LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT RANKINGS ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND DECISION-MAKING OF INDIVIDUAL COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

by

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LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS

“The U.S. News foray into the realm of ranking doctoral programs in the arts and sciences prompts this reaction: Get used to it. Americans love lists, just ask David Letterman. We rank everything from automobiles to football teams, from hospitals to mutual funds. Why not, then, rank the most popular graduate programs? Hell, churches may be next. (By the way, which denomination does have the best clergy?)”
–Richard Chait, University of Maryland (Responses to the Rankings, 1992, p. 49).

Problem Statement & Rationale

Over the past decade, the level of external scrutiny toward the world of higher education has continually increased. Upon reflection, the above quotation from former University of Maryland and current Harvard University professor Richard Chait seems to have provided foreshadowing that has been eerily accurate. State and federal policymakers, media outlets, professional associations, independent pundits, alumni, parents, students, and the public at large exert greater influence on the functioning of colleges and universities, perhaps at a rate and volume greater than at any prior point in American history. The ability to assess the “value-added” of higher education was a resounding message in the latter half of the 1990s, and continues to impact the manner in which leaders of colleges and universities must approach their work (Kirp, 2004). Increased calls for higher levels of accountability within higher education strike at the heart of the tension between the autonomy historically enjoyed by colleges and universities and challenges to both the substantive and procedural components of institutions of higher education (Berdahl, Altbach, & Gumport, 1999). Furthermore, higher education continues to be increasingly subject to the forces of marketization (Kirp, 2004) and commercialization (Bok, 2003; Duderstadt, 2003; Rhodes, 2001), which add fuel to the fire of the autonomy versus accountability debate by raising the number of external influences within individual institutions and the system as a whole.

While it is inconclusive whether or not these new challenges are of greater magnitude or pose greater threats to higher education than other historical occurrences, they are in fact new challenges in a world where the rate of change seems to be continually escalating. The challenges of
accountability, assessment, and commercialization all coalesce around yet another perceived challenge: the pursuit of prestige by colleges and universities. Much has been written about the pursuit of prestige by institutions of higher education in the context of accountability, assessment, and commercialization (Couturier & Scurry, 2005; Diament, 2005; Ehrenberg, 2002; Hodges, 2002; Lovett, 2005; Machung, 1998), yet few empirical studies attempt to understand the impact of seeking institutional prestige within the unique organizational context of higher education and within individual colleges and universities. Those writings that do examine this phenomenon do so using almost exclusively anecdotal evidence (Ehrenberg, 2002) or examining the impact on the overall system of higher education instead of individual institutions (Aldersley, 1995; Arnone, 2003; Astin, 1985; Clark, 1987; Dey, Milem, & Berger, 1997; Morphew & Huisman, 2002). In fact, there are relatively few empirical studies that explore the unique organizational behavior of colleges and universities and the impact of forces within their organizational environments (Kezar, 2001).

This paper aims to fill both of these gaps within the scholarly literature by focusing upon a single, highly visible, under-studied influence on the pursuit of prestige and its impact within the unique organizational environments of colleges and universities: U.S. News & World Report (hereafter U.S. News) rankings. Prior studies that have focused upon U.S. News rankings (or other studies of prestige-seeking) have examined a limited range of outcomes or have attempted to illustrate the flawed nature of the methodology of the rankings, and in both cases have done so either in the aggregate or through the use of highly anecdotal evidence. As such, the impact of the rankings on individual colleges and universities and their organizational environments is relatively unknown.

The following section will review literature in three broad areas. First, pieces from the popular press, other journalistic sources, or other general works that illustrate the need to better understand the influence of the rankings and prestige-seeking within higher education are considered. Second, a framework for understanding the unique organizational environment of
colleges and universities and the manner in which it can be studied is presented, as it will significantly inform the development of a research agenda on the subject. Lastly, a review of those empirical studies that exist is offered to illustrate the work that has been done on the rankings or prestige-seeking within higher education and to show where the gaps in the literature exist. It is necessary to include both studies that specifically examine the U.S. News rankings as well as those that are more general in order to compile a comprehensive review of studies of the pursuit of prestige given the limited number of works that are rankings-driven. A proposed research agenda for examining the phenomenon in question will follow in a subsequent section.

**Literature Review**

The following review is broken into three substantive sections. First, pieces are reviewed that lack empirical research, yet explain U.S. News rankings in some way or attempt to argue for the need to better understand the prestige-seeking process. Second, the major works that help to illustrate the conceptual framework for studying colleges and universities as unique organizational contexts are discussed in connection to pursuing increased prestige and status. Lastly, empirical studies focusing in upon the rankings themselves, or the larger prestige-seeking process, are reviewed.

**Social Commentary Pieces on Prestige-Seeking & U.S. News Rankings**

A significant body of literature exists that either focuses upon the pursuit of prestige in higher education broadly or attempts to illustrate the perceived threats posed by U.S. News rankings and other similar indicators toward colleges and universities. These works, for the most part, lack any empirical research to substantiate their claims. However, given the mass of pieces that fall into this category, their review is necessary, at least in part because they help to contextualize the need to better understand the problem at hand and the potential influence of the rankings on individual institutions.
An appropriate place to begin is with a review of U.S. News rankings themselves. It should be noted at the outset that unless otherwise specified, references to the rankings should be interpreted as relating to the classification of undergraduate colleges and universities, not professional or graduate school rankings published by U.S. News. Given that the proposed research agenda below will assess the institution-wide impact of the rankings, it makes little sense to focus upon the professional and graduate school rankings. Additionally, there is tremendous variation among methodologies for different types of graduate or professional schools, which intuitively suggests that such rankings have significant variability within the respective fields and/or disciplines. Thus, to avoid the resulting complications, the research agenda considers the impact of U.S. News rankings on colleges and universities as undergraduate institutions.

The most concise explanation of the U.S. News rankings of America’s best colleges and universities can be found in a recent piece by Ehrenberg (2003). While the author remains somewhat neutral in assessing the potential benefits or threats to higher education posed by U.S. News, he does suggest that they have “become the ‘gold standard’ of the college rankings business” (Ehrenberg, 2003, p. 1). Ehrenberg (2003) also does a very eloquent job of illustrating how the rankings are computed, at least as of 2002-2003. Academic reputation, as measured by a survey of presidents, provosts and deans of admissions, comprises 25% of the overall ranking. Student selectivity, with a total value of 15%, is comprised of the acceptance rate (10%), average SAT/ACT score of all freshmen enrolled that took the test (2.5%), and proportion of the entering class that was in the top 10% in their high school class (2.5%). The third indicator, faculty resources is given a weight of 20% - faculty compensation is the largest sub-factor in this indicator (7.5% to the overall ranking), which is defined as the average pay and benefits of full-time professors adjusted for regional cost of living. The institution’s 6-year graduation rate (16%) and freshmen retention rate (4%) compose the fourth indicator, also at 20% overall. Financial resources is given 10% in the
overall ranking, measured by FTE per student on instruction, research, public service, academic
support, student services, institutional support, and operations and maintenance. The percentage of
alumni donating money to the institution is given 5% in the final ranking score and the graduation
performance rate (6-year rate measured by considering inputs of the student body with institutional
resources and measuring a predicted rate against the actual rate of graduation) also receives 5%.

Having established the basic methodological framework employed by U.S. News for
achieving the outcomes of their ranking system, a review of the pieces that can be considered social
commentaries on their value, use, or connection to the prestige-seeking process more broadly can be
undertaken. In a recent piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, President of the American
Association for Higher Education Clara Lovett (2005) decried that pursuing prestige could lead to
“perilous” outcomes for colleges and universities, largely due to the quest for increased status atop
rankings such as U.S. News. Lovett argues that seeking increased prestige leads to paradoxical
results. Specifically, she reasons that as efforts are made to expand access to higher education,
institutions competing against one another are rewarded in the rankings game for restricting access
to seem more prestigious, and that the entire process reinforces social and economic stratifications
within society. Additionally, Lovett suggests that prestige mechanisms such as college and university
rankings devalue those institutions that do not occupy the highest status levels but also educate the
largest portion of students, and that these institutions deserve far greater recognition than the
prestige wars will ever grant as currently configured. Hodges (2002) makes a similar argument,
questioning, “Where are the rankings for the colleges that serve the underprivileged? Where are the
articles that brag about campuses maximizing the potential for students possessing few social and
educational advantages? For the most part, state and community colleges dedicated to educating the
masses are the recipients of scorn” (p. 34). This is one common theme of articles that fall into the
social commentary category: to infer that prestige-seeking and the rankings systems themselves
promote a single, uniform vision of the ideal institution of higher education such that institutions with lesser public images are devalued.

Connected to this argument is the suggestion that prestige-seeking and U.S. News rankings restrict access and promote inefficient competition between colleges and universities. Yet another recent article from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, itself focused on the reporting of *The Futures Project*, argues that increased competition “means that universities are competing for two types of students: those who will increase an institutions ranking in *U.S. News & World Report* and those who can pay the full cost of their education” (Diament, 2005, p. A23). *The Futures Project*, funded and initiated by the late Frank Newman, seeks to illustrate the impact of market forces within the system in an effort to recommend ways in which higher education can once again be considered a social good as opposed to an individual benefit. The project recognizes that prestige is an increasingly significant market force creating “unhealthy competition that does not lead to increased access, better instruction, lower costs, or greater efficiency” (p. 1). The report also comments that “Today, many academic leaders feel compelled to chase revenues and rankings rather than to focus their efforts on providing a high-quality education to an ever-expanding share of the population” (pp. 1-2). Additionally, the report suggests that the status of teaching be elevated in considering the quality of institutions, “so that students can choose their endeavors and their courses on the basis of the quality of the learning experience, and not on the basis of dubious college ‘rankings’ schemes” (p. 8).

