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A Study on The Influences of the *U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges* Rankings on Policy and Decision-Making at Southern Comprehensive Colleges

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by John D. Head entitled "A Study on The Influences of the *U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges* Rankings on Policy and Decision-Making at Southern Comprehensive Colleges." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Administration.

E. Grady Bogue, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Norma Mertz, William Snyder, William Lyons

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

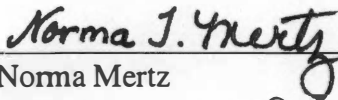
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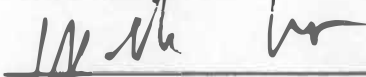
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Norma Mertz



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Vice Chancellor and Dean of
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Rankings on Policy and Decision-Making at Southern
Comprehensive Colleges.**

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

John D. Head
May 2005

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Thesis
2005b
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Lee Ann, my daughter, Katie, and my parents,

Bill and Maxine Head. I thank Lee Ann and Katie for their patience, love, encouragement and support over the past six and a half years. I thank my parents for their love and encouragement throughout my life. There was never any question as to “if” my sister, brother or I would go to college. My parents truly believed that our horizons would be expanded and our lives would be enriched through education.

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I would like to thank Cary Springer from the UT Statistical Consulting Center. I deeply appreciate her wisdom, guidance and patience as I worked with the analysis of data for this study.

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Abstract

For over a century, colleges and universities have been the subjects of numerous attempts to provide a ranking system for use by the general public. These rankings have examined a variety of indicators in an attempt to determine quality. Everything from the accomplishments of graduates in the workforce, their success on entering graduate schools, and the reputation of institutions among their peers, have all been examined at one time or another in an attempt to measure quality.

Public demand for a ranking system is evidenced by the millions of dollars spent each year on rankings. Publishers are eager to provide a product to fill the demand. Since 1983, *US News and World Reports* has been the dominant producer of college rankings. How are colleges responding to the rankings? The purpose of this study is to determine how college presidents perceive the rankings and how their institutions use their rank. The specific research questions for this study are:

1. How are institutions in the study marketing, publicizing and using their rankings by *USNWR* and is there any significant variance in how institutions use the rankings or respond to the rankings when examined by institutional ranking by *USNWR*?
2. What policy changes and decisions have been made in an attempt to improve an institution's ranking?
3. Are there differences in the perceived validity of the rankings by presidents at southern comprehensive colleges and universities when examined by the institution's ranking by *USNWR*, public vs. private status, or

length of service as a college president?

This study surveyed the presidents of the 105 colleges and universities identified by *US News* as peer institutions in the **Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's –South** category of the 2004 *America's Best Colleges* rankings. The category includes both public and private institutions from the following twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The research indicated that presidents of Tier 1 institutions were more likely to indicate that they promoted their rank to different constituencies than presidents in any other tier group. Tier 1 presidents were also more likely to state that the *US News* rankings were valid and accurate than presidents in any other tier group. While the presidents of Tier 2, 3, and 4 institutions were more likely to criticize the rankings, they also felt that the rankings were important to many of their constituencies. These presidents were also in agreement that a good ranking was beneficial to their institutions.

This study highlights the need for dialogue in higher education about quality. Specifically, administrators should have conversations on their campuses about how quality is defined in relation to mission and purpose.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Currently in the United States of America, there are over 4000 colleges and universities. Each institution makes claims about providing a quality education, a stimulating environment, and preparing students to meet the challenges of a changing global economy. Deciding which college or university is the right one can be confusing for students and parents. For some, the reputation of an institution can play a key role in the decision making process.

Reputation is a commodity that institutions and organizations use to convey standing or position in relation to competitors. In the marketplace, reputation is built by responding to market demands and can be influenced over time. In higher education, institutions deal in a non-tangible product where quality is difficult to assess beforehand. In such cases, reputation can play an important role in the decision making process of prospective students. (Brewer, et al. 2002, pp. 27-29).

The predominant guide to ranking colleges and universities in the United States is the *America's Best Colleges* published by *U.S. News and World Reports* magazine. Since 1983, *U.S. News and World Reports (USNWR)* has published an undergraduate ranking of U.S. colleges and universities. Initially, the rankings were based solely on a reputational survey of college presidents. They were later altered to include weighted measurements of what *UNWR* calls quality indicators. Currently these quality indicators include academic reputation, retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, graduation rate performance, and alumni giving. The rankings are now

compiled yearly and published in the fall and spring. Annually, over three million copies of the rankings are sold.

The rankings are presented in a comparative format, categorizing colleges and universities by mission and region. There are separate categories for national universities and liberal arts institutions; colleges and universities with more regional missions are grouped geographically. The institutions are surveyed to gather data on the quality indicators, and a reputational survey is sent to the presidents, chief academic and enrollment officers at peer institutions within each category. The rankings are assigned based on each institution's score. *USNWR* lists the top institutions by numerical rank in the first tier, then group the remaining institutions into the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th tiers.

U.S. News and World Reports says they publish the rankings to help students make one of the most important decisions of their lives. They state that a college education is an investment that can “profoundly affect your career opportunities, financial well-being, and quality of life.” (<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank>)

With the *USNWR America's Best College's Guide* playing such a key role in establishing reputation and rank in relation to peer institutions, some colleges and universities are making attempts to influence their rank. Institutions have established goals for rankings in their strategic plans, diverted resources to areas that will help them improve rank, initiated expensive public relations campaigns to peer institutions, and have altered admissions policies and practices. Some faculty have even stated they have felt pressure to be more accommodating to student desires in order to obtain higher student satisfaction scores on rankings surveys. One administrator was even terminated

for not submitting updated information to the *USNWR* rankings surveys.

In 1995 Ohio State University launched the 20-10 Plan: By the year 2010, the university wants to have 20 of its programs ranked in the top 10 nationally by both the *USNWR* rankings and by the National Research Council. One of the programs used to help the university achieve this goal involved each college at the university being taxed one-half percent of the college's yearly operating budget. The tax was implemented in order to create a one million-dollar pool of money. The million-dollar prize is awarded to the college division that submits the best proposal on how it would use the monies to help improve the ranking of the university. Winning divisions have used the funds to attract prominent scholars to the university. Critics on the campus have charged that the administration has been blinded by the rankings and are ignoring programs that don't "fit neatly into the rankings" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 1, 2001).

In 1998 Carl Hansen, president of Midland Lutheran College, noted in *Change* that he was tempted to include a new line item in the Public Relations budget of the small college. Hansen indicated that he had begun to see a trend in the mail he was receiving from peer institutions, all announcing new academic programs, new faculty, and recent accreditation achievements. He also stated that he received publicity about guest lecturers and information about the recent accomplishments of the alumni at the peer institutions. When he realized why he was receiving the increased volume of mail, the temptation occurred. Hansen states that it dawned on him that these institutions were sending him the mailings because, as president of the college, he voted in the *USNWR* annual reputational survey sent to peer institutions within each category. Hansen states

that having never visited many of the campuses listed on the survey, the publications and mailings could influence how the institutions are ranked (*Change*, July/August 1998).

Since the mid-1990's, college's and universities have also initiated new admissions policies in an effort to improve rankings. Alvin P. Sanoff, former managing editor for the *USNWR* rankings, states that institutions have been using "early-decision" programs to improve two-factors in the *USNWR* rankings formulas. Early-Decision programs require that students applying to the institution agree to commit to the college and not apply to any other institutions. The college or university, in return, agrees to make a decision early in the student's senior year, typically before mid-December. How does this help with the rankings? Sanoff points out two specific benefits to the institutions: First, they are able to lock-in students with higher test scores, raising the overall average of the incoming class. Second, early decision programs allow for the institutions to improve their application yield, the number of admitted students that actually enroll (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 21, 2000).

A national survey of faculty at colleges of business also indicated that the rankings were impacting classroom instruction in higher education. Thirty-six percent of the faculty surveyed said they felt pressure to accommodate students. The pressure was reported to be in a direct response to the importance of student satisfaction measures in the rankings surveys (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 1999).

Hobart and William Smith Colleges felt the rankings were so important that a senior vice president was asked to resign for not sending in updated information to the *USNWR* rankings. President Mark Gearan stated that because the administrator had

failed to provide updated information, the magazine was forced to use old data. According to Gearan, this caused the institution to fall from Tier II to Tier III in the rankings (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 21, 2000).

While there has been research on the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings, the research has focused primarily on the validity of the rankings, the types of students that are using the rankings, and how the rankings are used in the college selection process. There has not, however, been any research on how colleges are influenced by the rankings. All that we know now is anecdotal, sporadic information about how one college or university is doing something new.

How important are the rankings to college presidents? Do they make policy decisions with the college's ranking in mind? Is it indeed possible to impact the institution's rank? To answer these questions, this dissertation focused on the perceptions of college presidents on the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings, how policies may be influenced by a desire to improve ranking, and any external pressures that presidents may feel from college constituencies to improve the institution's rank.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine how southern comprehensive colleges and universities use the ranking in *U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges* ratings and the extent to which policies and decisions are influenced by a desire to improve rank their rank. The population of the study consisted of the institutions identified in the southern comprehensive colleges classification by *U.S. News and World*

Reports. This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How are institutions in the study marketing, publicizing and using their rankings by *USNWR* and is there any significant variance in how institutions use the rankings or respond to the rankings when examined by institutional ranking by *USNWR*?
2. What policy changes and decisions have been made in an attempt to improve an institution's ranking?
3. Are there differences in the perceived validity of the rankings by presidents at southern comprehensive colleges and universities when examined by the institution's ranking by *USNWR*, public vs. private status, or length of service as a college president?

Significance

For twenty years, *U.S News and World Reports* has been publishing the "America's Best Colleges Guide." They have indicated that the rankings are a measure of the overall quality of the institution, published in an effort to provide unbiased information to the public.

While debate and controversy concerning the validity of the rankings have been present since their inception, limited research has been conducted to determine how the colleges and universities are responding to the rankings. It is important in the discussion of the validity of the *USNWR* rankings to understand if colleges and universities are attempting to manipulate the factors measured by the *USNWR* study. It is possible that

an institution attempting to pander to specific rankings criteria could be ignoring other areas of the institution. In such a case, one could argue that the overall quality has not been improved, even though an institution's ranking may have improved.

The information gained from this study may also prove useful to in the strategic planning process to presidents, administrators, trustees, legislators, students and other constituencies.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study the following definitions were adopted:

Southern Comprehensive Colleges and Universities – The 105 colleges and universities defined the *US News and World Reports* “America’s Best Colleges” rankings. These institutions focus on undergraduate education and offer a range of degree programs in the liberal arts, which account for fewer than half of their bachelor's degrees, and in professional fields such as business, nursing, and education. The category includes both public and private institutions from the following twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study was conducted by surveying 105 college presidents at institutions listed in the Southern Comprehensive Colleges category as defined by *USNWR*. They included institutions, both public and private, in the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida,

Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

While there is some diversity in the geographic location, affiliation, and size, these institutions are similar in the fact that their primary focus is on undergraduate education. The *USNWR* rankings survey annually includes over 1360 senior institutions separated by mission and geographic region into the following four categories: National Universities, National Liberal Arts, University – Masters, and Comprehensive Colleges.

While the great diversity in higher education was not completely represented by the institutions surveyed in this study, the results of the study promise to offer a glimpse at how institutions in one category have responded to the *USNWR* rankings. The findings, however, must be considered in the light that only one type of institution in one region of the country was included in this study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The *U.S. News and World Report* “America’s Best Colleges” has become the premier ranking of colleges and universities in the United States. This review of literature provides an overview of the rankings and the issues associated with the rankings. First, a discussion of the current popularity of the rankings and the problems associated with “defining quality” is warranted. Next is a history of college rankings, examining both early efforts and the modern rankings of undergraduate education. The remainder of the review focuses on the *U.S. News and World Report* “America’s Best Colleges” rankings, covering the methods used by *USNWR*, criticisms of the rankings, and research associated with the rankings.

Current Popularity of College Rankings

Rankings and ratings of colleges and universities have been around for over one hundred years. The purpose of the rankings has generally been to provide information to consumers about higher education institutions. Demand for this information does seem to exist. McDonough (1998) reported that officials at *Time* estimated in 1997 that over \$400 million was spent that year on college-prep products. “In an age where we consult consumer magazines for product safety or the Internet for up-to-the-minute news, is it any wonder that parents and college bound students consult college rankings before investing sizeable tuition dollars?” (1998, p. 515). As tuition costs continue to rise, it will be of little surprise to see the popularity of the rankings and ratings continue to

increase.

Aside from the cost of a college education, consumers have become accustomed to quality rankings. The current generation is one that has grown up with *Consumer Reports* ranking everything from consumer appliances to mutual funds. We have become comfortable with rankings and ratings. Hunter suggests that this dependence was born with Watergate and the scandals of the 60's and 70's. The public lost trust in institutions and is therefore looking for third party verification of an institution's claims (1995).

Litten suggests that another important factor in the popularity of rankings is the intangible nature of education. How does a consumer evaluate the quality of an educational institution? Rankings have filled this information void and have provided "unbiased" third party information (1986).

Defining Quality?

If the overall purpose of the rankings and ratings is to provide information to consumers, there is a great deal of controversy over how to best meet this noble goal. The publishers of rankings and ratings would say that they are meeting their goal by providing unbiased third-party information. Critics charge, however, that there is little validity to the rankings and ratings and are thus providing poor information to the public.

The overall question of "what is quality?" looms greatest around the topic of rankings and ratings. There is no consensus about what quality is and how to measure it. In *The Evidence for Quality*, Bogue and Saunders define quality as "...conformance to mission specification and goal achievement-within publicly accepted standards of

accountability and integrity.” This definition, they point out, respects and affirms the diversity of various institutions. It also allows a point of reference for questions related to quality - “the institution fulfilling its mission?” (1992, p. 20). If this definition is accepted, how then do you compare one institution to another?

Most rankings and ratings studies have relied on the reputation of an institution to serve as a key indicator of quality. The reputation variable has been judged by a variety of constituents in various studies: presidents, deans and faculty have all been used at some point. There are several problems related to relying solely on reputation.

The first area of concern related to reputational rankings pertains to “rater bias.” Stuart points out that past affiliations and geography all influence how a rater feels about the reputation of the institutions that he/she is being asked to judge (Stuart, 1995).

Second, the ranking of institutions suggests that quality is in limited supply. Bogue and Saunders point out that the notion of ranking schools does not allow for quality to dwell in several institutions at the same level. There can only be one “number one”, there can only be ten in the “top ten” (1992, p.86).

Stability of the rankings is also a point of concern among critics of the reputational surveys. Bogue and Saunders suggest that the movements in and out of the rankings suggest that “quality is a fleeting condition” (1992, p.87). Can a school be unranked one year, and then miraculously improve so much as to be listed the next?

Bogue and Saunders also suggest that there is a “halo effect” involved in the reputational rankings. They suggest that some institutions have good reputations because of one or two good departments. They offer, as an example, a study by Solomon and

Astin (1981) in which Princeton's undergraduate program in business was highly ranked in a reputational study. In fact, Princeton did not have an undergraduate business program (1992, p. 76). Stuart also suggests that institutional size can also have a "halo effect". Larger institutions that tend to advertise selective admissions criteria are viewed as more prestigious (1995).

Like the "halo effect", there is also a problem with "time lag" in reputational rankings. Stuart suggests that institutions that have made improvements in programs or resources are often underrated. Likewise, strong institutions or programs often ride on their past successes long after they have lost key faculty (1995). This problem is as old as the rankings themselves. Bogue and Saunders mention a passage from Hughes' 1934 study; "There was marked evidence of a lag in the estimate of departments. A department which has been strong, but which has lost good men and is really on the decline, has in several cases been rated too high. On the other hand, several departments that have recently developed much strength seem to be underrated. If this type of study could be repeated every few years, such errors could be eliminated" (1992, p. 67).

Brewer also points to a stifling effect as a result of rankings. More prestigious schools often set the standards as leaders in higher education; other institutions often seek to copy the industry leaders. This attempt at imitation can limit innovation and actually harm higher education in the long run (Brewer, et al. 2002, p. 42).

Another problem with the reputational rankings is the time lag between previous studies. Since 1983, however, one organization has been about the business of producing a semi-annual, and then an annual, ranking of colleges and universities. *U.S. News and*

World Reports began with a reputational study in 1983. They followed with two semi-annual reports, and since 1988 have produced an annual ranking of American colleges and universities. The methods used by the magazine have changed frequently, mostly in response to criticisms from academe.

