To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Nissa Dahlin-Brown entitled "The Impact of *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings on MBA Programs at Eight Public Institutions." I have examined the final paper copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Administration and Policy Studies.

E. Grady Bogue, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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Acceptance for the Council:

Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

The **Impact** of *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings on MBA Programs at Eight Public Institutions

A Dissertation
Presented for the Doctor of Education Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Nissa Dahlin-Brown

December 2003

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who helped make it happen…

To the 45 participants in the study, Dr. Grady Bogue and the rest of my committee, who made it all possible and worthwhile.

To my parents, A.V. and Janice Dahlin, who instilled in me a will that I could do whatever I set my mind to.

To my husband George and brother-in-law Clint Brown, who read and re-read the proposal and many drafts.

To my kids, Maddie and Marshall, who let me have quiet time and space to finish this and hopefully learned that if there is something you truly want to do, you can do it.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the 45 administrators and faculty members across the country who participated in this study. Also a note of thanks to Dr. Grady Bogue, my major professor, for his advice, support, and guidance. Dr. Bogue has been an inspiration who taught us about governance, educational quality, leadership and other facets of higher education. He also ignited my interest in the rankings, which led to this study. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee: Dr. Terri Mangione, who provided immeasurable assistance in qualitative research; Dr. Dave Schumann, whose knowledge of and contacts within the business college were invaluable; and Dr. Mike Singletary, whose advice kept the study grounded and cognizant of both sides of the story. I would also like to thank the other former and present faculty members in the Educational Administration and Policy Studies department: Dr. Jeffrey Aper, who taught us about assessment, research and how to converse at the philosopher's cocktail party and Dr. Norma Mertz, who made sure we learned about curriculum, ethics and values in higher education. And thanks to my fellow cohort members, Keith Carver, Andy Lewter, Renee Porier, Kristi Roberson-Scott, Robert Stewart, Sharon Tanner, Mary Taylor and Donna Tipton - good luck as you all finish up this worthwhile journey.

There are numerous people at the University of Tennessee, who supported me in this journey: Alan Lowe and Patti Rebholz at the Howard Baker Center for Public Policy; Mary Jerger, Linda Kallstrom, Vickie Kroeger, Nancy Orrick, and Marlene Burns at UT Professional & Personal Development; Dr. Bob Levy and Dr. Norvel Burkett for their encouragement; and Dr. Bob Leiter and Dr. Gayle Cooper for their support and assistance in helping me obtain a regional and a national scholarship from the Association for Continuing Higher Education, which made my travels to each campus possible.

Finally, many thanks to my parents, A.V. and Janice Dahlin, whose pride I can feel as I write this 430 miles away from my hometown. And finally, to my husband George, son Marshall and daughter Maddie, who were great sports and supporters and to whom I hope I never have to again say, **"Don't talk to me, I'm trying to write!"**

Abstract

U.S. News & World Report has published a ranking of the top 50 MBA programs since 1990. Today, the rankings are so popular and powerful, that prospective students, alumni, legislators, college presidents, deans, and admissions officers wait with bated breath to see where their school will be ranked.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to look behind the numbers of the rankings to discover the impact of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings on eight differentially ranked, public MBA schools, as perceived by 45 faculty and administrators. Three schools from the top 25, three from the bottom 25, and two unranked schools participated.

Data for the study was obtained from interviews, a selected year's *US News* survey form, field observations and each school's marketing materials. Nine themes emerged from the data. The dominant theme was that the **rankings matter.** Another theme was that the **rich kept getting richer,** as these highly ranked schools attracted the best students, more recruiters and more resources. There was also an 800-pound gorilla that hung over the policy and decision-makers at each school. And though schools generally **did not believe** the *U.S. News* rankings measured the **academic excellence** of a school, nevertheless, they **did believe** that the rankings, in general, **reflected the top schools.** The study also found that schools **reacted** to the rankings with curriculum changes, more student amenities and more student services. The rankings also reinforced the perception of the MBA program as the **flagship of the college of business** and this status created a **halo effect** (good or bad, depending on rank) onto the other programs within the college. The rankings also **strongly affected the career services and admissions staff,** resulting in growth and increased turnover. Finally, while many considered the rankings an imperfect measure of quality, they did see some **benefits in the rankings.**

This study should provide administrators, faculty and other interested parties with an interesting look at the complexity and passion that hides behind the numbers that are the rankings, while also providing suggestions for how they might deal with these impacts.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Americans are intrigued by rankings and ratings. We rate cars, computers, mutual funds, restaurants, movies, TV shows and even colleges. But, while *Consumer Reports* uses product engineers and scientists to rate cars and computers, colleges are rated by an interesting partnership of academicians and journalists. So, how do these journalists rate a college education? According to *U.S. News & World Report (USNWR),* which publishes 'America's Best Colleges' and America's Best Graduate Schools', you rate them by asking college presidents, provosts and deans, recruiters and employers, which colleges they like best. Then you collect some statistics on size; student selectivity and placement; faculty and institutional resources; you mix, weigh and measure; and out pops America's top 50 colleges and graduate schools!

USNWR has published a ranking of the top 50 'Best Colleges' in the country since 1983 and the top 50 MBA, law, education, medicine and engineering graduate programs since 1990. These controversial rankings claim to indicate the quality of the more than 1,400 institutions surveyed each year (Morse & Flanigan, 2000). Today, the rankings are so popular and powerful, that parents and prospective students, alumni, legislators, trustees, college presidents, deans, and development and admissions officers wait with bated breath to see where their school will be ranked. Each school knows a drop in the rankings could affect their enrollments, future research monies and reputation (Mallette, 1995). *U.S. News,* on the other hand, stands to benefit no matter what the outcome, as they rake in millions of dollars on the sales of the rankings and related publications (Machung, 1998).

In defense of *USNWR*, the rankings are one of the few publications available to parents and potential students that provide them with information they can use to compare one college to another (Webster, 1992; U.S. News.com, 2001). However, the problem is not with the information *U.S. News* provides, but with the <u>ranking</u> and how it is done. Academicians have questioned how anyone can <u>number rank</u> the quality of a school or denote one school as one point better than another. The current debate has academics crying foul and the publisher claiming, "It's the best we have to offer!" But is it the best? *U.S. News* claims that the information they offer to the college bound student will help the student make a better college choice. They caution readers about using the rankings purely on a stand-alone basis *(U.S. News & World Report,* 2001). However, Americans tend to ***listen to the headlines*** and react quickly. Many will probably never read this cautionary statement and will take the rankings at face-value.

While *U.S. News* stands by their claim that the rankings indicate the academic excellence of a school, academia claims the rankings only indicate the reputation and prestige of a school. However, this is one way to look at excellence (Bogue and Saunders, 1992). Therefore, *U.S. News* has responded to these criticisms with almost annual changes to the criteria of the rankings, which has further upset academia. In fact, the frustration level has climbed to such a peak that several schools have tried to put an end to the rankings. In a 1996 letter to the editor of *U.S. News*, Gerhard Casper, President of Stanford, criticized the rankings and asked *U.S. News* to eliminate their attempts to rank colleges "like automobiles or toasters" (Casper, 1997). Stanford went so far as to discontinue sending in reputation rankings and only submitted objective data to *U.S. News*. Casper went on to say...

> ...the strength of the American system of higher education lies in the diversity of institutions available to students...Each has something to offer and no standardized list of 'best colleges' can begin to do justice to what is best for a given student....We urge *U.S.News* to attempt to become a more reliable and credible participant in this effort. (1997, p. 2)

Other schools have also attempted to boycott the rankings, but none have been successful. Alan Stone of Alma College in Michigan tried to organize a national boycott by liberal arts schools in 1997, but only five percent of those he contacted agreed to support it (Machung, 1998). Reed College refused to send in data in 1995, so *U.S. News* *punished* them with the lowest possible score in each category and they plunged to the bottom (Glass, 1997). Later *U.S. News* expressed regret for this action (Glass, 1997).

Therefore, administrators will tell you they cannot ignore the rankings, because to do so could harm the public's perception of their institution and further erode their rankings. A number of articles support this perception (Shea, 1995; Machung, 1998; Gioia & Corley, 2000,). One such study on MBA program image and reputation by

Gioia & Corley (2000) found that,

> Paradoxically, the introduction of the rankings as an attempt to quantify and therefore objectify academic performance arguably has had an unwitting, opposite effect in that the rankings have forced schools to play what amounts to a game of illusion with very tangible results...playing that dangerous game has produced an environment where substance is no longer seen as sufficient, merely necessary and image increasingly is coming to dominate even in the new substantive guise. (2000, p. 332).

A study conducted by James Monk and Ronald Ehrenberg in 1999 found that the rankings did have an impact on the admissions outcomes and institutional pricing decisions for liberal arts colleges and national universities at the top of the rankings. They found a drop of five places decreased a school's admission rate by two percent (Monk & Ehrenberg, 1999). As the yield rate dropped, the students that were accepted had lower SAT scores and the downward spiral in the rankings continued.

To move up in the rankings, there are many stories about schools changing their admissions policies or changing the way they report their statistics to *U.S. News* (Machung, 1998; Patterson, 2000; Gioia & Corley, 2000; Monk & Ehrenberg, 1999). For example, Machung found that some schools encouraged students to apply, even though the school knew they would not accept them. This raised their selectivity ratio and thus their ranking. Other schools have instituted early admission procedures (fall of the high school senior year). This benefited the school by locking in the fall class early, but it also required the student to drop all other applications, which could mean the loss of financial aid (Machung, 1998).

Many stories of schools reporting false statistics have also been reported. Tennessee State University gave *U.S. News* a graduation rate of 40%, but according to the NCAA, only 24% graduated (Glass, 1997). Gioia and Corley (2001) cited several instances of creatively interpreting the reporting criteria. For example, some schools admitted lower quality students into the Master of Science program and then transferred them into the MBA after one year (Gioia and Corley, 2001). At Cornell, they changed their method of reporting alumni giving by removing all those who never graduated, before reporting their data (Gioia and Corley, 2001). This improved their rating factor, but had nothing to do with the quality of education (Patterson, 2000).

The newest attack has come from inside the ranks of *U.S. News*. In 2001, an article appeared by a former director of the *USNWR* rankings team, who questioned the validity of the rankings, due to the ranking's emphasis on reputation and lack of focus on student learning (Graham & Thompson, 2001). While the authors asserted that what students and parents needed was information on learning outcomes, graduation rates and student satisfaction, *USNWR* offered rankings based on institutional wealth, reputation and achievement of the high school student it admitted. In fact, *US News'* criteria provided a miniscule one percent of the rating based on the ratio of student to faculty (Graham & Thompson, 2001).

Rankings Impact on MBA Programs

One sector of academia that has seen a significant impact from the rankings is MBA programs. These rankings have become so popular and the competition to do well so tough that many MBA schools live in fear of where they will be ranked. If their ranking drops, many tell stories of decreased enrollments, angry alumni and students, lost funding and more (Jambotkar, 1998; Walpole, 1998; Gioia & Corley, 2000; Patterson, 2000). In fact, the pressure on business schools to do better and better was demonstrated in a study conducted in 1998 by Mary Kay Walpole. She looked at the ramifications of the rankings on a top 20-ranked MBA department (Walpole, 1998). Though ranked in *Business Week's* top 20, the administration wanted the Business School to be ranked higher. Walpole interviewed 31 members of the staff and found that the MBA program was particularly affected, because students enrolled were usually looking to increase their skills and salary. So, enrolling in a prestigious and highly ranked program only added to that. In fact, other programs within the college benefited from a halo effect. One of those interviewed stated, "our ratings have a big impact on our MBA and executive education revenues." Another stated, "We do see people stop writing checks...donors...(because of) the external rating system." (Walpole, 1998, p. 16).

Even more recently, the rankings are being blamed for taking resources away from research and support of doctoral education to fund placement, marketing or admissions personnel and publications (Gioia & Corley, 2000). Designing and developing a quality MBA program has become second fiddle to managing the image and reputation of the program (Gioia & Corley, 2000). As Gioia and Corley noted in their study of ten of the top-rated MBA schools,

> In little more than a decade, the rankings by various magazines have come to dominate the strategic thought and actions of many business schools....In the light of the prominence of the rankings in the industry's and public's consciousness, however, the rankings have usurped any other more comprehensive view of reputation and transformed it into a sound bite surrogate – the rankings number itself. (Infanti, 2001, pg. 1)

As with all *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, public institutions tend to be clustered in the lower ranks. One only has to look at the top 25 MBA programs in the 2002 *U.S. News & World Report* listing (2001) to find that only 36% (9) are public institutions, even though public MBA schools outnumber privates almost two to one (187 to 97 – MBArankings.com). Typically, public institutions have lower tuition rates and lower admissions requirements because their mission usually entails an open door policy to the citizens of that state. Therefore, they tend to be less selective and are not as wealthy as private institutions, both factors that can hurt them in the rankings.

So, does *U.S. News & World Report Best Graduate Schools* indicate the academic excellence of one school over another? Could this competition to be ranked in the top 25 actually cause some institutions to forget their original mission of education, research, and service and do whatever it takes to get to the top? These questions are of critical importance to faculty and administrators in higher education due to the impact the rankings appear to have on policy, curriculum, enrollment, resources and research. They are also important for the consumer of an MBA education and the future and prosperity of American management education in general (Corley & Gioia, 2000).

Statement of the Problem: Purpose and Significance

From the literature, we know that *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have had an impact on MBA schools. What we do not know is the extent of that impact as perceived by the faculty and administrators who teach in and direct these schools. What opinions and perceptions lurk behind the numbers? What impact have they seen and what have been the results of that impact? This study provided an opportunity for administrators and faculty to express their opinions on the rankings and how they have seen the rankings impact their MBA program, the college and the institution as a whole.

The Purpose

The purpose of the study was to discover and describe the impact of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings on differentially ranked public MBA schools as perceived by the faculty, dean(s) and director(s) of those schools.

To begin the interview, the researcher asked the participant to share his or her perception of the impact of the *USNWR* graduate rankings on ______________ College of Business, the MBA Program and the institution at large. The intent was to begin with an overall picture of the college and as the interview progressed, to focus on a more personal viewpoint. The other two primary questions were:

- How do you feel the rankings reflect the academic excellence of the schools they rank and what is your definition of academic excellence?
- How has your institution reacted to the rankings?

These general questions allowed the interviewee to share his or her most important concerns about the rankings without confining or limiting him or her to any specific areas or issues. This was an important consideration in order to truly discover the pertinent issues in the mind of each particular interviewee. However, as the interviews progressed, common issues reoccurred regarding program size, staff size, school location, financial resources for the CBA/MBA programs, student recruitment and placement issues, program marketing, student/faculty interaction, curriculum innovation, and more.

Significance

The purpose of this study was to discover and describe the impact of the *USNWR* rankings on public MBA programs, employing a qualitative methodology. The study was important to add to the research base on the subject of the rankings and to hopefully assist administrators and faculty in dealing more effectively and efficiently with the impact of the rankings on their respective institutions. Additionally, a paper written in 2001 blamed the rankings competition for a decrease in doctoral degree seeking students and for the low quality and lack of research being conducted by graduate business schools, (Zimmerman, 2001). If this is true, the rankings could impact not only enrollments, fund raising, or student recruitment, but also the number and quality of future business faculty. This should alarm anyone in higher education, and particularly those in management education!

Clarifications and Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following clarifications and definitions should be noted.

- **UG** is an abbreviation for **undergraduate**.
- **F** is an abbreviation for **faculty**
- **A** is an abbreviation for **administrator**
- The use of the terms: **college, school, graduate business schools, MBA programs and MBA schools** are used interchangeably throughout this study. *U.S. News* titled their rankings *Best Graduate Business Schools*, but the focus is on the full-time MBA program within the business school.
- The terms **MBA dean/director, MBA dean** or **MBA director,** are used to indicate whoever is head of the MBA program, be that a dean, associate dean, assistant dean or director. The three terms are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.
- The name ***U.S. News & World Report*** is used interchangeably with the abbreviations ***U.S. News, USN*** and ***USNWR***.

Limitations/Delimitations

This study was limited to eight public institutions. Three ranked in the top tier or top 25, three ranked in the second tier or 26-50 and two were unranked schools. In 2001 there were 365 accredited (AACSB) MBA programs in the U.S., of which 187 were full-time programs at public institutions (MBA program ranking and screening, 2001). The six ranked schools were selected from the *USNWR* rankings of the top 50 MBA programs. (*U.S. News & World Report,* date not given to protect participants' identity). The remaining two were unranked, but participated in the *UNSWR* survey. Additionally, the study was limited specifically to the *U.S. News and World Report Best Business Schools* rankings, while there are other publications that also rank business schools, such as *Business Week, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal* and *Money*. Finally, only the opinions of MBA faculty and deans/directors were collected, whereas MBA students, alumni, recruiters and employers could also provide different and valuable opinions.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

John Gardner in his oft-quoted book *Excellence* made the following observation about the *U.S. News Best Colleges* rankings:

> …less than one percent of the college-age population were qualified to attend the California Institute of Technology and Cal Tech is usually ranked in the top 10 of the *USNWR* rankings (1984). Does this infer that to be in the top 25, colleges must only admit the top one percent of the population, when most admissions standards would admit 10,20,40, 60%? If society turns to these rankings to determine excellence, then only the prestigious schools with their distinguished faculty, student selectivity and difficult curriculum will ever be considered excellent. (Gardner, 1984, p 114).

This quote provided a concise and descriptive summary of the feelings of many in academia with regard to the rankings. Gardner saw a problem with defining excellence and quality based on a school's selectivity, reputation and prestige, which are the primary factors of the *US News* rankings. So, what is a quality education? How do we define it and how do we measure it? In this chapter we will briefly explore several theories of quality and the use of reputation as an indicator of quality. Then we will dig into the history of reputational rankings and explore earlier academic forays into rankings, before the present move into the commercial ranks. Next, we will review the methodology used by *USNWR* to produce the undergraduate and graduate rankings, plus a more in-depth analysis specifically related to the MBA criteria. This section will describe the numerous tweaks and corrections that *USNWR* has made to the rankings since 1990. Then, an in-depth review of each of the three criteria used in the MBA rankings: reputation, placement, and student selectivity. Finally, a look at the power and impact of the rankings, the rankings competition and other recent articles related to the rankings.

Selected Theories of Educational Excellence in Higher Education

There are many theories of quality, most of which were based on manufacturing, which was true of the work of Edward Deming, considered by many to be the father of quality theory. His theory of quality focused on continuous improvement and utilized input from the workers and customers to determine the best way to achieve quality and continually improve it. We will focus on three theories of educational quality: limited supply (reputation), achievement of goals (mission) and results or value-added (Bogue & Aper, 2001).

Many inside and outside academia hold to the theory of limited supply or reputation when defining quality education. This theory assumes that only high-cost, comprehensive, highly-selective, and nationally ranked and recognized schools can offer a quality education. This is the primary factor behind *U.S. News* rankings (Bogue & Aper). However this theory ignores the other aspects of education, such as the particular program strengths of an institution. This leads to the second theory of quality within mission. In this theory, we see quality not limited to size, selectivity, reputation and resources, but related to the mission of the institution – how well the institution performs with regard to its mission and goals. Bogue and Saunders (1992) promoted this theory in their book, *The Evidence for Quality*. The advantages of this theory were that it respected the diversity of institutional missions and settings, but also put pressure on institutions to be accountable for their own results. This made an institution's uniqueness part of the quality equation. Finally, our third theory dealt with value-added, which was promoted by Alexander Astin. Astin defined an excellent education as one that added the most value to a student's experience - had the most impact on a student's knowledge, skill and attitude (Astin, 1985). With this very brief overview of three different theories of excellence in education, we can delve more deeply into the first one – limited supply or reputation.

Reputation as an Indicator of Academic Excellence

Logan Wilson stated in the introduction to Allan Cartter's 1966 graduate rankings report that "Excellence, by definition is a state only the few rather than the many can attain." (Cartter, 1966, p. vii). He also said "quality is an elusive attribute, not easily submitted to measurement." (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 69).

Bogue & Saunders (1992) described educational quality as:

...conformance to mission specification and goal achievement – within publicly

> accepted standards of accountability and integrity....diversity with distinction. (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 20).

Bogue and Aper noted that the conventional assumptions regarding quality in higher education were that only large, high cost, selective, nationally ranked colleges with many resources had quality (Bogue & Aper, 2000):

> The visibility and prestige of these universities, and the primary basis of these ratings, rest heavily upon the eminence of their faculties; and the eminence of the faculties resides heavily in their publication and research records. We are not surprised then, that the top-rated university and graduate programs are those whose faculties are publication productive and research oriented. Institutional size, history, and resources play important roles in this stability. (Bogue and Saunders, 1992, p. 75).

In a 1980 report titled, *A Question of Quality: The Higher Education Ratings Game,* the authors found similar results (Lawrence and Greene).

> Reputation studies – with their focus on faculty prestige as perceived by faculty raters, their preoccupation with graduate education and research-related characteristics, and their reliance on similar criteria and methodologies from one survey to the next, have dominated quality assessment of higher education...The unfortunate consequence of this situation are perhaps more attributable to the higher education community's competitiveness, the mass media's lust for sensational headlines and the American public's obsession with knowing who's at the top. (1980, p. 16).

Bogue & Saunders, in their book *The Evidence for Quality*, described the college rankings as a test of reputation. They described reputation, as something that took years to form and once formed, was difficult to change (Bogue & Saunders, 1992).

Up until 1982, only graduate programs were studied and the analysis was usually based on reputation. Reputational studies solicited the opinions of individuals who were supposedly in positions to know who were the most influential and prolific scholars in the field and which were the high quality institutions (Hattendorf, 1997). Thus reputational studies were very subjective. Clark, Hartnett & Baird's 1976 study for Educational Testing Service (ETS) explored three graduate fields and used the subjective reputational study and gathered objective data on faculty, students, resources and curricular characteristics (Clark, Hartnett, & Baird, 1976). ETS noted in the report that,

Ratings of reputation of a program among faculty members in the same field have

> a place in program evaluation; but they are not very helpful to those who may be seeking to improve their program, are highly related to program size and visibility, and only occasionally reflect recent changes (good or bad) in a program. (1976, p. 1.2).

A 1982 study by the Conference Board of Associated Research Councils ranked 228 institutions and studied sixteen measures of quality divided into six categories: program size, characteristics of graduates, reputation survey results, library size, research support and publication records (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). It was most similar to the measures used by *USNWR* today. The study's reputational survey asked faculty to evaluate the scholarly quality of program faculty, the effectiveness of the program in educating research scholars, the improvement in program quality in the last five years, and finally to indicate their familiarity with the program they were evaluating. In regard to this last question they found that on average, these evaluators were not familiar with 1/3 of the programs they evaluated (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Another criticism of the study was that for all the numbers, no rankings or summaries of the findings could be found. Bogue & Saunders questioned the connection between some of the factors used in the studies and quality. For example, did the number of faculty members indicate quality or just program size (1992)?

