



# Adventist COLLEGES

## and Universities and the Almighty Rankings

**A**dventist colleges and universities feel great pressure to attract more students in the ever-increasingly competitive environment of higher education. As they seek to distinguish themselves through accreditations, awards, and success of faculty, a new tool for showing a competitive edge has emerged: rankings. Various news outlets and Websites

rank United States (U.S.) and international universities.

This article reviews these rankings and some of the implications for Adventist colleges and universities. Therefore, two basic questions guide this analysis: First, do rankings really measure quality? And second, should Adventist institutions use these rankings to maintain and increase enrollment? Responding to these questions may have strategic implications for strengthening Adventist higher education.

### **The Almighty Rankings**

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing trend to classify and rank higher education, and these classifications and rankings evaluate a wide variety of characteristics such as quality academics, cost, campus diversity, location, and research opportunities. This trend started in the United States with *U.S. News and World Report (USNWR)*,<sup>1</sup> and similar ranking systems have spread nationally and internation-

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ally. The first one to launch international comparisons was the Institute of Higher Education of Jiao Tong University in Shanghai, China, also known as The Shanghai Rankings, which publishes the *Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)*. Other examples are the *Times Higher Education Rankings (2004)* and the *QS Stars University Rankings (2010)*.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the *U.S. News and World Report* has also created its own version of “World-Class Universities.” While the organization of these rankings varies in regard to the criteria they use, research productivity is a predominant measure in most of them.

These rankings have had a profound influence and a global impact amid a wide spectrum of reactions.<sup>3</sup> First, they have been assumed to be accurate measures of a good university.<sup>4</sup> Second, academic institutions use rankings to promote themselves. Third, policy makers have used rankings to advance policies, allocating more funding for institutions that engage in knowledge innovation to produce more jobs.<sup>5</sup> Several government assessment policies have stressed research productivity as a defining characteristic for flagship universities that strive for prominent positions.<sup>6</sup>

Now, back to the first question, can existing rankings be valid tools for assessing a university’s quality? What are some of the inconsistencies of these rankings?

### Challenges of Existing Rankings

It is important to clarify that rankings and evaluation are different concepts, although they are interconnected. When a university is assessed, it is measured against a set of benchmarks that an organization, such as an accrediting body, agrees to use for quality control. Academic programs within a university or the university on the whole may meet the assessed standards at varying degrees along a pass-fail continuum. Many of the evaluation indicators are qualitative and thus intended to guide institutions continuously toward complex views of

quality. Rankings also set quantitative indicators that allow comparisons of similar institutions. These benchmarks are combined into an index to rank institutions on a scale that can range, for instance, from 0 to 100.

Although rankings may be useful in determining how well institutions perform regionally or even internationally, they are controversial and far from being neutral. What kinds of indicators are used to rank universities? Tables 1 and 2 show a global view of parameters and their power within two very influential ranking scales.

In the case of *ARWU* (Table 1), most of its benchmarks are highly associated with research. Unfortunately, several studies have revealed important inconsistencies in the way criteria are chosen,<sup>7</sup> as well as inaccuracies in some indicators.<sup>8</sup> Univer-

sities may rank very differently depending on indicators and the weight given to each of them. The *Times Higher Education Ranking* and the *QS Stars University Rankings* are also very much oriented toward research, using it as their main quality indicator, although they have also added teaching, among other factors.

In the American context, the *U.S. News and World Report* also has a large set of undergraduate rankings that are different in many ways from the international ones. As shown in Table 2, research is not considered in ranking institutions. The whole ranking system hinges on reputation, selectivity, resources for faculty and students, graduation and retention, and alumni connection to the university.

Choosing and setting up quality indicators can be a problem for exist-

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**Table 1. Criteria and Indicators for the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)\***

Criteria	Indicator	Code	Weight
Quality of education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	Alumni	10%
	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals (Not including Peace and Literature Prizes)	Award	20%
Quality of faculty	Highly cited researchers in 21 broad subject categories	HiCi	20%
	Papers published in <i>Nature</i> and <i>Science</i> (With different weights for order and repetition of affiliation)	N&S	20%
Research output	Papers indexed in <i>Science Citation Index-Expanded</i> and <i>Social Science Citation Index</i>	PUB	20%
	Per capita academic performance of an institution (the weighted scores of the above five indicators divided by the number of full-time equivalent academic staff)	PCP	10%
<b>Total</b>			<b>100%</b>

\*Developed from *Academic Ranking of World Universities Methodology* Webpage <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU-Methodology-2012.html>.