Similarly, Machung (1998) argues that the driving force behind the continued use of U.S. News rankings is not simply to recruit students, but to raise funds with alumni and recruit faculty and administrators. She argues that the reason behind the immense popularity of the rankings is that institutions of higher education use them to aggressively promote themselves. The author suggests, “What gives U.S. News this clout is, in part, competition among colleges and universities, the desire of each to outshine the other, and their unwillingness to band together” (p. 17). An article from a
The 1992 edition of *Change* magazine illustrates a parallel argument. In this piece, titled “Responses to the Rankings,” the editors of *Change* solicited comments from leaders throughout higher education in order to show a wide-range of opinions about the rankings. One comment comes from C. Jan Swearingen of the University of Texas-Arlington, who argues that the rankings fail to consider interdisciplinary programs because they do not neatly fit into the categorizations of the system. This argument suggests that the rankings prevent or hinder internal collaborations. Others (see Ehrenberg, 2002; Kirp, 2004) suggest that the rankings do not prevent collaborations between institutions, as illustrated by the recent development of a multi-campus online classics department. The rankings themselves do nothing to encourage or reward collaborations that could result in greater economic efficiency and lower costs across institutional boundaries. In fact, they seem to be driving up both tuition costs and institutional spending in all areas (Ehrenberg & Monks, 1999).

There is some empirical evidence that supports this line of argument within the social commentary surrounding the prestige-seeking and U.S. News rankings dilemma. Astin (1993) argues that having a strong emphasis on reputation building has negative consequences for undergraduate education, especially through the hiring of star-caliber faculty that commit little time to teaching and drain institutional resources that could go elsewhere. Similarly, Ehrenberg and Monks (1999) illustrate that achieving an increase in the rankings allows an institution to increase all measures of its own selectivity while simultaneously raising tuition. Collectively, these works point to a second theme in the social commentary on the pursuit of prestige and the perceived impact of U.S. News rankings within colleges and universities: restricted access to the elite institutions, complimented by an expanding lack of efficiency as manifested in increased costs, expenditures, and the absence of rewards to recognized intra- and inter-institutional collaborations.

Another common theme of pieces from this broad category is that U.S. News and prestige-seeking further and enhance the continued commercialization of higher education as its own
industry. In each of Kirp’s (2004) case studies about the manifestation of marketing and other business practices within colleges and universities, U.S. News is mentioned as a force that seems to drive recruiting, admissions, and enrollment techniques within higher education. While his work does not explicitly focus upon the rankings and their influence within the system of higher education or within individual colleges and universities, it is striking to see him comment on them in all of the smaller case studies within his book. Ironically, many who highlight the threats that commercialization and other market forces, such as U.S. News rankings, pose to higher education are former university presidents (Bok, 2003; Duderstadt, 2003; Rhodes, 2001). While this particular threat to colleges and universities may or may not be of any greater significance than other challenges presented throughout history, the fact that retired presidents are those that are levying the strongest criticisms on this issue may illustrate the taboo and clandestine nature of their significance within colleges and universities. This point further illustrates the need to better understand actual and perceived impact of the rankings.

Lastly, the writings that consider the impact of U.S. News rankings or prestige-seeking more generally do so using almost exclusively anecdotal evidence. A section from Ehrenberg (2002) best illustrates this trend. The author writes, “Anecdotal evidence from several private institutions that immediately follows suggest that an institution’s U.S. News ranking is important to private institutions regardless of which selectivity tier they occupy. Subsequent sections will provide similar evidence for public institutions in several selectivity tiers. This evidence suggests that private and public institutions at many levels of student selectivity do worry about their U.S. News rankings” (Ehrenberg, 2002, p. 148). The two examples given are frightening. The first involves an administrator being fired for not reporting data to U.S. News on time and causing a drop in rankings. The second, in which the name of the institution cannot be disclosed for privacy reason (itself a scary indication of the potential influence of the rankings), involved an early draft of the institution’s
strategic plan calling for an increase in faculty salaries *specifically* because it would result in increasing the institution’s ranking. These brief anecdotes illustrate the relatively unknown influence of U.S. News rankings on organizational behavior of colleges and universities. Furthermore, the entire discourse within the broad overview of writings under the heading of social commentary implies that the impact of the rankings on organizational life within colleges and universities is strictly negative. Each theme from this section frames the impact of the rankings as threatening. Prestige-seeking and U.S. News rankings espouse a model for higher education that devalues institutions at lower levels of the hierarchy, restricts access, inhibits the most efficient delivery of services by driving up costs and expenditures, hinders intra- and inter-institutional collaboration, and increases the commercialized nature of higher education; yet they remain a relatively unknown factor within the unique organizational contexts of colleges and universities.

Having reviewed the emergent themes present in the works outlined above, a clear need emerges to better understand the complexities of the interactions between U.S. News and the organizational behavior of individual institutions. The following section turns to the development of a conceptual framework for studying organizational behavior of colleges and universities as unique organizational settings.

**Developing a Framework for Observing the Potential Impact of U.S. News Rankings**

This section has three objectives. First, an illustration of the unique conditions that make college and university organizational environments distinctive from other organizational environments is considered. Second, a review of studies of institutional isomorphism as a guiding principle for conceptualizing the potential impact of prestige-seeking and U.S. News rankings within individual institutions of higher education is presented. Lastly, a multi-lens organizational framework to guide the proposed research agenda to follow is established.
The Unique Organizational Environment of Colleges and Universities

In the most comprehensive review of college and university environments as unique organizational contexts, Adrianna Kezar (2001) identifies 13 key organizational factors from the research on higher education for understanding organizational theory as applied to the field. While it is worth noting that the impact or even presence of these factors varies greatly by institutional type, they are nonetheless useful in considering issues related to the organizational behavior of higher education. These 13 factors are: “1) interdependent organization, 2) relatively independent of the environment, 3) unique culture of the academy, 4) institutional status, 5) values-driven, 6) multiple power and authority structures, 7) loosely coupled systems, 8) organized anarchical decision-making, 9) professional and administrative values, 10) shared governance, 11) employee commitment and tenure, 12) goal ambiguity, and 13) image and success” (Kezar, 2001, p. 61).

The concept of an interdependent organization refers to how colleges and universities are heavily reliant upon outside organizations, such as accrediting agencies, state and federal governments, foundations, and national associations, and are not fully autonomous entities. This interdependent status can result in higher education receiving multiple or mixed messages from the types of outside entities noted above (Kezar, 2001). At the same time, higher education is relatively independent of the environment. External market, social, economic, or political forces can influence how responsive higher education must be to environmental conditions. Historically, higher education has had greater independence from these forces, but external pressures are increasing (Kezar, 2001). However, like the factor of interdependent organizations, external forces often do not have synergy and can potentially cancel each other out.

One of the most applicable and distinguishing characteristics of the organizational environment of colleges and universities is the unique culture of the academy. Relying upon the multiple model frameworks (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003), Kezar (2001) notes that the
values of faculty and administrators clash within most institutions, recognizing that the culture of higher education is often not unified, and further, that institutional type can emphasize or inhibit certain cultural elements. Institutional status is another unique factor influencing the organizational behavior of colleges and universities. Defining higher education organizations as institutions embodies characteristics such as having a long-standing mission, being closely tied to ongoing societal needs, and having set norms and socialization processes based on the combination of the mission and societal needs. Given these institutional characteristics, it is noted that change is less likely to occur, or that if it does, it will occur in response to a collaborative process involving lengthy debate among stakeholders (Kezar, 2001). Again, it is worth noting that the observation about the change process varies greatly across institutional contexts.

While all organizations are driven by values, the point of emphasis in identifying this factor is to recognize that different elements of higher education have complex and often contrasting sets of values. While some values are shared because of the nature of higher education (i.e., academic freedom), differences in discipline-based values, faculty, administrative and student values, as well as the ongoing diversity of the academy are parts of the unique character of describing higher education as a value-drive entity. A sixth factor identified as unique to the organizational environment of higher education is the presence of multiple power and authority structures within colleges and universities. Those that have power and influence within higher education, and the manner in which power and influence are exerted within colleges and universities can be starkly different than it would be among traditional bureaucratic organizations. The varying cultures within higher education each embrace different perspectives about the purpose and location of power, further complicating an analysis of their organizational behavior and capacity for change (Kezar, 2001).
Another salient characteristic within colleges and universities is the concept of loosely coupled systems, also described at length by Birnbaum (1988). Kezar (2001), referencing Morgan (1997) and citing Weick (1991), writes, “Loosely coupled systems are uncoordinated and have a greater differentiation among components, high degrees of specialization among workers, and low predictability of future action” (p. 70). This characteristic of higher education recognizes that large-scale change is often very difficult to achieve, with change likely to occur in pockets of the organization as a specific, locally determined adaptation to circumstances. The concept of organized anarchical decision-making is one first pioneered by Cohen and March (1974), expanded upon by Birnbaum (1988), and most recently adapted by Wheatley (2001). Related to the nature of power in colleges and universities, organized anarchies have ambiguous goals, fluid participation, are uncertain, unpredictable, and nonlinear. However, Kezar (2001) notes that the smaller the institution the less likely it is to be characterized by this particular factor.