On the other hand, Bogue and Saunders (1992) provided some factors that could lead to high rankings. They found that the size of an institution was important, as the more graduates, the better chance of those alums being in the position to rank. Also, publications and citations tended to mean more in the rankings than good teaching, because top researchers helped establish the reputation of an institution (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Roose & Anderson's 1970 study of program quality provided a prime example of this.

> The superficiality of exclusive reliance on reputation as a measure of quality was well illustrated in a comment made to us by the former chief academic officer...about one of his distinguished faculty members: (the professor) is highly regarded in his profession and has contributed importantly to the reputation of his department, but what has he done for students in 12 years? He has not turned out a single Ph.D. (1970, p. 24).

Finally, a distinctive mission or style of curriculum could earn an institution a reputation that would help it stand out from the crowd and thus rise in the rankings (Bogue & Saunders, 1992).

Obviously, these factors don't always hold true, but they are what the public may perceive as a quality institution. Gioia and Corley (2000) found that business academics didn't feel that the rankings indicated the quality of a school. But when one dean was asked why he continued to pursue high rankings he replied:

> The reality is that, independent of whether you believe rankings accurately reflect quality, the perception of the outside world is (that) it does and consequently resources flow to schools who are highly ranked. (Gioia and Corley, 2000, p. 323).

Quality is difficult to measure, particularly when you are measuring the quality of a service, such as education. However, today's society demands that we measure so we can be accountable for the public investment made in education. Reputation studies, on the other hand, do keep the quality question in the forefront, but they do not aid quality assurance or accountability or assist in improving education (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). However, whether *USNWR* measures quality or prestige, *America's Best Graduate Schools* does fill a void by providing comparative information on colleges that hasn't been available in the past (Webster, 1992, Stuart, 1995; Bogue & Saunders, 1992). According to David Webster, *U.S. News* rankings have provided a number of benefits to the public and academia (1992). They provided helpful data to potential students, parents and guidance counselors. They showed administrators and faculty how their department or schools compared to other institutions and they provided a motivation factor for all institutions to strive for improvement (Webster, 1992).

However, Gardner cautioned us in *Excellence* not to rush to an accountability method that caused everything to be reduced to a single number. Though, he was commenting on multiple testing of students in K-12, his comments could also be related to rankings to assess institutions:

> ...The rapid and efficient handling of large numbers of individuals exerts tremendous pressure toward oversimplified diagnoses toward the summation of individual attributes in a single index number and toward complete dependence on that number as a key to the individual's fate. Considerations of efficiency must not be allowed to distort our diagnoses or to narrow our conception of talent.

(Gardner, 1984, p. 67).

Critics of the use of reputation as the major ranking criteria are supported by many examples in the literature. For example, in 1996, a survey of 158 national liberal-arts colleges ranked by *USNWR* found that 84% of the voters admitted they were unfamiliar with some of the schools they ranked and one quarter of those guessed (Glass, 1997). In regard to the MBA rankings, critics have questioned the use of MBA deans to rank other schools. They claimed the high turnover rate of deans (5-10 years), their limited knowledge of other MBA programs, and the lack of specific criteria for defining a better school, have made the assessment questionable at best (Schatz, 1993; Zimmerman, 2001). Schatz claimed that *USNWR* factors of student selectivity and placement success alluded to something about the school, but it did not measure the quality of research, teaching, facilities, or equipment, nor did it measure the culture and values of the institution (1993). Zimmermann echoed these beliefs in his article on the rankings and stated that short-term deans, who tended to serve less than 10 years, are more focused on the short-term rewards. This meant continued cutbacks in research funding and lessening of the power of faculty to control the allocation of resources (Zimmermann, 2001).

While those administering MBA programs or surveying MBA graduates might agree with these views on quality, reputation and prestige, the bottom line is that students pay attention to these factors. In fact, a recent Graduate Management Admission Council survey (GMAC, 2003) of 4,125 students from 96 schools around the world listed quality and reputation as the number one school selection criteria, with published rankings number five among a total of 11 criteria. Respondents defined quality in a variety of ways. For example, students attending Asian schools equated quality with prestige and reputation of faculty. At European schools, quality was defined by prestige and global recognition of the school, whereas, respondents at American schools equated quality with prestige and career options available to graduates (GMAC, 2003).

History of the Rankings

Rankings of higher education colleges and programs are not a recent phenomenon. It may be surprising to some that academics themselves were the first to conduct rating studies of graduate programs. More than 75 years ago, researchers began to use reputation rankings or opinions of faculty and administrators, to rank the level of excellence of four-year institutions (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). In the past they were primarily conducted and studied by academics, not the consumer, trustee or legislator. The first rankings of academic institutions were conducted on graduate programs and published in 1911 by the Association of American Universities (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Several more ranking studies, which are described below, were conducted in 1925, 1934, 1959, 1966, 1970, 1976, 1982 and 1983 and then most every year after that (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). A brief timeline of higher education rankings follows below:

- 1911 – Bureau of Education published rating of 344 institutions by the Association of American Universities. The leaders were in rank order: Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, California, Yale, Michigan, Cornell, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Wisconsin and Minnesota (Logan, 1964).
- 1925 - Raymond Hughes launched the first study of graduate programs when he surveyed Miami University (Ohio) faculty for a list of institutions doing high-grade work leading to a doctors' degree in about 20 different disciplines (Hughes, 1925).
- 1934 - Raymond Hughes chaired a second survey that looked at 50 different fields. Scholars were asked to supply a list of 100 other scholars to which the rating forms were circulated. One important finding was the evidence of a time lag. Hughes found that older departments that had lost good faculty tended to be overrated, whereas, newer departments, that were growing, were underrated. He recommended that the surveys be conducted every few years (Hughes, 1934).
- 1959 - Hayward Keniston, as part of an evaluation of a program at the University of Pennsylvania, ranked graduate programs. He found that with few exceptions, the same institutions appeared in his study, as in the one conducted 25 years earlier by Hughes (Keniston, 1959).
- 1966 - Allan Cartter conducted a survey that encompassed 29 different fields and surveyed department chairs, senior scholars and junior scholars. He named his top ranked schools, but provided pseudonyms for the lower ranked schools (Cartter,

1966).

- 1970 - Replication of the Cartter study by Roose & Anderson of 130 institutions. They noted an improvement in the quality of faculty and evidence of regional improvements (Roose & Anderson, 1970).
- 1976 - Clark, Hartnett, and Baird of Educational Testing Service examined program quality in three graduate programs with regard to faculty, students, resources and curriculum characteristics (Clark, Hartnett, & Baird, 1976).
- 1982 – National Academy of Sciences published a study of 228 institutions. They surveyed 2700 programs in 32 disciplines for 16 variables clustered under program size, characteristics of graduates, reputation survey results, library size, research support and publications records (Jones, Lindzey, & Coggeshall, 1982).
- 1983 *U.S. News & World Report* begins *Best Colleges* annual rankings of four-year undergraduate programs.
- 1988 - *Business Week* began annual rankings of MBA programs (Webster, 1992).
- 1990 – *Money* Magazine began annual rankings of best value in four-year institutions (Webster, 1992).
- 1990 – *US News & World Report* began their annual *Best Graduate Schools* with a survey of four graduate and professional fields: business, law, medicine, and engineering. They looked at reputation, student selectivity, faculty and institutional resources (*U.S. News & World Report*, 1990).
- 2000 - *US News & World Report* continued their ranking of undergraduate and graduate four-year institutions. For the graduate rankings, they ranked 1000 programs in the five primary fields of law, education, business, engineering, and medicine. They surveyed 12,000 academics and professionals in the fall of 2000 to determine the top 50 schools in each field for 2001. They also ranked specialty fields, but only surveyed these departments every three years, though the ratings are published annually *(U.S. News & World Report, 2001).*
- 2001 – *Wall Street Journal* published rankings based of online interviews with recruiters regarding salary trends and recruiter opinion of MBA students.
- 2001 - *Financial Times* (London, U.K.) Launched first international ranking of

MBA programs focused on career progression of alumni, diversity of experience and research.

- 2003 – *Atlantic Monthly* announced new ranking of top 50 most selective colleges in November issue. (http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/preview/)

As the reader can see, prior to the early 1980s, most ranking was carried out within academia. Only within the last 20 years, have the media conducted their own rankings and began to dominate the landscape. With this brief history in mind, an overview of how *USNWR* actually ranks colleges is provided next.

The *USNWR Best College* Rankings – How Do They Do It?

USNWR claims in its website to be "America's authority on colleges" (www.usnews.com/usnews/edu, 2000). (Since *USNWR* doesn't rank community colleges, this should be revised to say four-year colleges and universities.) The stated purpose of their rankings is to:

> ...help you make one of the most important decisions of your life. Your investment in a college education could profoundly affect your career opportunities, financial well-being, and quality of life.

Further along they also caution users to use the rankings "as one tool to select and compare schools" (www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/primer.htm). The project is a lucrative one for *USNWR*. Revenue generated by *Best Colleges* was estimated at $5.6 million in 1997 (Machung, 1998).

So how does *USNWR* rank undergraduate colleges? In the beginning, *USNWR* based their rankings on reputation and used college presidents as their evaluators from 1983 until 1988. In 1988 they added deans and admissions officers and the first objective data. Today the rankings criteria for undergraduate institutions include the following factors along with their relative weights.

- Reputation = 25%
- Student selectivity = 15%
- Faculty resources = 20%
- Graduation and retention rate = 20%

- Financial resources = 10%
- Alumni giving = 5%
- Graduation rate performance = 5%

The fact that the weighting of the factors was devised by the *USNWR* staff and not based on any kind of objective analysis is a common complaint voiced by many in academia (Bednowitz, 2000). In fact a recent study which appeared in *Economics of Education Review*, used principal component regression analysis to examine the relative contributions of the 11 criteria used in the *USNWR* rankings of national universities (Webster, 2001). Webster found that the actual contributions of the 11 criteria did not match *USNWR's* weighting of the factors. In fact the SAT scores of enrolled students had the most impact on rank, due to the fact that SAT scores affected the other variables involved in the rankings of yield, enrollment, retention, tuition-based revenues and alumni contributions (Webster, 2001).

As mentioned previously, *USNWR* has changed their methodology for the rankings each year. This has caused dramatic fluctuation in the ranking of some institutions. For example, California Institute of Technology moved from 21 up to 3 in just one year (1987-88) (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 81) and from 9 up to 1 in 1999-2000 (www.usnews.com). To everyone's astonishment, Cal Tech surpassed Harvard, Princeton, Yale, MIT and many others (Gottlieb, 2000) in the 1999-2000 ratings. Also in 1987-88, Stanford moved from 1 down to 6 and UC Berkeley moved from 5 down to 24 and back up to 13 between 1987 and 1989 (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 81). Another example is provided by Cornell University, which dropped from 6 down to 11 in 1998-99 (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). These dramatic ups and downs have caused many to question the validity of the rankings.

In 2002, *USNWR* revised the way they grouped colleges and universities based on the Carnegie Classifications (*U.S. News & World Report, 2002)*. Today America's 1400+ colleges and universities are divided into four categories: National Universities-doctoral, Liberal Arts Colleges–bachelor's, Universities-master's, and Comprehensive colleges – bachelor's. The constant methodology changes have also caused frustration for the many educators who must supply the *USNWR* with data and then deal with the outcomes

(Hunter, 1995). For as most everyone knows, higher education does not change that drastically from one year to the next.

With this overview of the *USNWR* rankings of undergraduate programs in mind, we can now turn specifically to the subject of this study, the *USNWR* rankings of graduate business schools and their MBA programs.

USNWR Methodology for Ranking Graduate Business Schools

On their website and in their magazine, *U.S. News* described its rankings of graduate schools as a measure of academic excellence (*USNWR*, 2001). Based on the methodology *US News* has designed, reputation would appear to be the primary factor (40% for MBA programs and 25% for undergraduate rankings) for measuring academic excellence. The methodology used by *USNWR* to rank MBA schools includes three factors of quality assessment: reputation = 40%, placement success = 35%, and student selectivity = 25% (www.usnews.com, 2003). An in-depth description of the current methodology for business is attached (Appendix B). However a brief overview will help the reader understand how the rankings are determined (*U.S. News & World Report,* 2003). Of the 365 AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) accredited MBA programs surveyed in the fall of 2002, 284 responded. Of those, 165 full-time programs provided the data needed to calculate the weighted rankings. The criteria for 2004 rankings follows in Table 1. The ranking scores are standardized about their means, weighted and rescaled so the top school received 100 points and other schools their percentage of the top score *(U.S. News & World Report,* 2003).
Like the undergraduate rankings methodology, *USNWR* has annually changed the rankings criteria, reportedly to correct mistakes discovered by the institutions or to

Table 1 - *U.S. News & World Report* Ranking Criteria for MBA Schools

Quality Assessment (Reputation) = 40%	**Placement success = 35%**	**Student Selectivity = 25%**
Deans & directors = 25%	Mean starting salary & bonuses = 40%	Mean GMAT scores = 65%
Corporate recruiters=15%	Placement rates at graduation=20%	Undergrad GPA = 30%
	Placement three months after graduation = 40%	Acceptance rate = 5%

improve the validity of the rankings methodology. To compensate, *USNWR* has provided seven strategies they used to validate the data received from the schools. These included computer programs designed to flag data that varied too much from the previous year, asking specific questions to see that all students are included in the data and if not, why not; and cross-checking of data with NCAA (Morse and Gilbert, 1995). In a dissertation published in 2000, author Margaret Clarke provided a table of changes made by *US News* for ranking graduate business schools during 1995–2000. These follow in Table 2, with the addition of changes to the criteria for 2000-2001. As the reader can see, the reputation factor saw a change in 1996 when the weight given to recruiters' opinions was decreased and deans' opinions increased. The factor of selectivity saw no changes after 1996, but the factor of placement had almost annual changes.

As we have seen in the previous discussion of the first factor, reputation, as an indicator of excellence and in the review of the history of the rankings, the reliance on reputation to determine quality may be questionable at best. So, who is right? *US News* or their critics? Do the rankings reflect the excellence or quality of a school? Can you put a number on excellence or quality? Or do the rankings simply reflect the reputation, size and prestige of an institution? With these questions in mind, we can now turn to these other two factors in the *US News* controversial methodology for ranking MBA programs, student selectivity and placement success.

Placement Success and Student Selectivity

Placement success accounted for 35% of the ranking score. It is defined as the mean starting salary, plus bonuses, and placement rates at graduation and three months later. As seen in Table 2, the criteria changed often in this category. For example, one change compensated for students that did not look for employment after receiving their MBA. Another change was to weight the bonuses received, based on the number that actually received bonuses. Additionally, schools located in rural areas with a regional student audience are at a disadvantage as compared to schools in urban settings with a wider audience, unless there are competing schools in the same metro area. In other words, the region of the country where the school is located can inadvertently affect its

Table 2 - *US News* Ranking Criteria Changes 1995-2001

Year	2001-2000	2000-1998	1998-1997	1997-1996	1996-1995
Reputation 40%	NO CHANGE	NO CHANGE	Method change to obtain academic reputation score	Deans/Dirs.=25% Recruiters=15%	Deans/Dirs.=20% Recruiters=20%
Placement 35%	-Weighted bonuses based on proportion of graduates receiving them.	-Median salary inc. base salary and bonuses -Removed recruiters ratio -After 3 mo. =40%	NO CHANGE	*Proportion employed after 3 months includes students going to graduate school plus ¼ of unknown and exc. those not seeking employment	-Mean salary minus bonuses=40% -@ graduation=20% -After 3 mo.=35% -Ratio recruiters to graduates= 5%
Selectivity 25%	NO CHANGE	NO CHANGE	NO CHANGE	NO CHANGE	Mean GMAT=65% GPA=30% Acceptance rate=5%

scores for placement success. For example, an MBA program in Knoxville, Tennessee is probably going to have a much lower mean starting salary, than one located in Los Angeles, California, just because the cost of living is so much lower in Tennessee than in California. Therefore, the rank for a public MBA program in Knoxville will automatically start at a lower number than the rank for a public MBA program in Los Angeles.

In 1993, Martin Schatz studied 700 MBA programs for 17 criteria on student and faculty characteristics and institutional resources. Though he collected 92 pieces of data from each school, he found it was possible to predict the top 20 schools appearing in *USNWR* or *Business Week* by using an average of only the GMAT and starting salary. Schatz concluded that the

> …high survey rankings…are due to the halo effect resulting from these statistics and that the statistics themselves do not make them the best programs…no single MBA program is best for everyone, and almost every program is best for someone. (1993, p.5).

Student selectivity is the one factor that has remained unchanged for the last six years. It is a combination of GMAT, GPA and acceptance rate. Because the mission of many public institutions is to serve the citizens of their respective states, this factor of student selectivity has tended to put public institutions at a disadvantage. In a study conducted by the American Association of American Law Schools around 1997, they found that using only student selectivity (based primarily on LSAT scores), they could predict, with 90% accuracy, the schools that would appear in the top rankings (Monk, 1998). However, the reliability of standardized test scores in predicting success in college has been questioned (Sacks, 2001). In an article titled, *How Admissions Tests Hinder Access to Graduate and Professional Schools*, Peter Sacks (2001) reported that GRE scores had been found to predict only a 9% variation in grades of first year graduate students. This was taken from data submitted by 1,000 graduate departments covering some 12,000 test-takers. The article also reported that the predictive powers of the LSAT accounted for an average of 16% of the variance of first year law grades (Sacks, 2001). Sacks (2001) also reported gender and racial disadvantages in terms of GRE scores, along with parental education and wealth as predictors of high GRE scores, thus creating a further disadvantage for admittance and access to higher education by low-income minorities. In regard to the rankings, it has been said that some schools have changed admissions policies (raised GRE, LSAT, or GMAT minimum scores) in order to do better in the rankings. This would be a valid move, if standardized test scores had been proven to be a predictor of success in college.

These final factors of the rankings score, which in total accounted for 60% of the score, obviously have a great impact on the rankings. However, the use of student selectivity may put public institutions at a disadvantage, while placement rates can affect rural institutions. With this review of the three rankings factors of reputation, student placement and selectivity, we can now discuss the power and impact of the rankings on the schools they rank.

The Power and Impact of the Rankings

What do we mean by power and impact of the *USNWR* rankings? A survey of 2002 and 2003 MBA graduates provided a glimpse into the power and influence of the rankings in MBA school selection worldwide. Of these 4,125 students, the influence of published rankings on school selection "...continued to have the broadest reach and greatest influence of all media sources." (GMAC, 2003, p. 7), particularly among those younger than 35 and full-time MBA students. Additionally, country of citizenship affected their attitude with Asian, Canadian, and European citizens most influenced by rankings, and U.S. and Latin American citizens listing rankings second only to personal experience (2003).

Impact, on the other hand, refers to effect that the rankings have had on policy, programs and decision-making. With surveys like GMAC's, it is understandable how the rankings could impact MBA programs. Also, the rankings have fulfilled a requirement for accountability, while it satisfies American society's need to compare and rate, just like we rank football and basketball teams or comparison shop for a refrigerator or stove (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). But, what can the rankings really tell the parent, student, trustee or legislator? Educators are the first to tell you, "Nothing, it's a gimmick…to sell magazines" (Gilley, 1992); and *USNWR* will be the first to tell you it's the best comparison tool we have to offer right now (Morse & Flanigan, 2000).

Sadly, there are many stories of schools that have manipulated their statistics or changed their policies to improve their score and thus their ranking (Bogue & Saunders, 1992; Gilley, 1992; Shea, 1995; Thompson, 2000). For example, Christopher Shea in a 1995 article described how Boston College left out the SAT scores of 680 freshmen when they reported their institutional data to *U.S. News*. They omitted these freshmen, out of 4,450 others enrolled in a General Studies program, because they did not meet admissions standards for regular academic divisions. They also left out the verbal, but not the math scores of international students for whom English was a second language. The University of Massachusetts left out the test scores for 200 learning disabled and foreign students, as well (Shea, 1995). To raise their ratings at Stanford, students were paid $25/hour to contact alumni to raise funds. The student fundraisers noted that even a small donation would raise Stanford's ranking, since the ranking criteria had changed to provide points for the ratio of alumni donations, not the amount donated (Thompson, 2000). Cornell University's technique for raising their ranking was to increase the number of alumni giving and decrease the number of living alumni, by removing those who had never graduated from their alumni lists (Thompson, 2000).

With all of these efforts to move up in the ranks, one recent study has shown those efforts may not pay off. The study examined the transition between tiers or movement of schools in the ranks and found that of the 111 institutions that appeared in both the 1996 and 2001 rankings of undergraduate institutions, 75 did not change tiers, 25 moved up and 11 moved down (Ridley, Cuevas, & Matveev, 2001).

However, the impact of the rankings has also been reported to have a positive effect. When rankings rise, admission applications go up. Of course, when rankings drop, admission applications go down (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). For example, one large mid-western school claimed that falling out of the top ten MBA rankings caused their school to receive not a single applicant from Japan (Jambotkar, 1998). When foreign applicants can make up 40% of the MBA class, this is a problem (Gioia & Corley, 2000). Additionally, the pressure to rise in the rankings has caused some presidents and deans to focus on a goal of raising their rankings (Gioia & Corley, 2000; Carter, 1998), versus a mission of education, research, and service.

Peterson's, a company that publishes various college guides has condemned the *USNWR* rankings for...

> ...providing misleading information and making a national event that encourages colleges to shade the truth and to focus on the wrong factors in accepting students...For example instead of accepting a wonderful trombone player who might have an average SAT score, colleges are pushed to accept students for no better reason than high test scores, regardless of any other qualities. (Peterson, 2001, p. 1).

Instead, *Peterson's* advocated providing detailed and accurate information on schools (which they publish), so students and families can select the school that best fits their needs. (Peterson, 2001).

It would appear that the rankings do have power and impact on MBA programs, both positive and negative. With this in mind, we can now look at reports of competition in the rankings and the drive to get to the top and how these have impacted the schools and their policies.

Competition in the Rankings

As Bogue and Saunders, Gardner, and others have voiced their concern regarding the use of rankings to assess quality or provide accountability over the last two decades, another concern has surfaced in response to the rankings. Two articles, published in 2000 and 2001, reflect a growing concern that the competition to do well in the rankings has caused some schools to neglect their research agenda (Trieschmann, Dennis, North, and Niemi, 2000; Zimmerman, 2001). A third article (Gioia & Corley, 2000), found that MBA deans were becoming experts in the game of spin, as they learned to manipulate their images to improve their rankings.

The first study (Trieschmann, et al., 2000) examined the relationship between faculty research production (based on number of pages of published journal articles) and program rank. This study was published in the *Academy of Management Journal* (Trieschmann, et. al., 2000) and examined the top 49 MBA programs, listed consistently four out of five times, between 1995-1999, in the *USNWR* rankings. They found that research performance and MBA program performance (rankings) were different. Research performance improved with more faculty and proportion of full professors, assistant professors and editorships. MBA program performance (rankings) improved as the budget per faculty increased and to a smaller extent, the number of full professors. Larger schools (more faculty) tended to emphasize research, which garnered more faculty and thus more publications. Wealthier schools (based on budget per faculty member) tended to emphasize MBA ranking and gained more financial resources (specialized placement office and staff, classroom facilities, alumni relations, MBA program marketing, etc.).