A History of College Rankings

One of the earliest attempts to compare reputation among colleges and universities may have been Alick Maclean's 1900 book, *Where We Get Our Best Men*. In this book, Maclean provides a rank order of the universities attended by approximately 4000 prominent men. Maclean lists a ranking of the English, Scottish and Irish universities attended by over 1200 of prominent men of his time (Webster, 1986a). The ranking Maclean listed is as follows:

- Oxford (424)
- Cambridge (381)
- Edinburgh (132)
- London (97)
- Dublin (73)
- Glasgow (52)
- Aberdeen (42)
- St. Andrews (18)
- Belfast College, University of Ireland (6)
- Durham (3)
- Owens College (2)

In 1910, James Cattell's *American Men of Science* employed a method similar to Maclean's in order to identify the institutions which some of the country's most eminent scientists had attended (Cattell, 1910).

Bogue and Saunders mention the 1911 report by the Bureau of Education as the

first overall ranking of American colleges and universities. The report provides a rating of 344 institutions as determined by the Association of American Universities (AAU).

“The leading institutions listed were, in order, Harvard, Chicago, Columbia, California, Yale, Michigan, Cornell, Princeton, Johns Hopkins, Wisconsin, and Minnesota” (Bogue and Saunders, 1992, pp. 66-7).

The next reputational rankings to emerge were conducted by Raymond Hughes in 1925. Debra Stuart, as well as Bogue and Saunders, lists Hughes work as the first attempt to rate graduate education (Stuart, 1995; Bogue and Saunders, 1992). Hughes asked members of the faculty of Miami University to provide a list of other institutions that they considered to be doing quality work. Hughes also asked the faculty to compose a list of faculty raters from other universities to serve as judges in the study.

Hughes followed up his 1925 study nine years later when he was chair of the American Council on Education. In this study, Hughes made improvements by expanding from twenty fields of study to fifty, expanding the number of raters, and by examining more institutions (Stuart, 1995).

While the academic community had mainly been the audience of previous reports, Stuart suggests that Chesly Manly was the first to bring rankings and ratings to the general public. Manly, a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, published a series of articles beginning in 1946. The first article was based on an internal study conducted by the AAU. Six subsequent articles were based on rankings that were constructed by consultants (Stuart, 1995).

Hayward Keniston produced the next attempt to rank American colleges and

universities. The University of Pennsylvania commissioned his report, released in 1959. In his study, Keniston surveyed only department chairs. He then combined the rankings into groupings for the humanities, social sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences, and institutions as a whole (Bogue and Saunders, 1992).

Allan Cartter's *An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education* was published in 1966. Cartter's report evaluated undergraduate and graduate programs at 106 institutions by ranking departments on the basis of faculty quality (Cartter, 1964). In 1970, Kenneth D. Roose and Charles J. Anderson replicated Cartter's study with some minor modifications (Roose and Anderson, 1970).

While the Cartter study and Roose and Anderson follow-up, along with all of their predecessors studied graduate programs, Zames Marguiles and Peter Blau conducted two studies that solely focussed on professional schools (Marguiles and Blau, 1973). In their study, Blau and Marguiles used professional school deans as their judges. This proved to be a point of criticism for the study, primarily because it yielded such a low response rate. Although many were critical of the study, Webster (1992) pointed to an interesting relationship revealed in the Blau and Marguiles studies. He noted that the research revealed very little correlation between the prestige of the professional school and its parent institution.

In 1977, dissatisfied with the findings of the Blau and Marguiles study, Allan Cartter teamed with Lewis C. Solomon to conduct another ranking of professional programs in business, education and law. Cartter and Solomon added faculty raters to their study, instead of relying solely on deans as Blau and Marguiles had done. While

Cartter and Solomon did have a better response rate for their survey, the results turned out to be very similar (Webster, 1992).

Bogue and Saunders point to the 1982 study by Jones, Lindzey and Coggeshall of graduate programs as "...the most ambitious of contemporary efforts-reviewing programs at 228 institutions." The Roose and Anderson study, for example, had compared only 130 institutions. Within these 228 institutions, almost 2700 programs in thirty-two disciplines were evaluated." (1992, p. 71). Up to sixteen measures were collected on each of the programs, and each program was compared to a standardized score on each measure, showing how far above or below the standardized score a program fell on each measure (Stuart, 1995).

While Chesly Manly's series of articles in the Chicago Tribune were the first rankings and ratings directed at the general public, the 1980's saw a proliferation of rankings and ratings in the popular press. In contrast to most of the previous studies that had focussed on graduate programs, the newer entrants into the field focussed primarily on undergraduate education.

U.S. News and World Report, Newsweek, Time, Money, Business Week, Kiplinger's, Playboy and Rollingstone magazines have attempted to rank everything from overall quality and the "best buys", to the availability of parties and beautiful women on college campuses. McDonough (1998) estimated that in 1998, these magazines sold approximately 6.7 million rankings and ratings issues.

In addition to magazine rankings, in 1983, Jack Gourman began producing an independent ranking simply titled *The Gourman Report*. In the report, Gourman ranks

both undergraduate and graduate programs. While *The Gourman Report* has been in existence for approximately twenty years, it has been surrounded by a furor of criticism over the way rankings are compiled. The problem, critic's charge, is that Gourman gives no explanation of the methods used to calculate the rankings (Bogue and Saunders, 1992).

In commenting on Gourman, Bogue and Saunders assert that "*The Gourman Reports* are filled with puffed-up rhetoric about their own importance, and there are grammatical inaccuracies throughout. Nowhere in these reports are we told precisely what data were gathered, by whom they were obtained, by what means, or on what date. Nor are we told who rendered the judgements that led to the ratings expressed to the hundredths of a decimal point. Yet *The Gourman Reports* have been used by economists and other scholars studying the relationships between college quality and a host of other variables, such as alumni earnings, student choice, and so on" (1992, pp. 81-2).

Webster calls *The Gourman Reports* the worst set of rankings on the market, stating that "we need to look again at our willingness to accept such rankings from an individual who simply has the power of the printed page behind him" (1984, p. 55).

The U.S. News and World Report Rankings

The rankings issued by *U.S. News and World Report* have become, by far, the most popular college rankings of all time (Stuart, 1995). They have a tremendous reach within the general public and have become a staple of any high school guidance office. Students and parents use the rankings to help them make a decision on an important life

decision and financial investment. McDonough (1998) found that while the rankings were not a key in the decision-making process, they were heavily used in the college search process. She also found that certain types of students paid closer attention to the rankings: students whose parents were college educated, high academic achievers, students looking for a more selective college, and Asian-American students were all groups that paid more attention to college rankings.

The rankings do have an impact on colleges and universities, and places them in a precarious position. On one hand institutions are quick to join the critics in attacking the rankings. It is easy to say that the *USNWR* rankings do not measure the uniqueness of each institution and cannot adequately measure quality. On the other hand, colleges and universities are not oblivious to the impact of the rankings. They want to publicize good rankings to help them recruit students, good faculty, and donors. Just how important can they be to an institution? The answer was illustrated when Sheila Bennett was asked to resign from her position as a senior vice-president at Hobart and William Smith College for failing to submit the institution's updated survey information to *U.S. News and World Report*. The college believed that Bennett's failure to submit the information caused the institution to fall from Tier II to Tier III in the rankings. One college faculty member, who is also the president of the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors, supported the college's action saying. "Whether you agree with the rankings or not, they sell millions of copies and play an important role in the student's decision of where to go to college." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2000). This impact of the rankings on the decision making process was illustrated in a study by

Monk and Ehrenberg (1999). Their analysis of fifteen years of college applications indicated that when a school's ranking improved, it experienced an increase in the quantity and quality of applications.

USNWR began ranking undergraduate colleges and universities in 1983. They sold 485,000 issues of the first magazine. Two years later, they published a second set of rankings (McDonough et al. 1998). In 1988 *USNWR* began the yearly issuance of the college rankings, releasing a new rankings issue each fall. In 1987, *USNWR* also added a ranking of professional schools. In 1990 they added the ranking of graduate schools and also began to produce the stand-alone guide, *America's Best Colleges*, to accompany the rankings in the magazine issue (Stuart, 1995). *USNWR* added *America's Best Graduate Schools* in 1994 (www.usnews.com/usnews/misc/history).

Currently, *USNWR* issues a new set of rankings in their magazine in September. One week later they follow-up with the stand-alone guide, and then re-issue the rankings in March under a new cover. In 1998, they sold around 2.3 million issues of the magazine and over 700,000 issues of the guide (McDonough et al. 1998).

In the first rankings, *USNWR* relied on a methodology similar to that of Hughes, Keniston and some of the earlier rankings; they employed a reputational survey. Over thirteen hundred presidents of four-year colleges and universities were asked to rank peer institutions based solely on their reputation (Bogue and Saunders, 1992).

In 1988 *USNWR* changed the methodology of the rankings. That year they began to survey college deans and admissions directors. They also began to examine objective data that they felt would create a more detailed measure of quality. The data included

admissions selectivity, faculty strength and instructional budget per student, resources for educational programs, graduation rates and school reputational studies (Bogue and Saunders, 1992).

Over the years, *USNWR* has tinkered with the methodology, most often altering and weighting formulas for certain indicators, or altering institutional classifications. These changes have caused some schools to slip or rise in the rankings, and it has brought great criticism from the colleges and universities.

How U.S. News and World Report Compiles the Rankings

Currently, *USNWR* states that they use sixteen indicators to measure quality. These sixteen indicators can be broken down into seven categories: academic reputation, retention of students, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving, and (for national universities and liberal arts colleges) "graduation rate performance," the difference between the proportion of students expected to graduate and the proportion who actually do.

The following explanation of these seven categories is listed on the *USNWR* web-site:

- **Academic reputation.** The *U.S. News* ranking formula gives greatest weight (25 percent) to reputation because a degree from a distinguished college so clearly helps graduates get good jobs or gain admission to top graduate programs. The reputation survey also allows top academics to account for intangibles, such as faculty dedication to teaching. A school's reputation is determined by surveying the presidents, provosts, and deans of admission at institutions in a single

category. Each individual was asked to rate peer schools' academic programs on a scale from 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). Those individuals who didn't know enough about a school to evaluate it fairly were asked to mark "don't know."

Market Facts Inc., an opinion-research firm based near Chicago, collected the reputational data; 67 percent of the 3,969 people sent questionnaires responded.

- **Retention.** The higher the proportion of freshmen who return to campus the following year and eventually graduate, the better a school may be at offering the classes and services students need to succeed. This measure has two components: six-year graduation rate (80 percent of the retention score) and its freshman retention rate (20 percent of the score). The graduation rate indicates the average proportion of a graduating class who earn a degree in six years or less; we considered freshman classes that started between 1990 and 1993. Freshman retention indicates the average proportion of freshmen entering between 1995 and 1998 that returned the following fall.
- **Faculty resources.** Research shows that the more satisfied students are with their contact with professors, the more they will learn and the more likely it is they will graduate. We use six factors from the 1999–2000 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction. Class size has two components: One represents the proportion of classes with fewer than 20 students (30 percent of the faculty resources score); the second represents the proportion with 50 or more students (10 percent of the score). Faculty salary (35 percent) is the average faculty pay, plus benefits, during the 1998–99 and 1999–2000 academic years,

adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living (using indexes from Runzheimer International). We also weigh the proportion of professors with the highest degree in their fields (15 percent of the score), the student-faculty ratio (5 percent), and the proportion of the faculty who are full time (5 percent).

- **Student selectivity.** A school's academic atmosphere is determined in part by the abilities and ambitions of the student body. We therefore factor in test scores of enrollees on the SAT or ACT tests (40 percent of this ranking factor); the proportion of enrolled freshmen who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school classes for the national institutions and the top 25 percent for the regional schools (35 percent of the score); the acceptance rate, or the ratio of students admitted to applicants (15 percent); and the yield, or the ratio of students who enroll to those admitted (10 percent). The data are for the fall 1999 entering class.
- **Financial resources.** Generous per-student spending indicates that a college is able to offer a wide variety of programs and services. *U.S. News* measures the average spending per student on instruction, research, student services, and related educational expenditures during the 1998 and 1999 fiscal years.
- **Graduation rate performance.** This indicator of "added value" was developed to capture the effect of the college's programs and policies on the graduation rate of students after controlling for spending and student aptitude. We measure the difference between a school's six-year graduation rate for the class that entered in 1993 and the predicted rate for the class. The predicted rate takes into account the standardized test scores of these students as incoming freshmen and the school's

expenditures on them. If the actual graduation rate is higher than the predicted rate, the college is enhancing achievement.

- **Alumni giving rate.** The percentage of alumni who gave to their school during an academic year is an indirect measure of alumni satisfaction.

(<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank>)

In 2003, *USNWR* added a new dimension to the reputational portion of the survey.

College presidents, deans and admissions directors were asked to nominate peer institutions that had “exemplary” programs in eight undergraduate educational areas. The program areas that schools could be nominated for are: First-Year Experience, Learning Communities, Senior Capstone Experiences, Undergraduate Research, Service Learning, Study Abroad, Internships, and Writing in the Disciplines. *USNWR* provided a brief paragraph defining each of the program areas.

USNWR also provides a simple explanation detailing how the scores are combined to come up with a final ranking:

“The method that *U.S. News* uses to rank colleges and universities consists of three basic steps. The colleges are categorized by mission and region, and we gather data from each on up to 16 indicators of academic excellence. Each factor is assigned a weight that reflects our judgment about how much each measure matters. Finally, the colleges in each category are ranked against their peers, based on their composite weighted score. We publish the ranks of the top schools; the others are grouped into tiers. Most of the data come from the colleges--although *U.S. News* takes pains to ensure their accuracy. This year, 94 percent of the schools returned surveys.”

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank>).

Much of the criticism around the *USNWR* ratings does revolve around the question of “how do you measure quality?” As stated, *USNWR* uses a method that looks at seven categories comprised of sixteen indicators that they feel will tell them about the quality of an institution. Weights are then assigned to these indicators to provide an overall score for each institution. The unanswered question is, however, whether the survey reflects a valid and helpful measure quality?

Criticisms of the *U.S. News and World Report* Rankings

U.S. News goes into great detail on how it arrives at the rankings, why they rank colleges and universities, and how they should be used. It would appear that they provide a great deal of information about their rankings, but are these measures enough to silence the critics? Hardly! There are many that criticize the motives and the methods of the *USNWR* rankings. The relationship between higher education institutions and *USNWR* is best described as one of love/hate, and that relationship seems to change every fall depending on the institutions’ rankings.

Alvin P. Sanoff, a former managing editor of *USNWR*, reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the reasons that colleges and universities are so passionate about the rankings. He cites that the criticisms tended to range from philosophical to financial. On the philosophical side, institutions ask “how can a magazine measure something so complex as educational quality?” On the financial side, Sanoff reports that there are many institutions so desperate to fill classes that a drop in rank often meant fewer

students and lower revenue. He goes on to add, however, that those same critics were often the first to publicize their rankings when their institution did well (September 4, 1998).

Some college presidents are so violently opposed to the *USNWR* rankings that they have attempted to initiate alternative rankings or even organize nationwide boycotts. In 1997 Gerhard Casper, president of Stanford University, urged colleges and universities to use the Web to post statistics and information about themselves that would be similar to information reported in *USNWR*. While several institutions were quick to join Stanford, the effort never really took off (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2, 1997).

That same year, Alma College president Alan J. Stone asked officials at 480 liberal-arts institutions to boycott the request for peer reviews by *USNWR*. Stone's attempt to organize the boycott stemmed from research that Alma College had initiated concerning the *USNWR* rankings. The Alma College study indicated that 84 percent of the respondents admitted that they were unfamiliar with some of the institutions they were being asked to rank. Nearly half indicated that they often left the survey blank on unfamiliar schools. For its part, officials at *USNWR* attributed Alma's criticisms to a bit of "sour grapes." Alma College was in the third of four tiers in the 1997 rankings (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 31, 1997).

The National Opinion Research Center Report

In September 2000, *The Washington Monthly* published an article revealing that an internal study commissioned by *USNWR* concluded that the rankings lacked any substance. The study was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, a nonprofit corporation affiliated with the University of Chicago, and focused on five major criticisms of the *USNWR rankings*. In the report, the NORC stated that “The principal weakness of the current approach is that the weights used to combine the various measures into an overall rating lack any defensible empirical or theoretical basis.” The report did not say that the weighting system was wrong, but that it is impossible to defend on any grounds other than *USNWR*’s own judgement.

