

Officials: Higher education rankings only part of equation

WSU, UI administrators, professors say value of various college rankings is in eye of the beholder

By Yesenia Amaro, Daily News staff writer

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Eric Spangenberg said his college doesn't "chase" rankings.

"I really just believe that we need to do the right thing strategically and then tactically, and then when you are recognized for having done the right things, that's what is very satisfying," said the dean of Washington State University's College of Business.

The college's international business program was recently listed among the top 20 in the nation by U.S. News and World Report, which dedicates an annual edition to ranking the world's best colleges.

The U.S. News and World Report rankings are among many produced and disseminated by various organizations and media outlets each year, and determining which ones really matter can be both challenging and frustrating for university administrators, faculty, staff, students and prospective students.

The WSU College of Business' entrepreneurial program has consistently been ranked in the top 25 over the last few years, but this is the first time the international business program was ranked by U.S. News and World Report.

"This is one of the rankings that is kind of meaningful," Spangenberg said. "There are lot of rankings out there that are not bona fide, meaning that a lot of people can do lots of kinds of surveys, and so forth, but the U.S. News ranking is one that means something, (and) that our peers look at."

Spangenberg said in order for the international business program to make it in the top 20, it "actually had to push somebody out of the top 20."

He said that had been a priority for the college since he became the dean about five years ago.

"It's satisfying to see that you can set objectives and if you direct the resources for those objectives you can realize success," he said.

University of Idaho College of Law Dean Don Burnett said the college was recently included in the "top 10" list of America's "best values" in legal education by The National Jurist magazine.

The UI College of Law ranked ninth out of 200 accredited law schools in the country, Burnett said.

Still, he said no prospective student should rely solely on college rankings because they can sometimes be misleading.

For example, he said the American Bar Association, the Law School Administration Council and other entities have issued statements criticizing U.S. News and World Report's methodology and rankings.

He said unanimous mail-in surveys are a common factor U.S. News uses in all its methodologies.

"A student should decide what she or he considers most important in a program," Burnett said. "Visit the Web site of the program and investigate it thoroughly and go to the institution and visit with administrators and faculty firsthand in order to get information that is more customized to the students' interest."

Inconsistencies can further complicate college rankings. For instance, the UI and WSU both received C grades in a recent study conducted by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, while nine of U.S. News' top 20 national universities received Fs.

UI Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management Steve Neiheisel said college rankings have become part of the higher education environment.

"Clearly some will be more valuable than others," he said. "It has to do with the methodology and who is reporting it."

WSU College of Veterinary Medicine Dean Brian Slinker said the college rankings that are valuable are those that collect "hard data."

"A lot of hard data so it boils down to the accuracy," he said, adding that it also depends on what media outlets or other organizations choose to value in their ranking systems.

Slinker said it's hard to say whether some college rankings could be harmful to an institution.

"I'm not sure if harmful is the right way to say it," he said

Neiheisel said some college rankings can have a negative affect on an institution.

"Ranking the schools based on the party schools is not something that is going to help the reputation," he said. "That's not going to be a positive."

Associate professor John Paznokas has taught at WSU for 33 years and said the criteria of the college rankings can significantly alter the results.

He also said someone can say that WSU is ranked 110th place in the latest U.S. News report, but for him WSU is "number one."

"I have worked with a lot of students who have gone on to have successful careers," he said. "There are a very few that left here without the skills they needed to be successful.

"That was their choice, we gave them the opportunity."

Neiheisel said parents and prospective students pay attention to college rankings when considering what institution to attend, even though there are other, more important things to look at.

He said students have to look at what kind of program and resources an institution has available for them.

"A student has to come to a college that is the right fit for them, where they will be successful," he said.

Burnett said there are two components of value in higher education, one being the quality of the program and the other the investment.

"Students should look at both sides of that equation. (The) cost of the program will determine the amount of debt that a student may take away from the institution," he said. "We want students to be able to take the job that fits their talents and that are consistent with their ideals, not simply the jobs that will pay the debts."

Spangenberg said a university degree is branded and students decide what they want their brand to be, but that brand might not always represent the quality of education they will receive.

"I think it's important to recognize and inform people that the brand (does) not necessarily mean a better education," he said. "In some respects it might mean less of an education."

On the Web:

- www.nationaljurist.com

■ <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges>

■ http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/rankings/national_university_rank.php

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