The second article titled, *Can American Business Schools Survive*? (Zimmerman, 2001), the author argued that the competition to rise in the rankings has caused deans to divert resources from knowledge creation, including doctoral education and research, to short-term strategies, such as placement offices and public relations campaigns. As a result, Zimmerman foresees a critical faculty shortage and the ultimate demise of the once eminent American management education schools (2001). He pointed out that deans, who admitted that the rankings are an imperfect measure of school quality at best, also claimed that a drop in the rankings resulted in angry calls from influential alumni, trustees, university administrators, potential donors and current students. On the other hand, deans admitted they used the rankings as a student recruiting tool, particularly for foreign students, who may make up as much as 40% of the entering MBA class (Gioia & Corley, 2000). In fact, Zimmerman predicted an American brain drain with American students leaving for foreign MBA programs and the decision by many top graduate students to pursue doctorates in more exciting fields that rewarded research, such as the sciences and medicine (Zimmerman, 2001).

The third study published in *Corporate Reputation Review* (Gioia & Corley, 2000), examined the rankings from the perspective of the business school deans, MBA directors, and PR directors at ten schools ranked in the top 50 of *USNWR*. Penn State researchers found that these business school leaders did not believe that the rankings represented the quality of a business school; they believed that the rankings were a way for publishers to sell magazines and a way to oversimplify the process of choosing a school. One dean interviewed stated that it was easy to be objective when he selected the top 10, since his school was never going to be number two, at least not in the near future. But he wondered if the other schools "within five or ten of me in either direction will give us an adequate hearing, so to speak." (2000, p. 322). Those interviewed referred to the rankings as "a game, a dynamic competition with changing rules, invented by outsiders in part to sell magazines, with very serious consequences for business education." (2000, p. 322). Though the authors felt that the competition improved business schools, the downside was that the constant changing of the methodology had prompted schools to become masters of spin and image management in order to keep their rankings up. The study recommended that the media look at these unintended results, choose their criteria more carefully and then stick with them. Additionally, both groups should agree to have their data audited by an independent organization, which would then be made available to the public.

Finally, the fall 2001 edition of *Selections*, a quarterly journal published by the Graduate Management Council (GMAC), focused on MBA business school rankings. *Selections* interviewed the directors of rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report*, *Business Week, Financial Times* and *Wall Street Journal* (Schmotter, 2001) and various administrators of MBA schools. With regard to the *U.S. News* rankings, the *Selections* team noted that *U.S. News* had adopted data reporting standards from GMAC's MBA Reporting Criteria and the MBA Career Services Council's MBA Employment Standards (2001, p. 3) in answer to criticisms of faulty data in the ranking. To address another concern of the schools, bias in the reputation factor, *U.S. News* stated they threw out the two highest and two lowest scores when weighing responses about reputation, to guard against bias. When asked if business rankings were here to stay, most publications mentioned plans to add ranking of undergraduate business programs and/or international programs to the rankings. In a discussion of student perspectives on the rankings, a survey by GMAC in 2001 found that 95% of the 5000 MBA graduates cited the rankings as their most influential media source in their selection of an MBA school (2001).

However, the journals also verified the love-hate relationship between business schools and the rankings. For example, Dartmouth saw its applications jump from 7,500 in 2000 to 12,000 in 2001 after a number one ranking in the *Wall Street Journal*. But, the bad news is that more and more resources are required of the schools to collect the data to submit to the various publications. Additionally, some schools reacted to a drop in their rank by looking inward at their program and made personnel changes and restructured. At the University of North Carolina, Keenan Flagler College of Business reorganized its admissions office to assign personnel to particular areas of the country in hopes of getting a broader range of applicants. They also developed a scorecard, which included rankings, curriculum innovations, student focus groups and other methods they have undertaken to improve their program. Alumni have also responded to higher rankings with increased donations. Southern Methodist saw an increase from 10 % to 25% in alumni donations from 1996-2001, during which they rose in their rankings to 35th in *US News* and 9th in the *Wall Street Journal*. Finally, international students appeared to use the rankings as their primary source of information about the MBA program. Recruiters may even limit campus visits to the top schools, while others have disregarded the rankings. However, the schools' policies and programs were impacted. Associate Dean, James Dean, Jr. of Keenan-Flagler noted that the rankings tend to reinforce that the "...rich get richer."

Because once a school gets ranked, it can attract more students, more resources and other means to keep it at the top (p. 37). Dean cautioned,

> …if you don't care for what the rankings have to say about you, then you probably need some other means to assess yourself. Students think there's truth in those numbers. No business school can afford not to pay attention to them. (p. 37).

Finally, a somewhat tongue-in-cheek editorial by Andrew Policano, the former dean of the business school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, provided *Ten Easy Steps to a Top-25 MBA Program* (Policano, 2001, p. 39). Though the ten steps were presented in a lighthearted manner, Policano cautioned that these steps had been suggested to him by many deans over the years, as their rankings strategy or method for "engineering the rankings." (p. 40). His list was as follows:

1. Hire a top public relations firm and launch a marketing program aimed at other business school deans.
2. Provide a wide variety of services for MBA students
3. Increase the average GMAT score to above 650; 675 would be even better.
4. Increase services to recruiters.
5. Eliminate not-for-profit programs and other MBA majors that produce graduate who are placed in low-salary options.
6. Eliminate recruiters based outside metropolitan areas; if possible stick with recruiters from the Northeast and the West Coast. (*US News* does not adjust starting salary for cost of living.)
7. Increase placement in the consulting and investment banking area. (Many of the top ranked placed as many as 40% of their graduates in consulting/investment banking.
8. Substantially increase the recruiting budget for your MBA program and market the program very broadly. Entice everyone to apply (qualified or not).
9. Adjust your admissions policies and make up your own rules so that you can report both admissions and placement in a more favorable light.
10. Increase the budget for the MBA program substantially; $50,000 per student is a good target. (Decrease size of undergraduate and doctoral program and reallocate resources to MBA program.) Divert resources from faculty research to MBA program. Increase tuition for MBA program.

As evidenced by this list, Policano feels strongly about the rankings and the damage he sees they have inflicted on business schools. For example, he questioned why the rankings only look at the full-time MBA, when some business schools have relatively small full-time MBA programs and large executive or part-time MBA programs or

Undergraduate programs. He also criticized business schools for continuing to let the media tell it what to do. He stated that some public universities no longer have undergraduate business programs and those with 40,000 students now have fewer than 700 students. Some schools have also decreased the size of their doctoral programs.

These articles made several good points about the impact of the rankings on American MBA colleges, which academia and society should be concerned with. However, there is one more article from a former *U.S. News* director who has come out with criticisms of the rankings, which support those described previously by academia.

Former *U.S. News* Director Breaks Ranks

Appearing for the first time in 2001 was an article by former *USNWR* director of data research, Amy Graham and previous *U.S. News* rankings critic and *Washington Monthly* editor, Nicholas Thompson. Though their article criticized the criteria used by *US News* in ranking undergraduate programs, similar criticisms could be attributed to the MBA rankings. The article, *Broken Ranks*, criticized the *USNWR* rankings for its selection criteria and for the lack of concern for educational quality. The authors stated that *U.S. News* primarily ranked a school based on its wealth, reputation and achievements of the students it admitted. They gave too much weight to an institution's wealth and standardized test scores, versus looking at the students themselves (Kuczynski, 2001).

U.S. News countered this criticism by stating that they measured student learning by the ratio of students to faculty on campus. However, that criterion accounted for only one percent of a school's final score. In fact, schools, which ranked highly in *US News*, also had strong research orientations. These same schools showed students had a decreased satisfaction with faculty and overall quality of instruction, decreased leadership skills and decreased self-reported growth in public speaking skills, and other areas. Of course the opposite was true for schools with faculties highly focused on students. These same schools did not do well in the rankings (Graham & Thompson, 2001). Graham and Thompson (2001) also criticized the use of graduation rate, noting that the criterion does not distinguish between the school that neglected it students or the one with the more difficult curriculum. To substantiate their criticism they analyzed the *U.S. News* data and found that

> ...a high reputation score in the college guide correlates much more closely with high per-faculty research and development expenditures than with high faculty-student ratios or good graduation–rate performance, the magazine's best measures of undergraduate learning (Graham & Thompson, 2001, p. 4).

Ultimately the authors recommended that *USNWR* make changes to the rankings that measured more of the quality of a student's education than its reputation (Graham & Thompson, 2001):

> There's something contradictory in a magazine making a mint off of a ranking system called *America's Best Colleges*, that virtually ignores educational quality, spurring on a rival movement (National Survey on Student Engagement) and then claim that, even if the rivals have the right idea, their numbers just aren't good enough...Instead of asking admissions deans and university presidents to grade their peers, the magazine could send surveys to institutional researchers and people actively involved in assessing undergraduate education (p. 8).

Graham and Thompson concluded the article by noting that five years earlier, when *U.S. News* added a category that credited schools for high alumni donation rates, it caused programs across the country to employ their students to call alumni for donations. With different criteria, *U.S. News* could have encouraged students to talk to faculty for the sake of learning, versus encouraging them to talk to alumni for the sake of fund-raising (Graham & Thompson, 2001).

Conclusion

The review of the literature has provided a brief look at theories of quality in higher education, a history of undergraduate and graduate school rankings, an examination of the factors used in the ranking methodology, and a look at the controversy surrounding them. Gardner (1984); Cartter (1966); and Bogue & Saunders (1992) offered thought-provoking descriptions and definitions of educational quality and excellence and explored the problem of trying to quantify quality in a single number, as promoted by *US News* rankings. However, as David Webster (1992) pointed out, the *U.S. News* rankings have provided helpful data to potential students, parents and guidance counselors. They showed administrators and faculty how their department or schools compared to other institutions and they provided a motivation factor for all institutions to strive for improvement (Webster, 1992).

There was also the question of whether the rankings actually measured the academic excellence of a school, as claimed by *U.S. News*, or its reputation and prestige, as reported by others (Clark, Hartnett, and Baird, 1976; Roose & Anderson, 1970; Lawrence and Greene, 1980). There were also several articles, which discussed the negative impact of the rankings on a school following a rankings drop (Gioia and Corley, 2001; Patterson, 2000; Jamboktar, 2001). Additionally, recent articles by Gioia and Corley (2001), Zimmerman (2000), and Trieschmann, et al. (2001) pointed to a new concern in response to the rankings – business schools moving away from research and new knowledge creation to focus on MBA teaching and a vocational-type curriculum. Finally, a former *U.S. News* director has come out against her former employer, claiming the publication puts too much emphasis on a school's wealth, reputation and student achievement and too little on actual student experiences (Graham & Thompson, 2001).

The literature has provided solid evidence that the various media rankings (*US News, Business Week, Wall Street Journal*, etc.) have had an impact on American MBA programs. We know that:

1. Rankings and reputation are just one method of measuring academic excellence.

2. The validity of the rankings is questioned by academia, but embraced by the consumer.

3. Though the rankings had their origin in academia, it has moved to the media and academia has lost control.

4. The rankings are having a variety of impacts. Some are perceived to be negative and others positive.

This proposed study will do what none of the previous studies has done. It will provide an opportunity for the faculty and administrators of ranked and unranked MBA programs at public institutions in different regions of the country to express how they perceive the impact of the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings on their institution. That impact may be seen in the form of policy changes, decision-making or other ways. The study should also determine whether there are differences or commonalities in the perceived impact based on whether a school is ranked or unranked or what that ranking level is.

We know there is an impact. Now we must determine what that impact is as perceived by these eight institutions and how it may affect the business schools of the future.

Chapter III

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this study was to discover how the faculty and administrators at eight public business schools perceived the impact of *US News & World Report's* rankings on their MBA program and the institution. A qualitative case study design was chosen as the research method so the researcher could get at the heart of these perceptions. A quantitative survey would not have sufficed. Yes or no answers, or Likert scale responses would not have provided the in-depth or descriptive responses required to answer the questions in the study. A qualitative method using focused interviews with the individuals at each campus, field observations and a review of selected MBA documents and materials was required. The researcher was also interested to see if perceptions varied between faculty and administrators or varied across cases, based upon the rank of the school. Therefore, a comparative or cross-case study was chosen to further explore differences and similarities among faculty and administrators and among the selected schools. Also, since the rankings were a controversial subject, the participants were guaranteed anonymity. Therefore, a cross-case analysis would serve to protect that anonymity in the final report.

With the overall research method and design of the study in mind, a further explanation of qualitative research, case study, the researcher's role and justification for this method is provided next.

Qualitative Research and Case Study Design

As stated above, the nature of the research questions for this study required a qualitative interview approach, so the researcher could discover and then describe the impact of the rankings as perceived by the participants. Author and researcher, Donna Mertens cited Denzin & Lincoln's definition of qualitative research:

> Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational,

> historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

This definition of qualitative research was particularly fitting for this study of perceptions of rankings impact. Since qualitative research requires an inductive strategy, the researcher must discover the answers to questions by listening to the participants and allowing issues and themes to bubble to the surface and emerge, versus influencing or directing the participants' answers. In this case, a quantitative survey would have allowed for a larger population to be surveyed, but the opportunity to explore and describe this media phenomena of the rankings and to develop a true understanding of the impact these faculty and administrators perceived, would not have been possible with a quantitative survey. Additionally, a quantitative survey may have directed or limited the participants' answers in ways that did not adequately reflect the impact the faculty and administrators actually felt. Finally, due to the depth of information desired for this study, busy MBA faculty and administrators, might not have taken the time necessary to complete an in-depth quantitative survey.

A qualitative research method may include several different types of research strategies or designs of which case study is one type. The others included: ethnographic, phenomenological, historical, biographical, grounded theory, participative inquiry, clinical research or focus groups (Mertens, 1998). The case study design was selected because it fit the needs of the study. For example, the primary question of the study was - *How do you perceive the impact of USNWR rankings on the MBA program and the institution as a whole?* Author and researcher, Robert K. Yin recommended that a case study be selected when "a *how* or *why* question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control."(1994, p. 9). For this study, case study was the logical choice because the researcher was trying to discover the how and why of rankings impact, which was a contemporary issue over which the researcher had no control.

The definition of case study design varies among researchers. However, Mertens (1998) provided a simple one from the US General Accounting Office (1990): "A case study is a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance obtained by extensive description and analysis of that instance taken as a whole and in its context." (as cited in Mertens, 1998, p. 166.) Merriam (1998) explained that a case study design could be used when detailed information was needed about a group or project through observation, interviews, or self-report. It might be selected "for its very uniqueness for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to." (Merriam, 1998, p. 35). Case studies also helped explain the process of events and aid in the discovery of what may be contributing to that particular issue or event. (Merriam, 1998). All of these definitions warranted selection of the case study as the best possible alternative for this study on rankings impact.

For the qualitative researcher, Yin (1994) recommended six possible sources of evidence for case study research:

1. Documentation: letters, memorandum, newspaper clippings, written reports, etc.
2. Archival records: organizational records, maps or charts, survey data, personal records.
3. Interviews
4. Direct observation (field or site visit)
5. Participant-Observation – researcher assumes a role in the situation such as an employee, resident, decision-maker, etc.
6. Physical artifacts: tool, instrument, work of art, technological device (computer).

For this study, the first four sources were used: documentation, archival records, audio-taped interviews with 45 participants, and field observation. The documents and archival records included:

- A copy of each school's previously submitted *USNWR* rankings survey (year not indicated to protect identity of the schools).
- Each school's full-time MBA marketing piece and application form, either print or web-based.
- Participant/researcher email.
- Researcher's field notes.

Yin (1994) also suggested that a case study researcher follow three principles when collecting the research data:

1. Use multiple sources of evidence, such as interview, documents and observation, so that findings can be based on a union of information from different sources.

2. Develop a case study database consisting of case study documents and notes, tabular materials (surveys, archival documents); and narratives or reports of the researcher.

3. Maintain a chain of evidence within the report so that the reader can go back and retrace how the conclusions were reached.

These suggestions were followed as well, because these principles for collecting the data also addressed the issues of validity and reliability, so critical in any type of research. In fact, Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that the design of a case study actually had the added benefit of validation of results.

> By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, validity and the stability of the findings. (As cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 40).

Adding to the validity aspect of case studies, Yin (1994) suggested that a draft report be reviewed by the participants as a way of corroborating the facts and evidence and adding to the validity of the study. This research study followed that advice and provided a draft copy to all participants for review and comment before the final report was made.

Another aspect of this particular study, was the need for anonymity as expressed by the researcher's committee and later by the participants, due to the fact that rankings were a highly controversial subject. Although Yin (1994) cautioned that keeping cases anonymous could detract from the results and that it was a difficult procedure for the researcher, it was a necessity in this instance.

In qualitative research, the researcher's role has always been a critical one. The researcher is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing the data (Merriam,1998) and therefore has a direct influence on the directions and findings of the study. With this important and crucial role, the literature contained many recommendations as to the skills and abilities the researcher should have. For example, Merriam cautioned that, "...the researcher must have a tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to context and data, and good communication skills." (1998, p. 23). She advised the researcher to be empathic and to maintain a sense of timing and focus that recognized emerging ideas and issues (1998). Yin (1994) also recommended that the researcher be able to ask good questions, be a good listener, be flexible, have a firm grasp on the topic under study and be "...unbiased by preconceived notions..." (1994, p. 56). Creswell (1994) echoed this last concern about bias. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, it was critical for the researcher to identify any personal biases, assumptions or beliefs at the outset of the study and continually reflect on those to keep them separate from the interviews. Finally, Yin (1994) recommended that the researcher be trained in the case study process, a case study protocol be set up and a pilot study conducted. As suggested by Yin, this researcher conducted a pilot study in Summer 2001, which looked at the impact of *US News & World Report* rankings on graduate programs in the Colleges of Law, Business and Education on one university campus. This pilot study influenced the decision to limit the study to one type of graduate ranking (Business schools) and aided in the refinement of the interview questions. Additionally, the process of analyzing the data in the pilot study and input from a committee member, also influenced the researcher's decision to use NUD*IST qualitative software to assist in analyzing the data for this study.

With this overview of qualitative case study method and justification for selecting this process, we can move on to how the schools were selected and the data obtained.

Selection of Schools and Data Acquisition

A major concern of any research study is acquiring the data. Due to the controversial nature of the rankings and busy lives of the MBA administrators and faculty, it was sometimes a problem to obtain participants for this study. Additionally, the credibility of the researcher was unknown to these individuals. Therefore, the assistance of two University of Tennessee MBA administrators (one was a committee member) was obtained to assist the researcher in generating the sample of schools. While their professional knowledge of, and network within the MBA colleges helped assure the contacted individual(s) of the credibility and confidentiality of the study, sometimes the follow-up call from the researcher to the invited participants ended with a refusal to participate. However, alternative schools were contacted and eventually eight schools were selected. (Only two unranked schools participated, due to this problem.)

The plan for the study was followed and appears in Figure 1. A review of this plan will provide the reader with an overview of the study followed by a more detailed description of the data collection process.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, prior to collecting the data, proper approval for the study was obtained from the University of Tennessee Office of Research. This was required for any study, which involved individuals and issues of confidentiality (Creswell, 1994).

Following approval, the researcher consulted with the University of Tennessee Associate Dean of Business, Dr. David Schumann (committee member), and another MBA administrator to develop a list of potential participants and to send each a letter of introduction and invitation from Dr. Schumann (Appendix C). A recent year of *US News* rankings was selected by the researcher and a group of public institutions were identified and listed along with their rank. From this list, a set of schools was selected to receive a letter of invitation. The researcher attempted to spread the schools geographically. The first three institutions were ranked in Tier I (ranked 1-25) and were identified by the pseudonyms A1, B1, and C1. The next three schools were selected from Tier II (ranked 26-50) and were identified as D2, E2 and F2. The remaining two institutions were unranked and are known as G3 and H3. As indicated, the selected institutions were approached via an email from the MBA administrator. This email alerted each MBA dean/director to watch for a follow-up letter of invitation from Dr. Schumann. This letter was typically sent to the dean of the college, but in some cases the MBA director was approached. The invitation letter specified that a follow-up call from the researcher would follow in two weeks requesting permission to do the study. The letter included a consent form (Appendix D) and a list of documents to be collected for review (Appendix E). However, objections were raised by some school officials concerning the number of documents requested and the time needed to collect those documents. When these

Steps in the Study:
Impact of the Rankings on Selected Public MBA Schools

1. Proposal accepted by committee.

2. Obtained IRB approval for study.

3. Consulted with UT MBA administrators to select schools and make initial contact. An email alert was sent to the CBA dean or MBA dean/director, followed by a letter of invitation to participate in study and a consent form. Researcher followed with phone call and emails to obtain participation agreement.

4. Upon agreement, researcher requested names of administrators and faculty to contact or MBA director or assistant offered to set up a schedule of interviews.

5. Researcher and MBA dean agreed to interview dates and times. Prior to visit, information about the school and those being interviewed was accessed via the Internet.

interviews over a two to four day period. An impression of the MBA culture was obtained during the visit.

7. Interviews were transcribed, then analyzed using NUD*IST. Data from a selected *US News* survey were input into Excel. All data was sorted and searched to determine categories, discover themes, chart similarities/differences, and compare within case then across cases.

8. Draft submitted to advisor and participants for review of findings.

Figure 1: Steps in the Study

objections were used as a reason not to participate in the study, this request was dropped by the researcher. Instead, a copy of a specific year's *US News* MBA survey and the school's current MBA marketing materials were collected by the researcher during the campus visit. The researcher also obtained other documents on the MBA program from the Internet and during the campus visit.

In some cases, the researcher's attempts to reach the individual by phone were unsuccessful and an email contact was made. If the school agreed to participate, the researcher requested names of three faculty teaching in the MBA, PHD, and UG programs and two administrators in career services and admissions, in addition to the MBA dean. (Typically, the CBA dean was not available for an interview.) If the school declined to participate and attempts by the researcher and/or Dr. Schumann to change that decision were not successful, an alternative school was contacted. In all, three Tier I schools accepted and four Tier I schools declined. Three Tier II schools accepted and one Tier II school would not respond. Two unranked schools accepted, but three unranked schools declined or would not respond. The researcher discovered from the *US News* website that some schools no longer returned their *US News* survey or did not return with complete data, which rapidly shortened the list of possible alternative schools.[1] In light of this, the committee chair and committee member, Dr. Bogue and Dr. Schumann, agreed to accept two unranked schools instead of the original three proposed.

