



# Gaming the Rankings: Richard Freeland and the Dramatic Rise of Northeastern University

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The marketisation of higher education in the United States is a historical process as much as it is contemporary. Emerging and expanding in the chaotic political landscape of the 1800s without central control or reliable funding, universities had to develop in a way which maximised competitive advantage, and which pursued all opportunities for patronage (Labaree, 2017). Within the past fifty years, however, this process has penetrated further into the sanctums of higher education, imposing market-driven logics through the primacy of research and its concomitant funding (Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), the

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J. D. Branch and B. Christiansen (eds.), *The Marketisation of Higher Education*, Marketing and Communication in Higher Education,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67441-0\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67441-0_11)

increase of part-time and adjunct professors at the expense of unionised, tenure-track professors (Rhoades, 2019; Umbach, 2007), the influx of managerialism and rationalised quality-improvement schemes (Birnbaum, 2000; Vican et al., 2019), and, ultimately, the commodification of knowledge and students (Saunders, 2007, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Although each university boasts its own individual culture, history, and set of specialties, it remains under enormous pressure to conform to the moral order of marketisation in order to survive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; O'Neil, 1986; Stensaker et al., 2019).

Rankings now operate as a powerful mechanism of marketisation. Indeed, they structure patterns of school choice (Griffith & Rask, 2007), override the historical values of higher education (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Pusser & Marginson, 2013), and prescribe appropriate “moral habits” for university dwellers, from presidents and provosts to professors, staff members, and students (O'Neil, 1986). Rankings, which range from state-sanctioned ratings (College Scorecard, for example) to those published annually by the *US News and World Report* and *Times Higher Education*, confer tangible benefits to institutions which comply with their worldview. This worldview is largely defined externally to colleges and universities by politicians, parents, and other influential actors whom project market-oriented outcomes onto the purpose and benefits of higher education (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Whereas institutions might typically buffer themselves against such intrusions through symbolic myths or informal practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), prior research has demonstrated that rankings are able to change, not only the fundamental activities of universities, but the behaviour and self-management practices of people within a university (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). In essence, their inhabitants become “disciplined” as they negotiate new meanings of their work and the work of higher education.

Accordingly, this chapter reframes the well-known story of Northeastern University, which in the 1990s was characterised as a “blue-collar commuter school whose main draw was its low cost” (Bombardieri, 2015). The appointment of Richard Freeland as president in 1996 began a ten-year period of rapid transformation which saw the regional player emerge as a national university which could compete with other elite universities (Freeland, 2000). Rankings were central to Freeland's “Top 100” plan, which explicitly sought to manipulate Northeastern University's position in the *US News and World Report* ranking as a means of institutional improvement. Drawing inspiration from Sauder

and Espeland's (2009) study of law school rankings, this chapter deploys insights from new institutionalism and Foucault's concept of discipline, to understand (1) how rankings constitute a mechanism of marketisation which effectively reshapes the principles and purposes of universities (such as Northeastern University) with defined, unique identities; (2) the processes and consequences of marketisation which is driven by rankings; and (3) how organisational theory can be leveraged for nuanced accounts of change in higher education.

## 2 RANKINGS: CONTEXT AND HISTORY

Although rankings in the United States might be a relatively recent phenomenon, they emerged within a well-established history of "social statistics" (Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Weber (1946) argued that quantification was a key component of modern culture, which derived its power from "calculability" in pursuit of hierarchy, efficiency, productivity, and other hallmarks of bureaucratic authority. To some degree, the quantification which undergirded the strength of bureaucracy was also essential to the early success of the American university. The American state struggled to rebuild in the post-Civil War period, thereby empowering universities to produce "experts" to staff the burgeoning civil service bureaucracy. In return, universities received legitimacy as public sources of knowledge (Nemec, 2006; Pusser & Marginson, 2013). Bureaucracy is, in some respects, a totalising institution—it reshapes societies to respond to the meaning of numbers and ranks, and to the types of people who accompany them (Goffman, 1961; O'Neil, 1986). Foucault (1977) elaborated Weber's contention, noting that quantification is a mechanism for organising and partitioning individuals and spaces: "Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual" (p. 143).

Within this historical context, it is perhaps unsurprising that rankings are powerful and meaningful (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Griffith & Rask, 2007; McDonough et al., 1998). The most well-known American ranking, assembled by the *US News and World Report* magazine, was first published as a survey of university presidents in 1983 (Stuart, 1995). By 1990, *US News and World Report* began regularly publishing the standalone "America's Best Colleges", which contained more information than the annual ranking issue. The first *US News and World Report* rankings were based entirely on assessments of reputations by leaders in higher education, eventually evolving into a constantly changing formula which

is based on a variety of variables (funding ratios, graduation rates, and job placement rates, for example). Although subjective metrics (institutional reputation among peers, for example) have been supplanted by more objective measures (graduation rates, for example), they still constitute one-fifth of the overall ranking calculation (Morse et al., 2019).

Rankings are consistently criticised for inadequate methodology, or for reinforcing unjust norms (see Pusser & Marginson, 2013). But there are clear effects of rankings on both organisational and individual behaviours. At the organisational level, Bastedo and Bowman (2010b, 2011), Bowman and Bastedo (2009), and Sauder and Fine (2008) found that shifts in position altered institutional access to valuable resources, such as money, prestige, and reputation. Further, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) described how rankings threatened collectively-held organisational reputations. At the individual level, Griffith and Rask (2007) and McDonough et al. (1998) depicted how patterns of school choice are influenced by rankings, which significantly impacts who goes to which college or even who goes to college.

