

## The Ranking Racket

*Breaking Ranks: How the Rankings Industry Rules Higher Education and What to Do About It*, Colin Diver, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022, pp. 368, \$18.88 hardbound.

### Glenn M. Ricketts

In March 2019, an unusual collegiate scandal came to light; unusual because it did not involve miscreant star athletes, game fixing by professional gamblers or under-the-table player recruiting by aggressive football coaches. Instead, the Varsity Blues scandal involved a decade-long criminal conspiracy orchestrated by college admissions consultant William Rick Singer who, in exchange for large monetary payments from affluent parents—approximately \$25 million in total—secured admission to prestigious schools for their children. By means including bribery of college admission officials, elaborately contrived cheating on SAT admissions tests and fabricated athletic

credentials, Singer gained admission for them to high prestige schools such as USC, Yale, Georgetown, Stanford, and the University of Texas, Austin, among others. Singer's well-heeled clients included a number of high-profile businessmen and Hollywood celebrities, all apparently willing to pay dearly for their children's admission to top-tier schools, even to the extent of knowingly participating in a criminal fraud scheme.

For Colin Diver, a former dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, president of Reed College emeritus, and retired trustee at Amherst College, his *alma mater*, the sordid affair is symptomatic of the pernicious influence of the college rankings industry, which he takes severely to task in *Breaking Ranks*. The book is not an easy read, and for those who aren't college presidents or deans of admission, the author's steady barrage of statistics, charts, and bureaucratic acronyms makes for some dry and heavy going. Diver argues that the "rankocracy" dominates and corrupts much of American higher education and has fostered an almost Hobbesian competitive culture among the top-tier institutions that are the particular

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**Glenn M. Ricketts** is professor of political science at Raritan Valley Community College, North Branch, NJ 08876, and public affairs director of the National Association of Scholars; ricketts@nas.org. He was the founding president of the NAS New Jersey state affiliate, and served for twenty years on the NAS board of directors. Ricketts last appeared in these pages with "In Defense of Free Speech on Campus" (Fall 2021).

focus of the book. Year after year, admissions offices, college presidents, deans of liberal arts, and boards of trustees wait anxiously for the latest rankings to be published, in hopes of achieving a higher place in the various listings or, failing that, avoiding too much of a downgrade from the previous year's placement. Higher rankings can mean many things, but above all they confer the grand prize, the object that student consumers covet, and institutions hope to bestow: *Prestige*. Greater prestige means a higher number of applications from the best students, especially wealthy ones whose parents are potential donors, and who are also most likely to graduate on time, which can in turn bolster the school's prestige for future applicants, attract star faculty, and more. The frantic pursuit of higher status induces college officials to jump through many hoops:

The literature, both journalistic and scholarly, is full of stories about how competition for the best college label has changed institutional behavior. Academic leaders have reshaped staff incentive and reward structures, altered admissions procedures and criteria, reordered

expenditure priorities, and even rewritten strategic plans.

All of this, Diver argues, imposes a stultifying homogenization on what he regards as the great variety that has always characterized the American higher educational landscape, as approval from the "rankocracy" demands conformity to a one-size-fits all pattern and the relegation of uniqueness.

The rankocracy has numerous sources—*Peterson's Guide*, *Forbes*, among others—but Diver cites *U.S. News and World Report* as the leader of the pack, since it first published its rankings in 1983. The magazine's rankings are the most frequently consulted by potential students and their parents and cited in the promotional literature of college admissions offices. (We at NAS were not immune: The 1989 *U.S. News* ranking of "best colleges" became the basis for our first in-depth curricular study, *The Dissolution of Higher Education*, issued in 1996).

What exactly are the components that are used in determining institutional rankings on the lists? As Diver notes, that depends: the criteria and the methodologies employed are subject to frequent changes. Most common, however, are categories such as the average SAT scores of the

incoming freshman class, their high school GPA, the percentage of applicants admitted to the freshman class (which encourages select schools to enlarge their applicant pools—a smaller admission rate means higher rankings), the graduation rate after four years, and the average expenditure per student. The last category is especially elusive, since the “average expenditure” per pupil is simply an aggregate figure that could be based on new classrooms or a new gymnasium. Not surprisingly, Diver also cautions that the figures submitted by college officials from year to year are inherently suspect, since numerous cases of fraudulent data submitted by college officials have regularly occurred, an indication of the frantic quest for higher ratings (including alas, from the Fox School of Business at Temple University, my *alma mater*). Of course, there is no way of knowing how much bogus information slips under the radar, although it’s not difficult to imagine that a great deal does.

What does Diver propose as an alternative to the rankocracy, which he concedes is likely to be a permanent feature of the educational landscape? Resistance. In his concluding chapter, he offers practical advice to prospective students, college presidents, and admissions officers for how they can escape the tyranny of the college

ratings game. For students, the best alternative would be to ignore the ratings altogether, although he concedes that this is unlikely. Instead, he suggests that prospective students consult multiple listings and compare them, based on the type of school they’d like to attend. For college educators, he urges them to do as he did as president of Reed, by simply refusing to cooperate when *U.S. News* comes calling for this year’s information. That, he cautions, carries a penalty, since the magazine retaliated by assigning Reed College a much lower ranking the following year. But Diver did not yield and continued his non-cooperation. He also recommends that admissions offices consider that the “best” students may not be the “brightest,” and suggests that intellectual curiosity, open mindedness to different ideas, or the ability to flourish in Reed’s communitarian campus culture are better indicators of a student’s suitability for admission. Good advice by Reed’s lights, perhaps, although Diver probably knows that prospective college students aren’t likely to read dense books by former law school deans.

