.

“It (success) lies in the enthusiastic embracing of one’s own community in the search for educational relevance, research innovation and community engagement that can allow each university to find its métier – that unique quality that distinguishes it as legitimately pre-eminent and worthy of attention in its own community and in the wider world.
Being innovative and inculcating that mindset in faculty, students and staff can be tough sledding, and one needs to be more attuned to the world outside the university. That might mean many things: in entrepreneurship education, focus more energies on real-world simulations and experiential coursework, as well as co-curricular experiences; in developing centres and institutes, make sure that a large fraction of the stakeholders and participants are from the private sector; encourage faculty research that has links to both conceptual questions and problems out in the world, and reward and encourage faculty and students accordingly; conduct more use-inspired research, and support entrepreneurial problem-solving initiatives to address them (Tornatzky and Rideout, 2014: 253).

In other words, and in every way: engage.

The SFU experience

For its part, SFU has taken the goal of engagement as its principal opportunity to differentiate, and has done so comprehensively. The university's strategic vision calls on the institution 'to be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research and far-reaching community engagement.' The vision sets goals for engaging students through some of the most ambitious experiential education programmes in Canada. It calls on faculty and researchers to engage – to connect directly and for mutual benefit with all of the communities SFU serves, both for inspiration and for the resulting advantages in mobilizing research discoveries and innovations. And perhaps most distinctively, the vision articulates SFU's ambition to engage physically and programmatically.

Physically, the university has built two new campuses in the last 25 years, establishing both in neighbourhoods that were at risk and, in both locations, catalysing community development. The university has also built a model sustainable community adjacent to SFU's original campus – once an isolated, mountain-top retreat very much in the ivory-tower tradition. The new community is now earning international acclaim for its environmental practices and standards.

Programmatically, the strategic vision challenges SFU to 'be British Columbia's public square for enlightenment and dialogue on key public issues, and (to) be known as the institution to which the community looks for education, discussion and solutions.' To this end, the university has developed programmes to encourage and support those across the university to make their expertise – and our unique and valuable spaces – available for public dialogue. And once a year, SFU convenes a week-long summit on an issue of importance to the community. This year, for example, SFU Public Square hosted a series of public seminars, dialogues, workshops and events around the theme 'We The City' – an exploration of issues and ideas focused on the role of citizens in city building.

While pursuing this vision of engagement, SFU has maintained its pre-eminent standing in the Maclean's ranking of Canadian comprehensive universities. Yet, as gratifying as this rating success may be, I believe that the university has gained far more reputational benefit domestically, and more notice worldwide, for our mission to be Canada's 'engaged university,' and for the initiatives we have pursued in support of its realization.
**Conclusion**

There is no question that domestic and international university rankings are interesting and useful. The lists identify exemplars that deserve admiration and, to the extent possible, emulation, and they sometimes reveal weaknesses or opportunities in need of attention. But the rankings hold no special magic. Students can find best-in-the-world educational experiences in many institutions that reside far from the bright lights of the top 10 or 20. And researchers who are inspired, well-networked among their international academic colleagues and well-connected in their immediate community have myri-ad opportunities to achieve best-in-the-world results, often in the most out-of-the-way places.

Thus if the goal is excellence – greatness on a global scale – the path to success for most universities does not lie in a struggle for incremental improvements in esoteric and opaque rating systems. Rather, it lies in the enthusiastic embracing of one’s own community in the search for educational relevance, research innovation and community engagement that can allow each university to find its métier – that unique quality that distinguishes it as legitimately pre-eminent and worthy of attention in its own community and in the wider world.

**References**