The researcher traveled to each of the eight campuses, located in urban and rural areas of the United States. Interviews were conducted on each campus with faculty who taught in the undergraduate (UG), MBA and/or PhD programs and administrators in the college of business (dean), MBA program (associate dean/director), MBA career services office (director or associate) and MBA admissions office (director, associate director, or enrollment coordinator). In some cases faculty taught at all levels and some also held administrative duties as program heads. In one instance, a telephone interview was conducted with a faculty member and one joint interview was held with an associate dean of a MBA program and the director of MBA admissions. Prior to each campus visit,

[1] *US News* sent surveys to all accredited (AACSB) MBA programs, but not all schools returned complete data. For example, in 2000, there were 341 MBA schools. However, only 105 with full-time MBA programs returned enough data to be included in the rankings. (*US News*, April 9, 2001).

additional material on the MBA program was obtained from the school's website. Once on campus, each focused interview was semi-structured in format and audio-taped. The interviews were held in private offices or other campus locations. The interview format was designed to collect some specific information, but allowed for individual perceptions, thoughts and issues to emerge. The following three questions began the interview:

1. Please share with me your perception of the impact of the *USNWR* graduate rankings on ______________ College of Business, the MBA program and the institution as a whole.

2. How do you feel the rankings reflect the academic excellence of your school and how would you define academic excellence?

3. How has your institution reacted to the rankings?

Answers to these questions were desired from all respondents, but the larger portion of the interview was designed to allow the researcher to listen and respond to the emerging view of the participant and to discover new ideas or concerns on the topic (Merriam, 1998).

Depending on the interviewee, sometimes there was a need to offer more probing questions, but the researcher was flexible and reacted to those situations as necessary. The additional questions followed up on areas mentioned by the interviewee or were taken from the literature, such as funding of the MBA program; issues related to student recruitment and placement; student/faculty interaction; program size and wealth, curriculum innovation; etc. This was an important step in order to truly <u>discover</u> the pertinent issues in the mind of each particular interviewee.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher recorded her observations in the field. This included impressions about the physical environment of the MBA program, the college and its surroundings; impressions created by the administrators, faculty or other staff; staff and faculty morale; and comments related to the rankings, upper administration, etc. The researcher also collected other documents and archives. For example, a copy of each school's current MBA marketing materials was obtained. In some cases these materials consisted of a short booklet, while others were larger catalogs.

All were full color, glossy brochures with applications. One featured less printed copy and used a CD with video interviews and an online application process. While on campus the researcher also collected a copy of the *US News* survey sent to the company one particular year. Annual reports and quarterly magazines or newsletters were also collected during the visit. Finally, the researcher reviewed each school's website for any mention of the rankings and other pertinent school statistics.

As the data were collected and the interviews transcribed, analysis began concurrently. The following section describes the analysis process.

Steps in the Study: Data Analysis

The data for this study were obtained from interviews, documents and field observations, all gathered by the researcher. This central role of the researcher in the collection and analysis of the data made it even more imperative that the researcher retained her objectivity. Therefore, it was critically important that a plan, approved by the researcher's committee, for collection and analysis of the data was followed, to help insure validity in the research results. The steps in the analysis process are provided in Figure 2.

The researcher's objective was to analyze the data, looking for similarities and differences among the individuals and institutions to see what patterns or themes, if any, emerged. To begin this process the researcher transcribed the tapes as the interviews occurred, printed them and began a review for themes and issues, differences and similarities. To assist in this analysis, NUD*IST software was purchased and the individual transcripts were downloaded into the program for analysis. This software was selected based on the experiences of one of the committee members and articles by researchers obtained from the NUD*IST website links (www.qsrinternational.com). One article which explored how NUD*IST was used in one research project, emphasized its usefulness as follows:

> ...(the program) is able to search for words and phrases very quickly; and claims to support theorizing through enabling the retrieval of indexed text segments, related memos, and text and index searches and through the construction of hierarchically structured trees (categories and themes) to order index categories.

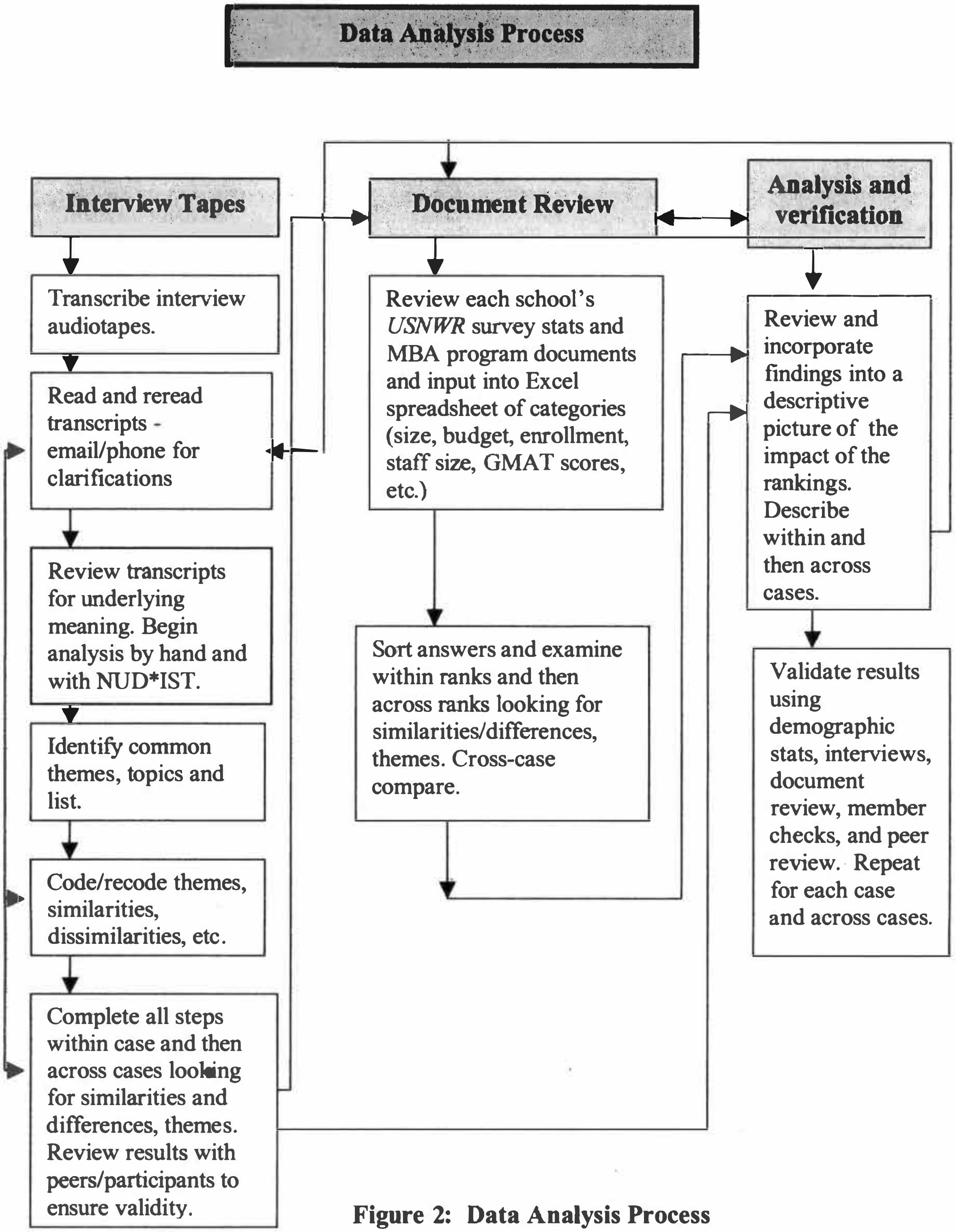

Figure 2: Data Analysis Process

(Buston, 1997, p. 1).

The program handled the mundane tasks of copying and pasting portions of the transcripts into different and multiple categories (termed nodes by the software's designers). It completed text searches and produced reports, which showed all text coded into a particular node(s). This saved the researcher valuable time required by more labor-intensive methods such as color coding by hand. However, Buston (1997), cautioned against allowing the software to dictate or shape the analysis. As the author pointed out, "...packages such as NUD*IST should be seen for what they are – very useful -- but powerless without a human brain leading them." (Buston, p. 13).

All interviews were transcribed and then imported into NUD*IST for coding and analysis. Responses to the research questions were grouped by faculty members or administrators and then by rank of the school. A total of 54 nodes or categories were initially created, but this number proved to be too unwieldy and redundant. As the process continued, new nodes were added and others deleted or absorbed into existing nodes, which resulted in approximately 22 nodes categorized into different hierarchies or trees. Text searches for specific words or phrases were also conducted. The transcripts were continually reviewed, re-sorted and re-coded as necessary. Finally, a variety of reports by nodes, combinations of nodes and text searches were produced. This process helped the researcher analyze the large amount of data collected and see the various themes and concepts, which emerged.

The archival data, which consisted of a survey submitted by each school to *US News* for a selected year, was input into an Excel spreadsheet along with other pertinent data obtained from each school's MBA catalog, website, the researcher's field notes, and emails with the participants. This data was reviewed for any patterns related to rank based on program size, acceptance rate, mean GMAT, mean starting salaries, staff size, etc. These results assisted in creating a picture of each school and finding any patterns that might arise among the similarly ranked schools.

As this data analysis process continued, the researcher emailed the interviewees for clarification. Finally, each participant was sent a draft of the findings to review for accuracy. However, to ensure the anonymity of the participating institutions, the results were aggregated in the final analysis and findings. By combining three types of information: document review, interviews, and field observation, a rich description of each institution and the impact the rankings have had, was developed for this descriptive cross-case study.

Validity of the Study

In qualitative research, the intent is not to prove a hypothesis about how something will behave or react or to generalize the findings to a large group. Qualitative research is designed to inform the reader through descriptive narrative that creates a holistic view of how an individual or group experiences some phenomena or makes meaning of his or her experiences. However, since the collection and analysis of the data was driven by the researcher and was subject to researcher bias, establishing the validity of the study's findings was critically important. To assist the researcher in verifying the results of a qualitative study, Merriam (1998) suggested the use of the following six strategies:

1. Triangulation of the data – use of multiple sources of data and methods to confirm findings.
2. Member checks - participants review the data and the interpretations.
3. Long-term observation.
4. Peer review by colleagues as the findings emerge.
5. Collaborative modes of research - involving participants in all phases of the study.
6. Stating the researcher's bias, assumptions and worldview at the beginning of the study (p. 204-205).

As discussed previously, Miles and Huberman (1994) saw the design of case study research as adding to the validity of a study, because it contrasted and compared a range of similar cases. Many of these strategies were used to validate the results of this study. Additionally, as was suggested by Yin (1994), a draft of the final study was sent to each participant to check for any interpretation problems, breaches of confidentiality, or misrepresentations (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2001). These strategies together should be a large step towards insuring the validity of the study's findings.

Chapter IV

Presentation of the Data

This study was designed to discover how faculty and administrators at eight differentially ranked public MBA schools perceived the impact of *US News & World Report* rankings on their school and their college. The data was collected from interview transcripts, field observations, MBA marketing brochures, websites and a selected year's *US News & World Report's* survey form. Through inductive, thematic analysis of the data, various themes emerged, some familiar and some new. The results are presented in this chapter, along with selections from the data, which are used to highlight themes, illustrate issues and explain more thoroughly the findings of the study.

The 45 participants were asked the following primary questions:

1. Share with me (the researcher) your perception of the impact of the *USNWR* graduate rankings on the _____________ College of Business, the MBA Program and the institution at large.

2. How do you feel the *US News* rankings reflect the academic excellence of the schools they rank and what is your definition of academic excellence?

3. How has your institution reacted to the rankings?

Generally, administrators were more concerned about the rankings than faculty and typically had more to say on the topic. However, the faculty were aware of rankings and most agreed they had an impact on the MBA program and the entire college of business. Several faculty had taken an avid interest in the rankings and had done some analysis of the ranking criteria. They were enthusiastic and forthcoming in providing their viewpoints on the rankings. As one such faculty member at a Tier II school stated,

> I think it (opinion on the impact of the rankings) varies amongst the faculty. There is some mixed opinion, some people say we should pay attention to it - we do things right it will all happen. But I'm on the other camp which is – it's important to have decent rankings, because it affects the quality of students coming in, your comfort level about what type of institution you see here, so I am in the camp that rankings matter. (Tier II)

To begin the presentation of the findings, a descriptive picture of each group of schools is presented, along with noted similarities and differences within each group of schools. Next the nine major themes from the data are presented.

The Schools

While it is important to provide the reader with a picture of the schools in the study, it was also important to retain each school's anonymity. The eight schools in the study were located in various areas of the U.S., with the exception of the Northeast, though this was not intentional. In this first section, schools are discussed as part of their group: Tier I (ranked 1-25), Tier II (ranked 26-50) and Unranked. In place of specific locations or names, pseudonyms and general terminology were used. In place of specific figures or statistics, rounded figures or ranges were used. The descriptions provide the reader with information regarding size of the school, tuition cost, GMAT scores, selectivity, MBA base salaries, etc., all factors included in the *US News* survey form. Also included are descriptions of each school's physical facilities and their promotional materials, which may have an impact on their ranking.

Tier I – Schools Ranked in the Top 25

In the selected year of *US News* rankings chosen for this study, only about one third of the schools in the top 25 were public institutions, even though public MBA programs outnumbered privates, two to one. The three schools in Tier I (ranked 1-50) are identified as A1, B1, and C1. The faculty and administrators at the schools were interviewed in the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003. All were large comprehensive universities (32,000 students and up) and their full-time MBA programs ranged in size from medium (275-474 students) to large (475 students and up). They were located in different areas of the country, but all were located in or near metropolitan areas of more than one million. Each school had fairly new or brand new facilities, which carried the name of a wealthy benefactor and radiated a corporate image with their professionally designed and furnished offices and reception areas. All had undergraduate, PhD, and executive and part-time MBA programs. Each school's PhD program(s) was of similar size (65-85), and one school had a very large undergraduate (UG) program (more than 4000 students), while the other two were quite small (less than 600). Students in these UG business programs were not admitted until their junior year and competition at each school was tough, because each undergraduate business program was also highly ranked. These MBA staffs were the largest and ranged from 16 to 30, but the programs they ran were the also the largest. (See Table 3.)

All three schools recruited students domestically and internationally. International students accounted for 24-29% of student enrollment and each of these schools was highly selective. While the number of applicants was quite large (ranging from 960 -3,170 applicants), the number accepted, ranged from only 14% up to 28%. This was the most selective of all three groups of schools. The application fees varied widely from a low of $30 to a high of $150. The two schools with high fees ($100 and $150) also attracted the largest number of applicants (2,600 and 3,170), so the high application fees were not a deterrent. One administrator commented on the fact that these fees provided an extra revenue stream ($260,000 and $475,500, respectively), which helped subsidize the expensive MBA program. Mean GMAT scores were the highest of the three tiers, and ranged from 646 to 690. The mean salaries for MBA graduates of these schools ranged from $78,000 to $89,600. All fulltime MBA programs (for non-business graduates) were 21 months in length and students were only admitted in the fall.

In-state tuition ranged from around $7,000- $10,000 and was the highest among the three groups. Each school had a glossy, 25 or 50 page MBA brochure which featured information on the school's curriculum, students, faculty, and extracurricular programs. The brochures also featured photographs and stories on famous alumni and faculty and provided statistics on the achievements of past MBA graduates. One school featured a CD-rom in their brochure, which included student's testimonials, faculty interviews and other information. None of the

Table 3 – Tier I Schools

School	# MBA Staff	Prog.. Size*	Applic Fee	Instate Tuition	# Applic.	# 1st yr. Enroll	% of Applicant Accepted	Mean GMAT	Mean Base Salary @ Grad.
A1	16	large	$150	$10,500	3170	240	14%	690	$89,600
B1	30	large	$100	$ 7,100	2600	264	22%	666	$80,200
C1	20	med.	$ 30	$ 9,000	960	139	29%	646	$78,000

***Note on Program Size:** large = 475 or more students
medium = 275-474 students

schools had minimum requirements for acceptance, but each school provided the prospective student with competitive scores, which ranged from 640-760 GMAT, 3.0-3.3 GPA and five years of work experience. Each school's application required recommendations, transcripts, and essays. One school featured their rankings prominently on their website, but the other two did not.

Tier II – Schools Ranked 26-50

The Tier II schools, identified as D2, E2, and F2, were those ranked in the second or bottom tier of the rankings, numbers 26-50. This group was interviewed in the summer and fall of 2002. These schools were typically smaller than those in Tier I. The overall campus enrollments ranged from a low of 15,000 up to 40,000. The MBA programs were smaller as well and ranged from very small (less than 174) to medium (275-474). All had UG, PhD, and executive and part-time MBA programs. The UG programs ranged in size from 1,100 up to 5,500 and PhD programs from 28 up to 110. Instate tuition ranged from $3,000 to $5,900, lower than the Tier I schools. They also attracted far fewer applicants 500 to 790 and had higher acceptance rates of 28% to 45%. All of the schools recruited students domestically and internationally with 18% to 32% international students. Unlike the Tier I schools, none of these business schools had new buildings. In fact all of the MBA programs were housed in older, academic buildings with linoleum floors and institutional white walls. However, two schools had plans for new facilities within the next few years and one had a new building scheduled to open in the summer 2003. Two of the schools were located in large metropolitan areas with populations greater than one million and one was located in a rural area near a large city. The GMAT scores were generally lower than Tier I and ranged from 636 to 652. The mean salaries MBA graduates received upon graduation were generally lower than the Tier I schools and ranged from $68,100 to $77,400. The MBA staffs ranged in number from eight to a high of 17. (See Table 4.)

The marketing materials of these schools were similar to those of the Tier I schools. Each had glossy, 25-50 page booklets, which featured the familiar photographs of smiling students, faculty and business celebrities, plus the usual charts, sidebar facts, etc. The application fees were much lower than most of the Tier I schools and varied only slightly within the group, from $30 -$50. Each school required a transcript, essays, and personal recommendations. Like the Tier I schools, these schools did not list any minimum scores, but provided prospective students with a student profile. One school encouraged an interview in their application process. Two of the schools featured their rankings prominently on their home web pages, but the other school listed them in a link under *facts*.

Unranked Schools

The last two schools were not ranked, though one of them had been ranked about a decade earlier. Identified as G3 and H3, both were comprehensive universities with total campus enrollments of around 25,000 each. These schools were interviewed in Summer 2002 and Winter 2003. Each had small MBA programs and fewer staff, than those in Tier I and Tier II. Only one school had a

Table 4 – Tier II Schools

School	# MBA Staff	MBA Prog. Size	Applic. Fee	Instate Tuition	# Applic	# 1st yr. Enroll	% of Applicant Accepted	Mean GMAT	Mean Base Salary @ Grad.
D2	8	small	$30	$4,900	500	91	35%	636	$77,400
E2	17	medium	$50	$5,900	790	131	45%	652	$68,100
F2	11	v. small	$30	$3,000	661	99	28%	645	$69,000

Note on Program Size: medium = 275-474 students
small = 175-274 students
very small = 174 or fewer students

PhD program and an executive MBA program, though the other school was starting an executive MBA off-campus. One school was in a rural location and the other was located in a small city. Each school was within a three to four-hour drive of a major metropolitan area. Unlike the Tier I and Tier II schools, neither of these schools recruited internationally, but their international student population ranged from 25% to 34%. The unranked schools were similar to the Tier II, but had the lowest mean GMAT scores (610 and 623). The instate tuition was similar to those in the Tier II group and ranged from $3,400 to $4,200. The mean salary of their MBA graduates included the lowest amount of $54,000, but climbed to $69,400. Each school had an UG business program and their enrollments were similar – 3,000 to 3,800. (See Table 5.) Neither of these schools had new facilities, but their needs were quite different. One school was quite satisfied with their building and classroom space. The other was in such dire need of classroom facilities that they had to borrow classroom space from their law school for their first year MBA students. Both schools had very small MBA staffs of five and seven. One school did not have a staff person responsible for career services for MBA students, or a director of admissions. An enrollment coordinator worked with applicants, but did not actively recruit them. This school had recently begun to use a regression analysis to make their initial selection of candidates. Each school had a glossy brochure, but one school's was quite short, only ten pages. Each required transcripts and recommendations, but only one required essays. Unique to these two schools was their mention of successful football teams increasing applications. However, the most obvious difference between the two schools, was their strategy to break into the rankings. The smaller program was reducing the size of their program, while the other was growing the size of their program. Both

Table 5 – Unranked Schools

School	# MBA Staff	Prog. Size	Applic Fee	Instate Tuition	# Applic	# 1st yr. Enroll	% of Applicant Accepted	Mean GMAT	Mean Base Salary @ Grad.
G3	5	v. small	$45	$4,200	209	39	43%	623	$54,000
H3	7	small	$35	$3,400	509	86	35%	610	$69,400

Note on Program Size: small = 175-274 students
very small = 174 or fewer students

schools, though unranked in the *US News* rankings, were ranked in other specialty rankings and listed those on their websites.

With these overviews of the schools in mind, the themes that emerged from the data follow next. Please note that at the end of each quote, (Tier I F) means that the quote came from a Tier I faculty member or (Unranked A) means the quote came from an Unranked administrator, and so on.

Nine Themes on the Impact of the Rankings

> Americans like numbers – they rank who's at the top, what's the best car…It is kind of weird because obviously, no matter what the polls, any metric that is used is going to be fairly superficial in terms of representing the underlying quality of an institution's ranking. (Tier I F)

This thought, expressed by a faculty member at a Tier I school, was echoed by many of the study participants. It is at the crux of what makes the rankings so contentious among academia. However, Americans do love to rank things and until that changes the rankings will remain. So, whether we like it or not, the rankings matter and this was the dominant theme that emerged from this study.

This study of the impact of the rankings on MBA programs provided some new information and reiterated some older claims stated in the literature. The interview transcripts, survey statistics, documents, and field observations provided numerous facts, opinions, and examples of impacts and reactions to the rankings. Through thematic analysis, the following nine themes emerged as the major findings in this study.

1. **Top-ranked public MBA programs had a new building, many smart students, high MBA graduate salaries, high tuition and a metropolitan location.**

2. **Rankings mattered to most stakeholders.**

3. **Rankings drove policy and decision-making.**

4. **Rankings can become a self-perpetuating cycle.**

5. **Academia viewed the rankings as a beauty contest.**

6. **The ranking of the MBA program has created a halo effect over the entire business college.**

7. **The rankings have impacted career services and admissions offices.**

8. **A paradox arose between academic excellence and top ranked schools.**

9. **The rankings had positive and negative impacts.**

Theme #1: Top-ranked, public MBA programs had a new building, many smart students, high MBA graduate salaries, high tuition and a metropolitan location.

The first theme was generated by the interviews, statistics provided in each school's *US News* survey form, information from their marketing materials and the researcher's field observations. (See Table 6.) When reviewing the statistical data of all the schools together, the Tier I schools had some traits that stood out from the other two tiers. The data suggested a picture of a top-ranked school with the following traits:

- Medium to large MBA program (275 students and up – the bigger the better)
- New, professional facilities for students and staff
- Higher tuition (for public institutions)
- High student selectivity (large number of applicants - low percentage accepted - 14-28%)
- Location in a metropolitan area
- Mean GMAT scores above 645 (higher the better)
- Large career services and admissions staff

With these traits and attributes, graduates at Tier I schools earned the highest salaries ranging from $78,000-$89,600.

