

Rankings don't tell the whole story

BY LUIS M. PROENZA

Thousands of students are finalizing their choice of a college or university, a daunting task because of the rich diversity of institutions.

There are 3,856 colleges and universities across the nation. More than 200 are in Ohio, 38 of which are part of our system of public colleges and universities. That multiplicity of choices overwhelms many students and parents. So, how to make sense of all the options?

The many guides, rankings, classifications and state-by-state reports on performance that you might turn to for assistance have varying perspectives that, at best, make uniform comparisons unlikely and, at worst, provide a distorted picture of the higher education landscape.

Even the often-touted Carnegie Foundation's Classification of colleges and universities will not help.

Its long-standing approach was recently discarded because too many institutions abused it, claiming that their classification conferred status or excellence. The foundation's new "millennial edition" is an interim scheme awaiting a 2005 revision, but it is based on arbitrary thresholds and remains

subject to pretentious claims.

You may want to examine the best known, if always controversial, collegiate rankings published annually by *U.S. News & World Report*. The magazine uses its own categories, and you will see that among the four tiers of the 228 so-called national universities, 10 of Ohio's 38 public colleges and universities are listed. None appears in the first tier, three appear in the second, two in the third, and five in the fourth tier.

You may notice that only four of Ohio's public universities have any specific graduate programs ranked nationally: Ohio State University, the University of Cincinnati, The University of Akron, and Bowling Green State University.

(Of course, I would be remiss if I did not remind you that The University of Akron is the only public university in Ohio to have a science and engineering program ranked in the top five nationally.)

Indeed, the strength of American higher education lies in its competitive diversity. With so many different institutions, simple measures are impractical, and satisfactory rankings improbable. For instance, numerous rankings rely

heavily on measures of student retention or of graduation rates, clearly favoring schools that enroll full-time students over universities that enroll those who work while going to school. When students are working, they cannot complete a degree in four years, or even in the 5.3 years that the average full-time student in America takes to finish a baccalaureate degree. In other words, the time it takes to obtain a degree is more a function of the student than of the university.

One of the most-used ranking measures has been student selectivity (number of students admitted as a percentage of those who apply). But selectivity will ensure you only of a group of students matched according to the criteria for admission. In fact, careful studies confirm that when student quality is factored out, there is no particular reason to choose Stanford over Michigan, or either of those universities over Ohio State or Akron. Selectivity, in other words, may tell you a lot about incoming students, but does not mean that a selective university adds any value.

In many college rankings, selectivity is equated with quality

because the high price of tuition enables such schools to report more spending per student (a measure that would be synonymous with inefficiency in business). Yet, a recent study by Alan B. Krueger at Princeton University, and Stacey B. Dale, a senior researcher at Mathematica Policy Research Inc., concluded that students who chose colleges with lower admissions standards over more-selective colleges earned incomes equivalent to those who attended the more exclusive (and expensive) institutions.

As a prospective college student, the best question is to ask what you as an individual want to get out of a college or university. Consider what career opportunities you want to pursue after college and what college experiences would best prepare you. You need not have all of the answers to these and other questions, but thinking about them in relation to the universities you are considering will provide a good basis for an important and highly personal decision.

— Luis M. Proenza is president of The University of Akron.