The notion of professional and administrative values as a defining characteristic of the organizational environment of higher education is another “either-or” characteristic of the faculty versus administrative cultures. Kezar (2001) writes, “Administrative power is based on hierarchy; it values bureaucratic norms and structure, power and influence, rationality, and control and coordination of activities. In contrast, professional authority is based on knowledge and the values system emphasizes collegiality, dialogue, shared power, autonomy and peer review” (p. 72). A tenth distinguishing feature of organizational behavior within colleges and universities is the practice of shared governance. Shared governance minimizes power and status differences by equalizing, at least to a degree, membership on respective cross-institutional committees. This process also allows for expression of more voices that might not otherwise be heard, and is generally thought of as helping establish broad institutional support for new initiatives. Shared governance is also an attempt to tap into the informal networks that exist on a college campus.
Three final characteristics are identified as influencing the organizational environment within colleges and universities: employee commitment and tenure, goal ambiguity, and image and success. By comparison to other industries, faculty and administrative turnover in higher education is relatively low. However, the average tenure of a university president is seven years. Seemingly contradictory pieces of this factor are institutional commitment and the longevity of one’s employment, which can either positively or negative impact change in higher education. One of the more striking characteristics, by comparison to organizations in other sectors, is the multiplicity and ambiguity of goals and the absence of clearly defined “bottom lines.” The absence of clear goals in some ways disables strong visionary leadership from materializing and can cause inconsistency between actions and espoused values (Kezar, 2001). This is one of the most contentious factors in higher education as calls for increased accountability continue to mount. While not very well understood given the absence of research in this area, image and prestige are clearly elements of higher education that seem to impact organizational behavior. Several scholars attempt to tie image to individual identity, with specific ramifications for how the people in an organization feel about themselves and about the institution. However, focusing on image may present conflicting outcomes in contrast to efforts towards other accountability measures such as student learning or development.

The 13 factors described above each influence the organizational environment of institutional of higher education in unique ways that necessitate a distinctive analysis by comparison to governmental or corporate entities. Birnbaum’s (2001) most recent study of management fads in higher education is further evidence of the unique organizational context and character of colleges and universities. Birnbaum (2001) illustrates that management techniques developed in the private sector have little if any chance of succeeding in higher education, particularly since colleges and universities adopt the practices after their demise in the corporate world. However, Kirp’s (2004)
work suggests that under certain more Machiavellian conditions, stricter corporate-like management and budgeting practices may take hold in higher education.

In general, as noted by Kezar (2001), empirical research that focuses upon the organizational behavior of institutions of higher education is either outdated or absent entirely from the scholarly literature. However, a study of institutional transformations in higher education through the American Council on Education (Eckel & Kezar, 2003), illustrates that change in colleges and universities is very much connected to the unique organizational characteristics of colleges and universities themselves. Thus, the 13 factors identified by Kezar (2001) as salient for understanding the organizational behavior of colleges and universities should be applied to developing an understanding of change and the elements that impact or influence change within higher education as well.

In order to understand the impact of U.S. News rankings and process of prestige-seeking within individual colleges and universities, studies must be guided and framed by the unique organizational characteristics of the institutions themselves. While recognizing that the factors outlined above may be more or less salient in particular institutional settings, each is useful in contextualizing the larger dilemma understanding the impact of a certain variable – U.S. News rankings – on organizational behavior within individual institutions. These factors are used to guide the development of a conceptual framework in a subsequent section.

Institutional Isomorphism as a Guiding Concept

While the 13 factors described in the previous section inform the specific research questions and proposed research agenda in greater depth in subsequent sections, another principle from the organizational theory literature – institutional isomorphism – serves as a guiding concept for the agenda as well. Institutional isomorphism (Reisman, 1956), also known as organizational homogenization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and upward academic drift (Clark, 1987), suggests that
within a given hierarchy, organizations that seek to gain increased legitimacy, prestige, or status do so by emulating the behaviors and practices of those already atop the hierarchy. This is a concept that has been employed extensively throughout the literature on higher education, and has value for a paper such as this in which phenomenon (U.S. News rankings) and its influence on organizational behavior of colleges and universities is itself a hierarchical mechanism of prestige and legitimacy. The pieces reviewed in the social commentary section on the rankings and prestige-seeking illustrate this point. A variety of studies have used the concept of institutional isomorphism to explore the influence of prestige-seeking or status hierarchies within higher education, although strangely, none have focused on individual institutions and the specific impact of U.S. News rankings. These studies, and a host of related others, will be reviewed in a subsequent section.

The most frequently used typology for understanding institutional isomorphism as a concept within organizational theory comes from DiMaggio and Powell (1983). This typology outlines three mechanisms that create pressures leading to organizational homogenization within a hierarchy. Regulative (coercive) mechanisms involve the formal rules and laws that are the result of colleges and universities existing in a legal environment. Normative mechanisms are those that arise distinctly from the values and behaviors deemed to be of importance within professional communities within higher education, such as professional disciplinary associations that transcend institutional boundaries. Mimetic mechanisms are those that are the result of the inherent human instinct to define and redefine behaviors based upon continually changing perceptions of the world around us. Pressures to conform, poorly understood technologies, a symbolic environment, and the desire to provide structure in highly ambiguous settings contribute to imitative behaviors within higher education. While regulative mechanisms apply themselves in a uniform manner (except under the legal distinctions between public and private institutions), normative and mimetic functions that lead to isomorphism are directly applicable to the problem at hand.
A variety of authors have commented on this type of behavior and its potential outcomes for the system of higher education in the aggregate. Reisman (1956) suggests that colleges and universities operate in a “snakelike” manner where the head of the snake sets the pace and path and the middle and tail of the body follow the head. Jencks and Reisman (1968) argue that economic and professional forces within higher education promote mimetic behavior at a faster rate than institutional differentiation. Astin (1985) furthers this line of the argument, suggesting that state systems that differentiate types of institutions within an overall hierarchy may actually contribute to institutional isomorphism by providing the lion’s share of resources to those at the top of the hierarchy, providing incentives for those at the bottom to aspire to be more like those at the top. This general process is what Clark (1987) terms “upward academic drift” in which “institutions of lesser status seek to make themselves over in the image of institutions of higher standing” (p. 61).

Arnone (2003) makes a point very similar to Astin (1985) in suggesting that within state systems, many schools are trying to achieve greater prestige in the rankings and are potentially harming the overall diversity of the system in doing so. The author states, “While many school officials scoff at the influence rankings have on how their institutions are run, a lot of them say their boards of trustees put incredible importance on the rankings” (Arnone, 2003, p. A18). Arnone (2003) points out that colleges and universities feverishly attempt to influence each other in efforts to garner higher peer evaluations, which themselves constitute a significant portion of the final ranking score. According to the author, it is now common practice for colleges and universities to send promotional materials highlighting their successes to presidents and other administrative leaders at institutions across the country. Not only does this practice seem tremendously wasteful, it also encourages the perpetuation of the use of the rankings as an accurate predictor of institutional quality and potentially encourages isomorphic behavior.
Several studies that do not explicitly focus upon institutional isomorphism in the context of higher education, but rather other industry areas, provide empirical support for this concept. Galaskiewicz and Wasserman (1989), focusing upon the contributions of corporate entities to charity groups, found that within situations characterized by uncertainty, organizational decision-makers will mimic behaviors of those institutions that are found to be successful. Haverman (1993), looking at organizations that were new entrants into a market, also found that organizations are likely to imitate those they perceive to be successful. However, Morphew and Huisman (2002) found “that isomorphic forces may operate with varying effect on different organizational attributes: some organizational characteristics may be more vulnerable (or resistant) to homogenizing pressures” (p. 497). This last finding is particularly compelling, as it illustrates that even within situations characterized by isomorphic behavior, certain components of the organization may be impacted in greater ways by normative or mimetic forces than other components. This point further reinforces the need to understand the impact of U.S. News rankings and other forces driving isomorphic behavior within individual institutions, as opposed to studying the phenomenon in the aggregate as has been done thus far.

While not specifically focusing on isomorphism, an article by Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) explores the concept and influence of organizational legitimacy, and has relevance for understanding of the impact of U.S. News rankings within a college or university. Organizational legitimacy is something that is granted by the constituents of an organization and occurs when there is congruence between the goals and methods for achieving the goals with the norms, values, and expectations of the constituents. The authors illustrate two primary ways in which organizational leaders seek legitimacy – substantive management and symbolic management. The former “involves real, material change in organizational goals, structures, and processes or socially institutionalized processes” (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990, p. 178). Symbolic management involves transforming the
meaning of actions within the cultural fabric of the organization. If pursuit of increased prestige through U.S. News rankings can be understood as an effort to increase perceptions of constituent legitimacy of the college or university, then this framework for observing legitimacy is a potentially viable one.

The authors provide a typology of organizations that seek to extend, maintain, or defend legitimacy. A similar typology may also be useful for characterizing the impact of the rankings within higher education. The authors argue, “the less legitimate the constituents believe the organization to be, the greater the need to gain legitimacy and the greater the effort to gain legitimacy” (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990, p. 185). However, the authors also point out that paradoxically, the lower the perceived level of legitimacy the greater level of skepticism constituents will hold towards efforts to increase legitimacy. They provide three ways in which individuals that “protest” legitimacy too greatly can be perceived – as clumsy, nervous, or overacting. “In sum, managers that protest their organization’s legitimacy too much are those that have clumsily, nervously, or overzealously applied the techniques of symbolic management and, to a lesser extent, substantive management” (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990, p. 191). The concept of organizational legitimacy, and in particular the differentiation between substantive and symbolic management, would be useful in complementing the concept of institutional isomorphism as a guiding principle behind this proposed study. Having reviewed these concepts, and having illustrated the value in using such concepts to frame the overall inquiry into the problem at hand, they will be applied with the unique organizational factors described in the prior section to inform the conceptual framework for understanding the potential impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking within individual colleges and universities in the next section.

