



Why College Report Cards Are Flawed on College Value

By Darryl Greer and Mico Lucide

Nationally, there has been a recent explosion in the number of college report cards, rating and ranking initiatives.¹ Examples include those supported by the White House, student activists, for-profit companies, non-profit foundations, college associations, and even social media enterprises such as *LinkedIn*. Values driving these grading/rating schemes have a mix of commercial and public accountability objectives. But one factor connects their purposes: an overriding concern about what drives college cost (expenses) and the price students pay. This principal concern diminishes rather than adds to their usefulness for many students and families, especially first-generation, poor and underserved populations.

Our research indicates that more than price concerns, citizens link college value with availability of practical experiences (such as internships) tied to academic studies; better advising about academic choices and careers; and easier credit transfer to reduce time to degree completion; leading to the most important outcome of college—an increased prospect for a good job and a better life.

The Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance Project (HESIG) of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University (N.J.) qualitatively reviewed 10 college rating websites, following a 2014 New Jersey poll on college value (summaries of ~~HEVWHV~~ content, how to use them, and survey results are available at www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig). These report cards should be judged not only regarding the validity, reliability and utility of the data provided, but also on principles guiding their development in the first instance. We suggest an approach based on college value and outcomes expectations that might work better in providing information to advance college opportunity, affordability and success.

Flawed Assumptions on Need, Audience, Comparability and Outcomes

¹ Michael W. Klein. "What Counts: The Policy and Politics of the Proposed College Rating System in the United States." Higher Education Forum; Volume 12, March 2015, Hiroshima University.

Report card providers explicitly state or imply that there is too little information and a lack of transparency about college cost and price. They assume that more comparative cost information will lead to more enlightened consumer choices, better decisions on where to attend college, and about how much to pay, leading to better outcomes and less personal debt. But as a recent Brookings study regarding transparency in

take into account college as a mixed public and private good that provides long-term benefits over a lifetime. The problem with a consumer-driven, market-model approach is that there is already so much information available about choosing a college, that more, sometimes questionable, information may confuse some college-bound individuals, especially poor and first-generation college students. While models excel at providing users with the freedom to find and exchange information, they are insufficient in providing equitable access to other resources needed to exploit successfully a marketplace crowded with often questionable or useless comparative information about thousands of colleges.

Some of these websites, such as *the Center for Affordability and Productivity*, seem to be self-serving in justifying their purposes, and aimed at a relatively higher income, sophisticated college-bound audience who may be more likely to have family college experience, and who might be better prepared to benefit from the information, to gain admission to selective colleges. It is highly unlikely that much of the data provided on many sites are useful to underrepresented populations without intensive face-to-face counseling, and without more information about how to choose and succeed in college beyond the issue of paying for it. Scant research exists indicating that these report cards serve well these students and families. Furthermore, many of the sites, such as *Noodle*, seem to be simply churning available data,

² 30/00/SDHERH/R/W/ November 2014.

reproducing in a different format readily available information from colleges or other sources on matters such as cost, net price, student financial aid and debt.

Much worse, in some cases, developers such as *Unigo* create new highly subjective data from

- x Measures of demonstrated abilities of college graduates on essential learning outcomes, especially regarding writing, speaking and problem solving, as reported by colleges and employers;
- x Where college graduates are working after one, three and five years, and the relationship between job, career choices and academic studies;
- x Number of graduates engaged in community and public service, and enrolling in post-graduate/professional studies after one, three and five years;
- x Number of internships offered by academic field, and number of students participating;
- x Extensiveness and intensity of academic advising and career counseling for new and transfer students, based on college surveys;
- x Total degree credits earned, compared to those required for graduation, and how long it takes to earn a degree; and
- x Credit awarded for prior learning as a percentage of total credits earned required for graduation.

College in America is highly valued. Citizens are willing to pay for what they value, but they expect colleges to be accountable about access, affordability, completion and outcomes. Placing more emphasis on the college value proposition as we tackle the big questions—*who goes to college, how we pay for it, and the expected outcomes that benefit the individual and society*—seems to be the right step in helping students choose and succeed in college.

