

Don't Rank Research Universities —Compare Them

BY ROBERT A. BROWN

Robert Brown's essay reads like the scientific article it is and reflects the kind of thorough analysis expected from such a scholar-researcher. The fact that he was also a president of a large private research university adds both to his understanding of the need for such a study and his desire to offer more than a criticism but an *alternative* to the current (flawed) rankings system.

Using Brown's "sports team" analogy, I will say, for the most part, he hit some home runs. But he also had a few "swing and a miss" moments.

His home runs include highlighting all that is wrong with these rankings from an analytical (statistical modeling) standpoint. Another is his alternative analytic framework, which uses a technique known as principal component analysis to capture 18 features that may influence the rankings of (specifically) research universities, both (and separately) public and private. He also wisely suggests two categories of private institutions (larger and smaller). And his recommendation that US graduate diplomas awarded to top international students "should have a green card stapled to them" clears the outfield wall.

His whiffs came in the section on endowments, specifically the differences (Brown believes to exist) between public and private institutions.

First strike: Private research universities are no longer all that different from large public research universities in terms of awarding aid. And public universities' efforts to keep in-state costs relatively

low often are offset by their objective of attracting more out-of-state students who pay higher tuition. The argument that public universities' missions of access and workforce development (something *all* universities should have) "by holding down in-state tuition while increasing student numbers to boost revenue" is spurious. Brown's assertion that institutions without large endowments are forced to raise tuition and fees, or enroll more students, also falls flat.

Instead, I observe, most have turned to philanthropy to continue to keep costs affordable for students and their families and to invest in capital projects that relieve the institution from having to bear those costs entirely on their own. Yes, some universities have used enrollment growth to generate resources, but this is not the norm. Demographics, market realities, competition, and several other factors will require most institutions to look for other revenue streams. The elite privates, while perhaps best positioned to capture increased enrollment market share, often are land-locked and competing for space with their research, clinical, innovation, and entrepreneurship missions.

Most of us hope rankings are dead or at least gone the way of the batter's box rule. What Brown has given us is better than a replacement ranking system. His analytic framework allows us to examine and better understand meaningful differences between universities, differences that are statistically significant and relevant.

Brown closes with two very important questions, more important today than even a few months ago: Can the United States accept the consequences if the number of research universities dramatically shrinks because fewer can afford to keep pace? And can the United States remain a global leader in innovation if its research universities don't thrive?

We can replace the last part of each question with "if the federal government dramatically decreases its commitment to and investment in scientific research." Brown offers this closing swing: "At such a juncture, it is time to take a careful look at the health of the enterprise as a whole to envision its future." I couldn't agree more. Indeed, that future is at risk today. Batter up.

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