

**The Journey of Ranking Ph.D.-Granting Human Development
and Family Studies Departments**

Alan Reifman, Ph.D., Jacki Fitzpatrick, Ph.D., Sylvia Niehuis, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University

Jennifer K. Chapman, Ph.D.
Eckerd College

C. Rebecca Oldham, Ph.D.
Middle Tennessee State University

Jean Pearson Scott, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University

Dan Fang, Ph.D.
GLG Quantitative Insights, Hong Kong

Shu Yuan, Ph.D., Miriam Lieway, Ph.D.
Texas Tech University

Desiree N. Walisky, Ph.D.
Texas Tech Health Sciences Center

&
Leah Gregersen
Texas Tech University

ABSTRACT. This Professional Development and Reflection Corner (PDRC) article accompanies our research article on ranking Ph.D.-granting Human Development and Family Studies departments. Rankings of departments, universities, and other organizations can be helpful to many people, such as faculty members mentoring promising undergraduates on where to attend graduate school. However, there are also concerns over rating systems. One involves whether they use meaningful criteria, highly accurate data, and transparency in their methods. Another concern, coming from critical literature on “performativity,” questions whether heavy reliance on rating and ranking systems creates undesirable incentives and diminishes scholars’ intrinsic motivation. We discuss our journey to mitigate concerns over data quality and reflect on our research in light of possible unintended consequences of ratings. Finally, we offer tips and recommendations for department chairs, deans, and others considering how best to measure academic departments’ productivity and achievements.

Keywords: assessment, evaluation, Human Development and Family Studies departments; rankings, ratings

Direct correspondence to Alan Reifman at alan.reifman@ttu.edu, Jacki Fitzpatrick at Jacki.Fitzpatrick@ttu.edu, or Sylvia Niehuis at sylvia.niehuis@ttu.edu

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Rankings of academic institutions, programs, and departments are all the rage worldwide. National rankings are ubiquitous...These operations are widely criticized for questionable or flawed methods as well as for the concept itself, but everyone uses them.

– Altbach (2006, p. 2)

Rankings of academic departments, universities, and other organizations have potential to influence observers' impressions of these entities (in a positive or negative direction) and to affect people's decisions. Potentially positive uses of rankings include enhancing faculty mentors' ability to guide promising undergraduate students to graduate school programs that match students' aspirations and career goals, and young professionals' ability to gauge departments' strengths and weaknesses when time comes to accept offers employment. However, as illustrated in the quotation above, such rankings are as controversial as they are ubiquitous. Altbach (2006) also suggests further "The problem with ranking concerns the practice, not the principle" (p. 2), a view that many would likely share. Critical theorists, however, raise concerns over ratings and rankings in principle, noting their possible contributions to "commodification of knowledge," an assessment-focused "culture of performativity," and "reduc[tion of] intellectual life to a series of measurable 'outputs'" (Roberts, 2007, pp. 352-353). Kenny (2017) and Roberts (2007) concur that extensive rating systems may overlook or diminish faculty members' intrinsic motivations to do research.¹

Whether one is concerned with the practice (empirical operationalization) of rating and ranking studies, their principle (premises, assumptions, and possible consequences), or both, researchers must reflect on these issues and strive to minimize negative effects. After all, ratings and rankings appear to be with us for the foreseeable future. The present paper, therefore, expands on our empirical research article by delving into concerns raised above. Although few readers of this paper are likely to conduct large-scale multiple-university ranking projects, readers serving now or in the future as department chairs or deans may find our metrics useful for evaluating faculty members' productivity. Furthermore, even academicians who never serve in administration will almost certainly have their research subjected to evaluations and rankings (e.g., annual review, third-year review, promotion and tenure), so the topic is urgent for them, too.

¹ Ratings and rankings are distinguishable, with the former involving evaluation of an object in its own right and the latter explicitly comparing one object to others. Evaluations of the type we discuss typically contain elements of both rating and ranking. For simplicity, therefore, we sometimes use only of the terms, depending on which seems more applicable to a given situation.

Reflections on the Journey of Data Collection

As detailed in our accompanying research article, we devised statistical rankings for 50 North American Ph.D.- granting Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) programs, using metrics such as faculty members' publication and citation rates, grant receipts, and editorial board memberships. In devising our metrics, we sought to achieve objectives of meaningfulness, accuracy, and transparency in two main ways.

First, we presented our preliminary findings and sought feedback at a special session of the 2015 National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) conference. We had submitted our ranking study to this conference with the expectation that, if accepted, program organizers would assign it to a poster session or oral-presentation session with several papers. However, given the apparent interest in HDFS departmental rankings (likely inspired by Claire Kamp Dush's [2014] rankings, which focused on judges' subjective ratings of departments' reputations), we were assigned to a unique session. This session included only our study and discussant remarks by Kamp Dush and her Ohio State University colleague Jason Sullivan of the school's Institutional Research & Planning office. This session sought to generate – and we believe, succeeded in generating – larger discussion of how to integrate human ratings and statistical metrics in rating academic departments. Attendees included faculty members from many different HDFS departments. Their suggestions included broadening the set of funding agencies we used in compiling our grant-funding data and the set of journals we included in our editorial board tabulations. Some audience members expressed their impressions that the list of faculty members we used in assessing their departments may have omitted the names of some colleagues.