Secondly, the report indicated that *USNWR* had done no research on the statistical properties of the sixteen measures. There had been no studies to determine if the factors measured were redundant or exactly how sub-measures related to each other within the overall framework of the *USNWR* ratings matrix. The NORC report cites the example of graduation rates. This measure is entered twice, once directly and once in the value added measure, thus giving it more weight than other factors.

A third criticism cited by the NORC deals with the validity of the rankings. The report questions whether the *USNWR* rankings are measuring exactly what they say they are measuring. The report uses the example of the alumni giving measure. *USNWR* uses this as a measure of alumni satisfaction. The report notes that this may be more a measure of the worth of the development office rather than a true measure of alumni satisfaction.

The fourth criticism deals with the reputational measure. The NORC points to the fact that this measure requires the rater to make broad judgments about institutions that he/she may have little knowledge about.

Finally, the report suggests that *USNWR* add two new measures, one that addresses student experiences in campus life, and another that analyzes the academic demands on the curriculum.

The NORC report also offered several other suggestions to help improve the overall quality of the *USNWR* rankings:

- 1) *USNWR* should decide on a methodology and stick to it, as opposed to the almost yearly changes that occur now.
- 2) *USNWR* should undertake a statistical analysis of the 16 measures used and how they fit within the ratings matrix. This would help them understand the limitations and strengths of their methodology.
- 3) The ratings should be reported as a three-year average to help limit the impact of reporting errors and smooth out short-term fluctuations and other factors that can cause wild jumps within the rankings.
- 4) A standing body of experts should be organized by *USNWR* to meet with the staff and offer advice and criticisms to help strengthen the ratings reports.

(<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2000/norc.html>)

Research on the Validity of the *U.S. News and World Reports* Rankings

McGuire (1995) conducted two studies that examined the validity of the *USNWR* rankings. His studies dealt with the arbitrary nature of the weights and how they can

impact the rankings. In the first study, he surveyed the presidents, deans and admissions directors at fifty-five national liberal arts institutions. This survey population is significant, because these institutional officers are the same ones used by *USNWR* in its reputational portion of the rankings. McGuire asked these educational administrators to supply weights to the categories used by *USNWR*. His study found that there were several categories in which the administrators' weighting were very different than that of *USNWR*. The administrators placed more importance than *USNWR* on low student-teacher ratios and high-school rank, and less importance than *USNWR* on faculty compensation and average SAT/ACT scores. McGuire states that while there may be no "best weights" for use in evaluating academic quality, using an arbitrary system threatens the validity of the rankings. He suggests that *USNWR* would be better served by using empirically derived weights to determine the rankings.

In the second study, McGuire tested the sensitivity of the rankings to changes in the weighting system. He took the 140 national liberal arts colleges and re-ranked them using three alternative ranking schemes: 1) the weighting scheme suggested by the administrators he surveyed in the first study, 2) those same weights varied by one-half standard deviation (some weights increased and some decreased, so that they added up to 100 percent within a category), and 3) those same weights varied by one-half standard deviation in the opposite direction. He then compared the ranks of the institutions under each scheme to the rank in *USNWR*. In his comparative ranking schemes, 88 percent of the colleges changed rank from the original *USNWR* ranking. McGuire reports that some institutions improved their rank by as many as twenty-four places, while others dropped

as much as twenty-two places. While most of the movement occurred in the middle of the distribution, McGuire notes that 77 percent of the institutions in the top quartile moved by as many as five places. McGuire's study points out that since there is no agreed upon set of weights, those weights arbitrarily chosen by *USNWR* impact the rankings just as much, if not more, than any quality improvement activity at the institutions.

Something is being measured through the rankings process. We know that for over a century, there have been numerous attempts to rank colleges and universities. A variety of methods have been employed in an attempt to differentiate institutions.

We know that there is a public demand for the rankings. Annual sales of the rankings produce millions of dollars for the publishers. The demand for the rankings tend to increase each year, encouraging the publishers to refine and repeat the yearly process.

As the popularity of the rankings has increased over the past few decades, so has the level of criticism. One of the main criticisms of the rankings is that they do not accurately measure quality. Many critics charge that rankings do not account for the individual mission and purpose of each institution. Instead, the rankings tend to lump all institutions together and measure them with one yardstick.

Whether the rankings are actually a measure of an institution's quality, a measure of a magazine's ability to hype and sell issues, or a measure of the public's desire for clear and concise information comparing colleges and universities, is still open for debate.

The main target of contemporary debate is the *U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges* rankings. As the market leader, *USNWR* continues to draw criticism each year when the rankings are released. Studies have been conducted to examine the methodology and weighting system of the quality indicators identified by *USNWR*. There has been research on how students use the rankings and their significance in the college search process.

One issue, however, has not been thoroughly addressed by the literature. How are colleges and universities responding to the rankings conducted by *U.S. News and World Reports*? Do colleges and universities even care about their ranking? And if so, how are decisions and policies being influenced by a desire to improve the institution's rank?

Chapter 3

Methods and Data Analysis

Methods and Procedures

This study surveyed the presidents of the 105 colleges and universities identified by *US News* as peer institutions in the Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's –South category of the 2004 *America's Best Colleges* rankings. The category includes both public and private institutions from the following twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was designed by the researcher after a review of the literature, the ranking methodology used by *US News and World Reports* magazine, and a series of interviews with 10 current and former presidents of colleges listed within the survey population. The questionnaire was then field tested by the same sample of current and former college presidents. The reviewers were asked to evaluate each question on clarity and relevance to the *USNWR* rankings. The comments from each reviewer were then used to create a revised questionnaire.

The revised questionnaire was then reviewed by the researcher's doctoral committee. Suggestions and feedback from the committee were then incorporated to create the final version of the questionnaire (Appendix B). The final questionnaire developed consisted of forty-eight questions and took less than ten minutes to complete. The first four questions asked descriptive or historical questions relevant to the president and the institution. Questions 5 through 9 were related to Research Question 1 and were

designed to determine how the rankings are being used by the institution. Questions 7 through 14, and 33 were related to Research Question 2. They were designed to determine what, if any, policies or decisions have been made in reaction to the rankings. Questions 17 through 32 were related to Research Question 3 and designed to determine the presidents' perceptions on the validity of the rankings. Any variance based on the descriptive data from questions 1 through 4 will be used in analyzing Research Questions 1 and 3.

A cover letter (Appendix A), follow-up letter (Appendix E), and two postcards (Appendices C & D) were also developed to send to the presidents. The research participants were sent the initial cover letter (Appendix A), informing them of the study and asking them to respond to the questionnaire (Appendix B) that accompanied the letter.

A self-addressed envelope with pre-paid postage was provided for participants to send their completed responses. Participants were then sent a post card (Appendix C) two weeks after the letter and questionnaire were mailed to remind them of the study and to encourage them to participate in the study. Two weeks after the first postcard was sent, a second postcard (Appendix D) was sent to encourage non-respondents to return the questionnaire. A final letter (Appendix E) enclosed with another copy of the questionnaire (Appendix B) was sent to request the participation of the college presidents in the study.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was coded by a number that represented the individual institution and the tier ranking. This coding served two purposes. First, the

coding allowed for the proper placement of each respondent into the proper tier ranking. This allowed for the comparison of responses to questions between institutions with different tier rankings. The individual numerical coding also allowed the research to determine which institutions had responded and which institutions needed to be included in the follow-up mailings.

Ethical Considerations

The proposed study was reviewed and approval secured by the College of Education and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee. Form A was submitted to the College of Education in accordance with institutional guidelines.

The following steps were taken to manage the confidentiality of each respondent:

- 1) No names appeared on any questionnaire. The questionnaires were coded by numerical ID. Each institution was assigned a numeric code to allow for placement in the proper tier ranking and for follow-up mailings only. Once the data collection period ended, the coded addresses were destroyed in order to eliminate any identification of any individual respondents.
- 2) All lists of numeric codes and the completed questionnaires were kept under lock and key by the researcher during the research study.

Data Analysis

The Data Analysis begins with descriptive data on the presidents and institutions that responded to the questionnaire. A breakdown of the different response rates from institutions within each ranking tier was presented along with a determination of the

impact of response bias based on the tier ranking.

Responses to the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to determine if responses to clusters of similar questions resulted in any significant differences based upon rank, public vs. private status, and length of service of the president. An Analysis of Variance was also conducted on each individual item within the cluster if the MANOVA demonstrated significance. The remaining items were analyzed using the Chi-Square test to determine any correlation between an institutions ranking and responses to survey questions.

Specifically, items 1 through 4 of the questionnaire were initially treated to a descriptive statistical analysis. These first four items were also examined in order to determine if any variance occurred in the way that the subject responds to other items on the questionnaire. For example, while question 1 asks about public vs. private status, the researcher used the SPSS program to determine if public vs. private status significantly impacted the response to other items in the questionnaire.

Questions 5 through 11 were related to Research Question 1 and were designed to determine how the rankings are used by the institution. Again, the analysis of these questions begins with descriptive statistics, specifically identifying the number of institutions within each ranking tier and how they respond to each item. These questions were also treated to the Chi-Square test.

Questions 12 through 16, and questions 38 through 44 were related to Research Question 2. They were designed to determine what, if any policies or decisions have

been made in reaction to the *USNWR* rankings. Questions 17 through 37 were related to Research Question 3 and were designed to determine the perceptions of the college and university presidents on the *USNWR* rankings. Questions 7 through 47 were all related to Research Question 1, and a Chi-Square analysis was conducted on each question to determine if the institution's rank impacted how they respond to each question.

Question 48 is an open-ended question. A content analysis was performed on this question, grouping like responses and offering a summary analysis of items mentioned and an analysis on any variation between institutions within ranking tiers.

Contributions of Proposed Research

The *USNWR* rankings appear to have become a permanent fixture on the landscape of higher education in the United States. Students and parents use the rankings in a variety of ways during the college selection process. While there is still debate over the validity of the rankings, no college really is 100% comfortable with being left out. Displaying the *USNWR* "America's Best Colleges Badge" on publications and web-sites has become as common as the *Good Housekeeping* "Seal of Approval" on consumer products. This dissertation was designed to achieve three objectives:

- First, to understand the extent to which the *USNWR* rankings have influenced how colleges and universities make policies and decisions, allocate resources, and if and from where presidents may feel pressure to improve an institution's rank.
- Second, it to examine the variance of each institution's ranking over the

past ten years to see if previous efforts have indeed impacted the institution's ranking.

- Finally, to determine if there are any differences in their responses to the rankings based on: an institutions *USNWR* rank, public vs. private status, or undergraduate vs. graduate course offerings.

There has been no prior research on how colleges and universities use the rankings. Studies have been conducted to show which students use the rankings, and how students use the rankings. Studies have also been conducted to prove or disprove the validity of the rankings. This study examined how colleges and universities react to the *USNWR* rankings, if there are differences in rank based on how an institution responds to the rankings, and finally the impact of those responses on the institution's ranking.

If the research reveals that there is a tendency for institutions to shape policies with the rankings in mind, it is important to determine if this impact has been positive or negative in nature. An institution may hire a "superstar" to join the faculty in an attempt to enhance academic reputation, but what impact would such a move have on the rest of the institution? Would this mean that more adjunct faculty would be used to teach other classes? Did the institution really made an impact on the overall quality of instruction? No research has been conducted to determine how institutions are responding to the *USNWR* rankings, how those decisions are being made, and how an institution's response to the rankings may actually impact its rank. This research provides presidents, administrators, trustees, legislators, students and other constituencies with a better

understanding of how the rankings are used to shape policies on college campuses. Such information may prove beneficial in the strategic planning process and open up the possibility for further discussion on the calculation of the rankings, and how an institution may or may not be able to improve its rank.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Descriptive Data

The questionnaire was sent to the presidents of the 105 colleges and universities identified by *US News* as peer institutions in the Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor's – South category of the 2004 *America's Best Colleges* rankings. The category includes both public and private institutions from the following twelve states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

Responses were received from the presidents of 75 of the 105 institutions surveyed. This represents a response rate of 71%. The breakdown of the tier ranking of the institutions that responded is illustrated in Table 1. The distribution of responses is relatively even among all of the tier ranking groups.

There were a total of 27 presidents surveyed in Tier 1, with 20 responses received. There were also 27 presidents surveyed in Tier 2, again with 20 responses. In both Tiers 1 and 2, a 74% response rate was achieved. In Tier 3, 26 presidents were surveyed with 17 responses received, resulting in a 65% response rate. In Tier 4 there were 25 presidents surveyed and 18 responses were received, representing a response rate of 72% percent.

Survey Question 1 asked presidents to indicate if their institution was public or private. There were a total of 62 responses received from presidents of private colleges and 13 responses received from presidents of public colleges (Table 1.1).

Table 1. Responses by tier ranking.

Tier Ranking	N	Responded	% Responded
1	27	20	74%
2	27	20	74%
3	26	17	65%
4	25	18	72%

Table 1.1. Responses by public vs. private institutions.

Tier	Public	Private	Total
1	0	20	20
2	6	14	20
3	3	14	17
4	4	14	18
Total	13	62	75

As Table 1.2 indicates, there were no public colleges listed by *USNWR* in the top tier; therefore, there are no public institutions represented in the responses from Tier 1 institutions. Out of 17 public institutions listed in the Southern Comprehensive Colleges category in Tiers 2, 3 and 4, 13 institutions responded to the survey. This provided a response rate of 76% among the public institutions.

Among the private colleges (Table 1.3), there were 88 listed in the Southern Comprehensive Colleges category. Sixty-two responded to the survey, providing a response rate of just over 70%.

A response rate of more than 60% was achieved in each individual tier level for both public and private institutions. The only tier ranking group to achieve a 100% response rate was in Tier 4 of the public institutions.

Table 1.2. Responses by public institutions.

Tier	N	Public	%
			Responded
1	0	0	
2	8	6	75%
3	5	3	60%
4	4	4	100%
Total	17	13	76.47%

Table 1.3. Responses by private institutions.

Tier	N	Private	%
			Responded
1	27	20	74%
2	19	14	73%
3	21	14	67%
4	21	14	67%
Total	88	62	70.45%

Presidential Profile

Survey Questions 2 and 3 asked presidents about the length of tenure as a college president. Seventy-six percent of the presidents who responded to the questionnaire indicated that they were in their first presidency (Table 2). As indicated in Table 3, 32% have been at their current institution for less than five years. Seventeen percent have been in their position between five and seven years. Overall, 72% of the presidents have been at their institution for less than 10 years. Of the remaining respondents who have been at their institution more than 10 years, 15% indicated that they had been at their institution more than 15 years.

Survey Question 4 asked presidents if they knew the rank of their institution in the *USNWR* rankings. The presidents of Tier 1 institutions were more likely to know their institution's rank than presidents in any other tier ranking. Table 4 illustrates a linear trend, as the institution's rank dropped, so did the ability of the president to correctly state the institution's *USNWR* ranking.

Table 2. Is this your first presidency?

	N	% of Responses
Yes	57	76%
No	18	24%

Table 3. How long have you served at your current institution?

Length as President	N	% of Responses
Less than 5 Years	24	32%
5 - 7 Years	13	17%
7 - 10 Years	17	23%
10 - 15 Years	10	13%
More than 15 Years	11	15%

Table 4. Did the presidents know their institution's rank?

Tier Ranking	Knew Rank		Gave Wrong Rank		Were Not Sure of Rank		Refused to Answer	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	19	95%	0	0%	0	0%	1	5%
2	14	70%	1	5%	3	15%	2	10%
3	9	52%	3	18%	5	29%	0	0%
4	9	50%	2	11%	6	33%	1	5%

How Are Institutions Using The Rankings?

In beginning the discussion on how the institutions are using the rankings and if there is any variance in responses based upon institutional rank, it is important to determine how important the rank is to the institution. One of the first questions that the presidents were asked to answer in the survey asked them to identify the rank of their institution in the *USNWR* rankings. While this is only one measure of importance, the president's ability to correctly state the institution's rank is a key indicator of how important rank might be to that president.

Fifty-one of the presidents were able to correctly identify the rank of their institution, representing 68% of the presidents that responded. Ninety-five percent of Tier 1 presidents knew their rank, more than presidents in any other tier group. Only 70% of Tier 2 presidents, 53% of Tier 3 presidents and 50% of Tier 4 presidents knew their institution's rank. The results of the chi square = 137.865, $df = 18$, $p = .000$. This indicates a significant relationship between rank and the president's ability to correctly identify institutional rank.