**Table 2. Criteria and Indicators for Undergraduate Ranking Through *USNWR*\***

<b>Ranking Category</b>	<b>Category Weight</b> National & Regional Univ.; National & Regional Colleges	<b>Sub Factor</b>	<b>Sub Factor Weight</b> National Universities & Colleges	<b>Sub Factor Weight</b> Regional Universities & Colleges
Undergraduate academic reputation	22.5%	Peer assessment survey	66.7%	100%
		High school counselors' ratings	33.3%	0%
Student selectivity for fall 2013 entering class	12.5%	Acceptance rate	10%	10%
		High school class standing in top 10%	25%	0%
		High school class standing in top 25%	0%	25%
		Critical Reading and Math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT scores	65%	65%
Faculty resources for 2013-2014 academic year	20%	Faculty compensation	35%	35%
		Percent faculty with terminal degree in their field	15%	15%
		Percent faculty that is full time	5%	5%
		Student/faculty ratio	5%	5%
		Class size, 1-19 students	30%	30%
		Class size, 50+ students	10%	10%
Graduation and retention rates	22.5%	Average graduation rate	80%	80%
		Average freshman retention rate	20%	20%
Financial resources	10%	Financial resources per student	100%	100%
Alumni giving	5%	Average alumni giving rate	100%	100%
Graduation rate performance	7.5%	Graduation rate performance	100%	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>			

\* Developed from the ranking indicator weights table in Robert Morse and Eric Brooks, "Best Colleges Ranking Criteria and Weights," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2014/09/08/best-colleges-ranking-criteria-and-weights>.

ing university models, since rankings reflect current patterns in tertiary education, and these patterns may not align with the mission of the college or university. This is not wrong if it is presented as one possible option and not as “the” model for postsecondary education quality. Why not? Several reasons, which include the following:

1. *Is this possible for all?* Although universities should promote and develop research, not all them have the resources to produce the most cited and selective journals or Nobel Prize-winning faculty, since that goal requires well-equipped and well-funded institutions. This is doable for universities that publish scholarly books or various journals in English, own the most advanced labs and research equipment, attract a wide range of the best national and international researchers and students, and have a strong institutional commitment to the applied sciences. How many institutions match such a description? Even in the United States, a front-runner country in rankings, only a few universities can really compete for the top positions.<sup>9</sup>

2. *What about different models of education?* There are thousands of training institutions that will not develop a mission that is oriented or designed to contribute through research and scientific discoveries. Is that incorrect or falling short? It all depends on the model and purposes of the institution. Adventist universities are good examples of institutions whose missions don't totally align with what rankings consider critical. Although research universities have a vital role in today's economy and social climate, one may ask, Is it possible and affordable for all Adventist universities to engage in these research-intensive activities? In addition, one major problem with rankings is that they tend to facilitate institutional isomorphism (copying one another) over universities that don't fit into this model and thus rank lower.<sup>10</sup> This has important practical implications that may blur some of the purposes of Adventist higher education.

3. *What about other indicators of performance?* Most influential rankings don't take into account community engagement, learning outcomes, and graduates' impact on society, to mention a few. These are very important components that reflect universities' missions. While universities are undoubtedly places that prepare professionals who can contribute to their disciplines, they should also strive to instill in their students the values that will impact their communities, improving them through not only discoveries but also technological innovation. Kronman<sup>11</sup> argues that the vast majority of universities in the United States have lost the dimension of “the meaning of life.” That is, they have become professional training schools disregarding other important aspects of education, such as inculcating spiritual and moral values. Many of the institutions that do not appear in any ranking contribute to their communities in countless unclassified ways.<sup>12</sup> For instance, they function as social “equalizers” by giving opportunities to poor and undereducated students to become middle-class professionals. Like many other small institutions, Adventist universities fulfill this role.

It is important to underscore that in many cases, organizations that report rankings are built as businesses. For example, magazines such as *U.S. News and World Report* sell more ads, get more exposure, and attract more external funding as they attract the attention of students, parents, and universities. Institutions search for ways to differentiate. Parents and students, concerned with the tuition they are about to pay, are looking for indicators that would enable them to make the best decision or, as frequently expressed, investment. Ranking managers know this and work hard to respond to these concerns. The strategies seem to work, at least for now.

## How to React

What can Adventist colleges and universities do to handle these powerful forces? In order to respond to these increasing demands for evidences of quality, it is important to put rankings into perspective and see how they really affect institutions in relation to (1) students' decisions and (2) institutional strategy.

*Students' decisions.* The American Council of Education (ACE) recently released a comprehensive study<sup>13</sup> that makes it possible to observe different patterns of students' decision-making, and this can help colleges and universities develop proactive strategies. Some of the key findings are summarized as follows:

1. Type and quantity of students using the rankings. The report showed that according to some early studies, rankings were important for students from high-income families with Asian-American backgrounds, and whose parents have college degrees. These students were high achieving, tended to apply to several institutions, and were more likely to attend selective universities. So, the most-qualified applicants were more prone to search for top-ranked institutions. This research confirms that selective and wealthy institutions attract students who match their profile.