Beyond suggestions and critiques pertaining to specific aspects of our methods, a broader recommendation from many in attendance at the NCFR session was that we enlist department chairs in resolving ambiguities inherent in online information sources and gleaning information that might not be readily available online. An example of resolving ambiguities would be having department chairs tell us whether anyone listed as a faculty member on their departmental website was actually a lecturer or adjunct without expectations to publish (whom we would exclude), or whether we had overlooked someone who should have been on our list. An example of obtaining difficult-to-find information from department chairs would be having them provide lists of their faculty members' grant receipts in recent years, since some funding agencies did not appear to list grant recipients online. These suggestions from NCFR session attendees constituted valuable lessons learned.

Operationally, our outreach to chairpersons of all Ph.-D.- granting HDFS departments involved e-mailed letters explaining purposes and methods of our project and requesting they review our current information about their faculty members (attached as Excel sheets) for accuracy and provide relevant information they felt we had overlooked. To avoid overburdening chairpersons and others in their departments who helped them, our letter stated, “We are only seeking corrections and supplementary information and do not expect you and your faculty members to provide comprehensive data.” We heard from 58% of the departments that we contacted. Most responses pertained directly to our areas of inquiry. However, other responses

were unique to particular schools and helped contextualize why that school may not have ranked highly on a given criterion. To give one example, the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University (BYU) relies heavily on internal grants for research funding. These grants are supported by donors and endowments (personal communication, Dean Busby, June 4, 2018), thus lowering this program's standing on external grant receipt. The key to securing department chairs' and other colleagues' cooperation in our data-collection was our avoidance of imposing on these colleagues. Their time and energy are limited resources, even though some colleagues might truly want to help. Based on our experiences, we strongly advocate involving professional colleagues in departmental ranking studies for the aforementioned purposes of meaningfulness, accuracy, and transparency. However, we realize their involvement may not always be possible.

Reflection on Larger Benefits and Costs of Rating and Ranking Systems

Even critical articles acknowledge positive aspects of academic rating and ranking systems. Kenny (2017) mentioned that well-conceived and implemented evaluation systems tend to make research expectations more clear to faculty members than less systematic approaches do. Roberts (2007) also cited reasons (as matters of principle) for having ratings, such as: "Devoting taxpayers' money to research in institutions and organizations where little research is undertaken is wasteful and ethically indefensible" (p. 356).

More negatively, as noted above, rating systems may spur transformation in what drives research: away from scholars' intrinsic intellectual interests and quests to achieve scientific progress, towards economic value, quantification, and applied utility. In our view, qualities such as economic and applied value are not necessarily bad, but they can become detrimental when pursued in a way that dwarfs basic research that is concerned with theory development, refinement, and testing. Having devoted much effort toward constructing a highly quantitative ranking system, we would hate to think we are helping to squelch intrinsically motivated, creative, basic research. Instead, we hope that scholarship from critics of ranking systems, including surveys of researchers to gain their perspectives (Kenny, 2017), can be used for blunting some potentially deleterious effects of rankings. Researchers' concerns reported by Kenny (2017) include: (1) scholarly output being evaluated relative to time available for research after taking into account teaching and service loads (see also Roberts, 2007); (2) "minimum" productivity requirements having "possible perverse effects such as a greater focus on the quantity of research output at the expense of quality" (p. 907); and (3) excessive focus on grant-receipt, especially in a "dwindling research funding environment" (in the words of one respondent; p. 907). As the article noted, pursuit of grants takes considerable time; with a low success rate, this may drive up negative emotions. Above all, we believe that each faculty member's research output should be evaluated "relative to opportunity" to work on research (Kenny, 2017, p. 903).

Conclusion

Returning to Altbach's (2006) opening quote, any ranking system, ranging from those involving national and international collectives of organizations to local departments, has a good chance of being "widely criticized." No metric is empirically perfect, so every overall ranking system will be made up of imperfect components. Furthermore, the entire ranking enterprise in principle may create negative or in some cases ambiguous consequences. As Roberts (2007) observed pessimistically, "It is often only through years of reflection, dialogue, investigation and writing that depth of understanding in one's area of research develops" and that this delayed recognition of a research contribution "cannot be captured... in the form of listed units of research 'output'" (p. 358). Despite the short-term thinking that rating systems potentially induce, the fact that some research may only come to be appreciated after the passage of many years may be a somewhat silver lining.

By reaching out to colleagues in the field and seeking their suggestions, we hope to have maximized accuracy, credibility, and benefits of our results and minimized any of their negative aspects. We also hope that individuals who must decide between departments (e.g., undergraduate students seeking graduate programs, new professionals considering faculty job offers) will find our efforts worthwhile. Ultimately, however, we feel extensive reflection by stakeholders throughout the ranking enterprise – which we (and other authors) have attempted to spur – will lead to rating and ranking schemes that are as fair and beneficial as possible.

Alan Reifman is a Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Jacki Fitzpatrick is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Sylvia Niehuis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Jennifer K. Chapman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development at Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL 33711.

C. Rebecca Oldham is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Sciences at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN 37132.

Jean Pearson Scott is a Professor (Retired) in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Dan Fang is a Ph.D. recipient from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Shu Yuan is a Ph.D. recipient from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Miriam Lieway is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1230.

Desiree N. Walisky, L.C.S.W., is the Director of Research, Policy, and Development and a Child and Family Therapist at the Center for Superheroes, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, Lubbock, TX 79413, and Ph.D. candidate in Educational Psychology & Leadership at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409-1071.

Leah Gregersen is an educator and businessperson in the Lubbock, Texas area.

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