Survey Questions 5 through 9 were designed to answer Research Question 1, "How are institutions in the study marketing, publicizing and using their rankings by *USNWR* and is there any significant variance in how institutions use the rankings or respond to the rankings when examined by institutional ranking by *USNWR*?"

Survey Question 5 asked the presidents if their institution listed their *USNWR* rankings on admissions materials sent to prospective students. Seventy-five percent of the presidents from Tier 1 institutions indicated that they list their rank on materials to

prospective students, while only 30% of the presidents from Tier 2 institutions indicated that they list their rank (Table 5). Less than five percent of Tier 3 and Tier 4 institutions indicated they listed their rank in materials sent to prospective students. The results of the chi-square = 28.741, $df = 3$, $p = .000$. This indicates a strong relationship between rank and the use of ranking in materials sent to prospective students. The Tier 1 institutions are more likely to publish rank than any other tier ranking group.

Survey Question 6 asked presidents if they listed their institution's rank on alumni publications. As Table 6 indicates, Tier 1 institutions were more likely to indicate their rank than institutions in any other tier ranking with 100% indicating they participated in this practice. Institutions in Tiers 2, 3 and 4 were less likely to list their ranking in the alumni publications. The results of the chi square = 47.309, $df = 3$, $p = .000$. Again, this would indicate a strong relationship between rank and use of ranking on alumni publications.

Expanding on how the rankings are used in those alumni publications, Survey Question 7 asked the presidents if they informed alumni that the level of alumni giving is one of criteria used by *USNWR* in determining an institution's rank. As Table 7 illustrates, there was almost an even split between institutions that listed alumni giving as a ranking factor to alumni and those that did not. The table illustrates that Tier 1 institutions appear more likely to inform their alumni that the level of alumni giving impacts the institution's rank, while Tier 4 institutions are least likely to inform alumni about the ranking criteria. The results of the chi-square = 5.838, $df = 3$, $p = .120$, indicating that the institution's rank does not play a factor in the responses to this item.

Table 5. Do you list your institution's rank on materials to prospective students?

Tier Rank		1	2	3	4	Total
Yes	Count	15	6	1	1	23
	% within Tier	75.0%	30.0%	5.9%	5.6%	30.67%
No	Count	5	14	16	17	52
	% within Tier	25.0%	70.0%	94.1%	94.4%	69.33%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Table 6. Do you list our institution's rank in alumni publications?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Yes	Count	20	9	2	0	31
	% within Tier	100.00%	45.00%	11.76%	0.00%	41.33%
No	Count	0	11	15	18	44
	% within Tier	0.00%	55.00%	88.23%	100.00%	58.67%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Table 7. Do you inform alumni that alumni giving is a ranking criteria?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Refused	Count	0	1	0	0	1
	% within Tier	0.00%	5.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%
Yes	Count	13	11	9	5	38
	% within Tier	65.00%	55.00%	52.94%	27.78%	50.70%
No	Count	7	8	8	13	36
	% within Tier	35.00%	40.00%	47.06%	72.22%	48.00%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Survey Question 8 asked the presidents if they send copies of magazines or press releases to their peer institutions. The reason a college or university would engage in this practice would be to influence the perceptions of the President, Provost or Dean, and Admissions Director at peer institutions. In the spring of each year, these three offices are given a reputational survey to complete about peer institutions within their ranking category. As Table 8 indicates, 60% of respondents indicated that they do not send materials to peer institutions. Within the Tier 1 institutions, there were an equal number of institutions that indicated they sent materials to peers as to those who did not. The majority of respondents in the three remaining tier groups indicated that they did not participate in this practice. The results of the chi square = 3.557, $df = 3$, $p = .313$. This would indicate that there is no significant relationship between an institution's rank and the practice of sending materials to peer institutions.

Among those who did respond that they sent the materials to peer institutions, Survey Question 9 asked specifically if they sent the materials in an effort to influence the opinion of their institution among their peers (Table 9). While there were 30 respondents who said they sent materials to peer institutions, 32 of the presidents responded to Question 9. Of the responses, just over half indicated that they did send materials to peer institutions with the expressed intent of influencing the opinion about their institution. So while the majority of institutions do not send materials to peer institutions, of those that do so, most of them are doing so in order to influence the peer evaluation. The results of the chi square = 6.249, $df = 3$, $p = .100$. This would indicate that tier ranking did not influence the response to this item.

Table 8. Do you send your magazines and press releases to peer institutions?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Yes	Count	10	8	8	4	30
	% within Tier	50.00%	40.00%	47.10%	22.20%	40.00%
No	Count	10	12	9	14	45
	% within Tier	50.00%	60.00%	52.90%	77.80%	60.00%
Count		20	20	17	18	75

Table 9. Do you send mailings to influence peer opinion?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Yes	Count	5	6	5	1	17
	% within Tier	50.0%	85.7%	55.6%	16.7%	53.1%
No	Count	5	1	4	5	15
	% within Tier	50.0%	14.3%	44.4%	83.3%	46.9%
Count		10	7	9	6	32

Attempts to Improve Rank

Survey Questions 10 - 14 and Question 33 address Research Question 2, “What policy changes and decisions have been made in an attempt to improve an institution’s ranking?”

Survey Question 10 asked the presidents if their institution has ever shifted funding from one area in order to boost another area or program that has a greater impact on the *USNWR* rankings. As Table 10 indicates, the majority of institutions indicated that they have not shifted funding from one area in order to influence rankings. Only five institutions indicated that they had shifted funding for the express purpose of boosting an area that had a greater impact on the rankings. The results of the chi square = 1.075, $df = 3$, $p = .783$, indicating no relationship between rank and responses to this item.

Survey Question 11 asked the presidents if their institutions offered an “early-decision” admission program for prospective students. Early decision programs offer students the option to apply to their first choice institution and receive an admission decision before the regular admission pool. This practice is used to secure strong students early in order to improve the profile of the entering class. Sixty-three percent of institutions indicated that they do not participate in an early decision program. As Table 11 indicates, 36% of the presidents responded that they do offer early-decision programs. Interestingly, more than 55% of the Tier 4 institutions responded they had an early decision program, far more than any of the other tier categories. The results of the chi square = 4.059, $df = 3$, $p = .255$. This would indicate that rank did not influence how presidents responded to this item.

Table 10. Has your institution ever taken funding from one program to boost another area or program that has a greater impact on the US News Rankings?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Refused	Count	0	0	1	0	1
	% within Tier	0.00%	0.00%	5.90%	0.00%	1.30%
Yes	Count	1	1	2	1	5
	% within Tier	5.00%	5.00%	11.80%	5.60%	6.70%
No	Count	19	19	14	17	69
	% within Tier	95.00%	95.00%	82.40%	94.40%	92.00%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Table 11. Does your institution offer an "early-decision" admissions program for prospective students?

Tier		1	2	3	4	Total
Refused	Count	1	0	0	0	1
	% within Tier	5.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%
Yes	Count	5	7	5	10	27
	% within Tier	25.00%	35.00%	29.40%	55.60%	36.00%
No	Count	14	13	12	8	47
	% within Tier	70.00%	65.00%	70.60%	44.40%	62.70%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Survey Question 12 asked the presidents if their institutions had a plan in place to maintain or improve ranking in the *USNWR* rankings. Only 28% of the respondents indicated that a plan was in place (Table 12). Tier 1 institutions would obviously be least likely to have a plan in place to improve ranking, since they currently have the top ranking. A greater percentage of Tier 3 and Tier 4 institutions indicated that a plan was currently in place to improve rank. Thirty-five percent of Tier 3 institutions and almost 39% of Tier 4 institutions indicated they had such a plan in place. Only 15% of Tier 1 institutions and 25% of Tier 2 institutions indicated that they had a plan in place to improve their rank. There was no relationship between rank and response to this question, as the results of the chi square = 3.273, df = 3, p = .351.

If the presidents responded that their institution did have a plan in place to improve ranking, they were asked to indicate which areas had been targeted for improvement. They were given the option to select from the seven key areas indicated by *USNWR* as impacting an institution's rank: Academic Reputation, Student Retention, Faculty Resources, Faculty Resources Student Selectivity, Financial Resources, Graduation Rates and Alumni Giving. Table 13 provides a breakdown of the responses to each of the seven items listed as possible target areas and how the institutions within each tier ranking responded.

While only a small percentage of the presidents responded that their institution did have improving rank as a goal, it is interesting to note the areas that were targeted by these institutions. Of the institutions responding to this item, "Academic Reputation" was an area targeted by all of the institutions in Tiers 2 and 3 as an area of concern.

Table 12. Does your institution have a plan in place to improve ranking in the US News rankings?

	Tier	1	2	3	4	Total
Yes	Count	3	5	6	7	21
	% within Tier	11.11%	18.50%	23.07%	28.00%	28.00%
No	Count	17	15	11	11	54
	% within Tier	85.00%	75.00%	64.70%	61.11%	72.00%
	Count	20	20	17	18	75

Table 13. The areas which you have targeted in order to improve your institutions ranking.

		Tier	1	2	3	4	Total
Area Targeted							
Academic Reputation	Count		2	5	6	5	18
	% within AR		11.10%	27.80%	33.30%	27.80%	100.00%
	% within Tier		66.67%	100.00%	100.00%	71.43%	85.71%
Student Retention	Count		3	5	6	7	21
	% within SR		14.30%	23.80%	28.60%	33.30%	100.00%
	% within Tier		100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Faculty Resources	Count		1	2	2	4	9
	% within FR		11.11%	22.22%	22.22%	44.44%	100.00%
	% within Tier		33.33%	40.00%	33.33%	57.14%	42.86%
Student Selectivity	Count		2	3	4	5	14
	% within SS		14.30%	21.40%	28.60%	35.70%	100.00%
	% within Tier		66.67%	60.00%	66.67%	71.40%	66.67%
Financial Resources	Count		1	2	3	6	12
	% within FR		8.30%	16.70%	25.00%	50.00%	100.00%
	% within Tier		33.33%	40.00%	50.00%	85.71%	57.14%
Graduation Rates	Count		2	4	6	5	17
	% within GR		11.80%	23.50%	35.30%	29.40%	100.00%
	% within Tier		66.67%	80.00%	100.00%	71.40%	80.95%
Alumni Giving	Count		3	4	4	5	16
	% within AG		18.75%	25.00%	25.00%	31.25%	100.00%
	% within Tier		100.00%	80.00%	66.67%	71.40%	76.19%

All of the institutions indicating that they were trying to improve rank mentioned “Student Retention” as an area targeted for improvement. This was the only ranking area that all institutions listed as an area targeted for improvement.

“Graduation Rates” and “Alumni Giving” were somewhat equally targeted by the presidents as areas of concern. All of the Tier 1 respondents to this question indicated that “Alumni Giving” had been targeted. All of the Tier 3 institutions indicated that “Graduation Rates” had been targeted.

The areas receiving the least attention from all of those responding that they had a desire to improve rank dealt with “Faculty Resources” and “Financial Resources”. However, the area of “Financial Resources” was important to Tier 4 institutions with almost 86% stating that area was a concern.

When asked to provide specific examples of steps their institution has taken to improve retention, the majority of the examples provided dealt with retention. This is not surprising, given that all respondents to this question stated that retention was a concern. Other areas mentioned dealt with improving graduation rates, improving quality of programs, increasing alumni giving, improving public relations and improving overall quality. One specific example dealt with the care to which one institution was taking when dealing with the *USNWR* survey, indicating that the institution was giving “careful attention to filling out the questionnaire. Attention by one person to assure maximum scorings in all areas of questionnaire.” (Appendix F)

When asked if their institution had listed a desired rank as a goal of their strategic plan, only 9.3% of respondents indicated that a specific goal was listed. No Tier 1

institutions indicated they had targeted a desired rank in any strategic plan. Only 10% of Tier 2 institutions, 12% of Tier 3 institutions, and 17% of Tier 4 institutions indicated that they had targeted a specific rank in their strategic plans.

When asked if the desire to improve rank had influenced any policies or decision making at their institutions, 72% of all respondents indicated that ranking had not been a factor in decision making.

Response to the Rankings

The last three items related to Research Question 1 asked presidents about how they respond to the rankings, if they ever considered not participating and what they felt the consequences might be for such an action.

When asked if they had ever considered not participating in the rankings, the presidents' responses were evenly split. Fifty percent of respondents indicated they had considered not participating and 50% indicated they had not considered it. When examined by tier ranking, the results were not surprising. Only 35% of Tier 1 and 40% of Tier 2 institutions indicated that they had considered not participating in the rankings. Fifty-three percent of Tier 3 and 80% of Tier 4 institutions indicated they had considered not participating. The results of the chi square indicated there was a relationship between rank and response to the question, the chi square = 8.059, df = 3, $p = .045$.

When asked if they felt their institution would suffer by not participating, 53% indicated they felt their institutions would suffer while 47% said they did not feel their institutions would suffer. Not surprisingly, 85% percent of Tier 1 institutions responded

that their institutions would suffer. Among Tier 2 institutions, 72% indicated they felt their institutions would suffer. Seventy percent of Tier 3 institutions and 87% of Tier 4 institutions indicated that they did not feel their institutions would suffer. The results of the chi square = 24.155, $df = 3$, $p = .000$. This would obviously illustrate that tier ranking influenced the responses to this item.

When asked if they wished the rankings did not exist, there was an even split among respondents and a fairly even split within each tier. Fifty-three percent of Tier 1 respondents stated they wished the rankings did not exist. Forty-two percent of Tier 2, 47% of Tier 3 and 60% of Tier 4 respondents indicated they wished the rankings did not exist. The results of the chi square = 1.185, $df = 3$, $p = .757$. This would indicate that there was no relationship between rank and a desire that the rankings did not exist.

The presidents were also asked about any movement in their institution's rankings over the past one, three, five and ten year periods. In examining the data from the one year time period, 56% of the institutions indicated they had not changed rank in that time period. Thirty-seven percent indicated they had improved and seven percent indicated they had declined in ranking. In evaluating the correlation between current rank and movement in ranking, the chi square found there was no significant relationship, chi square = 4.102, $df = 6$, $p = .663$. This would indicate that there was no difference in the movement of an institution's rank when examined by the *USNWR* tier ranking.

In year three, 49% of the respondents indicated that their ranking had not changed. Forty-four percent indicated they had improved and six percent indicated they had actually declined. Just over one percent of the respondents indicated they had varied

up and down in the rankings over the three year period. Again, the chi square did not yield any relationship, $\chi^2 = 5.779$, $df = 9$, $p = .762$. This would indicate that there was no difference in the movement of an institution's rank when examined by the *USNWR* tier ranking.

Over a five year period, 51 % of the respondents indicated that their rank had improved, 43% percent indicated no change and six percent indicated a decline. In Tier 1 and Tier 2, the majority of respondents indicated they had improved rank over the five year period. In Tier 3, 50% indicated they had improved rank and 50% indicated no change. In Tier 4, 47% indicated their rank had not changed and only 33% indicated it had improved. The results of the chi square did not indicate a relationship, $\chi^2 = 8.229$, $df = 6$, $p = .217$. This would indicate that there was no difference in the movement of an institution's rank when examined by the *USNWR* tier ranking.

Finally, the presidents were asked about their institution's movement in the rankings over a ten year period. Sixty percent of respondents indicated that their rank had improved over that time period. In Tier 1, 72% of respondents indicated that their rank had improved. Twenty-eight percent indicated no change. In Tier 2, 70% indicated their rank had improved, 24% indicated no change and six percent indicated their rank had varied up and down. In Tier 3, 57% indicated they had improved and 43% indicated their rank had not changed. In Tier 4, 36% indicated that their rank had improved. Fifty percent indicated no change and 14% indicated their rank had declined. The results of the chi square = 13.913, $df = 9$, $p = .125$. This would indicate that there was no difference in the movement of an institution's rank when examined by the *USNWR* tier

ranking.

It should be noted that through the 2004 edition of *America's Best Colleges*, only institutions in Tier 1 were assigned a numeric rank within the tier. Tiers 2, 3 and 4 were merely grouped alphabetically within their respective tiers. It would, therefore, be impossible for an institution in Tier 4 to improve ranking over any time period and actually remain in Tier 4.