It is clear that rankings are a powerful conferrer of legitimacy within the organisational field of higher education. Such legitimacy is not inherent, however. Universities and individuals within the field play a part in negotiating and maintaining the power of rankings (Giddens, 1984). Universities which seek to game the rankings produce contradictory narratives. The very act of transgressing the rules of the rankings to induce a beneficial position undermines the projected objectivity of the rankings themselves (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). The transition from reputational assessments to clinical formulas belies a deep investment in the perceived “scientific nature” of hierarchy and quality. That which is scientific and natural ought not to be easily manipulated. Conversely, the amount of effort which is needed to subvert the rankings is significant, potentially involving vast sums of money and years of strategic planning. Such exertion is perhaps a reminder of the importance of rankings, and a simultaneous reinforcement of their role in the field. It is further a reflection of processes of commodification due to the sheer investment which is required, and to the consequences thereof.

### 3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the processes and consequences of marketisation through the mechanism of rankings, we opted for a specific organisational approach to access the macro-level movements of organisations, fields, and their concomitant logics. With this approach, we can analyse the challenges for universities, as they fight to survive within the field of higher education, the market pressures which enable survival, and the steps which can be taken to ensure survival, and to improve their relative position. Rankings, however, are a multi-level phenomenon, manifesting within the everyday interactions which comprise organisations. As argued by Sauder and Espeland (2009), rankings infiltrate the everyday life of institutions, where the consequences of marketisation alter the behaviour of the inhabitants, and shift the purpose and kinds of work which occur. Accordingly, we drew insights from both new institutionalism and the disciplinary perspective of Foucault to better understand the nuances of rankings, and their role as a mechanism of marketisation.

#### 3.1 *New Institutionalism*

New institutionalism is perhaps the dominant tradition within organisational theory (Suddaby, 2015). In a broad sense, institutional theories attempt to explain the complex relationship of social structure and individual agency, usually privileging the ways in which macro-level structures constrain actions, perceptions, and behaviours (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Selznick, 1996; Suddaby, 2015; Zucker, 1977, 1987). Unlike the rational-exchange theorists, who advanced a conception of a rationally-minded *homo economicus* as the central unit of institutions and decision-making, new institutionalism draws on a range of more socially-determined intellectual threads. Accordingly, organisations become institutionalised as social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a “rule-like” status in the social thought and action of organisational members (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutional rules are unreflexive, embodying classifications which are built into the institution as “reciprocated typifications or interpretations” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 54).

New institutionalism emerged alongside the concept of the organisational field, which served to bind a collection of interdependent organisations and institutions which were operating with “common rules,

norms, and meaning systems” (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 118). The organisational field itself comprises of a number of competing “logics” which prescribe proper, legitimate structures and behaviours, and proscribe improper, deviant structures and behaviours. As such, organisational fields can be staging grounds for institutionalisation, a process by which social processes, myths, and ceremonies become embedded, normative rules within social thought and action (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutionalised organisations, therefore, reflect the demands of the field, rather than, or at the expense of, the demands of their work. Accordingly, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that highly-structured organisational fields provide a context in which “individual efforts to deal rationally with uncertainty and constraint often lead, in the aggregate, to homogeneity in structure, culture, and output” (p. 147). In contrast with older perspectives on institutions, which prioritised informal structure and self-interested sectarianism (see Perrow 1986), new institutionalism posited organisational legitimacy and survival as the central mechanisms of institutional life. Stated simply, institutions must manage norms, values, and attitudes to conform to broader expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008).

In order to maintain legitimacy, institutions undergo a process of “buffering”, wherein formal organisational structures are erected to protect informal (the actual) practices from the pressures of the environment (Orton & Weick, 1990). Institutions, universities in particular, undergo “mission drift” as they stray from their original purposes in pursuit of favourable resources, expanded prestige, or competitive position in the field (Jaquette, 2013; Morpew, 2002). Processes of certification, such as rankings or state mandates, are sources of powerful influence within organisational fields, promising expanded resources after more commercial orientations are in place (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Buffering, therefore, allows institutions to “decouple” formal and informal structures. Institutional survival depends upon securing legitimacy, which often involves adopting inefficient or purely symbolic practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As noted by Sauder and Espeland (2009), however, buffering does not always occur when an external pressure threatens institutional legitimacy. In the case of law school rankings, for example, Sauder and Espeland (2009) described the process of self-internalisation which embeds the influence of rankings beyond a symbolic buffer. In other words, the institution became more tightly-coupled, which is counter to the expectations of new institutionalism, and

a demonstration of the analytic boundaries of the new institutionalism approach (see DiMaggio, 1988).

### 3.2 *Discipline*

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Michel Foucault elaborated on the evolution of disciplinary practice, from an overt and performative act, to a more subtle and insidious process. Public executions and other ostentatious displays of sovereign power, for example, eventually gave way to self-policing and individual notions of constant surveillance. This shift in the mechanisms of discipline led to a disciplinary power which is diffuse, and enacted through the “penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life” (Foucault, 1977, p. 198). At the centre of this regulatory expansion is the body, the site of disciplinary power, which is simultaneously made more obedient and more useful through mechanisms, or “distributions”, of discipline. Consequently, discipline is constitutive of the self, establishing people as objects within a web of discourse which defines what is legitimate and what is mad or deviant. Discipline is “an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualises bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (Foucault, 1977, p. 146). Individualisation occurs through quantification and other processes which make constant supervision and monitoring, and also the internalisation of disciplinary notions, possible.