While this picture might not fit all schools in the top ranks, many in this study felt that these characteristics were significant to success in the rankings. Many study participants said that the larger the MBA program, the more recruiters would be attracted, the more alumni produced, the more potential donors. The top-ranked schools also had

Table 6 – All Schools

School	# MBA Staff	Prog. Size*	Instate Tuition	# Applic.	% of Applicants Accepted	Mean GMAT	Mean Base Salary @ Grad.
A1	16	large	$10,500	3,170	14%	690	$89,600
B1	30	large	$7,000	2,600	22%	666	$80,200
C1	20	medium	$9,000	960	29%	646	$78,000
D2	8	small	$4,900	500	35%	636	$77,400
E2	17	medium	$5,900	790	45%	652	$68,100
F2	11	very small	$3,000	661	28%	645	$69,000
G3	5	very small	$4,200	209	43%	623	$54,000
H3	7	small	$3,400	509	35%	610	$69,400

***Note Program size:** large = 475 or more students
medium = 275-474 students
small = 175-274 students
very small = 174 or fewer students

the highest tuition ($7,000-$10,000) fees, thus more resources. One administrator commented that he believed that money was not a factor when applying to a MBA school. Two of these schools, with the highest application fees ($150 and $100), appeared to support that statement, particularly when one school collected almost half a million dollars in application fees.

Another obvious difference between the top tier and the rest was the high student selectivity (14%-28%) and thus higher, mean GMAT scores. While a few questioned whether an urban location was important, they did agree that a location in or near a major city was attractive to recruiters. Several also commented that they felt a Northeast bias existed in the rankings, due to the large number of top ranked schools located in the Northeast, including the Ivy League schools and the fact that corporate headquarters of many companies were also located there. Since *US News* surveyed only recruiters from corporations that recruited at the top schools, many of the selected recruiters probably came from these corporations (*U.S. News*, 2001). As one Tier I administrator said,

> …I think for me one of the key biases that exists is that *US News* only speaks to a certain number of recruiters (those that recruit from the top-ranked schools). And so, if you're not one of those schools they go to, you're not likely going to get ranked by them. And actually *US News* does ask for a list of 12 or 20 recruiters so it's not nearly our complete list. But, of course, because there are more schools on the east coast and by nature of recruiting it has been more regional, there are

> going to be more recruiters responding to the survey (from the Northeast). (Tier I A)

New facilities also appeared to be a key to moving up in the rankings, as all of the Tier I schools had new facilities, but none of the other schools did. A Tier II administrator, whose school was in the planning stages for a new building said,

> I think our facilities have affected our rankings...everyone recognizes that our facilities are awful and ugly and students complain about them with good reason, so there is this feeling that if we don't take care of getting a new building, we will never get (higher ranked). (Tier II A)

Finally, larger admissions and career placement staff appeared necessary to move to the top and schools in Tier I and II had them, unlike the Unranked schools. Becoming top ranked did in fact appear to require smart students, money, many recruiters, high graduate salaries, and a larger career services and admissions staff.

The next theme to emerge was the fact that rankings mattered. They mattered to internal and external constituencies, no matter what the schools thought about them.

Theme #2: Rankings mattered to most stakeholders.

The rankings mattered to students, alumni, donors, recruiters, legislators, top campus administrators and most MBA staff. An administrator from a Tier II school described his first year as director of the MBA program.

> The first year I was here and the first year the dean was here, we dropped in *US News* from (30 to 40)...we had some very agitated students who felt in effect that we had broken a contract, that they had joined a college that was ranked (30) and now they were going to graduate from a college that was ranked (40) and that was going to mean that they were going to earn less and so it creates a tremendous amount of turmoil as far as things we have to manage that frankly have nothing to do with the quality of what goes on here. (Tier II A)

This quote was similar to others expressed by the study participants and illustrated how much the rankings mattered to students. The faculty and administrators described a number of ways the rankings had impacted their internal (faculty, staff, or students) and external (prospective students, alumni, donors, recruiters or legislators) constituencies.

For example, admissions directors, other administrators and faculty said that the quality of students improved when their rankings went up. Career Services saw the number of recruiters shoot up when rankings rose. A Tier II career services director described the impact as follows:

> My overall assessment of the impact of rankings is that it's very great. The caliber of student that you can attract to your program - it does have an impact on the number of quality companies that are interested in recruiting at your school and it certainly has an impact on the reaction and sentiment from alumni in terms of whether you hear from them either positively or negatively once the rankings come out. So it has a huge affect. (Tier II A)

A Tier II faculty member stated,

> Well I think rankings matter and the reason they matter is because students think they matter. Although one of the things that I've been told and I think is true is that rankings are used by a large proportion of students to decide where they are going. So rankings matter whether you like it or not - whether they are done well or not - they matter...the rankings affect the quality of your students and rankings affect the amount of resources available to the school....(Tier II F)

Executive and incoming full-time MBA students were also mentioned as being affected, along with the internal reputation of the program. As one unranked faculty member stated,

> ...I have seen evidence that the ranking makes a difference in the minds of people at least external to the building...executive students, incoming MBA students are aware of those rankings. Internal to the building, um, yes we see some evidence of people judging the overall worth of the program and or making comments about what are we going to do to pay attention to those rankings, without pandering to them. (Unranked F)

A Tier I faculty member agreed,

> I think it's pretty clear that a high ranking gives us a better student...which raises the level and quality of students. It is noticed and widely reported. The alumni notices it a lot and alumni is quite responsive to how well their alma mater is doing, or just the local business community- people want to give to a winner and particularly...one which is already a winner...(Tier I F)

The pressure for good rankings came from all facets of the MBA community and appeared to be growing. If rankings dropped or were low, the rallying cry was that changes should be made. These changes might be more a response to frustration than a concern for improved quality.

> ...when the rankings go down it creates conversation and creates frustration and it gives rise to a call to - let's change the program-lets fix the program...figure out how to gain the formula...I think that's very unfortunate...the faculty are talking about the rankings all the time....I don't see a fundamental effort to try to improve, say, instructional quality, no, we try to tweak the formula. (Unranked F)

Others tried to determine why rankings dropped,

> We're very pleased when the rankings go up and we do a little soul searching when the rankings go down. Can we analyze why we dropped, if we dropped...The dean might get together with the associate dean for the MBA program and the director of admissions and the director of placement might call up recruiters and assess their satisfaction with recruiting here. Um, might periodically meet with student groups and talk about how things are going to get a sense of student satisfaction or experience in the program. Yeah, people are happy when it goes up and try to understand why, and sad when it goes down and try to understand why and what we could do better. (Tier I F)

A faculty member at a Tier II school described the way their advisory board had put pressure on their new dean to move up in the rankings.

> We started caring about our rankings and then it's really escalated since our new dean. ...I think she feels a lot of pressure from our advisory board. And I say that because the first year that she was dean I served as associate dean and having attended the board meetings, it was just very important to these external constituents that they have this recognition for the school. So, it's become very important. (Tier II F)

One unranked school administrator reflected on the reality of the rankings...

> You can't not be ranked. It would be a killer. Harvard could do it. Someone among the top five schools with that kind of truly international reputation could say, 'Screw the rankings and we're not going to play that game.' Most don't have the luxury of doing that. When companies go looking and students go looking at programs, they look at the rankings and if you're not there, it hurts. That's why there is so much pressure at these conferences and among the faculty to say okay, look if you're going to rank us, at least let's do a decent job with what variables you're looking at, what kind of metrics you're using, those kind of things. Because, not playing, is not an option. (Unranked A)

Finally, an MBA director at a top-ranked school provided this tongue-in-cheek comment on the mood in the college on the day the rankings were released…

> Yeah, Thursday night, (chuckle) internet countdown...starting at 5:00 p.m…I guess we'll tune in...yeah there has been a significant heightened awareness around them. I'd say probably as early as 10 years ago…we might have known *US News* came out every March, but now we know it's March 10!

These comments illustrated why the schools paid attention to the rankings. In fact it led to the next theme, which illustrated the pressure the schools felt when it came to policy and other decisions.

Theme 3: Rankings drove policy and decision-making.

Many of the study participants described the rankings as something that was always in the back of their mind, like a shadow or specter. It hovered over a school's decision-makers (chancellors, provosts, deans, directors) like an 800 lb. gorilla and affected policy and decision-making, now more than ever. This was particularly true among those schools in Tier II and unranked. As an unranked administrator stated,

> You know I guess in a general way I would say -- the rankings are a very real 800 pound gorilla that is sitting out there all the time…what I can tell you is the shadow of the rankings never goes away. So even if I'm not dealing with it in an explicit way, there is a pressure that occurs because of that … its kind of a specter that's always back there. (Unranked A)

A Tier II administrator stated,

> …it's hard not to keep that (rankings) in the back of your mind. Every day you come into work, you are thinking about - are the things that we are doing going to help to move us up in the rankings. You are constantly aware of that. (Tier II A)

However, all the schools felt the pressure of the gorilla. The following statements provided an image of administrators and faculty pressed into changes by the rankings. This was not to infer that change was bad, just that the rankings influenced the change. For example, all schools said they analyzed the ranking criteria and paid attention to the factors. As a result, they had revised curriculums, added electives and courses; changed admissions standards (GMAT, work experience); worked to increase the school's visibility among other schools; and made strategic decisions to grow or reduce the size of their program. In fact, many commented that today their top school administrators paid much more attention to the rankings than in the past, which only added to the pressure. As an administrator from an unranked school stated,

> There are very few schools that are happy with the system, you can guess who they are, the ones that are sitting at the top of the pyramid. Most others feel pressured to make decisions because of rankings and most often you will hear, I can't always make the decision that I need to. They don't always force the best decision, in fact, they force bad decisions that programs don't want to make. (Unranked A)

A Tier II administrator described the frustration he felt with the influence of the rankings as follows.

> Our administration pays so much more attention. And it's not just the president…But even the provost regularly comes over to talk to the college, mentions the rankings and so everyone is aware and that's a change from years past and one I regret because I truly believe that if we did our best that we would go up in the rankings and maybe we wouldn't. How do you get in the top 10? I don't even think you can buy yourself into it any longer. We're going to have a new building $40 million. Is that going to make a dent? Well all of our competition is doing the same thing…(Tier II A)

Of concern to many in the study was what some saw as the rankings driving the policies and decisions of the school. An unranked administrator stated,

> I'm going to make a really idealistic statement. You know that rankings should reflect the quality of the institution or the action you have taken, not drive them. Unfortunately, what's happened is in many cases, and I'm sure to some extent ours, the rankings have become the driver and that's kind of getting the cart before the horse. Where the ranking really ought to be a reflection of what decisions you made, the kind of students you add, the kind of faculty you have, the kind of curriculum you have....It's quality after the fact, a quality measure , but instead I think that what they've become is a driver of decisions. And if that is what it takes to get up in the rankings, some schools at least will take some steps, whether it is just ratchet up the GMAT scores – even though that might not serve the constituency of that school the best to do that. (Unranked A)

Another unranked administrator described how his school had only recently begun to analyze the criteria in the rankings.

> …within the past four or five years, we've made a push to try and crack the top 50.…and we explicitly look at the rankings to try and figure out what we can do

better -- each of the criteria. And we started with things we had more control over like GMAT, admittance standards, that sort of thing and now we're working on boosting reputation. Especially we've begun to send more material out to other business school deans to try and raise our visibility and reputation and another thing we have to work on is recruiters. (Unranked A)

The MBA director at a Tier II school described how they analyzed the criteria as well.

> "When I came as Director...what I brought was the perspective that...we needed to track multiple factors and make darn sure that one of the factors we did track were the ranking factors...So if you are approaching things from "are we doing the right things?" It's possible there are 30 things to monitor and that you are ignoring the ones that do count and just paying attention to the things that you think are important. So...we have at least got to consider those (ranking factors) whether we like it or not. They need to be the mix of what we are measuring and keeping track of.... And I think the dean has also (felt this way)...When he first came in (his attitude was to) make sure we're doing the right thing and now he has said...Tell me what they measure, because I want to start making sure that we are doing that and that's fairly recent."

When discussion turned to the impact of the rankings on decisions regarding the curriculum or student services, several described the influence as dramatic,

> We changed our core curriculum dramatically this year. We shrank the core form 55% to 40% and added more electives, feeling that we were forcing them (students) to take courses that they didn't really need or want (Tier I A)

> ...when we decided we were going to try to move up into the top 50 MBA rankings, we changed the MBA curriculum. We revised the admissions standards. We tried to develop more of a cohort system at least on this campus...and we try and raise some money to support financial aid for MBA students. Yeah it's had pretty dramatic changes for those of us involved in the MBA program. (Unranked F)

> ...I know they're revising the MBA curriculum - I think they're trying to line it up more with the top schools that are above us in the rankings and bring it into more of that fashion in the sense of a competitive basis - So I think there is some comparison...(Tier II F)

Some schools have shifted resources to the MBA for additional student services, course offerings, staff, etc. This shift has taken away resources from other programs within the college and in some cases there was resentment. An irritated Tier II faculty member described overcrowded undergraduate classes as a result of fewer resources and increased offerings for MBA students.

> ... We offer many electives (in the MBA)...class sizes that we would not tolerate at the UG level...Small, very tiny, which is an extreme use of resources because you're using up faculty resources...So in a course that only has 15 students we've used a third of their (faculty) in-class teaching time for that small number...but you know that was clearly a resource shift and of course the result of that is that they have very, very large UG classes....and the reason I'm saying this MBA affects this is that we need more pupils to teach the UG so, you know we have a PhD student with some of her first experiences, she has a 110 students in a marketing research class and it's just awful...so you are seeing a shifting of resources. (Tier II F)

At all schools, curriculum changes were thought to attract new students. Most felt that moving up in the rankings required the addition of courses in the soft skills, such as communication and presentation skills, teamwork, leadership, etc. However, some administrators and faculty seemed to resent these offerings, such as this Tier II administrator.

> We've increased the out of class extra curricular activities we do for them (MBA students) and the physical amenities they get and coddle them in the ways we can...we do a lot of seminars and workshops, where we bring in consultants to do personal presentation interviews, networking, dining etiquette, etc. Then we do a lot of team building exercises - adventure things everybody is doing now. (Tier II A)

Some appeared to feel that the rankings required schools to compete for students and so each tried to outdo the other or at least keep up.

> ...we don't have any locker room or dressing room...we don't have any space for that. But that's $20,000 or $30,000 to put that together for ten days a year. So their expectations are to keep throwing money at us and we expect it and I sort of equate it with trading stamps. Everybody else is offering something then we have to. (Tier II A)

In fact, one faculty member at a Tier I school questioned services provided at another school.

> ...Well some of these mentored MBAs (referring to a mentoring service provided at another school) are going to become recruiters and maybe that's just a technique to win over more points (by the school). So, I'm a little cynical why

> they (another school) are doing this. I don't think MBAs need mentoring, they're pretty tough. They've been out in the real world - what do you need to mentor them for? (Tier I F)

However, one faculty member at a top ranked school spoke with pride that his school did not pander to the MBA students, but described the faculty as the students' personal trainers.

> One of the things we refused to do was to be affected in what we do by the rankings...A lot of schools that I speak to ... They will talk about the MBA program...and they talk about their students being their customers and their customer service. What is nice about (here) is that's not what they believe (here). They have this analogy that we are the personal trainers and therefore, they won't like what we give them, but in the end it will benefit them. So, you are not our customers, forget it. We are the people who have the knowledge to give you and there are times obviously we learn from you, but don't expect us to treat you like you are great...(Tier I F)

There was an unexpected observation made by an administrator at a Tier I school. He felt that the rankings limited innovation at the top ranked schools due to their fear of rocking the boat and falling out of the top 25. Instead they designed their curriculum to be all things to all people. As this administrator said,

> ...We are always trying to one up our competitors, but within the same framework.... So if a group of our faculty says we need to totally restructure our MBA program...the rest of the faculty would stand up and say well we agree with this, but no way should we do this because you know it will make us stand out. One of the things we are trying to do is to be all things to all people...we try to be student responsive and broad...Anyway my point is that it has stymied innovation, because we are looking at each other and in a phase of being copycats more than anything. Innovation is at the smaller level. (Tier I A)

If true, this attitude might separate the Tier I schools from the rest. But was this a prevailing attitude among the Tier I schools? Another top-ranked school administrator had a different perspective. Though this administrator did not specifically address innovation, he addressed new specialty focus areas.

> ...the eCommerce fad. Is it a flash or is it long-term trend? ...Is it a train that's headed somewhere and how many people have jumped on the train Likewise - we jump on and it costs you a lot to jump on the train. But I do think you spend more time trying to be creative...find a train that isn't heavily populated that's headed

> somewhere. Those are the opportunities we're looking for and then when you are on it - the other part of it is - is this train getting close to its destination? Will there be much more we can get out of it? Is it time to look for a new train to jump on? And so I think you do more of that - benchmarking in a world where you have rankings. (Tier I A)

This reference to benchmarking may lead some to believe that innovation was limited at the top-ranked schools, because benchmarking may tend to not encourage innovation, but rather comparison.

Two Tier II schools provided examples of how the gorilla impacted their admissions policies regarding GMAT and work experience in their attempt to balance school needs with ranking needs.

> ...when we in the admissions office are looking for GMAT scores and we're admitting with a 710 GMAT...and they bring down your average work experience or salary, it's a hard balance...being kind of a second tier school trying to break into the top tier. Because we're not at the point where we can turn down someone with a 710 GMAT...I mean even if you're a top 20, you know you have a little bit of a cushion...you feel that pressure and trying to balance that to try and stay up in the rankings on the admissions side as well as the career services side. (Tier II A)

> ...one year (the dean) told (our director) that he'd like to increase the work experience. She recruited students with a higher level of work experience...It was the best class we ever had...They could just participate in class...They just had a little more polish to them. I think that going out they did better when they had that additional experience going in. Well because we took people with more experience, the average GMAT was lower. The longer you're away from school the lower your GMAT is. Well, it hurt our rankings the next year so of course that was the last year we recruited for (laughter) increased work experience. (Tier II F)

Other faculty and administrators described how they kept the ranking factors in mind as they settled on strategic objectives. For example, one MBA administrator at an unranked school said, that one reason he and his staff attended professional meetings was to increase visibility among the other deans, who were such a large factor (25% of the 40% reputation factor) in the *US News* rankings...

> ...we've really increased our involvement in those (professional) organizations. To a large extent, because of visibility. I mean it's not strictly for that reason, I mean there are four of us for three days next week in Chicago at an AACSB

> meeting. Part of it is just simply having a presence and being there you know and getting a little bit better known by deans of other schools. (Unranked A)

A Tier II administrator echoed this sentiment as he described his dean's efforts to increase the visibility of the school and thus improve their rank.

> Our dean definitely makes an effort in getting out there doing site visits for accreditation - attending AACSB meetings. We've made an effort to have presentations at AACSB meetings to draw attention to the things we are doing and that is aimed at enhancing the ranking, uh, our reputation. And I completely support that. That is a really big factor in the rankings. And in talking to colleagues, a lot of schools focus very much on the admission and placement stats and tend to think that the other (reputation) will somehow take care of itself, whereas those are really big factors. (Tier II A)

Other administrators stated their deans were doing the same thing, all in an effort to increase their visibility and improve their reputation.

A dramatic footprint of the gorilla was seen in the opposite directions taken by the two unranked schools. A faculty member questioned his school's decision to grow the size of the MBA program at a time when resources and facilities were very scarce and faculty were stretched thin.

> ...so what the college is doing is they're ramping up the size of the MBA program. I think of the applicant pool...you try to skim the cream off the top...that pool is what you have so I don't see how you could expand the program and not deteriorate the quality of the program. I don't know how the faculty has the capacity and how we have the structural capacity - physical capacity to deliver the curriculum and so I think as I said earlier this is a specific example of how the rankings are very much driving our behavior, driving what we do and I think at the expense of some of the other missions of the college. (Unranked F)

The opposite decision was made at the other unranked school. They had decided to reduce the number of students, so they could increase the number of electives they offered in hopes that this would eventually increase the number of qualified applicants and increase the size of their school.

> We felt like we really needed to do something to improve the quality of the core....So a great number of new elective courses - um it caused us to reduce the size of our program. And ideally we'd like to have a bigger program, but we wanted to make a bigger improvement in the ranking and the only thing we

> controlled directly was the incoming students. The only way to do that overnight was to reduce the number of students we accept...If you don't have a large base of alumni - you don't get the money. If you don't have a large number of students you can't get companies to come in and hire those students. You get - if you look at the rankings, you get programs at the top of the rankings....based on graduating class size. So, I think it is a tremendous disadvantage. So we took down to the smallest number of students we possibly could and still have a viable program and still be included in the rankings. (Unranked A)

A Tier I administrator summed up the image of the shadow or 800 pound gorilla with this statement.

> ...one final one I can think of is always on the agenda, as many things are when it comes to new programs, new initiatives. Everything from how are you going to design your web pages, to what faculty member are we going to hire, to what students are we going to admit, and it has not been the lead, but it's always been part of the discussion. You know maybe the rhetorical open-ended question is "what will the impact of this decision be on the rankings?" (Tier I A)

The fourth theme to emerge from the data was the perception that the rankings encouraged a self-perpetuating cycle of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

Theme #4: Rankings can become a self-perpetuating cycle.

The old adage - *the rich get richer and the poor get poorer* – was definitely true according to the participants in this study. With higher rankings came better students, more recruiters, more money, happier alumni and free publicity. It became a self-perpetuating prophecy as those at the top remained at the top. Two administrators from Tier I schools substantiated this with these comments about their GMAT scores.

> ...our GMAT has been increasing...as we become better known – new facilities come on line –our ranking rises – we draw from a higher level student. I think likewise (we get) more interest – financial resources to work with - - we target the top 20. (Tier I A)

> We've been able to raise our GMAT scores because of the increased number of applicants and that is partly attributable to our ranking. It's the old adage – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The rankings have really hurt a set of schools that are good, that are honest and competent. A Vanderbilt, for example... (Tier I A)

GMAT scores have gone up the last couple of years…since I've been here um its gone up about five or ten points every year. I think a lot of that comes from the rankings and the recognition. (Tier II A)

All the schools felt that higher rankings brought more highly qualified students.

My overall assessment ...is that it's very great. The caliber of student that you can attract to your program ...the number of quality companies that are interested in recruiting at your school and it certainly has an impact on the reaction and sentiment from alumni in terms of whether you hear from them either positively or negatively once the rankings come out. (Tier II A)

There are a lot of applicants out there who basically only look at the top 20-25 schools so if they see you as highly ranked, perhaps more importantly are you moving up - an up and coming school - that will give a leg up in the (competition). (Tier I A)

Its impact has been…huge, uh, in terms of where students apply and therefore it has a huge impact on the College of Business. You know we aspire to have a large number of applicants so we can make the best choices possible… as (we) have personally moved up in that ranking the number of applications has increased and that's a positive thing. I think it provides you with a capability of more selective admissions, which is an aspiration of a lot of people. (Tier I A)

…and as your rankings are better and go up you get more and better applications and as they go down you get fewer and not so good applications. (Unranked A)

…when they (rankings) come out, (students) may be happy or unhappy and it's basically, if they're unhappy, then they'll let you know, and tell you all the things you should have done, you know kinda implying that all you have to do is a couple things and it changes the rankings and that kinda stuff. But they do have an immediate impact on people that are involved in the programs currently…then if you go a little bit out beyond that they probably…have some impact on applications, because there are students that are not here right now, but they could have been here, but they choose to go somewhere else or whatever. (Unranked A)

Several schools described how a higher rank resulted in happier alumni, who believed that a school's higher rank favorably impacted the alums' ability to progress and move up in his or her career.