Differences in Perceptions

Research Question 3 asked “Are there any differences in the perceived validity of the rankings by the presidents when examined by the institution’s ranking by USNWR, public vs. private status, or length of service as a college president.”

Survey questions 17 through 32 address the issue of perceived validity of the rankings, and information from survey questions 1 through 4 provided information about tier ranking, public vs. private status and length of presidency.

In analyzing the data, the survey questions were first clustered around three categories: Examination of Rankings, Validity of Rankings, and the Importance of Rankings. Second, each category was separately tested by tier ranking, public vs. private status, and finally by length of presidency.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was then used to examine the responses to each cluster of survey questions. The MANOVA was used to examine the clustered groups of questions in order to reduce Type I error. If significant differences were indicated by the MANOVA, individual Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed

which questions demonstrated variance based upon the independent variable.

Examination of Rankings

The presidents were asked to rate the *USNWR* rankings on a five-point Likert scale on seven questions that dealt with the ability of the rankings to measure an institution's overall quality. The seven questions relate to the seven broad categories that *USNWR* claims to measure through the *America's Best Colleges* rankings: academic reputation, retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, graduation rate, and alumni giving.

The first item the presidents were asked to rate involved academic reputation as determined by the presidents, deans and directors of admissions at peer institutions. This was the foundational indicator employed by *USNWR* in their first rankings survey and is still an important part of the rankings.

When asked if academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions was an important tool in measuring overall quality, there was equal agreement and disagreement among all tiers (Table 14). Among all institutions there was less than a five percent difference between those who disagreed or strongly disagreed, and those who agreed or strongly agreed. Only nine percent of the overall survey population stated that they had "No Opinion" on this question. When examining each tier individually, there was almost an even split between those who either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and those who agreed or strongly agreed. This trend held true among the institutions in the top three tiers. Among Tier 4 institutions, however, 50% either

Table 14. Academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

		Academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions is an important tool in measuring overall quality						
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	
1	Count	1	7	3	8	1	20	
	% within Tier	5.0%	35.0%	15.0%	40.0%	5.0%	100.0%	
2	Count	2	8	1	7	2	20	
	% within Tier	10.0%	40.0%	5.0%	35.0%	10.0%	100.0%	
3	Count	1	7	1	8	0	17	
	% within Tier	5.9%	41.2%	5.9%	47.1%	.0%	100.0%	
4	Count	3	6	2	6	1	18	
	% within Tier	16.7%	33.3%	11.1%	33.3%	5.6%	100.0%	
Total	Count	7	28	7	29	4	75	
	% within Tier	9.3%	37.3%	9.3%	38.7%	5.3%	100.0%	

disagreed or strongly disagreed that academic reputation as determined by peers was a valid measure of an institution's overall quality. Only 39% of Tier 4 institutions either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Retention rates proved to be more important to the presidents than peer evaluation. Almost 83% of the presidents indicated that retention was important in measuring overall quality (Table 15). Of the 17% who felt it was not important in measuring quality, no one strongly disagreed and the responses were evenly distributed among all tier groups.

Faculty resources were also perceived to be an important tool in measuring overall quality. Seventy-four percent of the respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed, while only 17% felt that faculty resources were not an important tool in measuring overall quality (Table 16).

Student selectivity was not perceived to be as an important tool in measuring overall quality. Fifty-six percent of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that examining student selectivity was an important evaluation tool (Table 17). Tier 1 was the only tier ranking group where a majority of respondents felt that student selectivity was an important tool in measuring quality.

When asked if an examination of the institution's financial resources was an important tool to measure quality, there was an even split between those who either agreed or strongly agreed and those who either disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 18). Forty-four percent either agreed or disagreed on the statement. Interestingly, in the top three tiers there was no majority of agreement or disagreement because of those who

Table 15. Examination of an institution's retention rate is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

		Examination of an institution's retention rate is an important tool in measuring overall quality				
Tier		Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	Count	3	0	15	2	20
	% within Tier	15.0%	.0%	75.0%	10.0%	100.0%
2	Count	3	0	16	1	20
	% within Tier	15.0%	.0%	80.0%	5.0%	100.0%
3	Count	2	1	10	4	17
	% within Tier	11.8%	5.9%	58.8%	23.5%	100.0%
4	Count	3	1	13	1	18
	% within Tier	16.7%	5.6%	72.2%	5.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	11	2	54	8	75
	% within Tier	14.7%	2.7%	72.0%	10.7%	100.0%

Table 16. Examination of faculty resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

Tier		Examination of faculty resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	5	0	14	1	20
	% within Tier	.0%	25.0%	.0%	70.0%	5.0%	100.0%
2	Count	1	3	1	14	1	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	15.0%	5.0%	70.0%	5.0%	100.0%
3	Count	0	2	3	10	2	17
	% within Tier	.0%	11.8%	17.6%	58.8%	11.8%	100.0%
4	Count	0	2	2	11	3	18
	% within Tier	.0%	11.1%	11.1%	61.1%	16.7%	100.0%
Total	Count	1	12	6	49	7	75
1	% within Tier	1.3%	16.0%	8.0%	65.3%	9.3%	100.0%

Table 17. Examination of student selectivity is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

		Examination of student selectivity is an important tool in measuring overall quality					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	1	8	0	11	0	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	40.0%	.0%	55.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	2	10	3	4	1	20
	% within Tier	10.0%	50.0%	15.0%	20.0%	5.0%	100.0%
3	Count	2	7	0	8	0	17
	% within Tier	11.8%	41.2%	.0%	47.1%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	3	9	1	3	2	18
	% within Tier	16.7%	50.0%	5.6%	16.7%	11.1%	100.0%
Total	Count	8	34	4	26	3	75
	% within Tier	10.7%	45.3%	5.3%	34.7%	4.0%	100.0%

Table 18. Examination of financial resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

		Examination of financial resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	1	8	2	8	1	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	40.0%	10.0%	40.0%	5.0%	100.0%
2	Count	0	7	4	9	0	20
	% within Tier	.0%	35.0%	20.0%	45.0%	.0%	100.0%
3	Count	0	6	3	5	3	17
	% within Tier	.0%	35.3%	17.6%	29.4%	17.6%	100.0%
4	Count	1	10	0	3	4	18
	% within Tier	5.6%	55.6%	.0%	16.7%	22.2%	100.0%
	Adjusted Residual	.9	1.4	-1.8	-1.7	1.8	
Total	Count	2	31	9	25	8	75
	% within Tier	2.7%	41.3%	12.0%	33.3%	10.7%	100.0%

expressed no opinion. In Tier 4, however, over 61% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that financial resources were an important tool in measuring quality.

An examination of graduation rates as a tool to measure quality proved to be as important to the presidents as retention rates (Table 19). Eighty-one percent of the respondents indicated that an examination of graduation rates was important. Ninety percent of Tier 1 presidents either strongly agreed or agreed, representing the strongest agreement on this item. Presidents in Tiers 2, 3 and 4 indicated that graduation rates were an important tool in measuring quality. Between 75% and 83% of the presidents in these tiers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Alumni giving was the last item in this cluster of questions. Those who agreed or strongly agreed that alumni giving was an important tool in measuring quality represented just over 50% of respondents (Table 20). Almost 43% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Within Tiers 1 and 3, there was a fairly even split between those who either agreed or disagreed on the importance of alumni giving as a quality indicator. In Tiers 2 and 4, however, the majority of the respondents agreed that alumni giving was indeed important in determining overall quality.

In order to determine if responses differed by the three independent variables of tier rank, public vs. private status, and length of presidential tenure, the responses to these seven questions were analyzed using a MANOVA.

First, the seven items were examined against institutional rank. This was done in order to determine if there were any variances in the responses to the *USNWR* quality indicators when examined by the tier ranking of the institution. The MANOVA indicated

*Table 19. Examination of graduation rate is an important tool
in measuring overall quality.*

Tier	Examination of graduation rate is an important tool in measuring overall quality						Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree		
1	Count	0	2	0	17	1	20
	% within Tier	.0%	10.0%	.0%	85.0%	5.0%	100.0%
2	Count	1	4	0	10	5	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	20.0%	.0%	50.0%	25.0%	100.0%
3	Count	0	3	1	9	4	17
	% within Tier	.0%	17.6%	5.9%	52.9%	23.5%	100.0%
4	Count	0	3	0	11	4	18
	% within Tier	.0%	16.7%	.0%	61.1%	22.2%	100.0%
Total	Count	1	12	1	47	14	75
1	% within Tier	1.3%	16.0%	1.3%	62.7%	18.7%	100.0%

Table 20. Examination of alumni giving is an important tool in measuring overall quality.

		Examination of alumni giving is an important tool in measuring overall quality					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	1	9	1	9	0	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	45.0%	5.0%	45.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	1	7	1	10	1	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	35.0%	5.0%	50.0%	5.0%	100.0%
3	Count	3	5	2	6	1	17
	% within Tier	17.6%	29.4%	11.8%	35.3%	5.9%	100.0%
4	Count	0	6	1	10	1	18
	% within Tier	.0%	33.3%	5.6%	55.6%	5.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	5	27	5	35	3	75
	% within Tier	6.7%	36.0%	6.7%	46.7%	4.0%	100.0%

that there were no significant differences between the different tier rankings on any of the seven items. The results of the MANOVA were $F(21,187) = .683, p = .847$ (Table 21). As indicated by the comparison of means (Table 22) for each of the quality indicators, there was little variance in the responses to the items when examined against rank.

Second, these seven items were examined against public vs. private status. The MANOVA did indicate that there was a difference in the perceptions of presidents at public and private institutions in the rankings ability to measure quality. The results of the MANOVA (Table 23) were $F(7,67) = 2.387, p = .031$. Since there were seven separate items in this category, seven individual ANOVA tests were conducted to determine which items demonstrated any significant differences in the response to the items based upon the public vs. private status of the institution.

As Table 24 indicates, only the item related to “academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions” was significant, $F(1) = 13.189, p = .001$. To determine how the perceptions of the presidents of the public and private institutions differed, a comparison of means was created. The mean for public presidents was 3.923,

Table 21. MANOVA for importance of rankings factors by tier.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	.683	.847

Table 22. Comparison of means for importance of ranking factor by tier.

Dependent Variable	Tier	Mean
Academic reputation	1	3.050
	2	2.950
	3	2.941
	4	2.778
Retention Rate	1	3.800
	2	3.750
	3	3.941
	4	3.667
Faculty Resources	1	3.550
	2	3.550
	3	3.706
	4	3.833
Student Selectivity	1	3.050
	2	2.600
	3	2.824
	4	2.556
Financial Resources	1	3.000
	2	3.100
	3	3.294
	4	2.944
Graduation Rate	1	3.850
	2	3.700
	3	3.824
	4	3.889
Alumni Giving	1	2.900
	2	3.150
	3	2.824
	4	3.333

Table 23. MANOVA for importance of rankings factors by public vs. private.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	2.387	.031

Table 24. ANOVA for USNWR examination of quality by public vs. private status.

Dependent Variable	F	Sig.
Academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	13.189	.001
Examination of an institution's retention rate is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	1.963	.165
Examination of faculty resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	.254	.616
Examination of student selectivity is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	.086	.771
Examination of financial resources is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	.077	.782
Examination of graduation rate is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	1.168	.283
Examination of alumni giving is an important tool in measuring overall quality.	.387	.536

while the mean for the private presidents was 2.76 (Table 25). Eighty-four percent of the public college presidents either agreed or strongly agreed on this item, as opposed to the 35% of presidents at private institutions that agreed or strongly agreed. This would indicate that *USNWR* rating of academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions is more important to presidents at public colleges than to the presidents at private colleges.

Finally, these seven items were examined to determine if there were any differences in the responses of the presidents based on length of service as a president at any college or university. The results of the MANOVA (Table 26) were $F(28,232) = .607, p = .942$. As indicated in the comparison of means (Table 27) for each of the quality indicators, there was little variance in the responses to the items when examined against length of presidential service.

Table 25. Comparison of means for public and private institutions for academic reputation.

Dependent Variable	Is your Institution public or private?	Mean
Academic reputation	Public	3.923
	Private	2.726

*Table 26. MANOVA for importance of rankings factors by
length of service of president.*

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	.607	.942

Table 27. Comparison of means for importance of ranking factor by length of presidential service.

Dependent Variable	How long have you been a college or university president?	Mean
Academic Reputation	Less than 5 years	2.917
	5-7 years	2.923
	7-10 years	2.824
	10-15 years	2.900
	More than 15 years	3.182
Retention Rate	Less than 5 years	3.667
	5-7 years	3.923
	7-10 years	3.706
	10-15 years	4.000
	More than 15 years	3.818
Faculty Resources	Less than 5 years	3.542
	5-7 years	3.615
	7-10 years	3.588
	10-15 years	3.700
	More than 15 years	4.000
Student Selectivity	Less than 5 years	2.750
	5-7 years	2.769
	7-10 years	3.059
	10-15 years	2.300
	More than 15 years	2.727
Financial Resources	Less than 5 years	3.083
	5-7 years	3.231
	7-10 years	3.059
	10-15 years	2.700
	More than 15 years	3.273
Graduation Rate	Less than 5 years	3.833
	5-7 years	3.846
	7-10 years	3.882
	10-15 years	3.700
	More than 15 years	3.727
Alumni Giving	Less than 5 years	2.792
	5-7 years	3.154
	7-10 years	3.412
	10-15 years	2.500
	More than 15 years	3.455

Validity of the Rankings

The presidents were asked to rate the *USNWR* rankings on a five-point Likert-scale on two items related to the validity and accuracy of the rankings. Specifically, the presidents were asked if they perceived the *USNWR* rankings to be a valid measure of an institution's overall quality. Next, they were asked for their perceptions on how accurately the *USNWR* can measure an institution's overall quality.

When asked if the *USNWR* were a valid measure of an institution's quality, the presidents overall response was to disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. As Table 28 indicates, 68% responded that they did not feel the rankings were a valid measure of quality. Twenty-three percent either agreed or strongly agreed that the rankings were a valid measure of quality.

Within Tier 1, there is an even split between those who agree and those who disagree that the *USNWR* rankings are a valid measure of an institution's quality. Twenty percent had no opinion. Tier 1 is also the only tier category where there are no responses that either strongly agree or strongly disagree. There is no tendency to either strongly criticize or vaunt the rankings. The table also illustrates a tendency to disagree with the validity of the rankings as the institution's rank drops. Eighty-eight percent of Tier 4 institutions either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the rankings were a valid measure of an institution's overall quality.

When asked if they felt the rankings could accurately measure quality, 76% of respondents indicated that they could not (Table 29). Only 17% percent agreed or strongly agreed that the rankings were an accurate measure of an institution's quality.

Table 28. The US News rankings are a valid measure of the overall quality of an institution.

		The US News rankings are a valid measure of the overall quality of an institution					
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
1	Count	0	8	4	8	0	20
	% within Tier	.0%	40.0%	20.0%	40.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	2	13	1	2	2	20
	% within Tier	10.0%	65.0%	5.0%	10.0%	10.0%	100.0%
3	Count	5	7	1	4	0	17
	% within Tier	29.4%	41.2%	5.9%	23.5%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	8	8	1	1	0	18
	% within Tier	44.4%	44.4%	5.6%	5.6%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	15	36	7	15	2	75
	% within Tier	20.0%	48.0%	9.3%	20.0%	2.7%	100.0%

Table 29. The US News rankings are an accurate measure of an institution's quality.

		The US News rankings are an accurate measure of an institution's quality					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Tier 1	Count	2	8	4	6	0	20
	% within Tier	10.0%	40.0%	20.0%	30.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	4	12	0	2	2	20
	% within Tier	20.0%	60.0%	.0%	10.0%	10.0%	100.0%
3	Count	4	12	0	1	0	17
	% within Tier	23.5%	70.6%	.0%	5.9%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	9	6	1	2	0	18
	% within Tier	50.0%	33.3%	5.6%	11.1%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	19	38	5	11	2	75
	% within Tier	25.3%	50.7%	6.7%	14.7%	2.7%	100.0%

Interestingly, Tier 1 presidents were less likely to agree that the rankings were an accurate measure of an institution's quality than they were to agree that the rankings were a valid measure of an institution's quality. Only 30% of Tier 1 presidents agreed that the rankings were accurate, compared with the 40% that agreed the rankings were valid.