Foucault’s broad conceptions of disciplinary power complement formal-rational ideas about bureaucracy (see Weber, 1946, for example) with a “physiology of bureaucracy and power” (O’Neil, 1986, p. 45) as the definitive feature of the disciplinary society. As disciplinary discourse establishes normative categories for individuals, it also constructs a “field of comparison” which creates and enforces differentiations among categories (Foucault, 1977, p. 182). In the context of institutional approaches to organisational theory, discipline is an essential part of defining what is legitimate and what is illegitimate within an organisational field. Isomorphic pressures draw their analytic power from overarching categories of acceptable knowledge and ways of being, and also from access to resources such as money and prestige (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Sauder & Fine, 2008). Further, the logics which comprise organisational fields are “made real” in local contexts through their institutionalisation in

policy and practice (Foucault, 1978; Swidler, 1995). Disciplinary power, therefore, functions as a mechanism of diffusion within organisational fields. In the words of Foucault, “power produces reality” (p. 194).

The inclusion of discipline contributes to the theoretical tools which can uncover the conditions under which particular organisational forms are constructed as gold standards to be emulated (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 244). Institutional responses are complex, as are the various environmental pressures which constitute, and compete within, an organisational field. A disciplinary perspective complements new institutionalism by accommodating the responses which are adopted by organisational members (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Moreover, external pressures like rankings introduce conflict. Indeed, ways of framing and forming meaning around the everyday life of an organisation are shaped and reshaped through the collision of multiple logics (Vican et al., 2019). How individuals negotiate these conflicts, ultimately as part of social interactions, forms the foundation of institutions and disciplinary power, and is an entrance into understanding the local mechanisms of organisational response (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Powell & Colyvas, 2008).

## 4 METHODS

This chapter utilised the case study method (Merriam, 1998) to explore how the *US News and World Report* rankings influenced institutional change at Northeastern University. We defined Northeastern University as a distinct case, and bound our data sources temporally. Specifically, our data were drawn from the years 1998 through 2002, a period which captured the majority of the university’s efforts to influence its position in the rankings. In some ways, Northeastern University represented an “extreme case” because it pursued a rise in the rankings overtly, and as an institutional policy (Chen, 2016). The changes during this brief period profoundly altered the university, and likely propelled Northeastern University into a more desirable echelon; few other institutions charted such a dramatic path.



#### 4.1 *About Northeastern University*

Founded in 1898 as “a night school at the Boston YMCA”, Northeastern University is a private, four-year, not-for-profit institution (Bombardieri, 2015). Today, the university is classified as a doctoral university with the highest level of research activity, and boasts an enrolment of close to 20,000 students. The university is composed of nine faculties (colleges and schools), and runs graduate campuses in Charlotte, Seattle, Silicon Valley, and Toronto. In 2015, Northeastern University’s endowment stood at 743 million USD (Northeastern University, 2016).

Northeastern University’s current status as a nationally recognised university is largely due to the actions of its sixth leader, President Richard Freeland (Kutner, 2014). At the outset of his presidency, Northeastern University was described as utilitarian at best, and held the 162nd position on the *US News and World Report* rankings for “Best National University”, a position which was characterised by Freeland as “almost a third of the way down in the third tier” (Freeland, 2000). In line with his ambitions of national status for the university, Freeland would single-mindedly pursue the advancement of Northeastern University in the rankings as the central part of his strategic vision.

#### 4.2 *Data*

Data were drawn from multiple secondary sources, including campus publications, public statements made by Freeland and other campus officials, meeting minutes, institutional documents, and journalism. Historical data were accessed and gathered using the Wayback Machine, an Internet archival tool which allows users to view and download cached sites over a number of years. Given the focus on the rankings project at Northeastern University, sources which specifically describe the rankings and the president’s initiatives, and the reactions from faculty members, students, and journalists, were chosen to compose the case. Although the conclusions find Freeland’s actions to be enormously effective in actually achieving the stated goal of improved rankings, the case relies upon multiple perspectives to recreate the contemporary debate over the merits of the plan in action.

### 4.3 *Limitations*

Limitations centre on the types of data which were used to construct the case, which limit the construction of the case of Northeastern University during the period in question. Although historical data allow for a broader understanding of an institution's evolution, there is difficulty in understanding "how struggles for legitimacy played out in daily life" (Barley, 2008, p. 507). Using news accounts and statements by important people within the university provided some insight into the broad patterns of activity which contributed to, and resulted from, the university's activities. It remains unlikely, however, that textual sources could provide enough information to produce a complete, meso-level account of the case (Fine & Hallett, 2014). Accordingly, the inferences which we drew about interaction-level processes and meaning-making are limited.

## 5 FINDINGS

When Richard Freeland, an academic administrator and historian, was appointed president of Northeastern University in 1996, the university was in a dire situation. It suffered federal budget cuts throughout the mid-1980s and early 1990s, which precipitated declining student enrolment and hundreds of employee layoffs. Beginning in 1991, the man who would become Freeland's predecessor, President John "Jack" A. Curry, pursued a mantra of "Smaller but Better", in response to the adversity which Northeastern University faced, by focussing on the institution's strengths, and by improving its attractiveness as a regional university (Ellis, 1998). Freeland grappled with this history in his first address to the professors, students, and staff members of the university following his hiring, by striking an optimistic tone:

We do not face an easy time. Northeastern is going through a transition. Charting a path to bring this university through the next few years as a stronger, more vibrant, more recognised institution will take the best intelligence and dedicated energies of all of us. I know we can do it. There is so much strength here. There is so much talent here. There is so much loyalty here. These wonderful buildings around us bespeak our strength. And there are sturdy traditions on which to build. (Freeland, 1996)

Freeland's vision emphasised the distinctive character of Northeastern University as an institution known for cooperative and practical education, access for "young people from modest backgrounds", and for service to the Boston community (Freeland, 1996). Yet "smaller but better" was not enough for him. Foreshadowing his future initiative to advance Northeastern University's position as a national university, Freeland urged that "we have work to do in continuing to serve students from our surrounding communities while reaching out aggressively to enrol larger numbers regionally, nationally and internationally" (Freeland, 1996). He wanted to propel Northeastern University onto the national stage as an example of a "premier urban university" (Freeland, 1996).

This section will present the case of Northeastern University under Freeland's leadership, during which the institution was transformed from an urban commuter college to a highlyranked and well-regarded research university. As we shall argue, Freeland's vision was the foundation for his revitalisation plans, with all routes to quality, survival, and excellence depending upon the mechanism of the *US News and World Report* rankings.

### 5.1 *The National University: Rhetoric and Vision*

By October 1998, President Freeland began implementing the changes which would presage his call for Northeastern University to aggressively advance in the rankings. In his annual address to the campus community, Freeland highlighted the modest position of Northeastern University on that year's *US News and World Report* rankings (somewhere around #162). He characterised the position as "impressive progress that nonetheless makes clear how far we still have to go" (Freeland, 1998). Accordingly, Freeland declared that "we enter the new year and a new century with rising fortunes", suggesting that "our surest path to heightened achievement and recognition is to attain excellence" as a national research university (Freeland, 1998). The president seemed to favour the idea of becoming a national university since he first arrived on campus, notably using the term as part of his first address to the faculty members, staff members, and students. Moreover, Freeland made his vision part of the decennial accreditation process.

The accreditation report itself consisted of five separate documents, each titled with one of the five pillars of Freeland's vision for the promise of a new century: national, research, student-centred, practice-oriented,

and urban (Northeastern Accreditation Documents, 1998). Freeland referred to the goals as “the mantra”, and national status was the first priority (Freeland, 1998). As a term, “national” both encompassed the other four categories and went beyond them: “National recognition is critical in our move from a quasi-public, regional university to a private university that draws students from around the country and world and competes on the basis of the quality of our faculty and our programs” (Northeastern Accreditation Documents, 1998). The primary indicator of Northeastern University’s progress towards this national goal would be “the image others have of us” as determined by the *US News and World Report* (Northeastern Accreditation Documents, 1998). In fact, national status seemed to depend upon Northeastern University’s ranking by the publication, and the report outlined four key aspects of the university which would shape the university’s reputation: the strength of its co-op programme, increasing enrolment, a renewed capital campaign for university improvement, and congruence with other national university practices (Freeland, 2000a).

On 3 May 2000, Freeland initiated an ambitious programme to advance Northeastern University to be among the top 100 national research universities within the following decade. Freeland characterised the move as a strategic imperative which fit within his overarching vision to “raise our level of achievement and recognition and truly become, both in reality and in perception, the better university envisioned in the ‘smaller/better’ formula” (Freeland, 2000a). In short, Freeland aimed to make Northeastern University a truly national university which stood within the top tier of higher education (Freeland, 2000a). Freeland acknowledged that Northeastern University’s position in the *US News and World Report* rankings had fluctuated between the third and fourth tiers since the early 1990s (Freeland, 2000a). He also pointed to some key successes, however, which convinced him the time was right for this ambitious agenda, citing a 1999 magazine headline about Northeastern University’s business programme which read “Harvard, MIT, Stanford and Berkeley trumped by Northeastern” (Freeland, 2000a). Freeland characterised the increasing recognition of the business programme as “a triumph in education”.

According to Freeland, this goal of greater recognition was “not just a matter of aspiring to excellence” (Freeland, 2000a). It was a necessity for survival in a field of increasingly expensive and undifferentiated private universities, and where Northeastern University’s “special advantages” of

co-op education and community engagement did not necessarily “return the highest possible value in the reputation of [students’] degrees if they are to compete with public institutions” (Freeland, 2000a). Calling the effort a “task of supreme importance”, Freeland believed that their “commitments as professional educators” always ought to drive the desire for improvement (Freeland, 2000b).

Despite his apparent ardor, Freeland indicated some disquiet with the idea of gaming the rankings, claiming that rankings “are hardly the best or most important indicators of institutional quality or even of reputation” (Freeland, 2000b). Yet Freeland also argued that strengthening the perceptions of Northeastern University among prospective students, other academics, and the general public was “terribly important”, and that the popular rankings are “useful indicators of how we are doing in this respect” (Freeland, 2000b). Freeland said that Northeastern University had “a wonderful story to tell”, and that a rise in the rankings would be “a test of success” following ten years of institution transformation, of “smaller but better” (Freeland, 2000b).

## 5.2 *Restructuring the University*

In order to achieve his strategic imperative, Freeland outlined four key moments which made this goal possible: (1) the reform of Northeastern University’s co-op programme, (2) changing the academic calendar, (3) increasing the number *and* quality of new student enrolment, and (4) the inauguration of a \$200 million capital campaign.

### *Co-op Reform*

Freeland declared Northeastern University’s storied co-op programme to be “our defining characteristic for decades”, stating that co-op “remains the basis of our claim to national recognition” (Freeland, 2000a). Accordingly, Freeland’s first actions largely focussed on reform of the co-op programme, which was intended to provide students with longer-term full-time career training and work experiences, in tandem with the traditional curriculum (Northeastern University, 2016). In his inaugural address, Freeland called the isolation of co-op, professional education, and liberal arts from one another a “key obstacle”, which “leaves students to figure out for themselves how liberal learning undergirds professional skill, how concrete experience informs academic theory, and how abstract conception leads to practical insight” (“Inaugurating a new era”, 1997).

He challenged professors and staff to confront this fragmentation and “invent an integrated plan of practice-oriented education” (“Inaugurating a new era”, 1997). By the autumn of 1998, Freeland and Provost David Hall planned to make co-op reform a top priority: “Our historic position as a national leader in co-op is by no means assured... We must change because we have a great opportunity to lead a national movement toward practice-oriented education” (Freeland, 1998).

Several years into his tenure, Freeland published the “Call to Action of Cooperative Education”, a reform plan for revitalising the co-op system (Freeland, 2003). The plan was meant to “make [Northeastern University] competitive with other major universities” in tandem with gains in student quality and graduation and retention rates (Freeland, 2003). The initiatives which were proposed by the plan included moving co-op staff physically and organisationally into the colleges, re-designing the curriculum of each college and major so that co-op aligns with other courses, develop professors and staff members, creating a web-based scheduling system, and researching and promoting the ways in which co-op enhances student learning. Perhaps even more importantly, Freeland wanted each student to have an increased ability to “gain the benefits of both liberal and professional education” throughout their undergraduate career (Freeland, 2003).

#### *Changing the Academic Calendar*

Freeland also sought a major reform of Northeastern University’s academic calendar, changing it from a quarter-based to a more traditional semester-based system. The so-called “4 × 4 model” would divide the academic year into two 15-week semesters during which students would take four courses of four credits each (“Faculty approve semester proposal”, 2000). In order to graduate in five years, therefore, a typical student would need to attend courses for seven full semesters and two summer sessions, and complete three 26-week co-op placements (“Semester calendar takes shape”, 2000). The calendar reform was considered to be an important step towards reforming the co-op programme, bringing Northeastern University into line with other major universities. By adopting this calendar, Freeland believed that Northeastern University would reduce anomalous inconsistencies, and increase the visibility of the institution’s unique and attractive qualities (“Faculty approve semester proposal”, 2000).

The proposal was not popular with everyone on the campus. Professor Charles Ellis, the chair of the Senate Agenda Committee (SAC), found it to be more rigid than he would like, and cautioned that budget officials ought to more thoroughly evaluate the cost of the transition. Ellis also urged Freeland to reconcile the feelings of both the professors and the student body. The plan had been supported by a majority vote at the faculty level; the results of a student referendum, however, reflected a desire to keep the quarter-system. The student government president channelled the frustrations of the student body, stating that “a lot of students felt that the [conversion to semesters] was a done deal...they were frustrated in terms of the referendum”. Freeland dismissed the student concerns and emphasised the importance of the conversion for realising the Top 100 goal (“Faculty approve semester proposal”, 2000).

#### *Increasing Enrolment and Quality*

Beginning in 1997, President Freeland instituted a cap of 2800 on the enrolment of new first-year students, stating that the university needed to focus on recruiting high-caliber students, and on improving the quality of the Northeastern University experience. In April 2000, however, just a few months before Freeland announced his Top 100 initiative, the president lifted the cap as it became clear that both the yield rate and academic standards for the upcoming academic year would dramatically exceed expectations. A subsequent enrolment spike surprised many in the university community when overall first-year applications dropped by over 2000 compared with the previous admission cycle, despite average SAT scores improving from 1128 to 1133. Patricia Meservey, the acting vice president for enrolment management, suggested that the new numbers reflected positively on Northeastern University: “It’s really very good news for the university because it means we’re attractive to more students and because it provides us an opportunity to continue our progress toward becoming one of the top 100 national research universities in the country”. Meservey noted that several factors might have led to the increased enrolment, including the improved reputation of Northeastern University’s academic programmes and physical campus, strong economic conditions which might favour the decision to seek private education, and an earlier effort to distribute financial aid notifications (“university gears up for a new year”, 2000).

Freeland indicated that the admissions cap of 2800 students would return for the 2001–2002 academic year, emphasising the importance of

increasing Northeastern University's retention and graduation rates. In his October 2000 address, the president stated that he was seeking to "do a better job of attracting talented applicants who can flourish at Northeastern and also to do more to support through to graduation those who enrol... There is no more important objective within our overall agenda of change than this" (Freeland, 2000b). Freeland noted that Northeastern University's graduation standards were not yet comparable to other major universities, and "every member of the faculty as well as the offices of admissions and financial aid, our support services, university relations, our alumni, our physical plant department, even our efforts to become a pre-eminent urban university" would be harnessed towards this aim (Freeland, 2000b).

### *Capital Campaign*

Alongside the efforts to increase enrolment and the caliber of students at the university, President Freeland announced a new capital campaign to "double the private giving level and fund important initiatives that support Northeastern's smaller-and-better vision". The \$200 million effort would fund endowed scholarships, professorships, research support, and new technology, among other things. Freeland dubbed the effort the "Leadership Campaign", because it was "linked to our determination to be a national educational leader".

By 2006, the Leadership Campaign funded the hiring of over 100 professors, and the construction of ten residence halls, a fitness centre, and academic buildings (Bombardieri, 2015). The expansion of Northeastern University's physical facilities allowed for the dramatic increase of residential students and for a greater number of student engagement opportunities on campus. President Freeland's goal was to increase the attractiveness of Northeastern University beyond its traditional mooring as a practice-oriented, urban university:

Our location in Boston helps a lot, of course, and our special strength in cooperative education causes many students to choose us over other places. But even here the competition is stiffening. Many universities are incorporating funded internships into their offerings. We need to show that we get better results in terms of learning, personal development, jobs and life prospects than our imitators. (Freeland, 2000b)



The competition in the Boston-area meant Northeastern University had to expand its financial bearings in order to differentiate itself from its competitors. Moreover, as Freeland noted, the university had to make-up ground before it could truly compete among the major national institutions.

### 5.3 *“Making a Great University Even Greater”*

In November 2001, Freeland was awarded a three-year contract extension by the Board of Trustees. The Board’s report concluded that, under Freeland’s leadership, the university was “qualitatively better and financially stronger”, specifically naming the rankings initiative as a main point of achievement (“Freeland gets a new three-year contract”, 2001). With the support of his Board, and a general sense of confidence from the university community, Freeland pushed ahead with the Top 100 plan.

Not everyone was as enthusiastic. As part of the launch of his initiative, President Freeland asked Judith Ramaley, a former president of the university of Vermont, to assess the Northeastern University’s progress towards Top 100 status. Ramaley warned that, while employees often remained committed to ranking goals, they were “also growing a little weary” (“Freeland gets new three-year contract”, 2001). During his 2001 address to the university community, Freeland relayed Ramaley’s observation that Northeastern University had “reached the ‘trail-mix’ stage of institutional change” during which “we had undertaken an inspiring journey, and we were making good progress... but we had a long way to go, and we were getting tired and a little cranky”. She recommended that the Northeastern University community “pause, sit on a rock, remind ourselves why we have undertaken this trip and have some trail mix to recharge ourselves for the rest of the way”. In a pithy gesture, bags of trail mix were distributed to attendees on their way out of the auditorium (“Freeland beats drum for top 100”, 2001).

#### *Faculty Senate Initiatives*

Following President Freeland’s declaration of the Top 100 plan, the Senate Agenda Committee (SAC) decided that “the primary focus for the 2001–2002 Faculty Senate would be initiatives in support of the university’s newly declared quest for top 100 status among national research universities” (Faculty Senate Annual Report, 2002; Faculty Senate Minutes, 2001). In an October 2001 address to the campus

community, Professor Robert Lowndes, the chair of the SAC and former ‘special aide’ to Freeland (“Lowndes re-elected to top agenda committee post”, 2002), recognised that “all top-100 institutions will be determined to maintain their status”, and that Northeastern University’s success “will require an integrated strategic effort that embraces giant strides rather than small steps” (“Lowndes sets ambitious agenda”, 2001). Lowndes and other faculty members viewed Freeland’s goal as a way to increase the number of tenure-track professors on campus, and to implement new development programmes. The SAC chair asserted that Northeastern University was “too dependent on lecturers and academic specialists”, and that, while the contributions of adjunct professors was vital and important, it was “the contributions of the professoriate that mainly shape the academic reputation of the university” (“Lowndes sets ambitious agenda”, 2001).

Setting the agenda for the upcoming year, Lowndes directed the Faculty Senate to form five new committees which would be dedicated to different initiatives in support of the Top 100 status (Faculty Senate Annual Report, 2002). Each committee made recommendations to the Faculty Senate, and a summary was presented in the Senate’s 2001–2002 annual report. The recommendations ranged from enhancing the honours programme to developing more attractive four- and five-year degree programmes (Faculty Senate Annual Report, 2002). The report also outlined “faculty salary equity funds to begin to reverse the dramatic declines in salary competitiveness over the last decade” and “thereby recruit and retain the best faculty and enhance our academic reputation” (Faculty Senate Annual Report, 2002). The Senate also began to assess the potential of Northeastern University’s athletics programme to contribute to the rankings initiative, and whether or not budget reallocations might “differentially advance the status of the university and expand its name recognition among potential student applicants and, in addition, contribute to higher retention rates” (Faculty Senate Annual Report, 2002).

### *Restructuring the Provost’s Office*

In February 2002, Freeland announced a plan to restructure the office of the provost following the retirement of Provost Hall. Freeland proposed the creation of “a new division of enrolment management and student life that would be led by a new senior vice president” (“President announces restructuring plan”, 2002). The new division, which would be composed

of units previously organised underneath the provost, was focussed on the issue of “student-centredness”, and it would both allow the provost to concentrate more heavily on faculty and research initiatives, and align with comparable organisational structures at other major universities.

The announcement came as a surprise to the Faculty Senate and the remainder of the university community. In response, the Senate advanced a resolution expressing “its deep concern about the process, the timing, and the outcome of the proposed restructuring of the Provost position”. Further, it requested “that the President and the Board of Trustees postpone any further action...so that the merits can be fully addressed by the students, the faculty, and the Administration”. Professor Lowndes stated that the resolution was about “collegiality” and its purpose was threefold, namely to (1) place the concerns of the Senate on record, (2) slow the process for further examination, and (3) preserve the power and influence of the provost within the academic enterprise (Faculty Senate Minutes, 2002).

Freeland, who appeared before the Senate as it considered the resolution, explained that “he had not invited discussion by the university community because, historically, a vice president’s responsibilities have not been a topic of public debate or Senate deliberation”. Freeland had concluded that the move would place Northeastern University into a comparable organisational framework as other top universities, which could only aid the institution in its pursuit of higher rankings. Lowndes and others disagreed, stating that they could not determine any single trend in how enrolment management divisions were structured. The president of the student government agreed, citing concerns that the new structure would have a potentially negative effect on students. Freeland dismissed the idea, replying that “he did not see any adverse effect in the interactions with students” (Faculty Senate Minutes, 2002). The resolution passed; however, Freeland did not reverse his decision.

### *Putting a Finger on the Scale*

In April 2002, Northeastern University launched a new, \$3 million marketing campaign which touted “the strengths of Northeastern’s academic offerings and its flagship cooperative education programme”. Sandra King, the vice president for university relations, said that “Northeastern offers an academic product that has been highly regarded in too narrow a circle”, and that the time had come to take “our message out to specific geographic areas that the university has targeted”. Northeastern

University's foremost strategy included a new partnership with the Boston Red Sox which gave the university "permanent signage on the Fenway Park tri-vision screen, a full-page ad in the Red Sox official magazine, and a scoreboard 'brainteaser,' written by Northeastern professors and staff, during the fifth inning of each home game" ("university launches marketing campaign", 2002). President Freeland acknowledged Northeastern University's increasing presence as "a new chapter in history" for the institution. In his 2002 address, Freeland called on the university community to meet the challenge of "making a great university even greater" by continuing to raise Northeastern University's reputation (Freeland, 2002). He declared that the new marketing campaign promised to "tell our story more aggressively than ever" (Freeland, 2002).

Northeastern University was not advancing quickly enough, however, largely due to Northeastern University's large population of co-op students. Co-op students still counted as full-time students according to the ranking methodology, despite the fact that they were away from the institution gaining practical experience (Kutner, 2014). Indeed, Northeastern University's coveted status as a leader in "practice-oriented education" meant that hundreds of students were counted as consumers of university resources throughout the academic year. In order to bolster Northeastern University's advancement in the ranking, President Freeland marched into the Washington, DC, offices of *US News and World Report* in 2004 to meet with Robert Morse, the data expert behind the rankings (Kutner, 2014). During the meeting, Freeland attempted to persuade Morse to change the methodology to better reflect the transient status of co-op students. Morse refused, but he did help Freeland to "better understand the criteria" with "just enough insight for Freeland to work with" when he returned to Boston (Kutner, 2014). Following the meeting, Northeastern University changed the process for counting co-op students during the academic year. Instead of counting co-op students as they completed their offsite service, Northeastern University removed them from the roll which drastically improved its cost-to-student ratio (Kutner, 2014).

## 6 DISCUSSION

Northeastern University's meteoric rise to the upper tiers of the *US News and World Report* rankings marked a distinctive shift in how the university and its inhabitants thought about their purpose, work, and relationship to their immediate community. Drawing upon our case and our conceptual understandings of how rankings shape institutions and alter the everyday lives of their inhabitants, this section presents some insights into the processes and consequences of marketisation through the mechanism of rankings.

### 6.1 *The Promise of the Rankings*

Immediately upon his appointment, Freeland articulated a vision of Northeastern University as a “national university”, which was a complete divergence from the institution's prior mission, and a firm statement of market principles. Northeastern University was not a desirable organisational form, especially as compared to the prestigious universities which dominated and drove competition among higher education institutions (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Moreover, the deterioration of Northeastern University throughout the 1990s presented a challenge which Freeland apparently did not believe could be solved by simply adhering to the mission (Morphew, 2002), which until then emphasised service to the surrounding urban, low-income community. Freeland recognised that the *US News and World Report* rankings operated as the gatekeeper to valuable resources for survival, especially prestige, reputation, and legitimacy (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010b; Bowman & Bastedo, 2009). These resources, in turn, could be leveraged to increase admission rates among desirable student populations: wealthy, highly-educated families which would pay attention to, and value, the rankings as an indicator of quality or return on investment (Griffith & Rask, 2007). Rather than reluctance to go along with the rankings, which Freeland himself acknowledged as a poor measure of quality, Northeastern University aligned its entire programme of revitalisation to a more prominent position in the rankings. Survival meant access to the benefits of success within a heavily marketised field.

Freeland was not alone in seeing the potential of the rankings. Indeed, faculty leaders also saw the realisation of their goals in Northeastern University's rise. Improving Northeastern University's ranking involved

generous increases in salaries and available tenure lines, which greatly appealed to the Faculty Senate as it embarked on Freeland's proposals. Gaming the rankings produced a tangible benefit for professors and the university overall (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Yet faculty members did not openly accept Freeland's proposals without some conflict. The reform of the academic calendar, for example, was meant to bring Northeastern University into line with other institutions, and to better preserve the unique co-op programme. The faculty members questioned the efficacy and cost of the proposal; Freeland ignored them in pursuit of alignment with the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Interestingly, the academic calendar reform further underscored the distinctive elements of Northeastern University's practice-oriented curriculum, an unusual occurrence according to new institutionalism. However, Freeland undermined this distinctiveness later in his tenure, by no longer reporting co-op students as part of the rankings, and by de-emphasising their role in advertising... a capitulation to field-level pressures (Bombardieri, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kutner, 2014).

As Northeastern University climbed the rankings, campus officials began spinning a tale of revitalisation, which attributed causal relationships between the rankings and positive local developments. Rankings increased Northeastern University's attractiveness to high-achieving prospective students, and a causal link was quickly established after enrolments unexpectedly jumped. This symbolic construction contributed to Freeland's efforts to promote the rankings as key to Northeastern University's success. Accordingly, professors, staff, and students received powerful messages which justified and valorised the Top 100 plan (Foucault, 1977). As field-level influences became apparent on campus, the consistent messaging by Freeland and others normalised the presence and importance of rankings across the university—notably, the increased focus on promotion and rebranding, both in the rhetoric of the national university and the public advertising campaigns, conveyed a message to external constituents and to professors, staff, and students.

## 6.2 *Normalisation*

The valorisation of the Top 100 plan was essential to its success, establishing it as an institutional myth of sorts which encapsulated a triumphant organisational saga (Clark, 1972; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The transition from local, urban college to national university was drastic, and

represented a break with the institution's mission and years of accepted practice. By adopting the market-focussed emphasis of the rankings, Freeland brought Northeastern University into comparison with élite universities. His rhetoric and actions strove to construct Northeastern University as a similarly élite establishment (Foucault, 1977). This shift in competitive set operated as an act of normalisation, which allowed for the measurement of gaps and for the identification of differences (Foucault, 1977). Freeland began this process early in his tenure, comparing Northeastern University's ranking-gains to Harvard, Stanford, and other major universities. Such rhetoric had local implications. Campus leaders, for example, were able to talk about institutional statistics, such as graduation rates and SAT averages, with comparative language. After a benchmark was firmly established, the campus community was able to define the meanings which were represented by a low graduation rate. Even though these measures were a central part of the *US News and World Report* rankings, they could only secure meaning through the normalisation of the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Foucault, 1977).

This process was most apparent as Northeastern University transitioned its academic calendar, and established enrolment caps. First, the calendar shift aligned Northeastern University with other universities, and enhanced the ability of prospective students to evaluate Northeastern University as part of the decision-making process. Interestingly, the calendar shift also allowed Northeastern University to better organise its distinctive co-op programme, a pattern of support which did not initially appear to be affected by increasing isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Northeastern University quickly absconded with this development, however, after the process for counting enrolled students was altered. The calendar shift now aided campus officials in improving an important statistic for the rankings. Second, the establishment of the enrolment cap acted as a major signal of differentiation and prestige-seeking. Many people at Northeastern University linked enrolment to increases in the rankings, a logic which likely influenced how others interpreted Freeland's Top 100 plan.

### 6.3 *Surveillance and Internalisation*

As the Top 100 plan moved forward, it became clear that faculty members and staff members were altering their activities accordingly. The penetration of competitive rhetoric revealed the ways through which professors'

work could be measured and improved, either in terms of efficiency or even expanded hiring. Although they did not fall completely into line, faculty leaders were generally supportive of the plan, and underlined various ways to improve Northeastern University's climb up the rankings. Faculty senate documents articulated an awareness that increased rankings would link to increased funding and hiring, and that behaviour would need to change in line with the priorities of the rankings. The incompatibility between the rankings and the prevailing logics of the professoriate, however, were not ignored. Indeed, Freeland encountered resistance when aligning professors' time with other, more marketised institutions (Vican et al., 2019). The new culture of managerialism, although tied to potential material benefits, still necessitated active surveillance to ensure compliance across the professoriate (Foucault, 1977; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Unlike other external pressures which alter the everyday operations of a university (accountability demands and legal regulations, for example), the rankings offer a path to survival, and access to resources which can be sheathed in obligatory, public grumbling. In many ways, rankings represent an inverse of the idea of institutional buffering: distaste with rankings and public affirmations of the mission of higher education mask enormous institutional efforts to improve ranking position (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Orton & Weick, 1990; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Moreover, the disciplinary process internalises the marketised logic of rankings with both the structure and denizens of the institution (Foucault, 1977; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). By 2002, Freeland's initiative became embedded within many of Northeastern University's policy mechanisms. The Faculty Senate reported a large number of committees and programmes which were specifically related to Top 100 priorities, from professor recruitment to academic library policy. The rankings were made "real" through institutional policy, as members of the campus community enacted the rankings in their everyday work (Swidler, 1995). Campus leaders, for example, constructed tautological narratives about student quality and the influence of the rankings on Northeastern University's position in the student decision-making process. As discussed earlier, professors internalised notions of "gaming the gaming", using the Top 100 plan to reinforce their own positions on campus, namely through the capital campaign. Professors likely became invested in this new order, however, because it enabled them to achieve the traditional aims of the academy.



## 7 CONCLUSION

Freeland's ambitions yielded results. In August 2005, following Freeland's meeting with the *US News and World Report* editors, Northeastern University advanced 17 points in the rankings over the previous year, from 115 to 98. The news came one day after Freeland announced his retirement. Freeland's tenure represented a period of massive organisational change—one which involved a complete reordering of institutional priorities, traditions, and values. Rankings operate as a mechanism which prescribes particular habits and modes of action for universities, chief among them the elements of marketisation. In many ways, this manner of organisation presents a threat to universities which lay claim to historical goals of learning, knowledge production, and contribution to society. Rankings reshape how people value what makes higher education unique, aiding in the transformation of knowledge, students, teaching, and other intellectual efforts, into goods for sale. The case of Northeastern University represents a complex moment during which one specific university reckoned with its collapse, and based an entire programme of reform on the premise of accepting a new regime to improve its position in the rankings. In turn, these improved rankings allowed Northeastern University to continue its existence at the expense of what made it unique. In the era of marketisation, survival, not purpose, is the prime imperative of the day, and everything can be sacrificed in its pursuit.

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