…(I) think the way you're ranked is terribly important as to their (alumni) willingness to open up their pocketbooks, to donate to the school, pride they take

> in the school. I think one implication of that is...you're dealing with potential donors who have...resources (that) will make a difference. I think another reality is for more recent alums, who usually aren't at the donating stage but ...during their working careers, the ranking of the school tends to directly impact how they are perceived in their organization and that affected their promotability, their own career path. (Tier I A)

If this saying was true, that the rich do stay at the top and the cycle does perpetuate itself, those schools at the bottom of the rankings or out of the rankings may become more frustrated as time goes on. This brought us to the next theme, which described the rankings as a beauty contest that lacked a valid methodology.

Theme #5: Academia viewed the rankings as a beauty contest.

Academia viewed the rankings as a beauty contest and were frustrated by its lack of a scientific or empirical based methodology. Even when considering the fact that the rankings are based on a connoisseurship model or reputation-based, there was 60% of the score from specific criteria, which most felt did not necessarily measure academic quality. One Tier I faculty member described the rankings as follows:

> ...looking over a long period - 10 to 20 years, I think these rankings, no matter how systematic they are, tend to be beauty contests. I think because there are always strong elements that are subjective and personal judgment. And even if they don't, even if there are objective measures in addition to those things, it's the judgmental subjective elements in those formulas that really make key differences. That's where all the variance is. Because most schools, business schools tend to...a herd instinct. (Tier I F)

Many staff and faculty complained about the criteria used by *USN* and others in the rankings business. Many noted how much of the survey criteria had no scientific or empirical basis. This led to much confusion and frustration when dealing with the issue of rankings. One unranked administrator said,

> For better or for worse our readers or potential students unfortunately hold information to be gospel and it (the rankings) is not based on scientific empirical research. None of the surveys are based on that. Not only that, but in my opinion, very poorly constructed although that has improved somewhat, but they use terminology that is very ambiguous and can be interpreted a number of different ways by different schools...they (surveys) have grown from 4-5 pages to 25 pages. We don't even collect some of the data, ambiguous data that they are

> asking for...(Unranked A)

An administrator at a Tier I school questioned the various weights *USN* applied in their rankings methodology.

> ...who is to say that this weighting is only 5% and this one is 30% - and the problem is once they do it, it is hard to change. Because changing those weightings, they think we put too much weight on this and must change it. Then they almost have to go back and redo all the rankings...(Tier I A)

Another complaint grew from the fact that none of the data was audited. A Tier I administrator described his suspicions that others were not always truthful when responding to the rankings survey.

> ...you spend more time worrying about how to boost your ranking which can in some schools cause unethical behavior. There are easy ways to jack up what you consider to be a complete application so that you can drop the percentage of students that get accepted and you can play games with the GMATs. We are one of the few schools last year that reported static applications. Do I really believe that we are the only top 20 school that didn't show a dramatic increase in applications? No, I believe we are the only school that was honest about it. So, there's just a tradition here that we don't play games with the statistics. But I am absolutely convinced that other schools do. (Tier I A)

Many faculty and administrators complained that a small MBA program did not have much chance when competing in the rankings. An administrator at an unranked school put it best.

> If you don't have a large base of alumni - you don't get the money. If you don't have a large number of students you can't get companies to come in and hire those students....So, I think it is a tremendous disadvantage -- so we took down (enrollment) to the smallest number of students we possibly could and still have a viable program and still be included in the rankings. You have to have a class size of at least 50. So our plan is to increase by 5-10% a year until we are (back up) at least twice as big. (Unranked A)

Another unranked administrator said,

> We've had a lot of discussion of the size of our program. Um, it's small enough that it's really hard to get the attention, especially of big companies that recruit. Probably one of the things we could do if we chose to do that would really, probably uh help our reputation in the MBA would be to get bigger than we are. Its both facilities and faculty issues -- we simply don't have either one of those to

> do it - to make a program twice or three times as big. Even 200 a year would be a small program...reputation-wise... you know the students would kind of look at that with a little bit of a mixed reaction. You know, they'd say, yeah, we'd like to be rated a lot better, but we really like this small program. Well, I'm telling you, you can't have both. So the smaller program simply isn't going to get the ranking that the same program would get if it were a lot bigger. (Unranked A)

Other complaints with the criteria centered around the reputation component, particularly with the lag time between reputation and current picture and the method for getting those rankings. As one Tier I administrator stated,

> The rankings tend to be a picture that's a little older news...while schools are always examining themselves - benchmarking their ability... the constant reminder -kind of the marker -- for knowing that at 5:00 p.m. tomorrow the rankings come out. I doubt the average faculty member in the building is sitting on pins and needles waiting for that and in a world, before these rankings became so important, I didn't think much about them. (Tier I A)

> I get this survey and it's got a hundred – two hundred MBA schools and I'm supposed to say what I think about these schools. I don't know enough about those schools to respond and I don't think anyone does...I don't feel comfortable assessing the quality of schools, when I literally don't know a thing about their program. (Unranked A)

> ...The reputation component (of the rankings) in my opinion leaves much to be desired, given the lag times in higher education are decades in length...I'm strongly in favor of focusing on output...the net present value of the investment the student made...kind of a return on investment kind of calculation. What that did is, number one, it corrected for the cost of living differential...but also corrected for the fact that many of the salaries from the Northeastern schools are in context of the people that were coming to them and already recognizing salaries that were substantially higher than that of people who go in (this area.) So that return on investment kind of calculation to me is one of the better ones because -- A it is objective -- B it corrects for cost of living and C -- it corrects for input. (Unranked F)

> The biggest thing in their rankings is the reputation and there are two reputations among your recruiters and among your peers. And you know those things are very sticky, so your reputation is not going to go from crummy to stellar in a year or two and it shouldn't. And so there is a self-perpetuating prophecy. So, it is hard to move from 40 to 20, regardless if your quality is that good or not, because your reputation is not going to change that fast. (Tier II A)

A complaint related to the selection of recruiters came from participants. *U.S. News* surveyed recruiters who recruited at the top schools. They also requested that ranked schools provide names of companies that recruited at their college. On the surface, this appeared to be a good idea, but in reality, *US News* might contact the headquarters for that company whereas the company's recruiter for a particular school might come from a regional branch and not the headquarters.

> ...For example...if State Farm is asked to rate schools they are going to go to Illinois (headquarters). Well they don't even know where we are. But (here) at the regional office - we are one of the heaviest to recruit at. So, we put them in as one of the companies (for *US News*) to contact, but if they went to the headquarters we wouldn't be mentioned. National companies reinforce the top ten mentality. (Tier II A)

Many in the study suggested a Northeast bias existed in the rankings due to the fact that most of the schools, including the Ivy League schools, and corporate headquarters were located in the Northeast. A Tier II faculty member said,

> ...but you know there is a definite media focus in the Northeast and having grown up there, I believe there is a bias against (this region). And I think that impacts those rankings. (Tier II F)

Another complaint revolved around the fact that the school rankings changed, sometimes drastically, from year to year. The staff and faculty reiterated what had been described in the literature, the inability of schools to change that much in just one year. As a Tier II administrator commented,

> In order to sell magazines you can not have stability and when you do an annual ranking such as *US News* - none of us believes that schools move around that much...It's ridiculous that you could fall from number three to number eight in one year. I mean did all your faculty leave? What happened? (Tier II A)

The schools also endeavored to educate their audience as to the shortcomings of the rankings and offered alternative ways to select an MBA school.

> I'd agree that the rankings are essentially designed to sell magazines and not rank business schools...and the other thing is that students or candidates make some assumptions that they are scientific methods so it creates an unfair picture of the program in everyone's mind and so part of my job, when people are getting carried away by the rankings, is to really educate them about what a particular

> survey does and who does it and how much attention they are going to pay to it when things like career services and their match with the program. How important are those? What area of specialization are they interested in and how important are those? (Tier II A)

A step taken by one school was to design their own scorecard as an alternative to the rankings.

> ...what we're trying to do is find not just an alternative to outside rankings, but something that can really be very specific and methodology can be put on the web for everyone to understand the methodology. I think that's one of the things that was very difficult for prospective students to understand...so I think the scorecard would not have happened had there not been rankings out their as kind of a counterpoint. (Tier I A)

As these schools tried to understand and get the most benefit from their ranking results, some complained about circumstances beyond their control. For example, several schools mentioned the dismal economy and fall of the high tech industry when discussing factors that had affected the salaries and number of graduates who secured jobs upon graduation. While this obviously affected their ranking, it had nothing to do with the quality of their MBA program.

> ...we dropped in the rankings from 44 to 49...it was driven in large part by the placement at graduation...driven by salaries...Many of our students have not taken traditional MBA paths, but they have started their own companies...or they are paid by options instead of salary. All that affects salaries and then the placement at graduation. Our industries were heavily hit by the high tech, startup and consulting - those three...We had people that were offered positions and then it was reneged or fell through...(Tier II A)

As the data illustrated, most of these study participants were frustrated by the rankings. They did not believe they measured the true quality of their program, but were more of a beauty or popularity contest. However, they also knew that the rankings were not going away. As one Tier I faculty member stated,

> ...so much goes into the rankings that don't cover the job we do and I think we do a great job in the classroom and at (this school). I don't think the rankings reflect that...there're all sorts of issues. And you've got to manage them. (Tier I F)

The sixth theme to emerge from the data was the image of the MBA as the flagship of the business college. This flagship status created a halo effect that increased the influence of the MBA rankings over the college, because the ranking the MBA program received reflected on the entire college.

Theme #6: The ranking of the MBA program has created a halo effect over the entire business college.

The rankings have reinforced the position of the MBA program as the *flagship* or *parent* for the entire college. Therefore, positive rankings provided a beneficial halo over the other programs, while lower rankings would have the opposite effect. An Unranked administrator commented,

> Other people, whether those are businesses or academics or whatever, tend to look at this particular program as the bellwether for the quality of the college as a whole. There's that umbrella-haloing effect off the MBA program on to other things. And I think that just reinforces or is complementary to this issue of how important rankings are, uh, if rankings are driving your external perceptions of your MBA program and your MBA program reflects on the larger school, than you know, you can't ignore the rankings. And so what I would say is that the college in general, the dean and larger faculty, realizes that we have got to have a good MBA program here. Excellence in this program is important, if not just for the program, but for the college as whole. And so, people don't sometimes don't like to use this term, but oftentimes, you'll hear the MBA program is the flagship of the college and I think that is a prevailing attitude. (Unranked A)

As described previously, when *USN* ranks graduate business schools, they only look at the full-time MBA program. However, a typical business college contains many graduate degrees in other types of MBA programs (part-time, executive, specialty) and at the PhD level. This has created some controversy, as some schools have stronger programs in the part-time or executive MBA, or PhD area. It has also resulted in a shift of resources to support the flagship/MBA, which has caused some negative feelings among other entities within the college. This was evidenced by the following comments from many of the differentially ranked schools.

> ...the MBA is the flagship program of this school. They should be, they have to be, it's the nature of the beast and the reason they have to be is because they are, partly because of their rankings, but also because they are in such a competitive market situation...(Tier I F/A)

...you need to care about your MBA program (because) it does affect your other programs, rightly or wrongly...I don't think there is much difference between the quality of your MBA program and the quality of the Executive Program, quality of your UG or doctoral program. I mean they are related but they are not real closely related. People perceive them - outsiders perceive them as much more closely related. (Tier II F)

...the MBA program is a very prominent component (in this college). Probably the single most important element from a visibility perspective...it drives much of what we do-and when the rankings go down it creates conversation and creates frustration and it gives rise to a call to – let's change the program-lets fix the program...what happens is the people start looking at how the formula itself is constructed, to figure out how to gain the formula...I think that's very unfortunate...the faculty are talking about the rankings all the time. They're the prestige of the institution...the prestige of the faculty members...(they) want to be in a top ranked program, they...want to be able to attract good students- they think the rankings can help do that...(Unranked F)

I think in general rankings affect all of the programs (executive, part-time)...a favorable ranking has a positive effect on the entire school...The only negative affect that I've seen is sometimes a few people become consumed in chasing the ranking as opposed to earning it... (Tier I F)

Oftentimes, just seeing that in the press somewhere, people don't differentiate from the executive program, so we could reap the benefits of their rankings when and if that should occur. And maybe it has and I'm just not aware of it. (Unranked A)

There was a task force a couple of years ago that looked at the question of how colleges of business establish their reputations. And the conclusion that came out of that group, and I think it is widely accepted by people here in the college, is that your MBA program, for better or worse, has a disproportionate influence on a college of business reputation. ...(MBA is seen as) the bellwether for the quality of the college as a whole. There's that umbrella-haloing effect off the MBA program on to other things. And I think that just reinforces or is complementary to this issue of how important rankings are, uh, if rankings are driving your external perceptions of your MBA program and your MBA program reflects on the larger school, than you know, you can't ignore the rankings. (Unranked A)

However, this attitude was not reflected by all participants, particularly the faculty. As one Tier II faculty member complained, the MBA was not the whole college,

So rankings matter whether you like it or not - whether they are done well or not - they matter... MBA is only one part of what the school does and the rankings

> don't necessarily reflect what the department is doing and doesn't reflect your contribution to scholarship in the field -- all sorts of reasons for faculty not being concerned....If you want my personal opinion, people put way too much weight on rankings but I think the other clear fact is that there may be a few schools that are - the top five schools or some small number of schools may be clearly separated from the rest. But the next group - the difference between 10 and 20 or the 20th and 50th school - the differences just aren't that large and people perceive them as if they are very large. That's just wrong. (Tier II F)

The seventh theme dealt with the impact the rankings had had on career services and admissions staff as they attempted to answer the numerous ranking surveys that cluttered their mailbox and fax machine.

Theme #7: The rankings have impacted career services and admissions offices.

The numerous ranking surveys have resulted in an expanding career services and admissions staff with greater status and responsibility, but increased turnover too. Typically it was the responsibility of the administrators in admissions and career services to fill out the ranking surveys and they were frustrated with the amount of time required to complete them. The proliferation of MBA rankings and the variety of data required by each group had almost turned the process into a full-time job. As a Tier I administrator commented,

> We spend a lot of time making sure we provide the data to the different rankings and it takes a lot of time. It takes one person dedicated to that to come up with all those figures and they each have a different methodology....Its almost become a sub-group of any admissions office that is responsible for that information. (Tier I A)

As one unranked program administrator described her frustration with the rankings surveys,

> ...our program could evolve into is a program that is designed to meet the needs of these surveys....I could spend all my time filling out surveys. It can be almost a fulltime job...some of the player schools are doing a lot to court them as well. They develop relationships with the people who are involved with the data, not the data collection, but overseeing the survey process, just the key people. And we don't do that. (Unranked A)

These new job duties and the responsibilities that went along with them had caused many schools to reorganize their career services and admissions offices as they enlarged them. Several top schools described how their career service and admissions offices were reorganized several years ago. These administrators described how their jobs had changed due to the rankings. While their staffs had grown in size and status, the chances of getting fired had also increased. One Tier I administrator told about his school's reorganization.

> ...about 1998...prior to my arrival, our career services got a lot of negative remarks and so the director was fired and it was reorganized...I think it (rankings) has helped career services immensely. Prior to 1999, there were only three and now we have 12... It's become impossible to become a ranked program without spending a lot of money on career services, admissions...(Tier I A)

A Tier II administrator described the increase in turnover that she had witnessed.

> I'm aware of people being fired over the rankings at other programs (University of Maryland,) who recently fired their director over the rankings...I'm on the Career Services listserve and I am amazed at the turnover in this profession...It may just be somebody moving, versus a position being added, but I don't know. My sense is it is both. I think it is a growing field. But I think there is that recognition that there needs to be additional growth. (Tier II A)

However, there were benefits to this growth, such as increased salaries. A Tier I administrator said,

> ...I hear from colleagues that...we can thank the size of our staff and the size of our salary for the intense concentration on surveys. Well at least it helped to grow our organization; to grow our salaries - cause the perception is that what we do is important, at least to the recruiters. (Tier I A)

Another Tier I administrator commented,

> Not over the last couple of years but before that it doubled in size. But the addition of the account managers to focus on recruiters was the thing that changed most dramatically and also the realization that if we wanted to be a top 20 business school, we needed to act like one. (Tier I A)

A Tier II administrator said that her career services department had gone from one person to two people and this year to four people. However, a different story was heard from an unranked administrator,

> Placement is one where we have been woefully understaffed, under resourced for years. And so what I am doing is fighting very hard for additional resources to just be able to throw a little more firepower at that piece...(Unranked A)

One career services professional felt that her school's move up in the rankings had also helped her to move up in her professional association, taking on a board position. As she noted,

> When you go to a conference - among other career services professionals - they will know that you're ranked and that makes a huge difference and that also makes a difference in being courted for boards, being an officer on a board. (Tier II A)

Administrators from the Tier I and Tier II schools made a very troubling comment. In effect, they had heard that some students were encouraged by career services staff to obtain a job, any job; by graduation and to find the highest paying job they could, in order to help the school in the rankings. One Tier I administrator felt strongly about this claim.

> ...I just in my heart could never coach a student to take a higher paying job just because I thought somewhere down the road it might add two cents to the average (in the ranking survey). ...we're going to work as hard as we can to bring opportunity to the students and then see what happens. If the offers are there, that's great, but whether they accept or not by graduation is again another place where I draw the line. I'm not going to be able to control that and I wouldn't try to push a student (to take a job they did not really want.). (Tier I A)

A Tier II administrator added,

> (There is) a love-hate relationship around the students, because we as a career center, and they as students, want to find a job they love regardless of the salary...whether or not it's by the time they graduate ...They also know that rankings have an impact so they feel a dynamic tension within themselves...(I've heard) some career centers are really kind of brutal in the way they handle students. Pushing them into jobs -- A - we can't do that; and B - I see it as I want them to find a job they love. And I've heard students - I've gotten email from students who have found a job and a Korean student -- he took a job in sales management and was very apologetic because it wouldn't help in the rankings. (Tier II A)

Most career services staff probably felt that the above cases were few and far between.

The eighth theme concerned the issue of academic excellence which *US News* claimed their rankings measured (*US News*, 2001). But when the study participants were asked if they felt that the survey measured the academic excellence of the schools, most said no. However, when asked if the rankings generally reflected the top schools, they agreed that they did. An interesting paradox arose.

Theme #8: A paradox arose between academic excellence and top-ranked schools.

The second primary question in the study dealt with academic excellence. A paradox arose when most faculty and administrators rejected *US News'* claim that the rankings measured academic excellence (*US News*, 2001), but agreed, in general, that the rankings reflected the best schools.

The majority defined academic excellence as programs that had:

- Quality, cutting-edge curriculum
- Supported a culture of curiosity, continuous learning, teamwork and enthusiasm
- Tenured and published faculty, residing on boards and involved in research.
- Excellent teaching & research
- Quality students with the ability to analyze business problems, articulate and formulate solutions, to lead, inspire and work as a team.

Many felt it was impossible to assess the academic excellence of a school's MBA program with only a survey. However, when asked if the ranked schools, as they appeared, reflected the top schools, most in the study agreed that they did. Thus a paradox was created. The rankings did not assess academic excellence, but the rankings did reflect the most excellent schools! As a top-ranked administrator stated,

> I think generally speaking, I can't speak for every line in the rankings...and I say when I go down the *BW* or *US News* rankings or *Financial Times*, they are all excellent academic institutions. In the broadest most general sense, yes, they are identifying the best. Are they in the right order? I don't know. I think the difficulty – how do you really rank schools? And are starting salaries, bonuses, career decisions – are those academic issues – you could argue that they are, but I don't know. But, how do you really rate academic excellence? But overall, yes,

the best academically. (Tier I A)

An unranked faculty member agreed,

> At a very general level…the programs at or near the top are very strong programs. Programs in the middle are middles, and the programs at the bottom are kind of bottom tier programs. I think generally the rankings are probably not too far from the mark. (Unranked F)

Table 7 shows the responses to the question of academic excellence. The Tier I schools were evenly split on this question. Those in Tier II, many of whom felt their school was under-rated, did not agree that *US News* measured academic excellence. Finally, the Unranked schools appeared slightly more positive. However, the total responses from all groups did show a negative opinion of *US News'* assertion that their rankings measured the academic excellence of the schools they ranked.

The respondents had these reflections…

> No, they (the rankings) don't (measure academic excellence.) Well it's in my view the rankings measure 7 to 9 things, but there are probably 30 or 40 things that are significant. To measure the quality of our students by their GMAT scores and our grade is kind of preposterous. The rankings, especially *USN*, doesn't even ask about their background, experience, not just business experience but their learning experience....I don't think there is any way that the majority of the faculty feels that *US News* is true reflection of our academic excellence, whether we were high or low. (Tier II A)

> …One of things we don't think the ranking reflects is the quality of the institution -we should be ranked more highly and I think most places think that, right? So what have we done differently? I'm not sure we've done anything differently. I mean we are concerned about placement of our students. But would not we be without the rankings? The fact that it affects rankings makes us a little more

Table 7 – Do *US News* rankings measure the academic excellence of the schools they rank?

School Group	Yes	No/Not Really	Maybe/Imperfect	Not Sure	No Response
Tier I	6	6	1	1	2
Tier II	1	7	2	1	5
Unranked	4	3	2	0	4
TOTALS	**11**	**16**	**5**	**2**	**11**

concerned than we would otherwise be, but we'd be pretty darned concerned otherwise. (Tier II F)

I guess I've never really seen the rankings as measuring academic excellence...Again to define the academic excellence in a business school context I think, well that's an oxymoron, because academic excellence - we're training managers - general management school, we're training people to go in and manage companies but also to start their own. So the excellence...I don't think you can be a good top business school...If you're not having that dialog between the company and the academician. (Tier I A)

I'd give a qualified "maybe." I think *US News* is the most objective of the rankings because they have more objective data. The other tend to be popularity polls. The *US News* has a lot more quantifiable data that they can compare across schools....but I'm not sure I would go so far to say that reputation...they ask all MBA directors to rate schools...that becomes the sort of reputation factor of quality. It's sort of ancestral...so you can say that that reputation factor quality factor is a little misleading. (Tier II A)

A paradox arose when the participants were asked whether or not they felt that the ranked schools, as they appeared in the rankings, were the best schools. While most felt the rankings did not measure academic excellence, a majority felt the rankings did reflect the top schools, though exact numerical order was questioned.