In order to determine if responses differed by the three independent variables of tier rank, public vs. private status, and length of presidential tenure, the responses to these two questions were analyzed using a MANOVA. First, these two items were examined against institutional rank. The MANOVA (Table 30) did indicate that there was a difference in responses based on rank. The results of the MANOVA were $F(6,140) = 2.753, p = .015$.

Since there were two separate items in this category, individual ANOVA tests were conducted to determine which items demonstrated a significant difference. Both items were found to be significant (Table 31), with the item related to validity being most significant, $F(3) = 5.12, p = .003$. The item related to the accuracy of the rankings was also significant, $F(3) = 3.266, p = .026$.

An examination of the means (Table 32) illustrates a linear trend in relation to institutional rank. For both of the items, as the tier ranking of an institution improves, so does the perception of the validity. Tier 1 institutions are more likely to believe the rankings are valid and accurate than institutions in any other tier group. The significance of the tier ranking is stronger on the question of validity, as the results from Table 28 would lead us to believe. The significance, though not as strong, still exists on the question of accuracy when examined by tier ranking.

Table 30. MANOVA for valid and accurate by tier.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	2.753	.015

Table 31. ANOVA for valid and accurate by tier ranking.

Dependent Variable	F	Sig.
The US News rankings are a valid measure of the overall quality of an institution.	5.120	.003
The US News rankings are an accurate measure of an institution's quality.	3.266	.026

Table 32. Comparison of means of valid and accurate by tier ranking.

Dependent Variable	Tier	Mean
Valid	1	3.000
	2	2.450
	3	2.235
	4	1.722
Accurate	1	2.700
	2	2.300
	3	1.882
	4	1.778

Next, these two items were examined against the public vs. private status of the institution to determine if there were any differences in responses. There were no significant differences based on public vs. private status. The results of the MANOVA (Table 33) were $F(2, 72) = 1.582, p = .213$. The comparison of means (Table 34) indicates no significant variance between public and private institutions. This would indicate that there is no difference in the perception of the validity or accuracy of the rankings between presidents at public and private colleges and universities.

Finally the responses to these two items were examined based upon the length of service as a college president. Again, there were no significant differences. The results of the MANOVA (Table 35) were $F(8, 138) = 1.822, p = .078$. As Table 36 indicates, the means between the responses did not vary significantly when they examined against length or presidency.

Table 33. MANOVA for valid and accurate by public vs. private.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	1.582	.213

Table 34. Comparison of means of valid and accurate by public vs. private.

Dependent Variable	Public vs. Private	Mean
Valid	Public	2.462
	Private	2.129
Accurate	Public	2.846
	Private	2.274

Table 35. MANOVA for valid and accurate by length of presidency.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	1.822	.078

Table 36. Comparison of means of valid and accurate by length of presidency.

Dependent Variable	Tier	Mean
Valid	Less than 5 years	2.083
	5-7 years	2.462
	7-10 years	2.412
	10-15 years	1.800
	More than 15 years	2.091
Accurate	Less than 5 years	2.500
	5-7 years	2.923
	7-10 years	2.35
	10-15 years	2.00
	More than 15 years	2.00

Importance of the Rankings

The questionnaire asked presidents to give their perceptions on how important a good ranking was to several different constituency groups and the impact it can have on those groups. Specifically, they were asked if they felt that the rankings were important to prospective students, alumni, or trustees. They were also asked if they felt a good ranking would benefit prospective students, increase alumni support or in general, be beneficial to their institution or to higher education as an industry.

The importance of rank to prospective students was the first item in this cluster (Table 37). Fifty-eight percent of presidents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Twenty-four percent expressed no opinion, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Presidents from Tier 1, 2, and 3 institutions were more likely to agree or strongly agree than presidents in Tier 4.

The importance of the institution's rank to alumni was the next item. As Table 38 indicates 60% of the presidents responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that rank was important to alumni. Twenty-one percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, and roughly 19% had no opinion. Presidents of Tier 1 and Tier 2 institutions agreed more strongly that the rankings were important to alumni than the presidents of any other tier group. The presidents of Tier 4 institutions disagreed more strongly that the rankings were important to alumni than presidents of any other tier group.

The presidents also agreed or strongly agreed that the rankings were important to trustees. Sixty-one percent indicated that trustees were concerned about rank while only 27% indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 39). Tier 1 institutions

Table 37. An institution's ranking is important to prospective students.

Tier		An institution's ranking is important to prospective students					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	2	3	14	1	20
	% within Tier	.0%	10.0%	15.0%	70.0%	5.0%	100.0%
2	Count	0	2	5	10	3	20
	% within Tier	.0%	10.0%	25.0%	50.0%	15.0%	100.0%
3	Count	0	3	4	9	0	16
	% within Tier	.0%	18.8%	25.0%	56.3%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	1	5	6	6	0	18
	% within Tier	5.6%	27.8%	33.3%	33.3%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	1	12	18	39	4	74
	% within Tier	1.4%	16.2%	24.3%	52.7%	5.4%	100.0%

Table 38. An institution's ranking is important to alumni.

Tier	An institution's ranking is important to alumni						Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	4	1	15	0	20
	% within Tier	.0%	20.0%	5.0%	75.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	1	2	3	11	3	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	10.0%	15.0%	55.0%	15.0%	100.0%
3	Count	0	3	5	9	0	17
	% within Tier	.0%	17.6%	29.4%	52.9%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	0	6	5	6	1	18
	% within Tier	.0%	33.3%	27.8%	33.3%	5.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	1	15	14	41	4	75
	% within Tier	1.3%	20.0%	18.7%	54.7%	5.3%	100.0%

Table 39. An institution's ranking is important to trustees.

		An institution's ranking is important to trustees					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	3	1	16	0	20
	% within Tier	.0%	15.0%	5.0%	80.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	0	5	1	11	3	20
	% within Tier	.0%	25.0%	5.0%	55.0%	15.0%	100.0%
3	Count	1	4	3	8	1	17
	% within Tier	5.9%	23.5%	17.6%	47.1%	5.9%	100.0%
4	Count	0	7	4	6	1	18
	% within Tier	.0%	38.9%	22.2%	33.3%	5.6%	100.0%
Total	Count	1	19	9	41	5	75
	% within Tier	1.3%	25.3%	12.0%	54.7%	6.7%	100.0%

were more cohesive on this statement with 80% stating they agreed. Tier 4 institutions were fairly evenly split with 39% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing and 39% either agreeing or strongly agreeing.

When asked if the *USNWR* rankings benefited prospective students, 45% of the presidents either disagreed or strongly disagreed (Table 40). Twenty-three percent had no opinion and 32% either agreed or strongly agreed that the rankings benefited prospective students. There was little variation in the responses to the question when examined by tier ranking.

The presidents were more convinced about the impact of the *USNWR* rankings and the higher education industry (Table 41). When asked for their perceptions on the statement that the rankings benefited higher education as an industry, 60% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Twenty percent had no opinion and 20% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Responses were fairly uniform among all tier groups.

When asked if a positive ranking improves alumni support, very few presidents had strong feelings (Table 42). Roughly seven percent strongly disagreed, 33% disagreed, 27% had no opinion and 31% agreed. Only 2.7% of the presidents strongly agreed that a positive ranking increased alumni support. As indicated in Table 7, however, nearly 51% of the presidents inform alumni that the level of alumni giving is a ranking criteria used by *USNWR*. So while the majority of the presidents inform alumni of the impact of giving on rankings, only 33.7% indicated that they felt that a good ranking actually increases alumni giving.

Table 40. The US News rankings are beneficial to prospective students.

		The US News rankings are beneficial to prospective students.					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	1	6	6	7	0	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	30.0%	30.0%	35.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	2	9	3	4	2	20
	% within Tier	10.0%	45.0%	15.0%	20.0%	10.0%	100.0%
3	Count	2	5	4	6	0	17
	% within Tier	11.8%	29.4%	23.5%	35.3%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	3	6	4	5	0	18
	% within Tier	16.7%	33.3%	22.2%	27.8%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	8	26	17	22	2	75
	% within Tier	10.7%	34.7%	22.7%	29.3%	2.7%	100.0%

Table 41. The US News rankings benefit higher education as an industry.

		The US News rankings benefit higher education as an industry.					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	5	6	6	3	0	20
	% within Tier	25.0%	30.0%	30.0%	15.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	5	8	3	3	1	20
	% within Tier	25.0%	40.0%	15.0%	15.0%	5.0%	100.0%
3	Count	2	6	4	5	0	17
	% within Tier	11.8%	35.3%	23.5%	29.4%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	7	6	2	3	0	18
	% within Tier	38.9%	33.3%	11.1%	16.7%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	19	26	15	14	1	75
	% within Tier	25.3%	34.7%	20.0%	18.7%	1.3%	100.0%

Table 42. A positive ranking increases alumni support.

		A positive ranking increases alumni support					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	7	7	6	0	20
	% within Tier	.0%	35.0%	35.0%	30.0%	.0%	100.0%
2	Count	1	6	5	6	2	20
	% within Tier	5.0%	30.0%	25.0%	30.0%	10.0%	100.0%
3	Count	2	7	4	4	0	17
	% within Tier	11.8%	41.2%	23.5%	23.5%	.0%	100.0%
4	Count	2	5	4	7	0	18
	% within Tier	11.1%	27.8%	22.2%	38.9%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	5	25	20	23	2	75
	% within Tier	6.7%	33.3%	26.7%	30.7%	2.7%	100.0%

When asked to respond to the statement that a positive ranking was beneficial to the institution, 73% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (Table 43). Nine percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed and just over 17% had no opinion. So while there were mixed responses about the benefit of the rankings to different constituencies, the presidents felt that a positive ranking was beneficial to the institution.

In order to determine if responses differed by the three independent variables of tier rank, public vs. private status, and length of presidential tenure, the responses to these seven questions were analyzed using a MANOVA.

When examined against the institutions ranking (Table 44), there was no significant difference in responses to the cluster of items. The results of the MANOVA were $F(21,184) = 1.168, p = .284$. A comparison of the means (Table 45) indicates little difference in the responses to these items in the cluster when examined against institutional rank.

When the cluster of items related to importance was examined against public vs. private status, there was no significant difference. The results of the MANOVA were $F(7,66) = 1.722, p = .119$ (Table 46). A comparison of the means (Table 47) shows little variance in the responses between public and private institutions.

When the cluster of items related to importance was examined against the length of presidency, there was no significant difference. The results of the MANOVA were $F(28,228) = .424, p = .996$ (Table 48). A comparison of the means (Table 49) shows little variance in the responses when examined by length of presidency.

Table 43. A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution.

		A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution					Total
Tier		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1	Count	0	3	3	11	3	20
	% within Tier	.0%	15.0%	15.0%	55.0%	15.0%	100.0%
2	Count	0	1	3	14	2	20
	% within Tier	.0%	5.0%	15.0%	70.0%	10.0%	100.0%
3	Count	1	1	3	10	2	17
	% within Tier	5.9%	5.9%	17.6%	58.8%	11.8%	100.0%
4	Count	1	0	4	13	0	18
	% within Tier	5.6%	.0%	22.2%	72.2%	.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	2	5	13	48	7	75
	% within Tier	2.7%	6.7%	17.3%	64.0%	9.3%	100.0%

Table 44. MANOVA for importance by tier.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	1.168	.279

Table 45. Comparison of means of importance by tier.

Dependent Variable	Tier	Mean
An institution's ranking is important to prospective students	1	3.700
	2	3.700
	3	3.375
	4	2.944
An institution's ranking is important to alumni	1	3.550
	2	3.650
	3	3.375
	4	3.111
An institution's ranking is important to trustees	1	3.650
	2	3.600
	3	3.313
	4	3.056
The US News rankings are beneficial to prospective students	1	2.950
	2	2.750
	3	2.813
	4	2.611
The US News rankings benefit higher education as an industry	1	2.350
	2	2.350
	3	2.750
	4	2.056
A positive ranking increases alumni support	1	2.950
	2	3.100
	3	2.688
	4	2.889
A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution	1	3.700
	2	3.850
	3	3.625
	4	3.611

Table 46. MANOVA for importance by public vs. private.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	1.722	.119

Table 47. Comparison of means by public vs. private.

Dependent Variable	Is your Institution public or private?	Mean
An institution's ranking is important to prospective students	Public	3.769
	Private	3.377
An institution's ranking is important to alumni	Public	3.769
	Private	3.361
An institution's ranking is important to trustees	Public	3.692
	Private	3.361
The US News rankings are beneficial to prospective students	Public	3.231
	Private	2.689
The US News rankings benefit higher education as an industry	Public	3.077
	Private	2.213
A positive ranking increases alumni support	Public	3.538
	Private	2.787
A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution	Public	3.846
	Private	3.672

Table 48. MANOVA for importance by length of presidency.

Effect	F	Sig.
Wilks' Lambda	.424	.996

Table 49. Comparison of means of importance by length of presidency.

Dependent Variable	How long have you been a college or university president?	Mean
An institution's ranking is important to prospective students.	Less than 5 years	3.542
	5-7 years	3.615
	7-10 years	3.471
	10-15 years	3.333
	More than 15 years	3.091
An institution's ranking is important to alumni.	Less than 5 years	3.458
	5-7 years	3.769
	7-10 years	3.294
	10-15 years	3.444
	More than 15 years	3.182
An institution's ranking is important to trustees.	Less than 5 years	3.542
	5-7 years	3.692
	7-10 years	3.235
	10-15 years	3.333
	More than 15 years	3.182
The US News rankings are beneficial to prospective students.	Less than 5 years	2.833
	5-7 years	2.846
	7-10 years	2.882
	10-15 years	2.778
	More than 15 years	2.455
The US News rankings benefit higher education as an industry.	Less than 5 years	2.292
	5-7 years	2.462
	7-10 years	2.353
	10-15 years	2.556
	More than 15 years	2.273
A positive ranking increases alumni support.	Less than 5 years	3.000
	5-7 years	2.846
	7-10 years	2.882
	10-15 years	3.000
	More than 15 years	2.818
A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution.	Less than 5 years	3.667
	5-7 years	3.769
	7-10 years	3.882
	10-15 years	3.778
	More than 15 years	3.364

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

Since 1983, *U.S. News and World Reports* magazine has published an undergraduate ranking of colleges and universities in the United States. While other magazine rankings and college guides exist, the *USNWR "America's Best Colleges"* rankings have become the predominant guide in the marketplace. Consumer demand for information on colleges and universities generates huge profits for the magazines, causing them to expand and improve their product each year. *USNWR* annually sells over two million issues of the ratings magazine and roughly one million copies of the expanded "*America's Best Colleges*" guide.

Over the past 20 years, *USNWR* has altered the methodology used in calculating the rankings. Initially in 1983, they employed a reputational study of the presidents of four-year colleges and universities. In 1988 they began to include college deans and admissions directors in the reputational survey. They also began to analyze the first sets of objective data, including admissions selectivity, faculty strength, instructional budget per student, resources for educational programs and graduation rates.

Over the years *USNWR* has continued to alter the criteria of the rankings and the formulas used to weight certain indicators. These changes have caused some institutions to rise and fall in the rankings from year to year. The altering of the formulas and criteria used in the rankings, along with shift in rank among some institutions has brought great criticism of the rankings from colleges and universities.

Regardless of the criticism, the rankings do play a key role in providing information to prospective students and their families. Some colleges and universities have recognized this trend and have begun to engage in practices that they hope will help them improve their rank.

The purpose of this research study was to determine the extent to which policies and decisions are influenced by a desire to improve rank in the *U.S. News and World Reports: America's Best Colleges* rankings at southern comprehensive colleges and universities. The data analysis of the four research questions provides a greater understanding of how colleges are using their rank and the perceptions of the college presidents about the *USNWR* rankings. It also provides an insight to any differences that may exist because of rank, public vs. private status, and length of experience of the president.

How are Institutions Using the Rankings?

One of the purposes of this research study was to determine how colleges and universities are using their rank. Tier 1 institutions are more likely to use their ranking in promotional materials than institutions in any other tier group. Seventy-five percent of Tier 1 institutions list their rank in admissions materials sent to prospective students, and all of the respondents in Tier 1 indicated that they included their rank in publications sent to alumni. When asked if they informed alumni that the level of alumni giving was one of the criteria used by *USNWR* in determining rank, over 50% of institutions in tiers 1, 2 and 3 indicated that they informed alumni of the ranking criteria. Tier 4 institutions, as a

group, were less likely to inform alumni about the ranking criteria.