At the heart of Diver’s critique of the rankocracy, as he notes repeatedly throughout the book, is the fact that the system is heavily weighted in favor of “wealth and privilege,” a phrase

that occurs in every chapter amid the welter of statistics and graphs. This means that ratings inevitably benefit the wealthiest and most prestigious schools disproportionately, and cater to the elites that can afford to attend them. Worse still is the fact that this top quintile is racially exclusive and manifests “whiteness”—another term that Diver repeats frequently in the book—reflective of the “white supremacy” which was long characteristic of American higher educational institutions. The racial composition of the top schools is a primary focus for Diver, and he devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of race on campus and the fact that the number of racial minorities at elite schools continues to be disproportionately low. Among those minority students that do make the cut, the failure rate is often prohibitive. He is blithely dismissive of *Mismatch* (2012) the seminal book by Richard Sander and Stuart Taylor that makes a compelling case against the widespread practice of elite schools admitting seriously underprepared minority students who very often fail.

Diver does not explore the question of *why* such students might be unqualified (a subject examined exhaustively by the late sociologist of K-12 education, James S. Coleman), and he refutes Sander and Taylor by simply citing without argument

*The Shape of the River* by William G. Bowen and Derek Bok. In that book, published some fourteen years before Sander and Taylor, and thus without consideration of the newer data on which their conclusions are based, Bowen and Bok held that affirmative action programs were largely beneficial to the minority students they admit. (See “The Changing Shape of the River: Affirmative Action and Recent Social Science Research,” a lengthy and compelling critique of Bowen and Bok’s book by Russell Nieli in these pages from the fall 2004 issue. Also worth consulting is Larry Purdy’s 2008 book, *Getting Under the Skin of Diversity*.) Instead, Diver blames the “rankocracy’s” continuing association of prestige with institutional “whiteness,” with the result that rankings lists usually contain no reference to the racial and ethnic composition of student populations. To do so, he asserts, would threaten the “prestige” ratings which the largely white elites consult when making decisions about which selective school to attend. Not quite intentional Jim Crow, but something very close to it, is the impression he conveys.

This a very curious view, to say the least. Anyone even superficially acquainted with the prevalent culture of elite schools—*especially* elite schools—will find it hard to avoid the conclusion

that they are literally obsessed with race. It's hard to know how anyone could fail to notice the ubiquitous "diversity" declarations, mission statements, week-long orientation sessions for new freshmen focused on race, theme dormitories emphasizing racial pride and exclusivity, "diversity" weeks, the ceaseless trumpeting of the school's racially diverse faculty and student body etc. All of this, of course, is in addition to the ubiquitous and aggressive Diversity, Equity and Inclusion bureaucracies which increasingly monitor all aspects of life on campus. In fact, if there is indeed a creeping conformity and homogenization of higher educational institutions in the United States, it is the explosive growth of DEI bureaucrats everywhere, from Harvard to Podunk. The community college at which I teach in New Jersey has open admissions and we have no concern about our rankings in *U.S. News*. In common with all elite schools, however, we also have a Director of DEI and aggressively pursue "diversity" in faculty and staff hiring, although we can't quite keep pace with Yale and Michigan, each of which recently hired more than one-hundred additional DEI administrators. And, ironically, the "wealthy and privileged" elites he so incessantly derides most likely *agree* with Diver's views on racial policies and a whole host of

social issues; indeed, they doubtless seek to attend the top tier schools precisely because *they know* that is what's on offer. See for example Charles Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve*, followed in 1995 by Thomas Sowell's *The Vision of the Anointed* and Michael J. Sandel's newly published *The Tyranny of Merit* for extended analyses of the elitist and entitled attitudes of those whose outlook derives not simply from wealth but from a self-perception of being vastly smarter than the ordinary run of mankind. And these institutional features, please note, are not the result of *U.S. News* rankings; they've developed strictly within. Yet somehow, Diver seems to miss all of this, despite having spent an entire career in the elite institutions he criticizes so relentlessly for their unchanging "whiteness." Not surprisingly, he advocates the use of remedial affirmative action admissions and specific quotas at elite schools, policies aimed at atoning for America's—and the schools'—past injustices and to break the monopoly of "whiteness" that continues to reflect their legacy racial oppression. As Diver indicates, top tier schools have administered such dubious race-based policies for some time. They simply need to pursue them more aggressively, if that's what it takes to finally break the hold of "whiteness."

*Breaking Ranks* will no doubt be useful to educators and others curious about the processes and excesses of the long-controversial ranking industry and its influence in American higher education. Unfortunately, the author remains firmly in rank with the discredited admissions policies that pose a much larger problem in elite schools than do the annual listings of *U.S. News & World Report*.