I think the difficulty - how do you really rank schools? And are starting salaries, bonuses, career decisions - are those academic issues? You could argue that they are, but I don't know. But, how do you really rate academic excellence? But overall, yes, the (rankings reflect the schools which are the) best academically. (Tier I F)

...when I go down the *BW* or *US News* rankings or *Financial Times*, they are all excellent academic institutions In the broadest most general sense, yes, they are identifying the best. Are they in the right order? I don't know. (Tier I F)
...I think it's very hard to differentiate once you go beyond 25. But it does affect students' perspective. I should even argue faculty perspective and I mean prospective faculty when they look at the school. But the faculty is a little more discerning. They are not going to make a big difference between a 28 and a 34. (Tier II F)

...people put way too much weight on rankings but I think the other clear fact is that there may be a few schools that are - the top five schools or some small number of schools may be clearly separated from the rest. But the next group - the difference between 10 and 20 or the 20th and 50th school - the differences just

> aren't that large and people perceive them as if they are very large. That's just wrong. (Tier II F)
>
> MBA rankings are difficult…for faculty to say one school is better than the other particularly outside my area. So, in general I find the rankings to be kind of popular opinion, kind of nice, very big standard deviation. You can go up and down so quickly and the lower tail, just a slight change moves you 20 or 25 positions. When you are talking about going from 80 to 60, it's nothing and so those perceptions become problematic (for us). (Unranked F)

Overall, the following statement made by an MBA director at an Unranked school, probably captured what most faculty and administrators would agree was missing from the rankings when discussing the rank and academic excellence of an MBA program.

> I'm not trying to be cynical. I'm just saying it is extraordinarily difficult for even people on the inside to look at program and compare and see what's going on…But certainly from the point of view of people who are looking from the outside in for them to assess quality is just, it's virtually impossible….what I think makes it excellent -- faculty composition, the kind of things the students are doing -- those are the kind of things that you have to judge and no one is going to take the time to do that…essentially (you have) a 'black box' in terms of what goes on in the two years between the admission and the output and I don't think that its possible, I truly don't think it is possible for any ranking to objectively assess quality....But the *US News* is absolutely stacked toward reputation among deans and so it is very subjective in that sense. (Unranked A)

The final theme to emerge from the study contained a review of the positive and negative aspects of the rankings.

Theme #9: The rankings had positive and negative impacts.

Faculty and administrators related positive and negative aspects of the rankings. On the positive side, some felt the rankings had encouraged healthy competition and created valuable student services. On the negative side was the impact on the policies, staff and resources. An ugly side of the rankings emerged when schools accused each other of manipulating their statistics for the rankings or administrators felt students used the rankings as weapon to get what they wanted. However, none of the participants were under the illusion that the rankings were going to go away.

I think on balance, they (rankings) are a good thing. I think there is wheat there,

> but you've got to separate it from the chaff...but I think this idea we have to do whatever it takes to get in the top 10 is a fool's errand...I think some have quite publicly boasted we're going to be in the top 25, whatever it takes. I think that is a huge mistake. (Tier I F)

> ...I wouldn't want to see the rankings go away, cause I think there is value in the rankings, but I think there is way too much focus on the rankings. We spend too much of our time catering to the various criteria that exists in the rankings and it gets us away from what we should really be doing - really helping the students and providing value and focusing on their needs and their goals rather than what is going to serve the MBA program well in the next ranking. (Tier II A)

> ...every school reads them (the rankings), pores over them, and tries to respond to them - tries to improve. I think on balance they are better than harm. They keep us on our toes. It's a scorecard, a quote-objective measure. You know we can all see the downside of them as well. And the downside can be pretty devastating...That you spend more time worrying about the rankings than the quality of an education...(Tier I A)

An administrator at a Tier II school provided her assessment of the rankings.

> ...51% of me is favorable – 49% of me doesn't like it. So, its pretty close and the reason that I don't is that it makes us focus on a lot of things that distract us from what I think the students want or what we should be doing. Um you know it forces you to build relationships with the companies that are going to pay the big bucks and so the small mom and pops –the medium size companies – the opportunities where it's more sales focused – commission based – you intentionally avoid those opportunities, because that can hurt us. ...I mean we have a very strong reputation in entrepreneurship. There is no benefit in me telling employers about it – it is only going to hurt me. (Tier II A)

On the good side of the rankings was the free publicity a ranking generated as suggested by a Tier I administrator.

> I've been pounding on it for a while because to quote a colleague, the rankings were worth about $5 million in marketing expenses. Uh, I don't know if it's that much, but I mean being ranked is better than spending a million dollars on promotion. With the rankings, at least in the top 50 you're going to come out on a lot more people's screens. (Tier I A)

> Well, the high rankings get favorable attention to the school and favorable attention is always good. It could have a hand in helping us recruit future students who otherwise would not have known about us...particularly international students who might not have had a chance to visit or even know the geography of

the US very well…(Tier I F)

Another issue that arose was the fact that the rankings were considered an expensive game that most public schools could ill afford to play.

> It's an expensive game to get into and yet a game you cannot afford not to play. You can't win at the game. You just tread water. It would be much better for everyone involved if they just disappeared. (Tier II A)

> Initially when they (rankings) came out in the 80s and everybody got excited about the rankings but we really didn't know what they were going to turn into. I think over time the reactions have been more negative year after year. The dean for example every year will stop by BW and US News and talk with both the editors, talking about how poorly they are put together and how they need to be changed, but he doesn't have any impact. So it's not something that we live and die with…it's a catch up game. (Tier II A)

An unranked administrator agreed with this, but also felt that the rankings had helped him to convince others to make changes to improve their program and the level of students accepted. The rankings provided a goal to shoot for and having that goal had instilled a new sense of pride in the school,

> The University looks at the rankings. We will periodically get publications from other universities…our goal is to give students the best possible MBA. Our goal is to make the degree more valuable to our alumni. Our goal is excellence in teaching….So it feels better to be able to walk up and down the halls and talk to faculty and have them say "you've got really good students in this program. It's just a pleasure to teach courses." Whereas four years ago people…didn't want to teach in the MBA program because they didn't feel like the students had the right motivation or the right preparation or there were elements of the program that were perceived as disorganized and so you know that's sometimes more important than the *US News* rankings. But to be able to attract those really high quality students, you need to be in the rankings. (Unranked A)

The ugly side of the rankings emerged in two forms. Though not mentioned often, one Tier II administrator felt the rankings had given the students too much power.

> …it's a very mixed blessing. The rankings create a lot of problems dealing with MBA (students) because they use it as leverage against the administration. You (administrators) have to do this because otherwise we (students) are influencing those rankings. It has an upside in that it has created a lot more interest in the sort of public at large, in terms of the schools. But I'd say if I had to say which one outweighs the other I'd have to say it's a negative influence on the program and a

negative influence on the college. (Tier II A)

Another Tier I administrator described an email which accused his school of lying about their statistics.

> After the ranking came out...he (another administrator at a competing school) sent out a blanket email to every business school dean, director anybody that might have had anything to do with the rankings, a wide net...we (his school) went down from 15th to 35h, a quantum drop. And here are four schools that maintained or went up and by the way, these four schools' information is disparate from what was reported to Business Week, Fortune, all the other rankings and...it doesn't take a rocket scientist to say School D was us...the dean...called me and...the one variable that was being pointed out about us was percentage of employed students at graduation. In BW we reported 84% in UNS we reported 92% - why the 8% difference? Because USN asks for these based on those seeking employment and we had 12 students who were not seeking employment. ..my guess is my counterpart at that school (later substantiated)...was brought into the woodshed and said "Read it!" (Tier I A)

Whether the rankings were viewed as positive or negative, all the schools indicated that they asked faculty and staff to be sensitive to the ranking and that they analyzed their rankings, so they could put their best foot forward and attract the best students possible. One administrator described their efforts.

> Well we have certainly tried to get the whole community on board, meaning the faculty and administrators. Not to try and say you need to change what you are doing...we have a large number of faculty who take teaching more seriously than they used to or have been sensitized to their deficiencies and are choosing not to teach in the MBA program...not to say they are bad teachers. (Tier I A)

On the other hand, he also stated how they downplayed any move in the rankings.

> The students are very aware of the rankings We tried to convince them that they can't believe them - whenever you go down, you get the doom and gloom. So, when we go up, we are happy, but we don't run around and celebrate. It's just ho hum. We're happy, but we can't admit that they (rankings) have any validity. (Tier I A)

But an admissions director at a Tier II school felt proud of her institution for resisting any kowtowing to the rankings.

> ...I think we're one of those schools that are staying the course that we believe, we're not compromising our integrity and the integrity of our program because

> these people who are and don't have MBAs, who don't even understand the business so we've had to educate them, um they can't even design a quality survey so we don't prostitute ourselves (laughter) for the sake of rankings. I think we stay the course…and being true to what we think and believe quality business education needs to be all about. Because in the end it wont' be *Business Week* or *USNWR* out there doing the job, it will be our students and our alums. So if we don't get them adequately prepared, then we've failed. (Tier II A)

For all the schools, the rankings game was a constant and tiring battle. As one faculty member at an unranked school found when he told a colleague at a conference about his school's goal to get into the top 50. The colleague remarked,

> "Oh you're one of the 100 trying to get into the top 50?" I just laughed. He hit it right on the head - it's a common goal. You're out of the top 50 you want in! (Unranked F)

Chapter V

Discussion, Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations for Future Study

Behind the school names and numbers that make up *US News & World Report* rankings, hides a complexity and a passion known only to the MBA faculty and administrators who run these programs. This complexity and passion was what intrigued the researcher and was the impetus behind this study. The result is a descriptive and intriguing account of the impact of *US News & World Report* rankings on eight public MBA programs and their institutions, from the perspective of the administrators who directed the programs and the faculty who taught in them.

There were 45 participants from eight public institutions, ranked and unranked by *US News*. In all, nine themes emerged from the data. The dominant, overarching theme was that the rankings matter. No matter the perceived quality of the ranking's criteria or the judgment of the staff or faculty, the students, alumni, recruiters and legislators paid attention to the rankings, so the schools must as well. Along with this finding, three other important themes dominated the landscape. One was the fact that those at the top of the rankings tended to stay at the top, i.e., the rich kept getting richer. Another dominant theme was the image of the 800 pound rankings gorilla taking his place at the table when decisions were made or policies adopted related to the MBA program. And another dominant finding was a paradox, which arose in connection with academic excellence and quality. Though the study's participants felt that the *USNWR* rankings did not measure academic excellence, as claimed by the magazine, they did feel that the schools listed in the rankings reflected the best schools.

In this chapter, a discussion on these and the remaining themes will follow, along with implications for policy and practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. The first theme will set the stage for discussion.

Discussion of the Findings

Theme #1: Top ranked public MBA programs had a new building, many smart students, high MBA graduate salaries, high tuition and a metropolitan location.

The first theme that emerged from the data was provided by the *USNWR* survey form and from the researcher's visits to each campus. All of the schools interviewed for this study exhibited distinct personalities, but schools within the same rank also shared certain similarities. This theme suggested a picture of a top ranked public MBA school as one with many smart students (275 or more), high tuition ($7,000-$10,000), high salaries for MBA graduates ($78,00-$89,600), new corporate-style facilities and a metropolitan location. Since this was just one sample of schools, this finding was not meant to imply causality, but just an interesting occurrence that may or may not be found in future studies with a different sample of schools.

At the Tier II schools, there were no new buildings. Many participants at the Tier II schools felt that their school was under-ranked and belonged in the top 25, but the lag time for reputation and possibly their lack of new facilities was keeping them down. They were very busy responding to the rankings, analyzing the factors, and learning from the competition to make sure they continued their move up the ladder. In general, Tier II did not exhibit quite the level of confidence as seen in Tier I, but they were quite proud of their respective schools. This group exhibited a strong team effort in attempting to move their school up, which differed slightly from the Unranked schools.

The experience of the researcher at the Unranked schools was similar to that at Tier II, but the Unranked schools appeared to have the toughest battle. Their efforts appeared to be driven more by the MBA directors, along with the support of their respective deans, versus the team effort seen at the ranked schools by administrators and some faculty. These two schools had very few staff (five and seven). Their facilities lacked the corporate, plush feel of those in Tier I and some administrators did not exude the strong air of confidence that top-ranked staff had. However, that was not to infer that they were not proud of their programs and worked hard to earn recognition for them, because their efforts were noticeable. However, the Unranked schools had several things going against them, including the lowest GMATs, fewer applicants, lower graduating salaries, and physical locations hours away from a major city. Both of these unranked schools appeared to be frustrated by the rankings. For example, they had taken opposite strategies to try and improve their rank. One was trying to grow the size of their program and the other had reduced its size. One had also just implemented a newer, shorter curriculum (17 months), which should improve their return on investment factor, but at the same time it reduced their revenue base. This concern for return on investment was not one advocated by some top-ranked school administrators, who believed money was not a deciding factor in selecting an MBA school. The data on the top schools tended to support this, though this sample of schools would not suggest such causality. The other unranked school had decided to reduce the size of their program to increase the quality of their student. According to faculty on campus, this change had begun to transform the MBA program into a more desirable place to teach, but also made it the smallest program in the study.

In general, the unranked schools perceived the rankings as an aggravation they could not ignore. Those in Tier II struggled for recognition of their "under-ranked" program and those at the top enjoyed the free publicity the rankings provided, not to mention, more and better students and more financial resources, i.e., the rich got richer. Policano's (2001) somewhat tongue-in-cheek article also supported this first theme by suggesting that the way to the top 25 was to raise GMAT scores, increase the MBA budget, and use recruiters from metropolitan areas only. Once again, this is not to suggest causality, but only to indicate what emerged from this study and the previous literature.

With these impressions of the physical and cultural environments of the schools in mind, a look at the overarching theme, which was that rankings matter, is next.

Theme #2: Rankings mattered to most stakeholders.

The overarching theme of the study was that rankings mattered. This theme touched on many of the other themes that followed. The rankings mattered to prospective and current students, alumni, recruiters, donors, many staff, deans and chancellors, and legislators. Staff and faculty described the pressure brought on by their advisory boards, chancellors or deans to improve their ranking. But as we saw in the literature, the other side of the coin was described by David Webster and was also used by the ranking media. According to Webster, *U.S. News* rankings provided a number of benefits to the public and academia (1992). They provided helpful data to potential students, parents and guidance counselors. They showed administrators and faculty how their department or schools compared to other institutions and they provided a motivation factor for all institutions to strive for improvement (Webster. 1992). However, one administrator at a Tier I school felt just the opposite. He claimed the rankings deterred innovation for fear of rocking the boat and dropping out of the rankings. However, others, particularly those in Tier II, were more likely to agree with Webster. They saw the rankings as encouraging change and a healthy competition among their peers. In fact, Gioia and Corley (2000) agreed that competition improved business schools, but reflected that the constant changing of methodology by the rankings, had caused these schools to become masters of spin and image management, instead of quality focused.

All of the schools concurred that it was fairly impossible not to be ranked. In fact this pressure resulted in a shadow that hovered over the decisions and policies adopted by the school. The shadow was described as an 800 pound gorilla, who always had a place at the table, which leads us to theme #3.

Theme #3: Rankings drove policy and decision-making.

The image of an 800 pound gorilla, a specter or shadow looming in the background created a vivid impression of the pressure these participants felt. Similar feelings were described in the MBA ranking's literature. Zimmerman (2001) was concerned for the future of business education because he had found that the influence of the rankings had caused some deans to divert resources from doctoral education or research to fund placement offices or public relations campaigns. While no one in this study described this specific type of resource transfer, placement and admissions staffs had grown within the ranked schools. A few faculty members expressed concern for more money being devoted to the MBA program. For example, one faculty member described her concern about her college's use of scarce faculty resources. In that instance faculty were used to teach very small MBA classes (15 students), while an UG marketing class had more than 100 students and was taught by a graduate assistant.

Policano (2001) criticized business schools for letting the media tell them what to do. He pointed out that some schools had done away with their undergraduate program and others had decreased the size to allow more resources for the MBA program. In this study, two schools in Tier I had very small UG business programs (less than 600,) considering their institutional size of 32,000 and up. One Tier I school had created their own scorecard, as an alternative to the rankings and the unranked schools were either growing or reducing the size of their programs. All of these changes and others reflected the influence of this 800 pound gorilla, also known as the rankings.

The next theme was also reported in the literature -- as the rich get richer (better students, more applicants, more resources), the poor get poorer.

Theme #4: Rankings can become a self-perpetuating cycle.

This theme described the vicious cycle of the rich getting richer, while the poor were getting poorer. The schools at the top attracted the best and brightest students, which in turn attracted more recruiters and more resources. Those at the bottom were left with the less qualified students, fewer recruiters and fewer resources. This self-perpetuating cycle can also be seen in Appendix A, as the same schools tended to stay in the rankings. They may move around within the ranks, but the same names appeared most years. Another factor, which may have encouraged this cycle was *US News'* practice of surveying only those recruiters who recruited at top-ranked schools (*US News,* 2001).

The next two themes described the rankings as a beauty or popularity contest, which had a halo affect on the other programs in the business college.

Theme #5: Academia viewed the rankings as a beauty contest.

Theme #6: The ranking of the MBA program created a halo effect over the entire business college.

The rankings were described by some in this study as a beauty or popularity contest, due to the survey methodology's reliance on reputation and the lack of a scientific or empirical base. Many in the literature have complained that the ranking factors and the weightings of those factors have no statistical base and that the results were not audited (Schmotter, 2001). This was also echoed by many in this study. Schatz and Zimmerman reported in their respective studies, that when deans were asked to select the "better schools" in the survey, no specific criteria was provided (Schatz, 1993, Zimmerman, 2001). So how could they respond, except based on personal opinion and reputation. The beauty contest quality of the rankings may have also given readers the impression that all MBA programs were alike. Therefore, these schools have tried to impress upon potential students their school's strengths and benefits and what made their schools unique. All schools tried to steer the students away from too much emphasis on the rankings and this was evident in their websites and marketing brochures, particularly with one Tier I school's scorecard alternative to the rankings and another's refusal to post their rank on their website.

In addition to the beauty contest aspect of the rankings, many participants agreed there was a halo effect from the MBA program onto the other programs in the college. This halo affect was also described in the literature (Schatz, 1993; Walpole, 1998) and put additional pressure on the MBA program to do well in the rankings.

One unexpected theme appeared as the seventh in the study. This one described the impact the rankings had had on career services and admissions departments.

Theme #7: The rankings have impacted career services and admissions offices.

While the impact of the rankings on admissions and career services was alluded to in the literature, the extent of the impact witnessed by the schools in this study was a surprise. Many administrators in this study described changes to their departments, from firing to hiring and reorganizations. They also said that the admissions and career services professions had grown in number, status and salary, thanks to the rankings. However, this also had the added affect of more turnover. Others in the study complained that the rankings had created a massive workload, because each ranking asked for different data. Policano (2001) advocated (somewhat sarcastically) that for schools to improve their ranking, they should change their admissions policies to increase the number of applicants, whether they were qualified or not. Obviously, this would impact admissions staff. Another example in the literature, came from the University of North

Carolina, Chapel Hill. MBA associate dean, James Dean, described personnel changes and a restructured admissions office designed to assign personnel to particular areas of the country in hopes of getting a broader range of applicants (Schmotter, 2001). And as two of the Tier I schools in this study showed, increased applicants also meant increased revenue. In one case, to the tune of almost a half million dollars! Obviously, the impact of the rankings on these two offices was great and the schools reacted in ways they felt would improve their ranking.

The eighth theme in the study focused on academic excellence and resulted in a paradox of quality versus rank.

Theme #8: A paradox arose between academic excellence and top ranked schools.

A paradox arose when academia in this study rejected *US News'* claim that the rankings measured academic excellence, but agreed, in general, that the rankings reflected the best schools. Gioia and Corley (2000) found in their study of business schools that deans also did not believe that the rankings indicated the quality of a business school, but like participants in this study, they felt they had to participate.

Once again we were faced with the premise that even if we did not believe that rankings actually measured quality, the fact that the public did, required the schools to participate. On the other hand, if we accepted the theory of educational quality as described in the literature as limited supply or reputation, then we can accept this paradox. The theory of limited supply, assumed that only high cost, comprehensive, highly selective and nationally recognized schools could offer a quality education (Bogue and Saunders,1992). Bogue and Saunders added that the size of an institution was important, as the more graduates, the better chance of those alums being in a position to rank.

On the surface, the top ranked institutions in this study fit this theory of educational quality. They all had large programs with lots of alumni, their tuition was the highest and they were most selective in the students they admitted. These factors enabled them to have more recruiters and more resources as well. Suffice it to say, the rankings may not measure the quality of an MBA program, but the factors they used fit the reputation theory of educational quality, which may help to make this paradox more understandable.

Finally, our last theme described what the participants saw as the positive and negative aspects of the *US News* rankings.

Theme #9: The rankings had positive and negative impacts.

As might be expected, those in the Tier I schools were more positive in their outlook on the rankings, as they had seen the benefits that free publicity in a national magazine had brought to their respective schools. The Tier II and Unranked schools were less favorable and probably privately lusted for the publicity enjoyed by the Tier I schools. However, many (at all tiers) preferred that the rankings went away. If not for the unfair advantage they gave the top schools, but also for the workload created for their staffs, particularly within the unranked. Several participants did comment that they felt the rankings had encouraged curriculum innovation and improvement of services for the students, but others questioned that. One Tier I faculty member took a rather cynical view of mentoring MBA students. Another Tier I administrator felt top schools lacked innovation due to the pressure to stay in the rankings and not rock the boat. Another Tier II administrator felt the rankings had helped schools become more aware of student needs. On the opposite side of the coin was the Tier II administrator who felt that students had used the rankings to get what they wanted from the MBA administration. Obviously, the rankings drew a lot of passionate responses from all levels of schools.

Finally, the ugly side of the rankings reared its head when the schools discussed the lack of an audit of the survey data and stories of false statistics circulated via the Internet. The literature had similar stories about schools, which manipulated their data to fare better in the rankings and were caught (Bogue & Saunders, 1992; Gilley, 1992; Shea, 1995; Thompson, 2000). These stories may have added fuel to the perception that schools were more concerned with manipulating data then improving the quality of their MBA program. However, this opinion was echoed, particularly by faculty in this study, but no one actually stated that they had witnessed such an occurrence. Many mentioned the desire for the rankings to be audited, to keep everyone on an even keel.

Methodological Considerations

The use of a qualitative method was critical to the success of this project as the interviews brought forth perceptions not mentioned in the previous studies, while concurring with others cited in the literature. The perceptions of the participants revealed opinions not presented in the previous literature and a passion that reverberated in the comments made about their schools and the rankings.