With the reputational survey playing a role in the ranking formula, presidents were asked if they sent magazines and press releases to peer institutions. Tier 1 institutions were evenly split between those who sent materials to peers and those that did not. Tier 2 and Tier 3 institutions were somewhat less likely to send materials to peers and Tier 4 institutions were least likely to send information to peers. Of those presidents who indicated that they sent materials to peer institutions, over half of them indicated that they sent the materials explicitly to influence peer opinion.

The use of the rankings was extremely important to many of the presidents. One president in this study was so concerned about the rankings that his institution conducted a study to examine how administrators at peer institutions approach the peer assessment survey. He reported that , “Of those who responded, 72% assign their rating based on what they ‘already know or assume about a school's overall reputation.’ And the majority of respondents complete the survey without any input from their colleagues...” (Appendix G).

Attempts to Improve Rank

The next purpose of this study was to determine if any policies or decisions have been made on college or university campuses in an attempt to improve rank. In general, the presidents did not indicate any shifting of funds or major initiatives to improve rank. Only 28% percent indicated that they had an actual plan in place to improve their institution’s rank. Of those institutions that indicated they had a plan, they were given

the option to select from the seven key areas indicated by *USNWR* as impacting institutional rank. Of all the institutions responding to this item, all of them listed improving “Student Retention” as a goal. Improving “Academic Reputation”, “Graduation Rates”, and “Alumni Giving” were also important goals to the respondents.

Presidents were also given the opportunity to provide comments about how they are trying to impact these areas. Again, student retention was the most common theme. Some of the presidents provided comments indicating that they are hiring a full-time Retention Director, appointing special committees, and providing additional training for faculty and staff (Appendix G).

Efforts to improve alumni giving were also common in the comments of the presidents. Launching new campaigns and improving the level of alumni giving were among the initiatives mentioned by the presidents.

Differences in Perceptions

One of the main focuses of this study was to determine the perceptions of the presidents about the *USNWR* rankings and to determine if those perceptions vary when examined against institutional rank, public vs. private status, and length of the president’s experience.

The presidents were given an opportunity to provide comments on the rankings at the end of the questionnaire. The comments provide much insight into their perceptions of the rankings and illustrate quite a variance of opinion (Appendix F).

- “The rankings are not unfounded or illegitimate in their content or

motives. They simply are not fully reflective of true institutional differences within the same categories and are too often misused by students.”

- “Higher education is trapped in the *U.S. News and World Reports* death spiral, just as we are trapped in the use of standardized tests to ‘score’ applicants.”
- “The *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings are not the most valid, but they do bring attention to campuses. They are not academic in nature, but they are understandable and that is what the public appreciates.”
- “In essence, the whole notion of ranking institutions is nonsense.”
- “They may sell magazines, but they tend to distort the goal-setting of many institutions.”
- “By and large, campuses favorable in the rankings approve of them; campuses not included find fault.”

The presidents were asked about the seven ranking criteria used by *U.S. News and World Reports* in calculating the rankings. Among the items of importance to the presidents were retention, faculty resources, graduation rates and alumni giving.

There was no relationship between institutional rank or length or presidential service and the way the presidents responded to these questions. When examined against public vs. private status, however, the data analysis revealed that the presidents of public institutions were more concerned with peer assessment than their private institution

counterparts. Eighty-four percent of public college presidents agreed or strongly agreed that academic reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions was an important tool in measuring overall quality. Only 35% of the private college presidents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

When examining the presidents' perceptions about the validity of the rankings, the data analysis revealed statistically significant differences. Overall, 68% of the presidents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "the *US News* rankings are a valid measure of the overall quality of an institution." When examined against tier ranking, the data analysis revealed that rank did impact how presidents responded to this question. The data revealed a linear correlation between rank and response to this item. The better the ranking, the more likely the president was to agree with this statement.

Tier ranking also impacted the responses of the presidents when asked about the accuracy of the rankings. Seventy-six percent of respondents indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "the *US News* rankings are an accurate measure of an institution's quality." When examined against tier ranking, again, the data analysis revealed that rank did impact how the presidents responded to this item. A linear correlation was present, indicating that presidents from better ranked institutions were more likely to agree with this statement.

There was no significant difference in the responses to these two items when examined against public vs. private status or length of service as a college president.

The presidents were next asked for their perceptions about the importance of the rankings to different constituent groups. Fifty-eight percent of the presidents indicated

that they felt the rankings were important to prospective students. Presidents from Tiers 1, 2 and 3 were more likely to agree with this statement than presidents of Tier 4 institutions. When asked if the rankings benefited prospective students, 45% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Twenty-three percent had no opinion and only 32% either agreed or strongly agreed that the rankings were beneficial to prospective students.

Sixty percent of the presidents indicated that the rankings were important to alumni. They were less sure if a positive ranking improved alumni giving. Only 33% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Sixty-one percent of the presidents indicated the rankings were important to trustees. Tier 1 presidents expressed the most agreement with this statement, 80% of the Tier 1 presidents either agreed or strongly agreed.

The majority of the presidents agreed that a positive ranking was beneficial to the institution. Seventy-three percent of the presidents responding indicated that they felt that a positive rank benefited their institution. Only nine percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

While they appeared to covet a good ranking, the presidents were mostly in agreement about the impact of the rankings on the higher education industry. When asked their perceptions to the statement that the rankings benefit higher education as a whole, 60% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Twenty percent had no opinion and 20% either agreed or strongly agreed.

When the responses to these items were examined against the three independent variables of rank, public vs. private status, or length of presidency, there was only one

item that indicated significance. When the item related to the importance of the rankings to prospective students was analyzed, rank did appear to have an impact on the response. The data indicated that Tier 4 institutions were less likely to agree with this statement than their counterparts in Tiers 1, 2, and 3.

Variance in Responses Based Upon Rank

The last main focus of this study was to determine if there were any differences in how the institutions use the rankings or how they respond to the rankings based upon their *USNWR* rankings.

The data did indicate that an institution's rank did impact how it used its ranking in two instances: Tier 1 institutions were more likely to include information about their rank in materials sent to prospective students. When asked if they included their *USNWR* rank on materials sent to prospective students, 75% of Tier 1 presidents indicated that they did use the ranking. No other tier group had a majority of institutions that engaged in this practice.

Tier 1 institutions were also more likely to include information about rank in materials sent to alumni than institutions in any other tier ranking group. One hundred percent of Tier 1 institutions indicated that they advertise their rank to alumni. Again, no other tier group had a majority of respondents that engaged in this practice.

There were no significant differences among any of the tier groups in their use of the rankings to increase alumni support or in the use of mailings to peer institutions in order to influence peer assessment.

The last section of questions asked the presidents about their institutions' response to the ratings. When asked if they had ever considered not participating in the rankings, the data revealed a relationship between rank and the response to this question. Fifty-three percent of Tier 3 institutions and 80% of Tier 4 institutions indicated they had considered not participating compared to 35% in Tier 1 and 40% in Tier 2 who indicated they had considered not participating.

When asked if they felt their institution would suffer by not participating, the data indicated a significant relationship between the institution's rank and response to this question. The presidents of Tier 1 and Tier 2 institutions were more likely to indicate that their institutions would suffer than the presidents of Tier 3 and Tier 4 institutions.

When asked if they wished the rankings did not exist, there was an even split among respondents who wished the rankings did not exist and those who did not. There was also a fairly even split within each tier. There was no relationship between rank and a desire that the rankings did not exist.

The presidents were also asked about any movement in their institutions' rankings over the past one, three, five and ten year periods. Fifty-six percent of the presidents indicated that their rank had not changed over a one year time period. Over a three-year time period, 49% indicated no change in rank, 44% indicated they had improved rank and six percent indicated they had actually declined in the rankings. Over a five-year time period, 51% of the presidents indicated that their rank had improved, 43% indicated no change and 6% indicated a decline. Over the ten-year time period, 60% had indicated improvement. In Tier 4, 36% of the presidents indicated their rank had improved.

However, through the 2004 edition of *America's Best Colleges*, only institutions in Tier 1 were assigned a numeric rank within the tier group. All of the institutions listed in Tiers 2, 3 and 4 were merely grouped alphabetically within their respective tiers. While sub-scores are listed on the ranking criteria for each institution, no numeric ranking within these tiers is assigned. It would, therefore, be impossible for an institution in Tier 4 to improve ranking over any time period and actually remain in Tier 4.

Conclusions

Do the rankings influence the policies and decisions made on the campuses of southern comprehensive colleges and universities? Are there differences in the way the colleges use the rankings? Are there differences in the perceptions of the rankings based on an institution's own rank? The answer to all of these questions is both "yes" and "no."

This study found that while there are some institutions that have included a ranking goal as part of a strategic plan, very few have actually shifted funding or introduced major initiatives in order to influence rank. It would seem that while most presidents would welcome a higher ranking, they are either not concerned enough or strategic enough to introduce initiatives that could influence rank. It is possible that the presidents do not believe such actions would actually pay off or that they would produce any positive return on the institution's investment.

While there is general agreement that rankings are not a valid and accurate measure of quality among tier groups 2, 3, and 4, there is agreement that the rankings are important to prospective students, alumni and trustees. There is also agreement that a

positive ranking is beneficial to an institution.

Responses to many of these questions highlight the dissonance in higher education over the rankings. Presidents, especially at lower ranked institutions, indicate that the rankings are not valid. Yet, these same presidents who indicated the rankings are not valid work to improve their rank. They agree that the rankings are important to prospective students, alumni and trustees.

The presidents indicated that the rankings do not benefit higher education. Yet they also indicated that a positive rank is beneficial to the institution. If it is not good for higher education, how can it be good for their institution?

Institutions do not want to participate, yet they are afraid not to be listed. They cannot afford to ignore the rankings. While they may feel that a low ranking is bad, not to be listed would be worse.

Perhaps the benefit of the rankings to colleges and universities has been that it has created dialogue about quality. Whether or not one agrees with the criteria put forth by *U.S. News and World Reports*, at least administrators are thinking about how to measure and improve quality quality in higher education.

The responses provided to the questions related to the seven *USNWR* quality indicators illustrate that presidents are concerned about student retention and graduation rates. These are certainly indicators of how well an institution is carrying out its mission. Several of the presidents indicated that they have hired personnel to focus on retention or appointed committees to study this important area. This would be beneficial to all institutions. Educating students and assisting them to achieve an education is a worthy

goal for all institutions.

As to the differences in the uses of the rankings, it is not surprising that institutions with a higher rank are more likely to use the rankings than their lower ranked peers. Our society is programmed to recognize winners. The rankings are an outside validation that an institution is successful if it has a high ranking. Tier 1 institutions are more likely to promote their ranking than any other tier group because they have been deemed the winner in the ratings game.

As far as perceptions of the rankings are concerned, this was the area of the study where lower ranked institutions seemed most troubled with the rankings when given the opportunity to provide comments. Many of the comments provided by the presidents expressed their frustration over the inability of the rankings to recognize the individuality of each institution and the uniqueness of its mission. Tier 1 institutions were more likely to agree that the rankings were valid and accurate. Tier 3 and Tier 4 institutions were more likely to indicate that their institutions would not suffer by not participating. When asked, however, if a positive rank was beneficial over 73% responded that it was indeed beneficial. This illustrates the “love-hate” relationship that higher education has with the rankings. Unless we are highly ranked, we are more likely to criticize the rankings on their validity and accuracy. All institutions, however, would like to be highly ranked.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the pervasive nature of the rankings, there needs to be a change in the way institutions respond to the *U.S. News and World Reports*

“America’s Best Colleges.” Institutions should begin to accept the fact that rankings are here to stay. While this does not mean that institutions should pander to the rankings, it does mean that as an industry, higher education could begin to work to improve both the quality of education and the quality of the rankings.

First, institutions should continue to have dialogue on their campuses about what constitutes quality. While there is disagreement that the *USNWR* rankings measure quality, institutions should decide how they choose to measure quality on their campuses. This could mean focusing on retention, graduation rates, quality of instruction or improving physical plant. It might mean tackling all of these issues. Institutions will benefit by continuing the dialogue and striving to improve.

An important part of the dialogue concerning quality should include current college students. Many institutions are good about asking their current students what initially attracted them and the things they like and dislike about the institution. Institutions that do not utilize this valuable resource miss an opportunity to enhance quality and improve retention.

Second, professional organizations such as the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, Council for the Advance and Support of Education and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers could begin to work with *USNWR* to refine the rankings. Input from such organizations could lead to changes that would allow *USNWR* to more narrowly define institutional regions or missions. Peer assessment of academic reputation could benefit from such a change, for example. It is improbable that administrative officers in Tennessee would know much

about institutions in Texas.

USNWR currently works with institutional researchers to streamline reporting of the data used in the survey. Working with professional organizations could assist in the improvement of the rankings and in acceptance by higher education.

Third, college admissions professionals and high school guidance counselors should utilize materials provided by *USNWR* to inform students on the proper ways to use the rankings in the college selection process. Students have access to the rankings and should, therefore, be informed on how the rankings are compiled and how they should be used. Coordination with high schools and colleges could assist students to make better choices in the college search process. The focus of such an effort should emphasize that quality is not necessarily a limited commodity. The uniqueness of each institution and how well that institution meets the student's individual needs is the most important factor, not the ranking an institution receives from *USNWR* or any guidebook.

Fourth, faculty should be included in the discussion of quality in higher education. Administrators have long been used to serve as peer evaluators in the *USNWR* rankings. Many administrators have never taught and have no base of knowledge about what goes on in the lab or classroom. *USNWR* should begin working with professional associations or the American Association of University Professors to assist in the improvement of the rankings and in acceptance by higher education.

There are several opportunities for further studies based upon the foundation of this research. First, a national study of all college and university presidents to determine their perceptions of the *USNWR* rankings could be beneficial in initiating dialogue with

USNWR. Such a study could extend beyond perceptions about the current rankings formula and ask for input on new quality indicators. While cynics might suggest that *USNWR* is more interested in selling magazines than providing a valid assessment of quality in higher education, the continued refinement of the rankings study would indicate that the magazine is attempting to improve the instrument.

Second, a study focused importance of the rankings to different constituent groups could prove to be valuable. Studies have been conducted to determine if the rankings are important to prospective students. There have been no studies conducted, however, to determine if rank influences alumni giving. Many of the presidents in this study felt that a positive ranking was beneficial and that it was important to alumni. A study of alumni giving at institutions that have improved rank could assist in answering this question. A longitudinal study that analyzed alumni giving and tracked ranking over a period of time could detect any differences in giving based upon rank.

Third, a series of case studies at several institutions that are highly ranked or are attempting to improve rank could be insightful. Analyzing the *USNWR* quality indicators at highly ranked institutions and how they impact the educational process, compared to the same areas at lower ranked institutions, could reveal the importance of such quality indicators.

Finally, a study that analyzed the impact of a president's tenure on quality would be beneficial to higher education. Nationally, presidents tend to stay less than seven years at the same institution. Building relationships with donors, establishing a vision and guiding the institution to achieve that vision can be a lengthy process. A study that

analyzed the length of tenure of presidents and their ability to improve the quality of the institution could be valuable in setting the agenda in higher education leadership studies.

While this study attempted to determine how the rankings have influenced the policies and decisions at southern comprehensive colleges. It also attempted to understand how institutions use their rank and how important they perceive the rankings to be. The success of the *USNWR* rankings has ensured that they will remain a part of the landscape in higher education for years to come. While its focus was limited to one geographic region, it is possible that this study will be a catalyst for dialogue in higher education about the rankings and what constitutes quality in higher education.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Cover Letter

[Date]

[President's First Name] [President's Last Name]

[Institution]

[Address]

[City], [State] [Zip]

Dear [President's First Name]

The *US News and World Reports* "America's Best Colleges" rankings have become a permanent fixture on the landscape of higher education. Colleges and universities all across the country have made achieving a high ranking an institutional priority. Institutional resources are some times diverted from one program to another, slick promotional materials are produced to enhance peer evaluations, and alumni are constantly reminded that their giving influences the rankings.

I would like to ask you to participate in a study that is designed to determine how institutions respond to the rankings, and how effective those responses can be in influencing the institution's rank. As the president of your institution, you are best suited to describe how your institution responds to the rankings and how different constituents of the college respond to the rankings. I am conducting this study to complete dissertation requirements as a doctoral candidate at the University Of Tennessee College Of Education.