However, in a recent study seeking to determine how influential rankings are, the Higher Education Research Institute at University of California (UCLA), Los Angeles, revealed that only about a quarter of students reported that rankings were very important to them. In addition, the ACE report quoted several studies showing that of the 70 percent of high-achieving students who checked rankings, only about half of them made decisions based on them. It seems not even the majority of the brightest students are really guiding their choices according to the highly visible rankings.

2. What drives students' decisions? Although rankings and prestige have an influence, the ACE report underscores the importance of educational

aspirations, involvement and communication with parents, peers, networks, and financial aid offered at universities in informing students' decisions about where to enroll. This is also true for low-income students who represent a significant percentage of those who enroll in many Adventist universities.<sup>14</sup> This group was more likely, according to the study, to make a decision and to enroll in a school based on family support, high school counselors, university representatives, and information obtained through publications and Websites. For this group, cost and location were crucial factors in selecting a university. The same was true for highly qualified low-income students from various cultural and racial backgrounds. The availability of information and strong communication with prospective students seemed to be central to their enrolling in a program.

In short, as the ACE report asserts: "Based on newly updated data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)—rankings are not a driving factor in student decisions on which institution to attend, and are even less relevant for students from low-income backgrounds. More salient influences include family involvement and encouragement, peer and other networks, and school- and higher education institution-based resources, including those that are semi-customized."<sup>15</sup>

It is clear that rankings do help institutions, to some degree, to attract and enroll students. However, as described above, other important factors may be significantly more influential. This gives Adventist colleges and universities a window of hope.

*Institutional strategy.* Is there any value for Adventist education in these rankings? How might colleges and universities benefit from them? Institutions may ponder this question from at least three broad perspectives, namely: (1) accepting rankings as an accurate measure of quality; (2) rejecting rankings as irrelevant;

and (3) evaluating them carefully and using their results in responsible ways. The first and second options denote a lack of understanding of how rankings work and influence people and institutions. The third option provides a wiser approach. This means that while universities may not agree with all the indicators and the overall results, they can judiciously utilize them as marketing tools. Schools can thus improve their rank or position by endorsing a pro-

active strategy to advance some indicators that are aligned with their institutional mission. For instance, improving graduation and retention rates (see Table 2) is an important rating factor in the *USNWR* and also represents a very positive outcome for any college. The same is true of alumni giving and expansion of research. Other indicators may be more controversial, such as selectivity. For

## Box 1. Examples of College and University Ranking Organizations

### ***The Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)***

<http://www.shanghairanking.com/>

First published in June 2003, *ARWU* was created by Shanghai Jiao Tong University to compare China's universities to international competitors. Six ranking indicators include the number of Nobel Prizes and Field Medals won by faculty and staff, highly cited researchers, articles published in journals such as *Nature* and *Science*, number of articles indexed in a *Science Citation Index–Expanded*, and per capita performance of a university. *ARWU* introduced the field of global comparisons rankings and is published and copyrighted by Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, an independent organization.

### ***QS World University Rankings***

<http://www.topuniversities.com/qs-world-university-rankings>

*QS World University Rankings*<sup>®</sup>, launched in 2004, publishes annual rankings for the top 600 universities in the world. Four key indicators include research, teaching, employability, and internationalization (international faculty and students). The rankings are governed by an independent, international advisory.

### ***Times Higher Education World University Rankings***

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/>

The *Times Higher Education [THE] World University Rankings*, founded in 2004, ranks the world's global universities across key indicators such as teaching, research, international outlook, reputation and more. *THE*, first published from 1971 to 2008 as *Times Higher Education Supplement [THES]*, and since 2008 as *THE*, is published by a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News International.

### ***U. S. News and World Report (USNWR)***

<http://www.usnews.com/rankings>

Compiled by the editors of *U.S. News and World Report*<sup>®</sup>, this magazine published the first ranking of undergraduate programs in 1983. Expanded to include rankings of medical, engineering, law, and business schools, *USNWR* provides one of the most widely circulated and well-known college and university ranking systems. Raters include presidents, academic deans, and admissions officers.



example, in the United States, every institution wants the best possible students, but screening them based mainly on ACT and SAT scores may not be quite fair. Alternative and complementary practices can produce better results in the long run if the goal is to serve the Adventist constituency. In the end, this is an institutional choice.