Establishing a Multi-Lens Conceptual Framework to Guide the Methodology

Although institutional isomorphism is a powerful and tested guiding concept for studying prestige-seeking and conceptualizing the impact of U.S. News rankings, the theory itself does not
enable one to study the unique organizational environments of individual institutions. The theory attempts to understand or explain the regulative, normative, and mimetic mechanisms that lead to isomorphism within an overall organizational field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and as such, can only serve as a guiding concept for the development of a conceptual framework for studying the prestige-seeking process and impact of U.S. News rankings within individual institutions. Moreover, a major flaw in the studies in both the preceding and following sections is that in almost all cases prestige-seeking, the impact of U.S. News, institutional isomorphism, upward academic drift and other related concepts are considered in the aggregate such that their conclusions are only applicable to the overall system of higher education. Thus, it is necessary to apply the concept of institutional isomorphism in establishing a multi-lens conceptual framework for studying the impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking within individual colleges and universities.

Before developing this framework, it is necessary to justify and explain the importance and meaning of a multi-lens framework. Contemporary organizational theorists argue that organizations cannot, and moreover, must not be analyzed using a single theory or concept (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Scott, 2003). Organizations are complex entities that require analysis using a variety of established mental models for observing and thinking about their different components. Scholars disagree about the exact number of mental models that should be employed in studying organizations – some prefer three (Scott, 2003), some four (Bolman & Deal), some five (Birnbaum, 1988), some six (Kezar, 2001), and some eight (Morgan, 1997). While the ideal number of lenses or mental models to be used in the observation and analysis of organizational behavior is debatable, what is mutually agreed upon is the need to use multiple lenses in order to grasp and understand the nuances and complexities of contemporary organizational environments. Moreover, Bolman and Deal (2003) note that managers and college presidents employing multiple lenses in their own behaviors are more successful than those that act upon a
single model for organizing. Thus, using a multi-lens framework for understanding and analyzing organizational behavior not only is valuable in scholarly undertakings, but also has practical value for managers and practitioners in enhancing their day-to-day success.

Despite having a host of potential lenses from which to construct a conceptual framework, there are four lenses that seem to transcend all contemporary writings on organizational behavior generally or within higher education specifically. Additionally, those lenses that are excluded from the conceptual framework developed below are excluded for legitimate reasons. First, the four lenses described below are those that have themselves been subject to the greatest levels of empirical testing whereas those excluded have been employed in few, if any, studies of organizational behavior (Kezar, 2001). Second, several of the excluded lenses are highly normative, and seem to exist as models for considering how organizations ought to operate as opposed to how they do operate (Morgan, 1997). Finally, the lenses discussed below are the most useful in establishing a conceptual framework for understanding organizational behavior and decision-making within individual colleges and universities given the range of unique organizational factors described above. While the concepts of an organized anarchy (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001), ordered chaos (Wheatley, 2001), or the garbage can (Cohen & March, 1974) may be ones that are used with great frequency to describe the behavior of colleges and universities, they do not in any way allow for anything more than a cursory understanding of how individual institutions operate. Therefore, the conceptual multi-lens framework proposed below meets these criteria just described and is grounded in the unique organizational factors of colleges and universities and the overarching concept of institutional isomorphism outlined earlier.

The first lens that is a part of the conceptual framework is referred to in a variety of ways – structural (Bolman & Deal, 2003), mechanistic (Morgan, 1997), rational (Scott, 2003), bureaucratic (Birnbaum, 1988), and teleological (Kezar, 2001). For the purpose of this framework, and given the
high degree of similarity across the literature about this lens, concepts coming from any of the above categorizations are considered to describe the *structural* lens of understanding and analyzing organizational behavior. The structural lens is perhaps the most recognized and most used mental model for observing organizational behavior. Its key concepts and operationalization come from early organizational thinkers such as Max Weber (1922) and his ideas on bureaucracies and Frederick Taylor (1916) and his principles of scientific management.

Simply put, the structural lens views organizations as rational, linear, and purposeful (Scott, 2003). With the articulation of an organization’s goals, and through the creation of a hierarchically structured system of responsibility, accountability, and differentiation, grounded in the relative stability of the environment and clarity of the purpose, individuals in the organization achieve maximum efficiency in their respective roles, thus maximizing the efficiency of the organization as a whole (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan, 1997). A host of key concepts help to further explain the structural lens. The concepts of differentiation and specialization suggest that as an organization grows older and larger, the tendency of the bureaucratic hierarchies within organizations is to promote increased variation and higher levels of specificity in the roles and responsibilities of individual and groups within the hierarchy (Bolman & Deal, 2003). At the same time, the principle of integration or lateral coordination illustrates that authority ought to be centralized, and control over the differentiated pieces of the organization should remain relatively connected to those atop the bureaucratic hierarchy. Furthermore, the structural lens suggests that organizations have clearly articulated goals that can be achieved rationally through planning processes and by implementing a series of rules for individuals to follow (Scott, 2003). However, it is recognized that the rules and goals of the organization must “fit” with the relative stability or instability of the environment in which it operates (Morgan, 1997). Lastly, the structural lens argues that restructuring the
organizational hierarchies or bureaucracies to achieve greater efficiency or to meet new goals is the primary means by which organizations solve problems (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Given the unique organizational environments of colleges and universities, it is not surprising to see that the application of the structural lens to higher education is a relatively weak one. This is not to say that colleges and universities are not structural, but rather that certain characteristics of the environment of individual institutions limit the strength of this lens in understanding and observing their organizational behavior. However, certain types of institutions may be more structural than others given their missions, relationships with state or federal governments, or founding traditions (Kezar, 2001). The conditions of loosely coupled systems, decentralization of power, goal ambiguity, and shared governance (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001) suggest that institutions of higher education are more professional bureaucracies (Bolman & Deal, 2003) than traditional structural models, where a clear hierarchy and clear product exist for the organization. Bureaucracies within higher education tend to be relatively flat and hierarchical business models for achieving efficiency tend to be mostly irrelevant (Birnbaum, 2001).

Furthermore, Birnbaum (1988) and Kezar (2001) suggest that leaders at the apex of bureaucratic hierarchies have almost no capacity to produce institution-wide changes and when change does occur it occurs at a relatively slow pace.

Although the structural lens may be relatively weak in its application to certain colleges and universities, it still has very strong potential to inform research questions under the guiding concept of institutional isomorphism. Several research questions become evident after considering the structural lens for understanding and analyzing organizational behavior:

- Are new offices or other forms of institutional bureaucracies (including rules and procedures) established to focus specifically on the institutions U.S. News rankings or
prestige status, and if so, how do these new mechanisms fit within the current hierarchy of the institution?

- Are aspirational prestige or rankings goals believed to transcend institutional boundaries, and are they believed to be achievable using rational planning mechanisms?
- Do university constituents perceive the expenditure of resources to increase ranking or prestige status to be efficient or inefficient?
- To what extent do aspirational peers, specifically those designated by the rankings, influence the planning and goal-setting process?
- Are decisions that influence the structural pieces of the college or university environment, as seen in response to the above questions, supportive of the concept of normative and mimetic isomorphism and reflective of the overall impact of U.S. News rankings?

The second lens of the conceptual framework also has multiple identifiers – human resources (Bolman & Deal, 2003), open systems (Morgan, 1997; Scott, 2003), and collegial (Birnbaum, 1988). For the purposes of this framework the term collegial lens is used. A basic summary of the collegial lens suggests that organizations should focus on the training and motivation of individuals (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The values, needs, goals, and informal communication systems of individuals within organizations must be considered when analyzing organizational effectiveness. Leadership must be focused on both the process of the task and the relationships therein. Organizations will ultimately attempt to achieve some form of internal and external balance in an effort to achieve stability (Morgan, 1997).

A set of key concepts exists for the collegial lens as well. The collegial lens adds to the structural lens by suggesting that organizations have an “open” relationship with the external environment that in some way drives internal adaptations (Morgan, 1997), and therefore decisions are contingent upon the interaction of the organization and its environment. A related concept is
that of homeostasis or negative entropy, which suggests that adaptations occur at the most fundamental level in order to prevent the death of the organization (Morgan, 1997). The concept of interrelated subsystems is one that also adds a level of complexity to understanding organizational environments through the collegial lens. This concept suggests that instead of viewing organizations as a singular entity, the subsystems within organizations ought to be the focus of observation and analysis because a coherent whole does not exist within an organization (Birnbaum, 1988). Additionally, the collegial lens argues, unlike the structural lens, that organizations need humans just as humans need organizations and that an ideal “fit” between the two is reciprocal (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Bolman and Deal (2003) argue that the empowerment of employees through training and professional development is necessary for success as well. Lastly, the collegial lens emphasizes that the informal norms of an organization are just as significant, if not more so, as the formal rules and procedures, illustrating the potential for a lack of congruence between what is espoused and what is actually done (Bolman and Deal, 2003).

As was the case with the structural lens, the applicability of the collegial lens varies significantly by institutional type (Kezar, 2001). It is perceived that the characteristics of a collegial environment would be greater at a smaller institution with a unified mission such as a liberal arts college, and weaker at larger institutions or community colleges. When the characteristics of the collegial lens do exist within an institution it is reflected in the values of consensus-building, collaboration, shared responsibilities and consultation (Birnbaum, 1988). Because of the strong emphasis on consensus and collaboration, collegial environments are also highly susceptible to “groupthink” as a condition of group dynamics in which consensus is valued so highly that dissenting opinions are squelched, often to the detriment of the group’s decision-making abilities (Janis, 1971). The collegial lens for understanding and analyzing organizations corresponds well with the unique factors of the organizational environments of colleges and universities described
above. Specifically, the concepts of an open environment and interrelated subsystems reflect the environmental and interdependent factors identified by Kezar (2001) as important for colleges and universities. The collegial values of consensus-building and collaboration are reflected in the practice of shared governance, and the need to address the informal norms of organizations is reflected in the concepts of colleges and universities as loosely coupled systems, having multiple authority and power structures, ambiguous goals, and multiple value systems (Kezar, 2001).