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About

Higher Education and Strategic Information Governance (HESIG)

HESIG serves as an agent for constructive higher education policy change, by recommending strategic policy action aligned with a public agenda to serve the public good. Guiding principles include: enhancing college access, affordability, completion, productivity, accountability, and building partnerships to achieve these ends.

William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and is also the home of the Stockton Polling Institute. The Center is named for William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton University. The Hughes Center blog can be found at blogs.stockton.edu/policyhues

Center for College Affordability and Productivity

Web Address:

www.centerforcollegeaffordability.org

Audience:

Higher Education Policy Advocates, Policy Makers

Sponsorship:

Lumina Foundation for Education – Forbes

Purpose:

The Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP), a nonprofit organization, states that it is dedicated to researching the rising cost, as well as productivity in higher education. CCAP seeks to facilitate a broader dialogue with the public on the issues and problems facing the institutions of higher education, policy makers, and the higher education community.

Information provided includes student financial aid policy, rising costs of college, causes of higher education inefficiencies, productivity of staff and faculty members, for-profit higher education, and accreditation.

It is led by a director and a team of fellows and associates.

Display and Content:

The website's display is somewhat generic. The data are compiled in simple tables, easily understood, but not especially appealing visually.

The website lists its ranking methodology as follows: 27 c a t

College Measures

Web Address:

www.collegemeasures.org

Audience:

Prospective Students

Sponsorship:

Optimty Advisors – American Institutes for Research (AIR) – Lumina Foundation

Purpose:

The website states: “College Measures is a partnership between the American Institutes for Research and Optimty Advisors, focused on using data to drive improvement in higher education outcomes in the United States.” The providers state that they are deeply concerned about improving American higher education, and believe that important underlying data is underexposed and underutilized by students, parents, policymakers, and even by institutions themselves.

Display and Content:

From the main page, the user is presented with three options: two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and economic success of graduates. The two-year and four-year websites are very similar; however, the economic success of graduates is connected to a program supported by the Lumina Foundation called the Economic Success Metrics (ESM) program. This program is currently limited to states which participate in its program. The website is relatively easy to navigate.

The ESM program has released several reports to provide insight into the economic outcomes of different states' higher education systems for individuals. Each state has a report of its own, which provides more information such as earnings by type of degree, by major, and location of employment (i.e., in-state or out-of-state).

A scorecard judges the state's higher education performance by four major factors: completion and progression; efficiency; productivity; and gainful employment. Each of these is further detailed. Under completion and progression, the site lists graduation rate and first-year retention. Under efficiency, cost per student (FTE) is provided. Under productivity, cost per degree and cost of attrition are provided. Under gainful employment, student loan default rate and ratio of student loan payments to earnings for recent graduates are provided.

Clicking either on two-year or four-year college tools brings the user to four options on performance, measured by AIR and Matrix Knowledge (now, part of Optimty Advisors). The options are listed by college, by state, by rank, and the United States' national average performance. Viewing colleges by name gives the user a search box where the name of a college can be entered. The user can also sort that by state, in case there is more than one institution with similar names. Searching performance by state brings up a page with three tabs: scorecard, compare against other states, and compare the state's public colleges.

Comparing states brings the user to a list of all states, including territories, ranked by a rating on each of the above factors. The user is able to organize a search by any of these factors.

Comparing a state's public colleges provides a list of each state's public institutions of higher education, and allows the user to get more specific information for each using tabs at the top of the page. Unlike

Sources:

The website lists no specific sources, but states:

metrics will be placed into the public square, allowing students, their families, and policy makers to get much better measures of the rate of return on their investment in higher education programs and institutions.”

Update Frequency:

The website has a copyright of 2014. The most recent article posted is from 2014.