Another practical way for institutions to use rankings to their advantage is by reporting on brochures and webpages any aspect of an awarded or ranked program that showcases the unique characteristics of the institution. This is also useful for schools that are unable to get ranked in an overall position through a ranking system. Likewise, the use of different types of rankings derived from a wide range of quality criteria is beneficial. In other words, what is not visible here may be visible over there!

In addition, universities can develop unconventional strategies to “counterbalance” some of the negative perceptions fostered by rankings. Through a Webpage and/or promotional brochures, for instance, institutions can describe how rankings are developed and the criteria they use to assess quality. This will enable them to explain and promote the “plus” factors inherent in Adventist higher education. Some institutions may advance this as a key strategy. It can be called “in-addition quality criteria” for potential students. Some potential areas schools may want to emphasize are as follows:

1. *Purpose.* The mission of Adventist education is not only to prepare people for employment and economic success but also to inculcate a Christian worldview. Adventist education does not reject the spiritual dimension of learning because it is difficult to measure scientifically. It exposes students to every element of reality and seeks to develop well-rounded persons who embrace a biblical worldview cultivated through experiences such as chapel services, seminars, church services, worship services, small classes, and personal

attention from professors. To successfully embrace and decide to integrate into their lives what the Bible endorses, students need a personal relationship with God. The ultimate goal is redemptive. In this process of developing character, young people embrace values that impact their subsequent professional practices and lifestyle. Accordingly, Adventist schools offer their students guidance in integrating their personal and professional values. Thus, the purpose of Adventist education can be equated to helping students to develop a worldview that influences all of their personal and professional dimensions. Public universities also look for ways to impact their students, but the focus tends to be on humanistic approaches that lead to an overemphasis on research and professional products as the future for students and society. Adventist higher education offers a significant difference!

2. *Curriculum.* Secular universities integrate literature and knowledge with materialistic approaches, which means that the guidance conveyed by sacred books, such as the Bible, has been neglected due to the focus on scientific and humanistic arguments. However, these works should be studied as a source of wisdom for life. In the Adventist college or university, the curriculum blends science and faith in a complementary way rather than excluding any legitimate source of information. Also, faith is integrated into all subjects taught within the curriculum, providing students with multiple opportunities to grow in their understanding of how faith impacts their decisions and choices. Involvement in academic and co-curricular activities reinforces the centrality of a student’s personal relationship with God. This approach helps students to become wiser, impacting their personal lives and professional growth. Ellen White emphasized this saying, “The strength of our college is in keeping the religious element in the ascendancy.”<sup>16</sup> Through curriculum, Adventist col-

leges and universities have the opportunity to create environments where students can experience the renewal of mind and can understand and act based on biblical assumptions through a personal relationship with God.

3. *Teaching.* Faculty members play a key role not only through what they teach but also through what they represent in their own lives as active Christians. Thus, professors must embody the institutional mission to avoid sending double messages to students who are seeking role models based on living examples. They should mentor and counsel students throughout the learning processes, helping them to adjust to real life and encouraging them to give their hearts to Christ. At the same time, these professors ought to be highly regarded professionals who contribute to their specific professional and academic community and foster academic excellence in their students.

4. *Students.* Most students recognize the importance of a spiritual dimension of their lives and want to enhance it through interactions with instructors, friends, and cocurricular experiences such as worship and chapel services offered by their college or university. Higher education enables students to modify their understanding of personal and professional needs and to adjust to new challenges. All this happens in the context of the disciplinary field they have chosen, enriching their future career performance. Students should leave the university with a clear sense of personal mission based on a biblical worldview and a commitment to service within their professions. This will give graduates a moral backbone that is essential for current society and the economy, as well as an involvement with the gospel commission.<sup>17</sup>

5. *Interaction with culture.* Adventist colleges and universities must strive to position themselves as regional, national, or even international advocates for a proactive vision of the paradigm they embrace. By producing positive changes in students and communities, universities become organi-

zations that have scientific and social impact. Ultimately, these institutions become a counterculture that seeks to influence all dimensions of human endeavor.

All of these are some of the real contributions that most Adventist colleges and universities make and may, in many cases, go unnoticed by potential students and constituents. So, with examples and cases to illustrate the “in-addition quality criteria,” institutions can better demonstrate quality.

### Final Thoughts

Although the number of rankings is growing and these comparisons are impacting Adventist colleges and universities all over the world, there is also evidence that institutions can develop their own models and strategies for attracting new students. The pressure to “fit in” is great and can distort the essential paradigms and mission that provide the rationale for operating a college or university, such as the ones operated by the Adventist Church.<sup>18</sup> There is a need to make explicit how rankings can serve as strong and strategic marketing tools to connect with prospective students. Perhaps the biggest challenge Adventist colleges and universities face is to know precisely how to deal with pressures to “align” with the dominant trends and remain relevant without compromising their essential features. ✍

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