Given the insights provided by the collegial lens about the unique organizational environments of colleges and universities, a range of research questions emerges:

- How does the pursuit of increased prestige or U.S. News rankings impact an institution’s ability to engage in empowering, professional development activities that reflect their valuing of their employees?
- Do U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking help or hurt the collegial practices of shared governance and consensus-building, and in what ways are isomorphic behaviors reflected in these practices at a given institution?
- Do U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking exacerbate any differences between formal and informal norms and policies within a given college or university?
- Are college and university stakeholders that exhibit isomorphic behavior because of the impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking more or less vulnerable to groupthink?
- Are certain institutional subsystems impacted more than others by U.S. News rankings, for those subsystems, how does the impact affect their relationships with other subsystems, are such subsystems more or less likely to exhibit isomorphic behaviors, and does the prestige-seeking process more tightly couple all institutional subsystems together?

All organizational scholars describe the third lens used in this conceptual framework in the same way – the political lens (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1997).
The political lens is characterized by tension in values, norms or patterns within organizations causing dialectical, small, negotiated changes over time. Underlying much of the characteristics of the political lens for analyzing organizations is that one’s ability to influence the political process is only as strong as one’s resources – particularly the strength of one’s relationships within the organization. Managing these relationships correctly is the recipe for success in institutions characterized by the political lens.

Similar to the prior two lenses, the political lens has several key concepts that further operationalize its meaning. Principal among these concepts is the typology of power established by French and Raven (1959) and employed by more contemporary scholars (Birnbaum; 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan 1997). The five most often cited forms of power are positional power (based upon hierarchy), expert power (based upon knowledge or access to information), referent power (based upon relationships), reward power (based upon the ability to give resources), and coercive power (based upon the ability to remove resources). While the types of power are a key component of the political lens, it is the characteristic of conflict and competing interests and values that bring the types of power into play (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Specifically, it is suggested that political or divergent interests exist within all organizations, most often these interests are not rational, and coalition-building and negotiating skills using the various forms of power are necessary to resolve personal or group differences (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, the political lens suggests that informal networks and alliances can be just as useful as formal networks or coalitions as sources of power within organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

The political lens is present across all institutional contexts to varying degrees (Kezar, 2001). Shared governance, the presence of multiple authority and power structures, differing administrative and professional values about the exercise of power, and the presence of loosely coupled systems further reinforce the applicability of the political lens within the organizational environment of
colleges and universities (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001). Additionally, scarcity of resources, whether real or perceived, increases the influence of organizational politics within higher education, as competition amongst organizational units increases attempts to influence where funds are directed. The ambiguity of goals within colleges and universities enhances the irrational and political nature of their organizational settings (Kezar, 2001).

Using the political lens in understanding the organizational behavior of colleges and universities in the context of institutional isomorphism and in considering the impact of U.S. News rankings adds another range of questions to this proposed study:

- Do constituents of college and universities that are involved in some aspect of the prestige-seeking process employ the use of particular types of power in their interactions with the university community at large over others?
- Do U.S. News rankings increase overall perceptions about the political nature of a given institution?
- How do U.S. News rankings drive competition for funding, budget allocations, and the decision-making process related to finances with individual institutions?
- What impact, if any, do U.S. News rankings have on the ability of college and university constituent to build coalitions or networks, either related or unrelated to prestige-seeking activities?
- Do isomorphic patterns of behavior related to U.S. News rankings impact an individual’s or group’s power with their institutional subsystem or within the institution as a whole, and if so, how?

The fourth and final lens making up this conceptual framework is referred to as both the cultural (Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1997) and the symbolic (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 2003). The identifier of the symbolic lens will be used to encompass concepts from both sets of models. A
summary of the symbolic lens suggests that non-linear and unpredictable are two unique characteristics of organizational life. Specifically, being able to influence an organization’s culture involves the challenge of transforming mind-sets, visions, paradigms, images, metaphors, beliefs, and shared meanings that sustain existing business realities, by focusing on myths, values, heroes, stories, ceremonies, and other “symbolic” components of what constitutes an organization’s culture (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

Like the prior three lenses, key concepts of the symbolic lens provide for a richer understanding of the organizational behavior of colleges and universities. This lens suggests that an organization’s culture is the collection of shared values, beliefs, and meanings that individuals and groups use to make sense of their roles within the organizations, although even these understandings can be marginally related to behaviors (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Organizational symbols, such as stories, language, legends, myths, metaphors, rituals, and heroes all contribute to the sensemaking process. Additionally, culture is an active, ongoing part of an organization, making it difficult to ever fully grasp it at a point in time, particularly as an outsider (Eckel and Kezar, 2003). Furthermore, there is a potential for a lack of congruence between the espoused values and norms within an organization’s culture and the “artifacts” of behavior that emanate from the values and norms themselves (Eckel and Kezar, 2003). While the symbolic lens views organizations as unpredictable, it also suggests that symbolic actions provide direction and increase predictability.

The symbolic lens has a relatively strong presence within the organizational environments of colleges and universities. The significance of traditions, history, heroes, institutional symbols, and the concept of institutional image suggest that a symbolic analysis for understanding college and university environments is helpful. Moreover, the characteristics of loosely coupled systems and professional versus administrative values illustrate that culture within colleges and universities may be fractured (Kezar, 2001). While many aspects of organizational life in colleges and universities
have symbolic components, the unique characteristics of the organizational environments in higher education almost prevent these symbolic components from being interpreted in a singular way, which has the effect of fragmenting meanings and interpretations of symbolic or cultural artifacts across institutional boundaries (Bolman & Deal, 2003, Morgan, 1997). However, employing symbolic tactics is one of the more successful strategies that institutional leaders can rely upon in creating energy towards change within colleges and universities (Birnbaum, 1988).

A final set of research questions emerges from the symbolic lens as well:

• To what extent are symbols are of U.S. News rankings or other prestige-seeking indicators present in institutional artifacts, and how does the presence of these symbols influence the cultural perceptions held by individuals and groups throughout the college or university environment?

• To what extent does the use of U.S. News rankings or other prestige-seeking indicators by certain individuals impact their abilities to influence the culture of a given institution?

• Is there a difference in the impact and value of U.S. News rankings amongst an institution’s administrative culture versus its faculty culture?

• Do institutional constituents perceive U.S. News rankings and isomorphic behavior as threatening institutional identity, tradition, and purpose?

Collectively, these four models or lenses – the structural, collegial, political and symbolic – provide a richer and more complex understanding of the organizational environments than would any one of the four on its own. Additionally, the capacity to blend each of the four lenses with the theoretical concept of institutional isomorphism in an effort to study the impact of U.S. News rankings in individual colleges and universities is strong, such that potential isomorphic behavior can be identified using all four lenses. Furthermore, the lenses themselves are adaptable to understanding and analyzing the unique organizational environment of colleges and universities, and
the characteristics that impact their environments in unique ways. Thus, the conceptual model outlined above and the accompanying research questions are helpful in providing a foundation for the development of the research agenda to follow.

**Prior Empirical Studies on U.S. News Rankings or Prestige-Seeking**

Studies that consider the impact of U.S. News rankings or prestige-seeking generally fall into one of three categories: 1) methodology studies, 2) access and selectivity studies, 3) and allocation of faculty time studies. In reviewing these studies it is clear that little is known about the specific impact of U.S. News and prestige-seeking within individual colleges and universities.

**Methodology Studies**

One of the most common arguments made about U.S. News rankings surrounds the methods used to develop the rankings themselves. Specifically, those that examine the methodology of U.S. News rankings argue that the methods themselves are highly subjective, fluctuate greatly from year to year making it impossible to draw accurate year to year comparisons, and that the manner in which the data is collected has the potential to encourage unethical behaviors amongst institutional administrators and researchers.

While there has been no empirical evidence to validate the last argument, Machung (1998) implies that such practices may occur because there is tremendous incentive to misreport the data to U.S. News. For example, between 1996, when the magazine computed its own student/faculty ratios, and 1997, when the institutions did so themselves, the average ratio for top 25 national universities fell from 12:1 to 10:1. While evidence to substantiate this claim is not present in the author's work, the drastic change in the aggregate student/faculty ratios for top 25 national universities from 1996 to 1997 requires a closer inquiry into the potential for the U.S. News rankings methodology and system of data collection to exert pressure to misreport data for public consumption. A research question emerging from this argument is:
• To what extent do college and university administrators feel pressure to falsely report data to U.S. News to improve their rankings in the methodology used and how often does such behavior occur?

Machung (1998) also suggests that the methodology for the rankings themselves has changed almost every year since U.S. News began the rankings of colleges and universities. This makes it impossible to compare changes in the rankings from year to year. Every year, college presidents attempt to influence the magazine itself to make alterations in its methodology that would positively impact their institutions. In fact, it has become so closely scrutinized that U.S. News has recently established a national advisory board to guide changes in the rankings methodology. Both of these processes illustrate the remarkable subjectivity of both the methods and the outcomes they produce. Another research question emerges:

• Do colleges and universities actively attempt to influence the decisions of others towards the “peer review” evaluation component of the U.S. News rankings, and if so, do these attempts actually impact the peer review process?

