
Regional

There are no such things as "party schools"

A few weeks ago in this very column I discussed the issue of college rankings by organizations such as U.S. News and World Report and how poorly they reflect the true nature of the institutions mentioned in their rankings. They fail to really measure what is truly important in education, including how much students really learn by attending a particular college. Yet, those rankings get a lot of publicity.

On Aug. 3, we learned about the rankings produced by The Princeton Review, which, again, grabbed a lot of attention that concentrated on what was categorized as the "top party school" in the country. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign grabbed that dubious distinction and the headline appeared in almost every media outlet.

To better understand how this happens some background information is needed. To begin with The Princeton Review is a private company that specializes in test preparation and college admission. In addition to those services, they provide tutoring, online courses and publish books through Random House. Despite their name, they have nothing to do with Princeton University, one of the most venerable institutions of higher education in the world.

Since 1992 they have been publishing rankings of the top U.S. schools. Today that includes 62 categories such as "Best Professors," "Best Career Services," and "Great Financial Aid." Unlike other ranking organizations, for the most part they do not use data in their rankings. They are based on surveying students (up to 136,000) at the 380 top colleges and universities (averaging 358

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students per campus). That means that these are subjective opinions and, therefore, misleading. Needless to say, unless a particular school is mentioned in positive areas such as "Best Professors," colleges and universities rarely talk about those rankings – but the media sure do.

According to their Web site, The Princeton Review's purpose "is not to crown one college academically 'best' overall or to rank the schools 1 to 380 on any single topic, our lists provide direct student feedback on the schools' campus culture, program offerings and cost. Our goal is to help applicants choose and get into their dream college - college – the best for them."

It is interesting that some schools that appear at the top of the "party schools" one year disappear from the rankings the next, as if the entire alleged culture of the institution changed overnight.

Just to show how unreliable these rankings are let me tell you how this works. A few years ago a group of students at Florida State University conducted a drive in order to have their school named "top party school," so they convinced many of their fellow students to add their opinions of The Princeton Review in a way that FSU would be placed at the top of the list, something they succeeded in doing. This was obviously a prank. Also some years ago, The Princeton Review named

Macalester College in Minnesota as the one "in which students are less likely to believe in God."

What followed demonstrated how administrators should not respond. In the case of FSU, its president showed a great deal of contempt toward the media attention, appearing before the TV cameras with a choleric reaction. He was then very upset that the video of his reaction was shown again and again on national television. To make things worse, they were even the objects of ridicule on TV shows. After showing the footage of the FSU president, Jon Stewart on his program said that the school "has now decided to add classes to their activities."

In the case of Macalester what happened was that apparently one of the members of the board of trustees complained to the president of the college about the seeming widespread atheism among its students. The next thing the president did was to send an email to any student who had matriculated in any theology course so they would write The Princeton Review and convince them that such atheism at Macalester was false. That move by the Macalester administration infuriated the students, who felt that they were being manipulated by the college administration. The incident was leaked to the local media, and, in turn, more negative attention was placed on the college.

These examples should teach all of us a number of lessons, among them that the messes created by these unscientific surveys are a matter of shared responsibility. To begin with, The Princeton Review should stop doing these surveys. But as a private company whose

business can increase with national media attention it is hard to think that they will stop doing these publicity stunts. In fact organizations like the American Medical Association has requested that the "party school" category be dropped, saying that it encourages drinking on campus.

The other lesson is for higher education administrators. Instead of showing their irritation in public, they should respond by educating both the media and different constituencies of their institutions (boards of trustees, parents, students) about the meaningless of these surveys. Furthermore, all of these institutions should stop airing the results of these surveys, even when they seem highly positive for them in their marketing materials.

Students should recognize that this bad publicity actually affects the reputation of their schools and should refrain from participating in these games. Finally, the media should also take responsibility by not reporting results of surveys whose methodology is questionable at best and that really do not reflect the true nature of institutions of higher education.

Colleges and universities in this country do have more important problems to deal with than mockery and pranks, and a primary one is to measure how well they teach their students to succeed as both citizens and professionals.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.aromerojr.net>