Chronicle of Higher Ed.College Reality Check

Web Address:

www.collegerealitycheck.com

Audience:

Students, Parents, Counselors

Sponsorship:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – Inceptia – The Chronicle of Higher Education

Purpose:

College Reality Check is produced by the Chronicle of Higher Education with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The goal of the website is to share data that students, parents, and counselors might consider in making decisions about college. These factors include:

Sources:

Project on Student Debt – The Chronicle of Higher Education – National Center for Education Statistics – National Student Loan Data System – Department of Education – White House College Scorecard – PayScale – Office of Student Financial Assistance Programs

Update Frequency:

There is no information regarding how frequently the website is updated.

College Scorecard

Web Address:

www.collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents, Counselors

Sponsorship:

LinkedIn University Rankings

Web Address:

www.linkedin.com/edu/rankings

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents, Returning Adult Learners

Sponsorship:

LinkedIn

Purpose:

LinkedIn provides a university ranking system (US, UK and Canada) based on projected earnings among its relatively limited membership database. By identifying “desirable” companies and “relevant” college graduates, LinkedIn compiles information on graduates’ institutions to identify which institutions lead to jobs in specific fields. LinkedIn currently has eight careers that it identifies in rankings: accounting professionals; designers; finance professionals; investment bankers; marketers; media professionals; software developers; and software developers at startup companies. For each of these careers, it ranks the top 25 institutions nationally, which excel at helping a student get a job in that field.

In order to identify desirable companies, LinkedIn utilizes its membership data. Members who work in those specified fields are first identified. Then, reviewing the work history of its members, LinkedIn recognizes patterns of migration and retention at companies. Companies which are better at attracting and retaining employees are deemed desirable.

Display and Content:

Noodle

Web Address:

www.noodle.com

Audience:

Prospective Students, Parents, Current Students

Sponsorship:

Noodle is founded as the flagship company of The Noodle Companies, which is independently founded by members of the Princeton Review.

Purpose:

The website states that “Noodle is an alternative to ‘pointless’ rankings, and to [leading] sites that simply drive students to the highest bidder. By holding the content to the highest standards, Noodle strives to bring the user the personalized, authentic, and honest information.” The intent of Noodle is to assist prospective students in finding the right institution for them.

Display and Content:

The display of information is clear and understandable. From the main page, the user immediately knows where to go. However, after clicking on “find colleges,” the next page is less simple to navigate. On the side, it offers many options to narrow down collon(68P8((rro)- sel(o) J(atel)e is f)h,)6(sutel)e ch as size, cost, location, workload, div(65.3(rs

Student Impact Project

Web Address:

www.studentimpactproject.org

Audience:

Students, Graduates, Higher Education Policy Advocates

Sponsorship:

Atlantic Philanthropies – California HealthCare Foundation – Kauffman Foundation – Lumina Foundation – The Annie E. Casey Foundation – The Arthur M. Blank Foundation – The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – The Boston Foundation – The California Community Foundation – The California Endowment – The Joyce Foundation – The Kresge Foundation – The Nathan Cummings Foundation – The David and Lucile Packard Foundation – The Rappaport Family Foundation – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – The San Francisco Foundation – The Seattle Foundation – Women’s Foundation for California – Center for Community Change.

Sources:

Congressional Budget Office -- Congressional Research Service -- US Census Bureau -- Center on Budget and Public Policy -- State Higher Education Executive Officers' Association -- Bureau of Labor Statistics -- Center for American Progress -- Oxford University Press -- National Bureau of Economic Research -- The Brookings Institute -- Industrial and Labor Relations Review -- Journal of Business and Economic Statistics -- The New York Times -- The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center -- Project on Student Debt -- Corporation for National & Community Service -- Department of Education -- American Enterprise Institute -- The Hamilton project -- US News and World Report -- National Center for Education Statistics -- National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators -- College Board -- American Federation of Teachers -- Center for Law and Social Policy -- SCOTUSblog -- The Century Foundation -- American Journal of Political Science -- State Legislative Websites -- National Association of State Budget Officers -- National Association

Unigo

Web Address:

www.unigo.com

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents

Sponsorship:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – Facebook – College Summit – King Center Charter School