Originally, this study was designed to assess nine public institutions, three at each level of ranking, located throughout the U.S. I was warned by my business school committee member that it might be tough to get cooperation from the schools, I was surprised when this turned out to be true. Many schools turned down my request to participate and some just would not respond to repeated attempts to contact them via letter, phone and email. In one case, a school that originally agreed, later withdrew and a few had to be persuaded, after initial rejections. This resulted in a more narrow geographic spread of institutions than desired. Numerous attempts were made to find a third unranked school to participate in the study, however finances and time had evaporated. Therefore, the study's advisor and committee member from the business school, agreed to accept just two unranked schools. I believe a school's unwillingness to participate may have stemmed from the MBA director's perception of the time it would take for the interviews and also a concern about the direction of the study. One administrator at a Tier II school shed light on this issue with this comment.

> ...You are the only person (since 1995) our school has assisted in such an effort (study). We believe you approached the issue in an effective way. This topic is much studied, commented upon, and criticized, but always in muffled tones and in private circles. The response to the rankings is classically American: No one wants to attack and bring down a system that clearly benefits only a tiny minority because everyone aspires to be in that tiny minority someday.

As researcher, it was also my intention to interview the dean of each business college. But, it proved impossible to obtain the participation of the dean, due to his or her busy schedule. If an interview was set up, it was typically cancelled, with the exception of one college. I also hoped to collect a variety of documents pertaining to the MBA program, but as this request proved to be a roadblock to participation, I deleted this and only requested a copy of the school's *UNSWR* ranking survey form. Any other materials, I collected from their website or during the campus visit. However, I believe this was sufficient.

An important part of this study was to insure validity of the findings. Triangulation of the data and member checks were the primary methods. All participants were emailed a copy of Chapter IV for review and comment. Four participants responded. They represented two from Tier I and one each from Tier II and Unranked. The general indication was that the findings were on target.

Some limitations of the study included the restriction to only public schools and limited geographic locations. However, the results of this cross case study can offer insight to other schools and individuals concerned about the rankings.

Conclusion

The dominant theme that emerged from these interviews was that the **rankings matter** and **you must be in them.** The **impact** of the rankings was **huge,** because students, recruiters, prospective students, alumni, donors, legislators, administrators, and some faculty paid attention to the rankings. **Highly ranked schools had the best students,** because they attracted the most applicants and could pick the cream-of-the-crop. Therefore, it was hard to break the **cycle of rank as it was a self-perpetuating prophecy** of the rich getting richer. There was also the impression that the rankings hung over the decision-making and policy process at these schools like an **800 pound gorilla** -- **an incredible influence for a media invention.** And even though schools generally **did not believe** the *US News* rankings measured the **academic excellence** of a school, nevertheless, they **felt** that the rankings, in general, **reflected the top schools.**

Schools have **reacted** to the rankings in a variety of ways. They have tried to analyze the factors in the various rankings and work those to their strengths. They have made changes to the curriculum, such as new electives (biotechnology, entrepreneurial, information technology); more student amenities (networking assistance, interviewing workshops, mentoring, nicer and newer facilities) and student services (larger placement staffs, more recruiters coming to campus).

The rankings have also reinforced the perception of the MBA program as the **flagship of the college of business** and this status created a **halo effect** (good or bad, depending on rank) onto the other programs within the college. Another finding was that the **rankings had strongly affected the career services and admissions staff** of the MBA program. These two departments had seen much growth in numbers, salaries and responsibilities, but as a result faced increased turnover. Finally, while many considered the rankings an imperfect measure of quality, they did **see some benefit in the rankings.** However, this statement must be considered within the context that the majority of these schools (six out of eight) in the study were ranked and were benefiting from that rank with the free publicity and national attention afforded them by appearing in a national magazine. As a recently retired MBA administrator at one Tier I school commented following his review of Chapter IV, "One of the joys of retirement is that I no longer have to worry about the rankings." The other participants in this study may also long for that day. But until they also retire, the rankings matter and though they may not like them, they will have to continue to worry about them and deal with them.

Implications for Policy and Practice

I interviewed 45 faculty and staff and the lessons learned from them may assist others in dealing with this issue of rankings. The rankings are part of the life of an MBA program, at least for the time being. Therefore, I have provided some suggestions for schools to help them deal with the problem of rankings. First some concerns that should be raised with *US News* and then some suggestions for schools in dealing with the rankings.

For years, academia has complained about the methodology used by *US News.* A few items that continually came up in this study should be addressed.

1. Is there a Northeast bias? If so, what can be done to correct this?
2. MBA salaries varied widely based on the particular job field and area's cost of living. Can this factor be adjusted to reflect that?
3. Why does *US News* only survey recruiters who recruit at the top schools? By doing this, does it not encourage the cycle of the rich getting richer? Also, could a

recruiter's decision to recruit at a certain school be related to things other than quality of the MBA graduate, such as the number and type of graduates, a location near the corporate headquarters or easy airline access?

4. How does the size of the MBA program enter into the equation? Are there many, if any, small, public MBA programs in the top 25? If not, does this mean that small programs lack quality?
5. Why is it that schools with new facilities appear to be in the top rankings? Do plush accommodations affect the learning that is going on? This is not to infer that environment is not important. But new facilities are particularly difficult in tight economic times and particularly for public institutions.

Realistically, it is unknown how much attention *US News* pays to suggestions from the schools. Therefore, a more productive effort may be to look inward at the things that a school can affect and examine those issues in the light of what is best for the students and the institution. For example, school leaders might consider the following suggestions:

1. **Examine the rankings** (*Business Week, US News, Money, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, etc.*) from the viewpoint of what can be learned from your school's rank and those ranked at the top. How can your school best position itself to benefit from a particular ranking? For example, first priority may be to focus on the rankings that have the most influence on the school's target audience or that fit its particular mission. As we have seen, all the rankings have different factors they measure and thus all the rankings differ. So schools should play to their strengths and target those rankings that will reflect their strongest assets.
2. **Implement a team approach to respond to the different rankings**. With a team effort, representing all facets of the program (students, faculty, staff), schools may be able to determine better ways to promote their individual strengths, including a picture of program quality, teaching excellence, cutting edge research and student satisfaction. In fact, expand your outreach and team effort to include some individuals outside the business school, but related to or interested in its mission, such as PR staff, recruiters, development staff, community business leaders,

alumni, etc. As we all know, there is power in numbers, so the more team members, the greater the likelihood that the message will get out. This also serves a dual purpose in strengthening the commitment of the staff, faculty, students, and alumni, as they become greater stakeholders in the process and inform the institution as a whole.

3. **Include your faculty in discussions about the rankings**, program innovations, student services, etc. At some schools, the faculty did not appear to be concerned or interested in the rankings. In some cases they appeared resentful and suspicious about the funding for the MBA program or services provided to students. At a few higher ranked schools, faculty had conducted research on the rankings and may have helped contribute to their school's climb up the rankings, by exploring what factors most benefited their school. Use faculty's expertise in research to help deal with the rankings.
4. **Encourage all faculty and staff** to be active in their field and professional associations so they can also promote the school and the institution. This would include all research, consulting opportunities (faculty should visit the company's recruiters while onsite), and publications. The more the school's name is seen the better, plus it will also benefit the professional development of the individual.
5. **Celebrate your strengths and successes.** Don't hide your innovative curriculum or unique services to students and recruiters. Spread the word through your recruiters, students, alumni, website, the media, your faculty and staff.
6. **Be careful about making assumptions** about how you think students, recruiters, faculty or staff will react to policy changes, new curriculum or ideas for new student services. If you utilize a team approach and appoint individuals from within and outside the college and encourage them to share their ideas and listen to their perspectives, you may learn a lot. For example, maybe the cost of tuition is not the most important factor. Maybe a higher tuition with more services will attract the students you want and allow you to provide a better quality education. Convince your Board of Trustees to allow differential tuitions for the MBA program, if they do not already. As the saying goes, you get what you pay for!

7. Finally, **consider the first impression visitors get at your school**. Look at your MBA program from an outsider's viewpoint. Be a student for a day and see what roadblocks they face. Are the classes interesting? Interactive? Be a recruiter coming to campus and see how hard it is to get a flight into your town or find a parking space on your campus. What is the interview space like? Do you provide easy access to phones and Internet connections? Be a prospective student and see what type of first impression your campus makes. Is it professional? Attractive? Was the staff warm and friendly? Is the application process easy? Does your website offer easy navigation and contact information for a chance to talk to a human being? Do they get a live person when they call? Read your application. Is it concise, clear and direct? Make it easy to apply.

Obviously, this list of suggestions is a tall order and many schools may be doing this already. Resources may also be stretched, so focus on those issues that require only time and effort and then hopefully the funding will follow. In fact, an interesting observation came from a Tier II administrator following his review of the Chapter IV findings. He remarked that he felt after schools got through their initial reaction to see what factors they could influence to move up in the rankings, that beneficial impacts followed.

> I would add a positive result not reflected in your analysis that comes from playing the "ranking game" over a period of time....In reality, playing with the numbers can only take a school a limited distance. Once that is achieved, significant change must occur to rise farther. It is this significant change that was and is the great hope of the more altruistic *Business Week* and *USN* editors. MIT, Chicago, UNC, and Indiana are good examples of schools that hit a ceiling in the rankings and now have taken risks and experimented with new concepts to rise to new heights. Bravo for them!

A word of caution to schools is necessary as well. There are many factors that schools cannot control, such as where their graduates choose to work and in what field, nor should they. Schools should also take a hard look at whether or not the rankings are having an undue influence on their decisions. If so, is that really the best way to provide a quality education for your students?

On the other hand, maybe the rankings have had a beneficial impact by encouraging new services for students and innovations in the curriculum. For example, would adding a mentoring program for MBA students assist the students in finding the best job? Would a specialized track in biotechnology serve the students, while also aiding in the economic development of the region? Would additional funds for more placement staff assist students in finding jobs and help the college improve its name recognition among businesses and recruiters? Would these contacts not also help the institution as a whole by attracting recruiters to other colleges on campus such as engineering or liberal arts? Furthermore, how might the institution help the business school improve their name recognition and thus reputation among other institutions and the business community? Could this not be another instance where a team effort is needed and not just within the business school, but throughout the institution and the community?

These suggestions may not be new, but they may be worth consideration. Particularly if a deeper examination of the MBA program produces a clearer vision and direction that all staff and faculty can buy into and thus a stronger and more cohesive program is created. And with this strength, the program will grow, its quality will improve and possibly the rankings will rise, all of which is at the heart of what all colleges and the public would like to see happen.

Recommendations for Future Study

While this study looked for clues as to how the rankings impacted eight public MBA schools, there are a number of other possible studies that would be interesting. For example:

- How have differentially ranked public schools in other areas of the U.S. (including the Northeast) responded to the rankings? Private schools?

- How do top schools in *Business Week* and *US News* differ? Are they the same schools? Do those ranked at the top of *Business Week* see any different impact than those in the top ranks of *US News*? What factors seem to elevate the respective schools to the top of each ranking and do those factors relate to academic excellence?

- How do deans and recruiters decide what schools to select as top schools?

- What innovations have occurred in the MBA curriculum and where? Is the only innovation occurring at the lower rankings or unranked schools, or is it occurring at all?

The list of possible studies is endless. For this researcher, what was most amazing was that this media publication, which designed a survey just 13 short years ago would attain the power and impact it has today. An impact which has caused institutions that have been around for more than a hundred years to sit up, take notice, and examine their policies and curriculum. An impact that has affected the decisions of prospective students, administrators, legislators, donors, and recruiters, as they decided where to obtain their MBA, where to put their scarce resources, or where to find their newest employees. All due to the fact that we as Americans love to rank things and we will continue to buy and believe in rankings, regardless of the soundness of the data which created those rankings.

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Appendices

BEST BUSINESS SCHOOL RANKINGS - U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORTS - 2001 - 1997

RANK- 2001	COLLEGE	RANK - 2000	COLLEGE	RANK - 1999	COLLEGE
7	UC BERKLEY	9	UNIV. MICHIGAN	7	UNIV. MICHIGAN -ANN ARBOR
10	UNIV. MICHIGAN	10	UC BERKELEY	10	UCLA
12	UCLA	11	UCLA	11	UVA
15	UVA	11	UVA	14	UC BERKELEY
18	UNC-CHAPEL HILL	16	UNIV. TEXAS AUSTIN	16	UNC CHAPEL HILL
18	UNIV. TEXAS -AUSTIN	18	UNC CHAPEL HILL	18	UNIV. TEXAS AUSTIN
20	INDIANA U. BLOOMINGTON	20	INDIANA -BLOOM	20	PURDUE
23	OHIO STATE	23	PURDUE	21	INDIANA -BLOOM
23	PURDUE UNIV. W. LAFAYETTE	25	OHIO STATE	26	OHIO STATE
29	UNIV. MARYLAND	28	UNIV. MINNESOTA - TW	26	UNIV. MARYLAND
30	MICHIGAN STATE	30	MICHIGAN STATE	26	UNIV. MINNESOTA - TW
30	UNIV. ARIZONA	31	UNIV. ARIZONA	31	ARIZONA STATE
30	UNIV. MINNESOTA	32	ARIZONA STATE	31	MICHIGAN STATE
33	ARIZONA STATE	34	PENN STATE	33	GA TECH
35	GA. TECH	34	UNIV. MARYLAND	34	UNIV. ARIZONA
35	PENN STATE	34	UNIV. WISCONSIN MADIOSN	34	UC IRVINE
35	UNIV. OF IOWA	40	UC IRVINE	36	TEXAS A&M
35	UNIV. WISCONSIN-MADISON	42	GA TECH	36	UC DAVIS
41	UC DAVIS	42	TEXAS A&M	36	UNIV. ILLINOIS URBANA CHAMP.
41	UNIV. WASHINGTON	42	UC DAVIS	36	UNIV. WISCONSIN MADISON
45	TEXAS A&M	48	UNIV. GEORGIA	44	WILLIAM & MARY
45	UC IRVINE	48	UNIV. ILLINOIS URBANA CHAMP.	44	UNIV. PITTSBURGH
45	UNIV. ILLINOIS - URBANA CHAMPAIGN			44	UNIV. WASHINGTON
50	UNIV. FLORIDA			49	PENN STATE
50	UNIV. GEORGIA				
50	UNIV. OF PITTSBURGH				

BEST BUSINESS SCHOOL RANKINGS - cont'd.

RANK - 1998	COLLEGE
8	UCLA
10	UC BERKELEY
10	UNIV. MICHIGAN
10	UVA
15	UNC CHAPEL HILL
15	UNIV. TEXAS - AUSTIN
21	INDIANA BLOOM
24	PURDUE
25	OHIO STATE
27	MICHIGAN STATE
27	UNIV. MARYLAND
27	UNIV. MINNESOTA
31	ARIZONA STATE
31	GA TECH
31	PENN STATE
31	UC DAVIS
39	WILLIAM & MARY
39	UNIV. OF ARIZONA
39	UNIV. OF GEORGIA
43	UC IRVINE
43	UT - KNOXVIILE
46	UNIV. FLORIDA
46	UNIV. PITTSBURGH
46	UNIV. WASHINGTON
50	TEXAS A&M

RANK - 1997	COLLEGE
10	UC BERKELEY
11	UVA
12	UNIV. MICHIGAN
16	UNC CHAPEL HILL
17	UCLA
18	UNIV. TEXAS AUSTIN
19	INDIANA BLOOM
22	OHIO STATE
24	PURDUE
25	UNIV. MARYLAND
26	MICHIGAN STATE
29	UNIV. MINNESOTA
30	PENN STATE
35	UNIV. ARIZONA
36	GA. TECH
38	UNIV. FLORIDA
40	UNIV. GEORGIA
41	WILLIAM & MARY
42	UNIV. PITTSBURGH
43	ARIZONA STATE
44	UC DAVIS
45	TEXAS A&M
46	UC IRVINE
48	UNIV. ILLINOIS URBANA
49	UT KNOXVILLE
50	UNIV. WASHINGTON

Appendix B

US News & World Report Best Graduate Schools 2002
Business Rankings Methodology

US News & World Report surveyed 341 accredited master's programs in business in the fall 2000. Of those 105 had full-time MBA program and provided the data needed to calculate rankings based on a weighted average of eight quality indicators described as follows:

Reputation: 40%

- Two surveys were sent to business school dean and directors of accredited programs. They were asked to rate program quality on a scale from "marginal" (1) to "distinguished" (5). Fifty-three percent responded and this scored accounted for 25% of the overall score.
- Corporate recruiters who hire from previous top-ranked schools were asked to vote for the top 25 programs. Twenty-six percent responded and their opinions represented 15% of the score.

Placement Success: 35%

- Mean starting salary and bonus (40%). Salary figures were based on those graduates reporting data. Signing bonus were weighted by the proportion who reported one.
- Employment rates were for 2000 graduates at graduation (20%) and three months later (40%), excluding those not seeking employment.

Student selectivity: 25%

- Mean GMAT score (65%)
- Mean undergraduate GPA (30%)
- Proportion of applicants accepted (5%)

The overall rank of the school was determined by standardized means and standardized scores, weighted, totaled and rescaled so that the top school received 100 and other schools received their percentage of the top score.

Obtained and summarized in 2001 from the following website for *US News*:
http://www.usnwes.com/usnews/edu/beyond/gradrank/gbbiznet.htm

Appendix C

Letter of Invitation and Introduction

January, 2002

Dean
College of Business Administration
School
Street
City, state zip

Dear Dr.

As you know another ranking of MBA schools will soon be released by *U.S. News & World Report*. A step down in the rankings may contribute to significant student/donor/alumni dissatisfaction, while a step up may increase the quality of the student applicant pool, donor contributions, and calls of congratulations from happy alumni and trustees. We all suspect that these rankings have influenced the attitudes and behaviors of our administrators and faculty, yet to date, few studies have formally investigated this relationship.

I would like to ask if you and your institution would consider participating in a dissertation study addressing faculty and administration perceptions and behaviors associated with the rankings. Ms. Nissa Dahlin-Brown, an outstanding student in the University of Tennessee's College of Education (who also holds a director position in UT's Center for Continuing Studies) has proposed an intriguing dissertation study focusing on the *U.S. News* business school rankings. I am serving as a member of her committee and I believe this study will break new ground in helping us better understand the impact of these rankings. Nissa is interested in looking specifically at public institutions and the impact the rankings have on administrator and faculty attitudes and behaviors. Her dissertation calls for a major qualitative study consisting of case studies of nine institutions (i.e., in-depth campus interviews, public information). Her sampling will include three schools from the top tier, three from the second tier, and three not ranked.

This qualitative study will be conducted confidentially and data will be considered in the aggregate. A set of attitudinal and behavioral themes are expected to emerge from the data that should give us some indication and better understanding of the impact of the rankings on our schools. Data will be collected from each institution, with no institutions or participants named. Again, all responses will be kept confidential and Nissa will offer a draft of the material from your institution and a final draft of the study for review by all participants to ensure accuracy and anonymity.

Your personal participation would require about 60-90 minutes of your time for an in-depth interview with Nissa on campus, and the completion of the enclosed informed consent form (Attachment A). Additionally, we would ask you to provide specific information and materials

Appendix C, cont'd.

(e.g., marketing materials, public documents, and institutional statistics) on your MBA program, that are not accessible over the Internet or via your admissions office, including those statistics presented to *U.S News* for the 2002 rankings (Attachment B). The primary interview topics would include

- Your perception of the impact of the rankings on your college
- Your feelings regarding how the rankings reflect the 'academic excellence' of your school
- Your perceptions as to how your institution (various constituencies) has reacted to the rankings

Your cooperation would be very helpful to the completion of this important study. Nissa will follow up with a phone call to you within the next two weeks. I would very much appreciate it if you would give her the opportunity to briefly describe her study to you and the nature of the required institutional participation. I hope the study will prove interesting to you and that your school will consider participating.

Thank you,

David Schumann.
Associate Dean and Professor of Marketing

Appendix D

Consent Form

The Impact of *US News & World Report* Rankings on MBA Programs at Nine Public Institutions

Purpose: The purpose of the study will be to describe the impact of the *U.S. News and World Reports Best Graduate Schools* ranking on differentially ranked public MBA schools as perceived by the faculty and deans of those schools. This qualitative study will interview the CBA dean, MBA dean or director, career services director and three faculty members from nine selected public institutions. The nine schools will be selected from the 2002 *USNWR* rankings of the top 50 MBA programs (*U.S. News & World Reports*, 2001).

Risks & Benefits: There are no foreseeable risks involved in your participation in this project. Participation will provide you with the benefit of reflecting on your own experiences and will provide me, as the principal investigator, the opportunity to understand and describe more completely some of your experiences. Also, you may indirectly benefit from the knowledge gained from the project findings.

Information & Confidentiality: With your permission, you will be asked to participate in an informal interview that will last approximately one to one and a half hours. The interview will be audio taped and the tapes transcribed to capture your exact words. Your identity will be kept completely confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Only I will have access to the consent form, tapes, and transcripts. The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely at my office in a locked file cabinet and only I will have access to the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study.

Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

Contact: If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact me, Nissa Dahlin-Brown, at 1534 White Ave. Knoxville, TN 37996-1526, (865) 974-0150 or email: nissa@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Research Compliance Services Section of the Office of Research at (865) 974-3466.

Consent: I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form.

Participant's name (print) ______________________________

Participant's signature ______________________________

Date ____________

Appendix E

Requested Materials for Document Review*

(*Soon dropped from study because of time required to pull materials together according to invited schools.)

Fall 2000 data submitted to *USNWR* for 2001 rankings

Overall institution size in the fall 2000

MBA program donor base in the fall 2000

Large gifts and/or grants received during fall 1998-fall 2000

New curriculum or major changes implemented during the fall 1998-fall 2000.

'Star' faculty appointed during the fall 1998-fall 2000

List of faculty elected to offices in national professional associations during fall 1998-fall 2000 – provide office and association name

List of faculty or administrator presentations at national meetings

New facilities announced or built during fall 1998-fall 2000

Any internal or external documents (mission statements, strategic plans, policy actions, etc.), articles or press releases addressing or related to the rankings and produced between fall 1998-fall 2000

Any fall 1998-fall 2000 marketing materials and press releases, which announced new publications, grants, new facilities, new curriculum, 'star' faculty, research awards, etc. that reflected upon the schools academic excellence or the rankings.

List of faculty publications (articles and books) fall 1998-fall 2000

List of national professional presentations by faculty/administrators fall 1998-fall 2000

Other materials related to the rankings

Vita

Nissa Dahlin-Brown was born in Elkins, West Virginia on October 22, 1955. She graduated in 1973 from Elkins High and enrolled at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In 1979 she graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture, specializing in Historic Preservation. Over the next five years, Nissa held jobs in architecture, historic preservation, real estate, photography, catering, and training and development before beginning a career with the Conferences Department in the Division of Continuing Education at the University of Tennessee in 1984. While working full-time, she earned a Master's degree in Adult and Technological Education in 1989 and moved from assistant director of the Conferences Department to Non-Credit Programs (later named Professional & Personal Development). Nissa worked as assistant director at PPD until 2003 when she moved to the Howard H. Baker Jr. Center for Public Policy. She received her Doctor of Education degree, with a major in Educational Administration and Policy Studies from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in Fall 2003.