A study by Porter (1999) examines the accuracy of the graduation rate indicator within the U.S. News rankings as it is intended to illustrate a measure of institutional quality in enhancing students’ achievement. The indicator itself is compiled by measuring an institution’s actual graduation rate in comparison to its “predicted” graduation rate, as impacted by the strength of its student body (as measured by SAT scores) and institutional resources (as measured by spending per FTE student). The author argues for several methodological changes with this particular indicator. First, the absence of data from some institutions or changes in the sampling to compute the indicator can drastically alter the predicted graduation rates for all institutions. Second, as Machung (1998) argues, changes in the definitions of the variables fluctuate from year to year, making it almost impossible to consider long-term under- or over-performance. Third, the model itself used
to determine institutional inputs into the graduation rate indicator, as measured solely by SAT scores, is remarkably incomplete and could be expanded to include other inputs such as racial, gender, and age demographic breakdowns of the entering cohort because such inputs could theoretically have substantial impacts on the predictability for student success within the overall student body. Additionally, expenditures per FTE student is an incomplete measure of institutional resources or constraints, and the author suggests that adding the variables of public/private, total enrollment, and religious affiliation would provide for a more complete model of institutional abilities.

When adding the suggested variables to a new model for computing the predicted six-year graduation rates, Porter (1999) found that the predicted error dropped within the model from 9.9% to 7.8%. It also found larger enrollments, larger proportions of female students, and younger students within the student body had statistically significant impacts on producing higher graduation rates. The new model also strikingly shifts 30 institutions from under- to over-performers or vice versa, illustrating that a change in the statistical modeling can have profound impacts on outcomes within the rankings. Most succinctly, the author argues, “How well an institution does depends not only on their programs and policies; performance also depends on the whims of the researcher” (p. 16). In conclusion, the author recommends bracketing the predicted graduation rates within confidence intervals to accurately account for the error in the statistical modeling. Doing so would suggest that at 95% confidence, a mere 5% of the institutions are over or under their predicted graduation rates, and even at 90% confidence only 7-8% are over- or under-performing. The U.S. News 1998 rankings suggest that 94% of institutions are over or under performing because it fails to bracket the predicted graduation rate within standard errors of the regression formula. A third research question from the literature on the methodology of U.S. News rankings emerges from Porter’s (1999) article:
• Do colleges and university constituents use the data reported through U.S. News as measures of institutional quality, and if so, are the individual variables within the methods perceived to be accurate?

Clarke (2001) extends the methodological arguments made against U.S. News rankings attempting to address two issues: 1) how do the U.S. News rankings formulas shift from year to year and what impact does this have on a school’s ranking over time; and 2) how precise are the overall scores assigned by U.S. News in creating discrete rankings? The author notes that between 1995 and 2000, across all graduate school areas and national university rankings, 53 total changes occurred in the rankings methodology, 85% of which were to either to the definition of variables or to the weight given to variables. Three indicators were added during this time and five were removed. Despite this seemingly high number of alterations to the methodology over this time, the author finds there to be no relationship between the changes themselves and shifts in the rankings. With the exception of education and primary care rankings, both of which have transformed more drastically during the time period under examination, the correlation between changes in the methods and the rankings for all other areas are between .88 and .95. Although this study combines the focus upon undergraduate college and university rankings with a focus on the methodologies of the graduate and professional school rankings, it nonetheless adds to the overall argument about the annual shifts in the U.S. News rankings themselves.

Clarke (2001) establishes two interesting conclusions. First, “that schools are differentially affected by the presence or absence of certain indicators in terms of their overall score and subsequent rank,” (p. 13) illustrate that different changes in the methods can impact institutions in different ways. The author tests this conclusion by altering or removing several of the rankings indicators and illustrating the ways in which the outcomes differ across institutions. Second, when the overall score for an institution is compared with all others in the top 50, “three groups emerge:
schools that score significantly higher, schools that score significantly lower, and schools with scores that are not statistically significant” (p. 14). The value of this conclusion is to illustrate that even with the top 50 rankings, the discrete values assigned to each institution are of little overall meaning. The author argues that simply having a high, medium, and low typology within the top 50 rankings without trying to differentiate who is number seven from who is number ten in the classification would eliminate the flaws in assigning discrete values to each institution and would serve a greater function for the consumer. Ehrenberg (2003) makes a very similar argument, “The real problem is USNWR’s arbitrary assignment of weights to each category and each subcategory factor within a category. No set of weights, regardless of whether they are determined by USNWR or any group of ‘experts,’ will accurately rank which of two schools a given student should attend” (p. 13). Another research question comes from these works:

- To what extent do college and university constituents perceive there to be value in the discrete rankings established by the U.S. News methodology as an indicator for relative institutional quality, and how do the discrete rankings impact behavior?

A final study by Ridley and Charmaine (1999) connects an examination of the rankings methods to the prestige-seeking process. The authors examined movements in the rankings over the period of 1996 through 2000 for nationally-ranked liberal arts colleges to determine the potential for movement in the rankings, the strength of such potential movements, and the direction (upward or downward). The authors found that there was only a 14% chance of movement in rankings from one year to the next, and that over the 5-year period 104 of the 162 institutions represented in Tier 1 through Tier 4 in the national liberal arts category did not change at all. While Tier 1 is the only tier that has specific rankings, making it difficult to assess movement in the lower three tiers, the authors also found that the average movement within Tier 1 over the time period studied was 1.94 places, or 5% of the potential movement range within the top 40 schools. Moreover, while some schools did
move up, either by rank within Tier 1 or from tier-to-tier within the other three levels of rankings, just as many colleges moved down within the same time period to create the effect of a zero-sum outcome. The authors conclude, “In general, there is sufficient stability within the rankings to make one take a somewhat skeptical view towards efforts to improve an institution’s ranking” (p. 4). A final research question from the literature examining the U.S. News rankings methodologies stems from the work of Ridley and Charmaine (1999):

- To what extent do college and university constituents perceive there to be the potential for significant upward movement in U.S. News rankings, and if these perceptions are high, what are they based upon?

Access and Selectivity Studies

A second broad area of focus in the scholarly literature surrounding U.S. News rankings are studies that consider the impact of the rankings on the issues of access and selectivity of colleges and universities. As was suggested at the outset, the rankings and prestige-seeking forces within higher education have the potential to limit access to the nation’s top schools by emphasizing specific factors for determining selectivity, as well as promoting a narrow vision of what constitutes prestige itself. The articles outlined in this section explore several components of the arguments above. Specifically, what type of student is likely to use the rankings in the college admissions and selection process, how do the rankings impact the admissions practices and decisions of colleges and universities, and how do changes in a school’s ranking impact outcomes such as selectivity and pricing?

One of the most referenced pieces under this heading is a study by McDonough, antonio, Walpole, and Perez (1998) that found that high achieving students were most likely to use the rankings in the college search and decision process. Another frequently cited study in this area comes from Monks and Ehrenberg (1999). Focusing in upon highly selective, liberal arts colleges,
this study found that changes in U.S. News rankings had an effect on admissions outcomes such as selectivity, average SAT scores for new students, and tuition policies. Specifically, the authors stated that moving up in the rankings allowed an institution to admit fewer students, improve their yield rate, increase the average SAT scores for the incoming class, be less generous in financial aid, and raise tuition, all of which made the institution seem more selective. A drop in the rankings had the opposite effect in each these outcome areas.

Expanding upon this study, Meredith (2004) examines the impact of U.S. News rankings using additional measures across a larger range of institutions. The author focuses on three primary indicators to assess the impact of the rankings: 1) their impact on admissions outcomes across different institutional types; 2) their impact on racial and ethnic demographics; and 3) their impact on the amount of gifts an institution receives. The results of the study focusing upon admissions outcomes vary. The author found that movement between the tiers of the rankings, and particularly from tier 2 to tier 1, impacts the percentage of incoming students in the top 10% of their graduating high school class and lowers an institution’s overall acceptance rate. This outcome is similar to Monks and Ehrenberg (1999). Additionally, the authors found that changes in ranking have greater impact on acceptance rates and percentage of students in the top 10% of their high school graduating class at public institutions by comparison to private institutions. With respect to demographic outcomes related to the rankings, the study finds that as a top tier school’s ranking drops the amount of Pell Grant aid increases and the regression model used to determine impact on the racial and ethnic composition of the student body yields inconclusive results. Lastly, the analysis showed no evidence that changes in rankings impacted the amount of gifts the institution received.

In a related piece, Machung (1998) argued that the expansion of early-decision programs is likely tied in some way to the “yield” factor within U.S. News rankings. If admissions offices can lock up a significant portion of their incoming class through early-decision, than they can reject a significant
percentage of normal applicants, driving up their selectivity (admissions rate) and driving down their yield, both of which are advantageous in the rankings.

While the research reviewed is useful, the most complete synthesis of the arguments surrounding the impact of U.S. News rankings in the area of selectivity and access comes from Ehrenberg (2003). Echoing the findings of McDonough, antonio, Walpole and Perez (1998), Ehrenberg (2003) states, “USNWR helps to fuel the competition for slots at the top institutions. However, it is important to stress that it is only exacerbating the pressures that already exist; it is not the major cause of these pressures” (p. 6) but because of the increasingly competitive culture amongst students and parents that are preoccupied with buying the best they can get for their money and seeking the highest possible “returns” in the process. Relying upon his earlier work (Monks and Ehrenberg, 1999), he argues that the variables considered in the rankings themselves fuel the competition and expenditure wars to get the best students which drives up tuition.

Similar to Machung (1998) and Meredith (2004), Ehrenberg (2003) hypothesizes that the specific U.S. News variables could result in a range of potential outcomes impacting access and selectivity. The acceptance rate variable encourages schools to reject students who they believe will go elsewhere, to encourage students with little chance of admission to apply, and to place a heavy emphasis upon early-decision admissions. The SAT variable encourages schools to make its reporting optional in the application process to eliminate unfavorable scores from ever being made known, as well as increasing merit aid to attract students with higher scores. The freshmen retention rate variable encourages institutions to devote more resources and incentives towards freshmen, potentially to the detriment of other students and particularly to transfer students. The retention and graduation indicators also hurt schools that have students that transfer to better or more selective institutions. Ehrenberg (2003) argues, “Should Binghamton be penalized in the rankings because some its students leave to go to higher rated institutions? If it enrolled fewer top students it
might actually have a higher 6-year graduation rate” (p. 10) to illustrate the potential for questionable admissions outcomes. In conclusion, the author summarizes his findings to suggest, “The heavy weight that student selectivity has in the ratings and the quest by all institutions to become ‘more selective’ may lead public higher education away from one of its most fundamental historic goals, namely to provide access to all qualified students” (Ehrenberg, 2003, p. 15).

While the bulk of Ehrenberg’s (2003) piece focuses on selectivity and access, he raises several other related issues that are worth considering. He suggests that the faculty resources indicator in U.S. News rankings could also see institutions hiring part-time faculty to do the lion’s share of teaching and then inflate the salaries of full-time faculty because doing so would result in a bump up in this category. He also argues that by including research money as a measure in the faculty resources indicator, it further encourages faculty, regardless of the institution, to generate external research funding. Lastly, the rankings punish institutions that focus upon fewer donors that are able to give larger amounts of money by focusing upon the percentage of alumni that donate money. This forces institutions to potentially operate large, inefficient fundraising services to tap greater numbers of alumni with significantly lower marginal returns. These last three observations are not directly tied to empirical data.

A host of research questions emerge from reviewing the literature above related to access and selectivity outcomes from the impact of U.S. News rankings:

- Are admissions offices disproportionately affected by the impact of U.S. News rankings by comparison to other institutional offices, and if so, how does this impact influence the relationship of admissions offices to others on campus?
- Do colleges and university constituents perceive that U.S. News rankings encourage inefficiency in the over allocation of resources, and if so, do certain offices or departments
receive funding that is disproportionate simply to garner institutional prestige through the rankings?

- Are institutional policies related to admissions, such as early-decision, recruitment, acceptance, and rejection of applicants, and tuition levels actually made based upon U.S. News rankings, or are the outcomes based upon changes in the rankings unintentional?

- How do individual institutions balance a commitment to access with a commitment towards prestige, and specifically, does a perception exist that maintaining a commitment to access in some way hinders the pursuit of prestige?

These research questions would connect the research already done on the impact of U.S. News rankings and access and selectivity in higher education with a more focused attempt to understand the impact of the rankings on the organizational environment of colleges and universities.

*Allocation of Faculty Time Studies*

A third area of research that informs a discussion of the impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking in higher education is the area of studies that consider their influence on the allocation of faculty time and responsibilities. While very few studies actually explore the impact of the rankings on faculty responsibilities, several studies consider the prestige-seeking and isomorphic process as it relates to the allocation of faculty time. Specifically, research falling into this category addresses the perceived tension between the commitment of faculty towards research and towards teaching, and the institutional and systemic factors that may be exacerbating this tension.

Studies by Zemsky and Massy (1993) and Massy and Zemsky (1994) establish a concept related to the notion of institutional isomorphism, which they term the academic “ratchet.” They define the academic ratchet as “whereby individual faculty members increase their discretionary time (time for pursuing professional and personal goals) largely by loosening their institutional ties and responsibilities” (Massy and Zemsky, 1994, p. 2). The authors argue that the academic ratchet has
led to the shift in faculty efforts towards increased specialized research and growth of administrative functions within colleges and universities. The ratchet effect has negative fiscal consequences for higher education as specialized courses continue to pop-up unbridled by any continued sense of a solid core curriculum, which presents challenges related to the economies of scale within colleges and universities. Additionally, it has allowed faculty to maintain lighter teaching loads with smaller classes dedicated to upper-class students, mostly at the expense of teaching younger undergraduates in fundamental curricular areas. As such, the ratchet effect has not only led to inefficient allocation of institutional resources but also a perceived drop in quality of undergraduate education.

Additionally, the ratchet effect is perceived to have its greatest influence at the departmental level because that is where institutional culture and rewards have their greatest impact upon the lives of faculty members.

The earlier piece (Zemsky and Massy, 1993) establishes a regression model for the optimal efficiency in number of faculty, individual teaching loads, course sections offered, and student per course based upon departmental norms and objectives. The study shows that in certain areas, colleges and universities could achieve greater fiscal discipline and greater curricular cohesion by adopting an economic model to determine the optimal number of faculty (both full and part-time), the optimal class size by disciplinary standards, and the optimal number of enrolled students. The model described in the earlier article is expanded upon (Massy and Zemsky, 1994) and used to assess ideal course load outcomes for departments and faculty at both research universities and liberal arts colleges in lecture course, seminar, and discussion course formats. A piece of the findings from the study illustrates that liberal arts colleges operate, across types of course formats, with greater optimal efficiency than do research universities, suggesting that the ratchet effect has a stronger impact in organizational environments with greater differentiation across boundaries or units. The academic ratchet is a way of applying the concept of institutional isomorphism to the specific issue of the
allocation of faculty time and the perceived tension between teaching and research in modern day colleges and universities. Although not specifically dedicated to examining the impact of U.S. News rankings, the academic ratchet as a concept is very much connected to the isomorphic tendencies of the system of higher education described earlier, and has the potential to frame additional research questions for considering the potential impact of the rankings on the organizational environment of colleges and universities. These questions are:

- Do U.S. News rankings impact the organizational environment of different types of colleges and universities in different ways, e.g., is the impact experienced differently by national versus regional institutions, research versus liberal arts institutions, and other relevant comparisons?
- Does the faculty experience with U.S. News rankings differ from the experiences of other institutional constituencies?
- Do departmental or institutional norms regarding U.S. News rankings drive faculty behavior, and how does the response to this question vary as the level of bureaucratic differentiation increases?

Another study in the area of the allocation of faculty time as it relates to institutional isomorphism is from Dey, Milem and Berger (1997). The authors studied changes in faculty productivity over a 20-year period under the guiding organizational frameworks of institutional isomorphism and accumulative advantage. They found increases in publication productivity measured by the number of books, articles published, and two-year publication rate across all levels of institutions using the Carnegie classification system. The results support the concept of accumulative advantage. Institutions at the top of the classification hierarchy had significant gains in publication productivity along the three measures over the 20-year period by comparison to comprehensive and liberal arts colleges lower in the hierarchy. The conclusions of the authors also
support the concept of institutional isomorphism because the rates of productivity over time have become increasingly similar across institutional types, illustrating “a nearly universal increase in the emphasis on research and publication in the American higher education system” (p. 319). This last finding is very similar to the conclusions reached by Fairweather (1995), who found that faculty reward structures, as shown by salary compensation, are based primarily upon research productivity regardless of institutional type.

Building upon their prior study, Milem, Berger and Dey (2001) provide useful evidence to counter the claims of Zemsky and Massy (1993). The authors found that over a 20-year period the percentage of time faculty spent teaching actually increased across all institutional types in a manner similar to the percentage increase in research activity noted in the prior study (Dey, Milem and Berger, 1997). The authors provide compelling data to expand the isomorphic patterns recognized above by illustrating that allocation of faculty time towards both teaching and research is increasing across sectors of higher education. However, this study suggests that faculty spent less time over the same period in advising and counseling students. Thus, the impact of pressures leading to isomorphic behaviors influence not only the perceived tension between teaching and research (Zemsky and Massy, 1993), but also between teaching, research, and other activities that faculty engage in such as advising students.

A final study in this area by Bayer and Radke (1999) examines U.S. News and its relationship to the allocation of faculty time, although not specifically using the rankings in doing so. The authors of this piece surveyed individuals at 519 colleges and universities in response to a 1996 U.S. News list of 93 of the best institutions in the nation with an unusually strong commitment to undergraduate teaching to determine if any difference existed in the emphasis placed upon teaching at these institutions by comparison to other schools surveyed. The study was compiled by asking presidents, provosts, and deans of admissions to identify the schools, and produced four subgroups:
Top National Universities, Top National Liberal Arts Colleges, Top Regional Universities, and Top Regional Liberal Arts Colleges.

The authors found no statistical difference between “teaching” and “non-teaching” schools in evaluating the teaching capacity of potential faculty. In fact, 71% of all institutions suggested that they emphasize teaching more than research in the hiring process. Furthermore, both “teaching” and “non-teaching” schools were equally likely to provide professional development for faculty to enhance their teaching skills, and no distinct difference existed between the two sets of schools in the evaluation of teaching for long-term contracts or tenure decisions. The results of this study further illustrated the flawed methodologies traditionally used by U.S. News to establish its listings or rankings of colleges and universities (Machung, 1998; Porter, 1999). However, it also seems to illustrate an opposite conclusion from other studies illustrating the enhanced importance placed upon research across all levels of higher education (Dey, Milem & Berger, 1997; Fairweather, 1995; Zemsky & Massy, 1993) and reinforce support for the conclusions of Milem, Berger and Dey (2000).

The results indicate that remarkable similarity exists amongst all institutions in valuing teaching as a criterion for hiring, training, and evaluating faculty, and in 71% of the institutions teaching was reported as being as significant or more significant than research in the hiring process.

Thus, the conclusions reached by the studies described above illustrate mixed outcomes about the impact of isomorphic behavior and prestige-seeking on the allocation of faculty time. While an increase in research activity has been observed across all sectors of higher education (Dey, Milem & Berger, 1997; Zemsky & Massy, 1993), this increase has not necessarily hurt the importance placed upon teaching (Bayer & Radke, 1999), but rather has hindered the pursuits of other faculty behaviors such as advising students (Milem, Berger & Dey, 2000). These studies illustrate the need to develop additional research questions regarding the impact of U.S. News rankings and the process of prestige-seeking around the allocation of faculty time:
• Do U.S. News rankings exacerbate the tension between teaching and research in the allocation of faculty time within individual institutions, and if so, is the impact greater in certain types of institutions?

• Are faculty, across all institutional types, encouraged, rewarded, or pressured to seek grants for research projects or otherwise engage in research activities in order to enhance institutional prestige and U.S. News ranking?

• To what extent, if any, does the impact of U.S. News rankings influence the capacity for faculty activities other than teaching and research, and is this influence greater in institutions where a tradition of faculty engagement outside of teaching and research exists by comparison to those institutions where faculty responsibilities have been traditionally limited to teaching and/or research?

**Summary**

Given that absence of empirical studies examining the impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking on the unique organizational environments of individual colleges and universities, it should not be surprising to see that a review of the literature on the rankings, prestige-seeking, institutional isomorphism, and the unique organizational environments of colleges and universities themselves yields more questions than answers. The review of literature above illustrates several clear gaps. It appears that much of the literature on the impact of U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking is either anecdotally-driven, examines a limited range of outcomes, does so in the aggregate, and in most cases, fails to consider their impact in connection to the literature on the organizational behavior of institutions of higher education. Moreover, few empirical studies exist that test the validity of conceptual frameworks for studying the organizational environments of colleges and universities and the impact of any variables in their environments. Lastly, while institutional isomorphism seems to be an appropriate guiding concept for studying the potential impact of U.S.
News rankings and prestige-seeking, the research that has used the concept before has, for the most part, focused upon the outcomes of isomorphic behavior for the entire system of higher education or within the aggregate of particular sectors of higher education.

**Establishing a Research Agenda to Study the Impact of U.S. News**

If the gaps in the literature on U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking identified above do not provide enough compelling evidence for the need to establish a research agenda to study their impact, the story of Sheila Bennett does. Dr. Bennett, a professor of sociology at Hobart and Williams Smith Colleges was asked at the request of President Mark Gearan to resign from her position as Senior Vice President after failing to submit the necessary information to U.S. News in 2000 for use in its annual rankings (Brownstein, 2000). Simply put, if U.S. News rankings create an environment in which the reporting process and its outcomes within a single institution can drastically impact one’s future career, then a need exists to systematically study the range of the potential influences of the rankings across all institutions. Relying upon the literature reviewed above, this concluding section is broken into six areas that reaffirm the need to further an empirical understanding of the impact of U.S. News rankings on the unique organizational environments of colleges and universities.

*Disaggregating an Understanding of Institutional Isomorphism*

A first important way in which a research agenda is necessary to study the impact of U.S. News rankings within the organizational environments of individual colleges and universities is to begin the process of disaggregating an understanding of the concept of institutional isomorphism. Isomorphism (Reisman, 1956), homogenization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), upward academic drift (Clark, 1987), and the academic ratchet (Zemsky & Massy, 1993) are theoretical constructs that have been considered almost exclusively within the aggregate of higher education as a system of institutions or within sub-sectors of the overall system (Astin, 1985; Dey, Milem & Berger, 1997; Milem, Berger & Dey, 2000). However, if these concepts are to be of continued value they must be
applied to studies that explore their manifestation within individual organizational environments. A perception that U.S. News rankings lead to isomorphic behavior of all types – regulative, normative, and mimetic – is evident across all forms of discourse and intuitively makes sense. Applying the concept of institutional isomorphism to studies of the impact of U.S. News rankings within individual college and university environments will enable scholars to develop a more nuanced understanding of isomorphism itself across a new unit of analysis.

Verifying the Validity of the Multiple Models for Studying Organizational Behavior

A second gap that studying the impact of U.S. News rankings within individual colleges and universities can help to fill is the absence of research aimed at verifying the validity of the multiple models for studying the organizational behavior of colleges and universities. Additionally, such studies can further confirm the value in employing a multiple-lens conceptual framework. While some research does exist in this area (see Berger & Milem, 2000; Birnbaum, 2001; Eckel & Kezar, 2003), the empirical validity of the mental models serving as the basis for the conceptual framework guiding the inquiry described throughout this paper are still in question. This is particularly true for both the political and symbolic lenses for studying organizational behavior, as most studies have traditionally employed structural or collegial perspectives (Kezar, 2001). Verifying the value in the lenses themselves as useful theoretical frameworks for observing organizational behavior is itself a valuable goal.

Furthering the Understanding of Colleges and Universities as Unique Organizations

At the same time that a research agenda to understand the impact of U.S. News rankings can help verify the validity of the multiple models for studying organizational behavior, it can also help to further an understanding of why colleges and universities are unique organizations. Kezar (2001) argues that 13 factors that exist more within colleges and universities than in other organizational entities that strongly influence change and decision-making within their environments. As pressure mounts to implement more traditional business models of management within higher education
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(Birnbaum, 2001; Kirp, 2004), the need to assess how colleges and universities are organizationally unique increases. Such studies would have the potential to counteract initiatives aimed at holding institutions more accountable and could reinforce the significance of autonomy. Additionally, if there is truth to the argument that U.S. News rankings are preventing institutions from being as efficient as possible (Ehrenberg, 2003), such studies would highlight the fact that inefficiencies are being driven by something more than the traditionally unique characteristics of colleges and universities.

Understanding the Impact of Prestige-Seeking on Students

A recent line of scholarly inquiry has attempted to understand the manner in which components of organizational behavior impact a range of student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 2000). Additionally, scholars have attempted to link an examination of the organizational behavior of colleges and universities to institutional-level studies on important areas such as student persistence (Tinto, 1993) and campus climate (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1999). Connecting prestige-seeking and the impact of U.S. News rankings can be an important piece of this overall movement to integrate an understanding of the organizational behavior of colleges and universities within research on the student experience and student outcomes. While Astin (1993) begins this conversation by considering how the hiring of faculty “stars” drain institutional resources as a component of prestige, his work does not focus upon individual institutions, the impact of the rankings specifically, nor does it tie the prestige-seeking agenda to organizational theory. This is yet another area in which such studies can add to the overall body of scholarly work in higher education.

Empowering Institutional Leaders and Policymakers through Research

A fifth area where a research agenda to study the impact of U.S. News rankings can make a difference is in empowering institutional leaders and policymakers. Recognizing that U.S. News rankings are such an understudied influence in the world of higher education, any targeted research regarding the overall prestige-seeking process would greatly enhance the ability of leaders and
policymakers to make decisions in guiding their institutions and systems. Furthermore, a goal of all research within higher education ought to be to empower college and university stakeholders and their decision-making. Too often research studies are abstract, difficult to read, and lack practical value. While it is important to ground research in well-formulated theory, the research itself ought not to simply be a theoretical exercise. If the assumption that U.S. News rankings impact leaders and policymakers in a meaningful way, then the research that examines the rankings ought to be meaningful as well.

*Shifting the Conversation from Prestige to Quality*

A research agenda that considers studying the impact of U.S. News rankings within individual colleges and universities can also assist scholars and practitioners within higher education in shifting the discussion from one of prestige-seeking to one of institutional quality. Other scholars make this argument as well (Berdahl, Altbach & Gumport, 1999; Couturier & Scurry, 2005). It is quite clear that U.S. News rankings are *not* a measure of institutional quality, despite the fact that some of the indicators within the rankings attempt to assess institutional quality such as the graduation performance indicator. Other research projects conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles and the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University attempt to assess the “value-added” of colleges and universities, but a research agenda examining the impact of U.S. News rankings has the ability to further such work and add to the overall movement towards assessment in higher education. The need to differentiate between institutional prestige and status with institutional quality, particularly as tuition rates continue to rise, is one that must be addressed by any research agenda that considers U.S. News rankings and prestige-seeking more generally.

*Looking into the Abyss*

The anecdotal evidence presented at the outset of this paper clearly shows that U.S. News rankings are a force that impacts the decisions made by colleges and universities. Ehrenberg (2003)
goes as far as to consider the rankings as the “gold standard” of all rankings systems. If these stories exist in certain places, and the rankings are perceived as the gold standard, scholars and practitioners in higher education must move past the “elephant in the room” phenomenon and begin to rigorously assess their impact on a range of outcomes within individual institutions. There is no justifiable reason for the continued mystical allure of U.S. News rankings within higher education. As a force perceived to be very strong within individual colleges and universities, the impact of the rankings on decision-making and organizational behavior must be uncovered.

The studies reviewed above consider the impact of the rankings on a limited range of outcomes, while the anecdotal evidence provided in the social commentary pieces suggest that their impact extends well beyond access, selectivity, and the allocation of faculty time. Furthermore, those concerned with the rankings need to move beyond the arguments about their flawed methodologies. This line of reasoning has been advanced repeatedly, and as accurate as it may be, it does not address the simple fact that despite the methodological flaws, the rankings are important. A significant gap exists in the scholarly literature – the impact of U.S. News rankings within individual institutions is relatively unknown. We do not know how deep the abyss goes, nor do we know exactly what we will find there, but we must begin to critically look into it.
References