Purpose:

The website states: "Powered by a network of the nation's top college counselors and a vibrant community of enrolled college students, Unigo is the Web's largest resource of information to find, get in, and pay for college. Unigo offers the ability for prospective students to have live one-on-one sessions with college counselors and current college students from around the country. With more than 15,000 college students and counselors available for sessions, prospective students can browse and search based on the type of desired session, areas of interest, region and much more. The counselors and college students available for live sessions have all been personally vetted by the Unigo team to ensure a valuable and informative experience. Prospective students also use Unigo for admissions advice and access to more than 1200,000 multimedia reviews by students on 6,500 campuses across the country, for free. The reviews on Unigo are included in US News & World Report's college directory and rankings. Founded in 2008, Unigo is based in New York and funded by McGraw Hill and angel investors."

Unigo.com is a wholly owned subsidiary of the for-profit Unigo Group. Unigo.com is led by a professional staff.

Display and Content:

This website is not well displayed. It is difficult to navigate, uses unconventional ratings, and does not provide substantial comparative information. The only way to compare colleges is by location, size of student body, and tuition cost.

From the main page, one can search a specific college to see reviews and ratings, which appear to be done completely by students. The website does offer real-time admissions advice from a team of college admissions officials. It also offers limited information on scholarships – which requires users to sign up for the website to obtain. In fact, reviewing more than just a few ratings will prompt the site to ask you to register.

The Ranking system used by this site exists in two distinct forms: 1) Ratings of individual colleges based on student reviews; and 2) Unconventional rankings, such as "far from faculty," "politicians and pundits," "fast and furious," "best bang for your buck," and "nostalgia Call." These second rankings were compiled after 30,000 students voted to decide which colleges had the best "atmospheres." While this may be a novel idea for prospective students, it does not necessarily help them to find a institution that is academically appropriate.

Sources:

Student College Reviews – College Counselors – National Center for Education Statistics – The Common Data Set Initiative

Update Frequency:

The website's copyright is 2014. No other information can be found on the site regarding update frequency.

U.S. News & World Report

Web Address:

www.usnews.com/rankings

Audience:

Prospective Students, Parents, Higher Education Officials, Current Students

Sponsorship:

U.S. News & World Report

Purpose:

U.S. News & World Report is one of the better-known national college ranking systems. Since 1983 it has compiled and released rankings of "America's Best Colleges," expanding ranking content over time. In 2010, it moved to online-only format for its rankings. Its purpose is to provide college-bound students and families with comprehensive information about choosing a college, and comparing colleges to one another cost and quality, and ranking colleges nationally and regionally by type. Annually in the fall, just as the school year starts, U.S. News & World Report updates its rankings.

Display and Content:

As one would expect, the website is displayed in a news format. This makes it relatively difficult to navigate for the pu

Sources:

Carnegie Foundation – Colleges and Universities – United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics – American Association of University Professors – National Collegiate Athletics Association – Council for Aid to Education

Update Frequency:

The website's copyright is 2014. The rankings update annually in the fall.

Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)

Web Address:

www.voluntarysystem.org

Audience:

Higher Education Officials, Prospective Students, Current Students

Sponsorship:

Lumina Foundation – Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) – American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) – Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) – American College Testing Service (ACT) – Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) – Council for Aid to Education (CASE) – ETS – Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) – National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment – National Student Clearinghouse – National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Purpose:

The VSA is a voluntary initiative developed by the higher education community to meet the following objectives: demonstrate accountability and stewardship to public; support institutions in the measurement of educational outcomes, and facilitate the identification and implementation of effective practices as part of institutional improvement efforts; assemble and disseminate information that is transparent, comparable, and understandable; and provide a useful tool for students during the college search process.

The VSA is directed by an oversight board, made of individuals from different institutions of higher education, such as presidents, chancellors, and provosts. It also has ex-officio members, the VSA Executive Director, the APLU Senior Advisor, and the Associate Vice President of Academic Leadership and Change (part of AASCU).

Display and Content: