Higher Education Institutional Rankings: Evaluating Their Credibility for Branding and Marketing

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Higher Education Institutional (HEI) rankings are listings of postsecondary programs that show how institutions compare to one another on some combination of factors. For many, HEI ranking can complement branding strategies designed to promote programs, schools, colleges, and universities. Opportunities to create, communicate, and validate a school's brand are buoyed by the internet and by the publication of HEI rankings that cover a myriad of institutional attributes, from best college

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to most diverse. As a result, institutional webpages that incorporate an HEI ranking to communicate institutional brand are becoming increasingly visible to students and other stakeholders of higher education.

This chapter informs those who use, or would like to use, HEI ranking for branding on the internet and other marketing materials about how to determine the credibility of an HEI ranking. First, we examine literature concerning the extent to which students are influenced by HEI rankings. We then provide a brief history of HEI rankings and how they have evolved as a tool for communicating the brand promise. Next, we identify issues of source legitimacy, data integrity and stability of methodology, all of which help users of HEI rankings make informed decisions about how to use these schemas. A discussion of rankings for professional schools exemplifies unique issues that can surface when rankings are made for specialized programs, such as those that are nested within institutions. We conclude with a discussion of efforts by the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) to create a framework for improvement and refinement of methods used to develop credible HEI rankings

Administrator and Student Perspectives on HEI Rankings

Because institutional rankings are among the more visible tools used by students to search for their institution of choice (Egan et al. 2015), institutions increasingly publish favorable rankings as part of their branding strategy. Research has long shown that there is a relationship between improvement in the rankings and the acceptance rate and test scores of the entering freshman class. For example, Monks and Ehrenberg (1999) found that improving one's rank in *U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges* was associated with increased selectivity, an increase in yield, and improvement in admission scores for liberal arts colleges and national universities that were at the top of the ranking list. This work was expanded by Meredith (2004) who found that movement in and out of the first quartile of rankings had a particularly large effect on freshman admissions. In a more recent study based on *U.S. News & World Report Best College Rankings*, admission rates increased by .3% when the rank of the institution improved by one position. This change in enrollments appears to be more sensitive for institutions ranked in the top 25 (Ren 2014).

Surveys of freshmen on their reasons for choosing a particular college or university are also driving the use of institutional ranking in marketing and branding. In the 2015 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey of American freshmen students, approximately 20% of students rated college rankings in national magazines as very important for deciding to go to a particular college (Egan et al. 2015). College rank was more highly rated than wanting to live closer to home (8%), being admitted through an early admittance program (16%), the advice of the high school counselor (10%) and the advice of a teacher (7%). On the other hand, how the institution ranked was less important than eight other reasons, among them, a good academic reputation (70%) and graduates getting good jobs (60%). The social activities for the college were also rated as very important (44%). It is thus not surprising that there are now rankings on academic reputation, economic value added by the degree, and a large number of social aspects of an institution.

Recently published European research also found that institutions use rankings in their marketing efforts and that they invest in strategies to improve their image or brand (Hazelkorn et al. 2014). Rankings are used by institutional leaders in the academic community and by governments or national education authorities. A large percent of survey respondents believe rankings influence prospective students (70%), prospective researchers (66%), other institutions (65%), authorities in charge of higher education (63%), and prospective teaching staff (52%). Half believe rankings influence benefactors, sponsors, investors, funding bodies, and similar organizations. The survey respondents use a variety of ways to publicize their brand based on their ranking. Some refer to their place in a band —"we are in the top –x." Some refer to the specific rank—if it is sufficiently high. Some use a cluster of rankings to demonstrate geographic status and reputation while others compare themselves to national institutions. The higher ranked institutions believe the rankings are more influential. Respondents from over two-thirds of ranked institutions (69%) believe rankings have a positive impact while less than one-fifth of the unranked institutions (17%) believe rankings are a positive influence. The authors conclude that the relationship between ranking and reputation is likely strong because rankings are often based on reputation, and reputation is often based on ranking.

Taken together, why HEI ranking has emerged as a robust marketing component in branding and is used extensively in college admissions is clear. The relationship between rankings and enrollments is large enough

to attract the attention of those who want to create more awareness and interest in their particular institution. In fact, it is increasingly difficult to find a college or university website that does not contain one or more positive claims concerning the institution's ranking. The claims are intended to promote the success and strengths of the college, communicate those characteristics, and validate the legacy that higher education is delivering on its brand promise.

THE LEGACY OF HEI RANKINGS

Publications leading to institutional rankings first appeared in the early 1900's with British and American studies of men who were considered geniuses. Most prominent were Alick Maclean's published study *Where We Get Our Best Men* (1900) and Havelock Ellis's study on how many geniuses attended specific institutions (1904). In 1906, James McKeen Cattell published *American Men of Science: A Biographical Dictionary*, a work that paved the way for institutional ranking in the US. In 1910, the American Association of Universities asked Kendric C. Babcock of the Bureau of Education to publish a study of undergraduate training that could help graduate schools determine which applicants were best prepared (The history of ranking 2016). He conferred with deans, presidents, and others but for political reasons, the study was suppressed.

By the middle of the century, other precursors to current rankings were developed based on the number of imminent individuals who attended, graduated from, and were taught at various institutions. In 1930, Prentice and Kunkel measured academic quality by the number of a college's undergraduate alumni listed in *Who's Who in America* (Myers and Robe 2009). Initiatives to examine colleges and universities based on their reputation among various groups such as college deans and provosts also appeared on the horizon. Rankings of undergraduate studies appeared in the 1950s and 1960s and became a national phenomenon in the late 1980s and 1990s with reports published by for-profit organizations such as *U.S. News & World Report, Money Magazine*, and *The Princeton Review* (Myers and Robe 2009). Publishing HEI rankings was becoming a profitable option for companies. At the beginning of the 21st Century, global academic ranking of world universities gained prominence with work done by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University, which provided global rankings of universities for comparison against Chinese institutions (About academic ranking of world universities 2016).

HEI rankings thus grew from seeds planted more than a century ago by a privileged sector of society (i.e., those who had the means to attend college). It has since expanded beyond privilege to encompass many factors, some of which reflect the value-added by higher education (e.g., socio-economic factors, equal opportunity). In the US, attributes incorporated into ranking metrics have expanded from traditional characteristics such as institutions by type, best value, net price, and early career earnings to include happiest students, most beautiful campus, best food on campus, and a multitude of other aspects and characteristics. This proliferation of data collection on attributes requires that sources of data be identified and that the data be critically examined.

Assessing the Credibility of HEI Rankings

Today's use of HEI ranking appeals to a much wider audience and appears to be more transparent, inclusive, and useful to the general public. However, critics argue that some ratings are trivial and reflect attributes that do not contribute to a quality education. Use of HEI rankings as part of the marketing and branding strategy requires that the institution understand the purpose of a ranking, how it was constructed, and whether it will be perceived as accurate and trustworthy. The user must be able to (1) establish the legitimacy of the organization publishing the ranking, (2) document the integrity of the data and (3) evaluate the methodology used in construction of the ranking. The purpose of this section is to help readers better evaluate the credibility and reliability of these products.

Website and Publisher Legitimacy

A recent study of European institutions found that 75% use the publisher's website to learn about the ranking methodology (e.g., variables used, data collected, weightings applied) (Hazelkorn et al. 2014). Trusting the integrity of HEI ranking is thus contingent on being able to establish the legitimacy of the organization that creates and publishes the ranking (McLaughlin et al. 2005: 334). The publisher, for example, should be recognized as an expert—or knowledgeable—and the data should be verifiable (e.g., replicable, reproducible, comparable) and accessible to the extent possible.

In general, data from legitimate publishers are believed to be reliable and valid. For example, government websites are generally assumed to be trustworthy. As such, HEI rankings published on government websites or those using government data are commonly accepted as legitimate more so than are institutional rankings based on data from non-vetted surveys. Data from non-governmental organizations such as higher education associations and advocacy groups require more scrutiny. Each of these organizations should identify their mission and purpose for publishing HEI rankings on their websites. Similarly, for-profit business organizations such as those publishing the *U.S. News & World Report Best College Rankings* should make it clear to readers that they are a for-profit business that is publishing a consumer product. A caveat is that, even when the organization provides documentation on a website, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the organization has posted HEI rankings on an informational site, an advocacy site, or a for-profit business site. If the rankings are published by an individual or party not associated with a known organization, it may be difficult to obtain information to determine the legitimacy of the site. In cases where documentation and information needed to assess the legitimacy of the website is missing, the institution is using the published rankings at their own risk.

DATA INTEGRITY AND INFORMATION

Data integrity concerns whether available data meets acceptable standards for use in ranking institutions. As a starting point, the data source (e.g., government data, association data) should be recognized as authoritative, and the data should be verifiable, interpretable, accessible, and reliable. Any data sets constructed from the raw data should be sufficient, relevant, timely, and generalizable. The data should be evaluated using general standards of data integrity. This requires documentation of the source and analysis of the data (McLaughlin et al. 2005). If the data do not meet the test of integrity, then the institutional ranking should be considered suspect and inappropriate for use in branding.

For developers of HEI rankings, one of the most trusted sources of data for ranking is national databases. As of 2016, almost all countries collect some data on higher education institutions, with some countries having longstanding and extensive data bases. For example, the US Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS), located in the US National Center for Education Statistics, includes a myriad of data

about US higher education institutions (e.g. enrollment, spending, location, student and faculty characteristics) for more than 40 years (IPEDS n.d.). These data are publicly available for download and have been used extensively for ranking and creating comparator groups for institutional benchmarking.

Less trusted are data from websites provided by organizations that create portals for collecting self-report data. Nevertheless, not-for-profit and for-profit organizations (e.g., educational associations, for-profit vendors serving higher education) are becoming a major source of supplemental reporting data. They are collecting institutional-level data (e.g., employment and salary data, student opinion) and making it available for use in institutional rankings. Some organizations using website portals to collect data are well-known (e.g., Payscale, LinkedIn). Others are relatively new and working to establish credibility for their data. For example, Niche, founded in 2002 by Carnegie Mellon University students, uses student opinion surveys to collect data on a very broad range of college attributes from diversity, food, and dormitories to party life (Best colleges ranking methodology n.d.). The data are frequently from anonymous individuals who may or may not be providing accurate or verifiable information, thus raising questions about the integrity of the data.

Though government data tend to be trusted, the data themselves can pose problems for developing and interpreting HEI rankings. First, the data definitions may change over time; second, the interpretations of the data definitions (e.g., faculty, student, course) may differ across institutions or countries. The consistency of definitions of variables over time is especially critical when developing international ratings, across countries. Third, issues around data are further aggravated by missing data, concerns over the correctness of the data being submitted, and questions of fairness. When credible evidence indicates that measures differ across cultures or academic disciplines (e.g., research funding, journal publication statistics), the data should be shown to be valid and should be collected and reported for each context being examined. Finally, ranking organizations themselves may compromise data by changing data definitions or by asking the institution for data that are not normally collected. For these reasons, issues of data integrity are frequently a focus of critics who raise questions concerning the validity of institutional rankings (Espinoosa and Tukibayeva 2014).

Issues of Methodology and Stability

> The challenge of building an educational brand is compounded by collegiate ranking methodologies, which make institutions' value propositions blatant, though not necessarily accurate. (Lockwood and Hadd 2007)

Methodologies used in HEI rankings are frequently criticized as inappropriate. For this reason, it is risky to brand an institution with a ranking that fails to present an adequate discussion of its methodology. Although an institution's challenge to methodology is sometimes moderated when it attains a higher rank, this does not diminish the importance of researching methods prior to using the ranking in branding.

An important source of information for evaluating ranking methods is the *Handbook on Constructing Composite Indicators* (2008). This source identifies key methodological issues that need addressing when constructing a ranking from multiple variables. Measurement aspects that should be presented in a ranking's methodology include, but not limited to, missing data; normalization, weighting, data aggregation, validity, and stability.

Missing data Missing data can skew any analysis and must be managed appropriately. One of the simpler ways to handle missing data is to delete the institution for which data are not available. If an institution with missing data is not deleted, the question is whether the data are missing at random. For data missing at random, the missing information can be estimated and replaced using the mean or median of the variable. For data that are not missing at random, more sophisticated imputation methods should be used. Any time data are missing, evidence describing the nature of the missing data (i.e., random or not random) and how that information is handled (e.g., institution removed from ranking, imputation) should be provided by the ranking organization. [In situations where specific institutions are not required to report data, the exception should be noted and the data not considered missing at random. For example, US institutions that admit all who apply are not required to report the number of applicants, the number accepted, and the number enrolled (IPEDS n.d.).]

Normalization When variables measured on different scales (e.g., graduation rate and average class size) are included in a ranking, there needs

to be a methodology for converting the variables to a common scale. Various normalization methodologies include ranking of the individual measures, standardization of the measures, normalizing to a $(1, 0, -1)$ scale, and creating a categorical scale based on percentage distribution. *U.S. News & World Report* sets the "best" (usually highest} institution at 100 and computes the proportion of each other institution—thereby giving all measures set on a similar scale (How U.S. News calculated the 2017 best college rankings 2016).

Weighting Following normalization, weights should be assigned to each variable. Statistical methods for developing weights include regression analysis and Principal Components Analysis. There are also judgmental methodologies, such as asking a panel of experts. Some rankings avoid this issue by allowing the user to assign their own ranks or by producing the complements and ignoring any combined ranking. For example, *U-Multirank* does not create a combined rank score but rather allows users to change performance measures, change the performance scores, and select the number of institutions they want to view (Our approach to ranking 2016).

Data Aggregation Aggregating the data by summing scores from the individual variables, sometimes called Weight-and-Sum, can cause problems when interpreting and using rankings. The problem occurs when summing scores mathematically allows a higher score on some variables to mask a lower score on other variables. For example, this aggregation methodology, as used by *US News & World Report Best College Rankings,* can allow a higher score for high faculty salary to compensate for a lower score on graduation rate. The question is whether it is appropriate for an input variable, like faculty salary, to mask the performance on an outcome measure like graduation rate. Ranking scales do not usually require a minimum performance on individual components before they are included in the ranking (Clarke 2002). It may be more appropriate to require that an institution meet a minimum level of performance on a set of characteristics to be included in a ranking.

Construct Validity Construct validity is typically interpreted based on the relationship of the ranking to other scales and variables and to the extent that a variable measures a specific construct. If a ranking scale is measuring academic excellence, for example, it should have positive

relationships with those things that are thought to measure academic excellence (i.e. convergent validity) and not have positive relationships with those things not thought to represent academic excellence (i.e. divergent validity). For example, U-Multirank reported the results of a study in which a survey of EUA member universities identified the importance of indicators to their strategic planning and institutional monitoring. The results of this survey allowed U-Multirank to claim that "12 out of 15 most important items (are) covered by U-Multirank" (Federkeil 2015). Most of the evidence of construct validity in rankings however has come from individual researchers and very few rankings present their own evidence.

Stability A final methodological issues is the stability of the rankings from year to year. Rankings that do not demonstrate adequate stability imply a lack of reliability in their data and methods. Institutions that use rankings in branding that are not stable place themselves at risk for having to explain to stakeholders during subsequent years why they "fell" in the aspect being ranked.

Efforts to address the methodological issues noted above are evolving. For example, the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence has developed a ranking audit for use in constructing HEI global rankings. This effort will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. First, however, we will examine the special case of HEI ranking for professional schools.

Professional Schools and HEI Rankings: An Example of Context

Broadly speaking, professional schools are graduate-level institutions (frequently but not always found within larger universities) that train students for careers in a specific field that may require or provide opportunity for professional licensure or certification after graduation. Examples of professional school disciplines include architecture, nursing, teaching, management, pharmacy, medicine, and law. The landscape of professional education is rapidly changing amid advances in educational technology and pedagogy, proliferation of schools, increased competitiveness for admissions, growing amounts of accessible information, and ongoing demands for accountability and transparency from stakeholders (McKee

and Eraut 2011). As a result, a growing number of ranking platforms have been developed in an attempt to assess value, demonstrate success, and promote reputation in professional schools.

Ranking platforms in the profession use a wide range of criteria for determining ratings, such as peer and alumni assessment, admissions data, student outcomes, budget, and licensure pass rates. Yet the extent to which these criteria align with and reflect what's truly important and unique about professional disciplines remains unclear. Further, concerns about the quality and adequacy of these metrics inhibit many institutions from utilizing rankings to affect strategic change. Administrators and leaders in professional schools and colleges must be prepared to engage in conversations about rankings (e.g. evaluate methodologies, interpret findings, discuss relevance) and help shape the development of metrics that more accurately reflect the mission and vision of the discipline or profession.

Relevant Aspects of Professional Education There are a number of aspects to professional education that warrant consideration in the development and use of HEI rankings in branding. Of critical importance is the quality and availability of data to measure attributes that are reflective of the professions. While strides have been made in the United States to collect and make publicly available a wide range of educational indicators for higher education, including institutional and student level data (e.g. IPEDS), this level of transparency lags in professional education. This lack of data limits our ability not only to create composite metrics for use in ratings but to engage in national-level research that could promote the effectiveness of our institutions. Data availability and measurement is further complicated by the fact that outcomes traditionally used to evaluate US undergraduate education (e.g., graduation rates, retention) lack variability in some professions. In pharmacy education, for example, graduation rates and licensure pass rates tend to average above 90%. This raises some question as to how we measure quality and outcomes in professional education—in other words, what outcomes or data points indicate how well professional programs are preparing students for success in the workforce? At the global level, this type of measurement is even more complex given that scope of practice and related educational outcomes can vary widely based on varying national policies.

Further, some professional schools are coupled with 4-year institutions (e.g. undergraduate universities) while others are independent

schools (e.g. no other degree programs offered). For those affiliated with a university, the professional school might have its own admissions processes and requirements, its own academic calendar and tuition structure, and its own degree requirements. In addition, professional disciplines often have their own accrediting body, which sets standards for accreditation above and beyond the standards required for the university. A medical school coupled to a 4-years institution in the southeastern United States, for example, might have regional accreditation standards to meet as a part of the university (e.g. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges) and national accreditation standards to meet as part of the medical profession (e.g. Liaison Committee on Medical Education). Many universities also provide faculty and researchers with opportunities to serve in multiple schools or departments with adjunct or dual appointments, particularly in cases where research interests in two units overlap. A faculty member with expertise in global health economics, for example, might have a primary appointment in a school of business and an adjunct appointment in a school of public health, making it difficult to determine the extent to which that expertise and success is attributed to one unit or the other. These aspects of professional education, among others, introduce unique challenges to defining and capturing data that are accurate, specific, attributable, and reflective of the school or profession.

In addition to aspects of professional education that are unique, there are similarities to traditional higher education that make rankings subject to scrutiny. Like other higher education institutions, professional schools can vary widely in terms of size, specialties, resources, and values. When a ranking platform collapses quality into a single metric and applies that metric across the entire profession, it is unlikely to capture relevant aspects of all schools.

Implications for Rankings in Professional Education Despite the challenges associated with collecting data that is valid and reliable, the role of rankings in branding higher education institutions can generally extend to the professions as well. Rankings in professional education have significance for the profession, for the schools in that profession, and for the prospects considering that profession or school. At the level of the profession, rankings can signal opportunities to work with respected colleagues. For schools, favorable rankings can generate potential student interest, prompt alumni engagement, increase donations, enhance

visibility, and enable benchmarking. For students and prospective students, rankings provide a mechanism for evaluating the extent to which a program aligns with their interest if the ranking actually includes data that are related to those interests.

Concerns about the quality and adequacy of metrics often inhibit institutions from utilizing HEI rankings as a tool to affect change in professional education. Understanding the recent history of ratings and rankings and basic criteria for measurement/data integrity can position administrators to evaluate the quality of rankings and promote the development of rankings that are valid, reliable, and meaningful for supporting decision making. Given the proliferation of ranking systems and increasing number of degree programs in professional education, administrators and leaders in these disciplines must prepare themselves to engage in conversations about HEI rankings and help shape the development of these metrics. Administrators and educators should work with ranking organizations to create rankings that more accurately reflect the mission and values embodied by professional disciplines. Understanding these issues will better position professional schools to better promote the unique contributions and aspects of their institutions that contribute to the development of students.

Creating Standards for HEI Rankings

Current efforts to address issues around creating, documenting, and promoting global standards for HEI ranking are designed to eliminate the confusion and cacophony in discussions of rankings, whether for the whole or parts of an institution (e.g., colleges, schools, programs). In 2004, an international group of individuals involved in HEI rankings was convened by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This group, the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG), formed the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence (IREG Observatory) as "an international institutional non-profit association of ranking organizations, universities and other bodies interested in university rankings and academic excellence" (About us n.d.). At IREG's 2006 meeting in Berlin, the group identified principles for quality and good practice in HEI rankings. The resulting principles (i.e., the Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions) were identified within a framework for the "elaboration and dissemination of rankings". The intent was to create a system for

"continuous improvement and refinement of the methodologies" that could be used to develop credible HEI rankings. As part of its over-sight, IREG developed the IREG Ranking Audit initiative.[1] Based on the Berlin Principles, it was developed to "enhance the transparency about rankings; give users of rankings a tool to identify trustworthy rankings; and improve the quality of rankings" (IREG Ranking Audit n.d.).

The IREG Ranking Audit identifies criteria for evaluating the pro-cess and outcomes of HEI ranking. Criteria are organized into five cat-egories: (1) Purpose, Target Groups, Basic Approach; (2) Methodology; (3) Publication and Presentation of Results; (4) Transparency, Responsiveness; and (5) Quality Assurance. The audit's criteria are made available on-line by the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence (IREG Ranking Audit n.d., p. 7).

The Berlin Principles and IREG Ranking Audit represent efforts to focus attention on quality assurance in HEI rankings. The audit's cri-teria are consistent with best practices in data integrity and with widely accepted standards for educational and psychological testing (*Standards for educational and psychological testing* 2011). In addition, consistent with the Berlin principles, institutions have the right to challenge data.

The primary concern of critics of the IREG's audit framework is that it does not require that rankings be accompanied with empirical analyt-ical evidence that they are valid for their intended use, that data have sufficient reliability, or that data should be sufficient, relevant and timely given the target population. This is a particular concern when HEI rank-ings need to demonstrate that they are free from bias when data are col-lected across institutions from different cultures. A second concern is the algorithm that is used in a decision to award for the IREG Audit's quality label and corresponding logo—"IREG approved". Criteria are divided into regular criteria (10 criteria) and core criteria (10 criteria) with the regular criteria weighted one and the core criteria weighted two. Based on evidence from the developer of the ranking, each crite-ria is rated on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1 being "Not sufficient," 3 being "Adequate," and 6 being "Distinguished." "Audit can be with condi-tions if there are deficits with regard to core criteria." Other than this consideration, if a ranking gets an average of "Adequate" it receives the

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quality label. This means it can be "not sufficient" on multiple criteria as long as it is "Distinguished" and/or "Strong" and/or "Good" on of criteria to bring its average back to "Adequate". It would seem to be desirable to require that a ranking needs to meet a minimum standard for each criterion.

In summary, development of the IREG guidelines represents progress in identifying and encouraging the continuous improvement of HEI rankings. This is important for building confidence in their appropriateness for branding. Rapidly changing technology and methodology will make it possible to augment these guidelines with insights from a wide array of stakeholders. This will make it possible for organizations publishing rankings to develop credible rankings for use in branding by both the larger multi-college institutions and for subunits such as a medical school or other discipline which differs from the larger university in very distinct ways. These guidelines can also contribute to development of credible rankings for branding institutions that are located in distinctly different culture.

Conclusions

Institutional administrators and students perceive HEI rankings as useful sources of information and believe that they signal the benefits of choosing a specific institution or program. Though the origins of HEI rankings can be traced back to sources published more than 100 years ago, the internet has made publication of HEI ranking accessible to stakeholders globally. As a result, it is imperative that institutions evaluate the benefits and dangers associated with using HEI rankings in branding. Prior to using a ranking on its website, decisions makers must be knowledgeable about the methods and data used to create the ranking and the legitimacy of publisher. Examination of special cases such as health sciences also demonstrates the need to be knowledgeable about differences across and among cultures, disciplines, programs, and institutions and their missions. Efforts to recognize these differences and create standards for HEI rankings are evident in the work of the IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence.

In today's connected world, HEI ranking will occupy a permanent space in the higher education market. Critics and proponents want to ensure that the rankings are based on reliable and valid data, properly operationalized variables, correctly defined categories, and sound

methodologies. When done correctly, HEI rankings can enable institutions to make better informed decisions about how to brand themselves as unique.

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