The enclosed questionnaire is designed to be completed fifteen minutes or less. I would deeply appreciate your cooperation in completing the questionnaire, and in providing useful input into the success of this study. All responses will be kept confidential. The coding on the survey is purely for response and follow-up purposes. All identifying materials will be kept under lock during the study and will be destroyed once the study is completed. A self-addressed stamped envelope has been provided for your convenience. Please return the questionnaire by [date]. Again, all responses will be confidential, and a copy of the findings will be available to all study participants simply by contacting me at the phone number or email address below.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the nature or purpose of this study. I deeply appreciate your cooperation.

Sincerely,

John D. Head

Ed. D. Candidate

Appendix B
Questionnaire

Presidential Perceptions of the *U.S. News and World Reports* “America’s Best Colleges” Rankings

Please provide your answers to the following questions related to your institution
and the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings.

1. Is your institution public or private?
☐ Public
☐ Private
2. Is this your first presidency?
☐ Yes
☐ No
3. How long have you served as a college or university president, at your current institution
and any previous institutions?
☐ Less than 5 years
☐ 5 to 7 years
☐ 7 to 10 years
☐ 10 to 15 years
☐ More than 15 years
4. What is the current rank of your institution in the latest *U.S. News and World Reports*
ranking?
☐ 1st Tier
☐ 2nd Tier
☐ 3rd Tier
☐ 4th Tier
☐ Not Ranked
☐ Not Sure
5. Do you list your institution’s rank on admissions materials sent to prospective students?
☐ Yes
☐ No

6. Do you list your institution's rank in alumni publications?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
7. Do you inform alumni that the level of alumni giving is one of the criteria used by *U.S. News and World Reports* to determine your institution's rank?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
8. Do you send copies of your institution's magazines and press releases to peer institutions? If you answer "No", skip to question 10.
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
9. If you answered "yes" to question 8, do you send the mailings to peer Institution's to influence their opinion of your college or university?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
10. Has your institution ever taken funding from one program to boost another area or program that has a greater impact on the *U.S. News* Rankings?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
11. Does your institution offer an "early-decision" admissions program for prospective students?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No
12. Does your institution have a plan in place to maintain or improve ranking in the *US News* rankings?
- ☐ Yes
☐ No

13. If so, please check each of the areas which you have targeted in order to improve your institution's ranking.

- ☐ Academic Reputation
- ☐ Student Retention
- ☐ Faculty Resources
- ☐ Student Selectivity
- ☐ Financial Resources
- ☐ Graduation Rates
- ☐ Alumni Giving

14. Please provide an example of steps your institution is taking in order to improve your ranking.

15. Has your institution listed in a strategic plan a specific rank or tier it would like to achieve in the *US News* ranking?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

16. If yes, please list examples of the specific areas identified in your strategic plan to help improve rank?

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements by placing an (X) in the box under the response which best represents your opinion.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 No Opinion	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
17. The <i>U.S. News and World Reports</i> rankings are a valid measure of the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Academic Reputation as determined by colleagues at peer institutions is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. An examination of an institution's retention rate is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. An examination of faculty resources is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. The level of student selectivity is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. The level of financial resources at an institution is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of the institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. The graduation rate performance of an institution is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 No Opinion	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
24. The level of alumni giving is an important tool in measuring the overall quality of an institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. An institution's ranking is important to prospective students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. An institution's ranking is important to alumni.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. An institution's ranking is important to trustees.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. The <i>US News</i> rankings are beneficial to prospective students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. The <i>US News</i> rankings are an accurate measure of an institution's quality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. The <i>US News</i> rankings benefit higher education as an industry.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. A positive ranking increases alumni support.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32. A positive ranking is beneficial to the institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. A desire to improve rank in the <i>US News</i> rankings has influenced policy formation or decision making at my institution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate your response to the following questions by placing an (X) in the box under the response which best represents your answer.

	1 Declined	2 No Change	3 Improved
34. Has your institution's rank improved, declined, or stayed the same in the last year?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. Has your institution's rank improved, declined, or stayed the same in the last three years?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36. Has your institution's rank improved, declined, or stayed the same in the last five years?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
37. Has your institution's rank improved, declined, or stayed the same in the last ten years?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

38. Has a desire to improve your institution's rank in the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings ever been the deciding factor in a decision or in establishing a policy on your campus?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

Please indicate your response to the following questions by placing an (X) in the box under the response which best represents your answer.

What pressure, if any, have you felt from the following constituencies in relation to your institution's rank?

	1 No Pressure	2 Some Pressure	3 Strong Pressure	4 Not Applicable
39. Current Students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
40. Faculty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
41. Alumni	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
42. Donors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
43. Trustees	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
44. Legislators	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

45. Have you ever considered not participating in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

46. Do you feel your institution would suffer if you did not participate?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

47. Do you wish the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings did not exist?

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

48. Please list any additional comments you would like to make at this time in relation to the *U.S. News and World Reports* rankings.

Appendix C

Follow-up Post Card 1

Dear President,

I know that you have many demands on your time. I do hope that you will make time to complete the questionnaire sent to you two weeks ago regarding the US News rankings. Your input will provide valuable information about how colleges just like you respond to rankings.

It only takes about fifteen minutes to complete the questionnaire. If you have lost your copy, just email me at jhead@shorter.edu for an additional copy. Thank you for your time.

Sincerley,
John D. Head

Appendix D

Follow-up Post Card 2

Dear President,

Your input is needed to complete an important study on how the US News rankings impact policy and decision making at colleges and universities. Please take the fifteen minutes to fill out the survey that was sent to you. If you need a new copy of the survey, please send me an email at jhead@shorter.edu. Thank you for your assistance in this research study.

Sincerley,
John D. Head

Appendix E

Follow-up Letter

[Date]

[President's First Name] [President's Last Name]
[Institution]
[Address]
[City], [State] [Zip]

Dear [President's First Name]

I am writing to you about a study that is designed to determine how colleges and universities respond to the *US News* "America's Best Colleges" rankings. This study is intended to provide useful information on how important the rankings are to institutions as they budget and prepare for the future. It is also designed to determine what actions different institutions take to influence their rankings.

Your participation in this study is important. The study focuses on your peer institutions and their reactions to the rankings. Your institution deserves to be included in this study, and your opinion is very important.

The enclosed questionnaire is designed to be completed fifteen minutes or less. I would deeply appreciate your cooperation in completing the questionnaire, and in providing useful input into the success of this study. All responses are confidential and will be kept under lock and key by the researcher at all times. A self-addressed stamped envelope has been provided for your convenience. Please return the questionnaire by [date]. All responses will be confidential, and a copy of the findings will be available to all study participants.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the nature or purpose of this study. I deeply appreciate your cooperation.

Sincerely,

John D. Head
Ed. D. Candidate
706-233-7342
jhead@shorter.edu

Appendix F

Questionnaire Comments

- **Question 14. Please provide an example of steps your institution is taking in order to improve your ranking:**
- Higher emphasis on student retention. Focus use of institution dollars to attract higher ability students
- We are an open admissions selective institution. Other issues predominate at this time.
- Targeted graduation rates, retention rates and alumni giving increases.
- Careful attention to filling out the questionnaire. Attention by one person to assuring maximum scorings in all areas of questionnaire.
- Eliminating associates degrees; allocating responsibility for retention; increasing alumnae giving; press interests in academic program.
- Working to develop visibility w/other institutions
- We try to make good decisions for our students and trust that rankings will take care of themselves.
- Faculty degrees, visibility, class size, retention/graduation rate, alumni giving
- No particular steps. Everyone is aware of the rankings, and is striving to become more efficient in their respective area.
- Keeping quality programs of studies, activities and student guidance; improving retention; maintaining good PR for the institution; providing a quality education to students.
- Increase the required SAT score/GPA for admissions; employed a full-time Director of Academic Assistance (retention officer).
- None - Most of our students are non-traditional, which the rankings fail to adequately take into account.
- Strategic Planning
- Our Education Department is revamping its program. We have hired a qualified Retention Director to oversee and implement strategic measures. We have implemented two giving programs and have increased our general campaign to the alumni.
- We are taking no extra steps. We allow consideration only because all the other institutions are involved. Too much emphasis is placed on graduation rates which is affected by the kind of student accepted in the first place.
- Appointment of a Special Assistant to the President on Enrollment Management and an Enrollment Management Committee to coordinate issues and develop strategies on recruitment, admission, enrollment, orientation, registration, financial aid and counseling.

- The college I oversee has recently come through a series of crises that cloud the data utilized by such ranking organizations. We have been concerned with survival, and we will improve our ranking as we improve our overall programs. I hope we can avoid expenditure of finite resources to influence unconcerned third-party "experts" who care little about the health and vitality of our specific institution.
 - Faculty and staff training to improve both retention and graduation rates; also established academic support center.
 - A task force was appointed on this matter. A strategic plan was developed for the aforementioned.
 - The ranking is not a consideration.
 - Endowed faculty development fund; alumni giving increased from 9% to 22%; improvements in retention (from 30% to 61% in one year); improvement in graduation rate; increased library resources; increases in faculty salaries; enhanced technology
 - We don't participate in US News Survey - somehow they continue to rank us.
-
- **Question16. If yes, please list examples of the specific areas identified in your strategic plan to help improve rank:**
 - Academic reputation, student retention, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving.
 - While we strive constantly to improve the quality of the education offered by Thomas More College, the focus has not been to improve our ranking. This has been a by-product of our efforts.
 - Change in Carnegie classification; double endowment; increase entering SAT's by 100 points; achieve 45% alumnae participation/giving; eliminate associate degrees; therefore increasing four year grad rates.
 - More visible at national conference: officer, presenter, hospitality; hire only those with terminal degrees; increase national visibility on web; hire outstanding international and retired faculty.
 - Increase academic scholarships; increase required SAT scores; focus long-term on retention.

- Without reference to improving its rank in US News, the University has in its strategic plan the following areas of focus that will, in effect, improve its ranking: 1) A comprehensive marketing plan to attract qualified graduate and undergraduate students, especially North Carolinians. 2) University-wide effort to retain and graduate students at all levels. 3) Faculty development program to focus on faculty having access to and support for opportunities related to professional growth. 4) Reduction in teaching load among full-time faculty. 5) Improvement in Freshman year program with activities designed to improve retention rate. 6) Increasing the percentage of faculty with terminal degrees. 7) Enrolling students with better academic preparation (i.e. SAT/ACT, high school GPA) at the University. 8) Increasing acquisition (i.e. fundraising) of financial resources, including an increase in endowment funds.
 - Enhance academic quality; enhance retention; enhance graduation rate.
 - Student retention; graduation rates.
 - Faculty upgrade; select admissions.
 - All in Q14 plus faculty excellence: publication, research, and teaching awards
-
- **Question 48. Please list any additional comments you would like to make at this time in relation to the US News rankings:**
 - Many of the indicators or rankings would make more sense if they were appropriately adjusted for differences in mission, selectivity, and characteristics of student enrollees. Most of the disagreements are due to the fact that appropriate adjustments in the calculations are not performed.
 - Many of our stakeholders, including alumni, donors and prospective students, look at US News rankings as an indicator of a university's progress. That is why I have become increasingly concerned about the way US News measures peer assessment, which accounts for 25% of each school's overall rating. Changes in peer assessment between +2% and -2% for 97.5% of the nation's top doctoral universities over four years clearly are too small to reflect reality. Many university administrators may not be in a position to promptly learn of the successes and failures of peer institutions, or may not reconsider their assessments from year to year. Because of our concerns, we commissioned a survey that examined how university administrators approach accessing peer institutions. Among other things, the study found that nearly 40% of senior administrators do not respond to the US News peer assessment survey. Of those who do respond, 72% assign their rating based on what they "already know or assume about a school's overall reputation." And the majority of respondents complete the survey without any input from their colleagues.
 - These rankings are not unfounded or illegitimate in their content and motives. They simply are a) not fully reflective of true institutional differences within the same categories and b) are too often misused by students.

- Life is complication. US News rankings are part of that complication. I regard the rankings as journalism, although they tend to be accurate from my perspective. I generally ignore them even as I am happy we are ranked well. That is probably a common contradiction among my peers.
- Decline was from #2 to #4 in Southeast Comprehensives, so fairly minimal.
- The Best value ranking is also important and should not be overlooked in your study.
- The US News & World Report rankings are not the most valid, but they do bring attention to campuses. They are not "academic" in nature, but they are understandable, and that is what the public audience appreciates. By and large, campuses favorable in the rankings approve of them; campuses not included find fault. At present, the rankings are the best public forum we have. Our only public promotion of our ranking (we are also selected as a Best Value) is via the sticker I attached to the envelope. We include this on out-going mail.
- Higher education is trapped in the US News and World Reports death spiral just as we are trapped in the use of standardized tests to "score" applicants.
- We really put no stock in them. We know schools that have high rankings but are very inferior. Their transfers to our small University have to have remedial work to even pass our classes. I think priorities are confused when colleges spend more time and money spending recognition when that time and money should be better spent on academic programs and student services. We had one admission director who was really an advocate of rankings but no one else here has been.
- During the last 10 years, have usually been in tier 2 but have "spiked" into tier 1 three times
- The rankings benefit institutions if they are ranked. Colleges and Universities that are not ranked would probably take issue with the criteria. They give free national and international exposure. There is a degree of objectivity since the US News and World Report is an external organization not affiliated with any specific institution.
- The assumption in the rankings is that there is a "best" college or university. This makes no more sense than the assumption that there is a "best" wife. In choosing colleges, as in choosing spouses, the task is to find the best fit for the individual. This means that different criteria must be applied in every instance and for every student. In essence, the whole notion of "ranking" institutions is nonsense.
- NSSE a much better indicator of effective, quality undergraduate experience. A sad by-product of a status-conscious, media savvy America...and beyond. A brilliant marketing strategy for US News but far from quality journalism.
- We use our ranking in advertising when it is high and ignore it when it is low.

- The individual measures of US News are interesting and helpful. However, the overall ranking of institutions is not valid, in my view. The study misses too much contextual data on institutions to produce real evaluations of quality. US News rankings are only a perception of quality based on a US News developed formula. It's designed to sell magazines, not improve higher education.
- Our institution has grown from 329 in 1991 to 1615 enrollment in 2003. We really can not keep up which is a great problem/opportunity to have. We have not, nor do we need in the future, this ranking to be the best, Christ-centered liberal arts college.
- Rankings do a disservice to higher education in the United States. They may sell magazines, but they tend to distort the goal-setting of many institutions.
- Regarding questions 35, 36, 37: According to US News Researcher, it is very difficult to make cross-year comparisons.
- I have no animosity toward these types of rankings, but all begin by building evaluation models which impress diverse institutions in boxes of common size and order. They fail to appreciate the diversity of opportunity inherent in higher education in the United States today. Such reports are not our focus.
- The ratings, in large part, are based on fiscal resources and support. It is not fair to smaller institutions with meager financial support.
- The ranking favors institutions with state support with the assumption that more money MUST translate to better quality. That assumption is totally false. Consider large public universities with high rankings which are also recognized as "party" schools with little academic worth.
- They are in every respect statistically invalid. A popularity contest does not generate quality. It is like the Miss America contest - the best never wins and politics plays a role.
- A survey of little value designed to sell magazines.
- Different criteria should be established. The current system is a "game" that many have succeeded at playing well.
- Just sells magazines.

Vita

John D. Head, a native of Trion, Georgia, earned the Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications from Shorter College. As an undergraduate, John was actively involved in student government, communications and media activities, the Baptist Student Union, and served as a student ambassador with the Admissions Office. After graduation from Shorter College, John attended the University of Georgia and earned the Master of Mass Communication degree.

John began his professional career in 1989, serving as an Instructor of Communications at his alma mater, Shorter College. Later that year, he began working at Reinhardt College as Associate Director of Admissions. In 1994, John became the Director of Admissions at Tennessee Wesleyan College. During his eight year tenure at Tennessee Wesleyan, he also served as Dean of Institutional Advancement and Dean of Students. In 2002, John again returned to Shorter College as Vice President of Enrollment Management. He currently resides in Rome, Georgia with his wife Lee Ann, and their daughter Katie.

John has served on various state and regional committees associated with the admissions profession. He has also presented at state, regional and national conferences on the uses of publications in the admissions process, customer/client services, and marketing private colleges. In addition, he has served as a consultant and trainer with D.H. Dagley Associates, an admissions recruiting and consulting firm.

John began his doctoral studies in Educational Administration and Policy

Studies with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration in 1998. He received the Ed. D. in May 2005.

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