



**By Darryl Greer
and Mico Lucide**

Nationally, there has been a recent explosion

in the number of college report cards, rating and ranking initiatives.¹ Examples include those supported by the White House, student activists, for-profit companies, non-profit foundations, college associations, and even social media enterprises such as *LinkedIn*. Values driving these grading/rating schemes have a mix of commercial and public accountability objectives. But one factor connects their purposes: an overriding concern about what drives college cost (expenses) and the price students pay. This principal concern diminishes rather than adds to their usefulness for many students and families, especially first-generation, poor and underserved populations.

Our research indicates that more than price concerns, citizens link college value with availability of practical experiences (such as internships) tied to academic studies; better advising about academic choices and careers; and easier credit

transfer to reduce time to degree completion; leading to the most important outcome of college—an

increased prospect for a good job and a better life.

The Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance Project (HESIG) of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University (N.J.) qualitatively reviewed 10 college rating websites, following a 2014 New Jersey poll on college value (summaries of websites' content, how to use them, and survey results are available at www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig). These report cards should be judged not only regarding the validity, reliability and utility of the data provided, but also on principles guiding their development in the first instance. We suggest an approach based on college value and outcomes expectations that might work better in providing information to advance college opportunity, affordability and success.

Flawed Assumptions on Need, Audience, Comparability and Outcomes

Report card providers explicitly state or imply that there is too little information and a lack of transparency about college cost and price. They assume that more comparative cost information will lead to more enlightened consumer choices, better decisions on where to attend college, and about how much to pay, leading to better outcomes and less personal debt. But as a recent Brookings study regarding transparency in calculating college costs points out, while cost calculators are “well intended, they have had limited success and may even make matters worse.”²

Some providers start with an implicit, simplistic “return on investment” framework that does not take into account college as a mixed public and private good that provides long-term benefits over a lifetime. The problem with a consumer-driven, market-model approach is that there is already so much information available about choosing a college, that more, sometimes questionable, information may confuse some college-bound individuals, especially poor and first-generation college students. While “self-service” market-models excel at providing users with the freedom to find and exchange information, they are insufficient in providing equitable access to other resources needed to exploit successfully a marketplace crowded with often questionable or useless comparative information about thousands of colleges.

Some of these websites, such as *the Center for Affordability and Productivity*, seem to be self-serving in justifying their purposes, and aimed at a relatively higher income, sophisticated college-bound audience who may be more likely to have family college experience, and who might be better prepared to benefit from the information, to gain admission to selective colleges. It is highly unlikely that much of the data provided on many sites are useful to underrepresented populations without intensive face-to-face counseling, and without more information about how to choose and succeed in college beyond the issue of paying for it. Scant research exists indicating that these report cards serve well these students and families. Furthermore, many of the sites, such as *Noodle*, seem to be simply churning available data, reproducing in a different format readily available information from colleges or other sources on matters such as cost, net price, student financial aid and debt.

Much worse, in some cases, developers such as *Unigo* create new highly subjective data from unconventional sources on these matters, without being explicit about methodology. Some of the ranking information is so incomplete or arcane (such as a “fast and flirtatious” college rating category), that the purpose of the exercise becomes murky, except perhaps for its lightheartedness, or commercial benefit to its developer.

LinkedIn, which proposes to link college choice to prospective employers and earnings, is another example of a commercial operation clearly providing a “brand” product for its customers.

Also, somewhat suspect, some commercial sites require the user to sign in, or to provide additional personal information, without being clear about how it may be used by the site or by others.

Another flaw in some rating/ranking systems is that they attempt to provide college value and outcome comparisons within a national context. On close examination, there appears to be limited need for complex national rankings of colleges, given that most students attend college locally and regionally, and within fewer than 200 miles from home. In other words, most students attend a local public two-year or four-year college, within state or regional boundaries. Some states, such as New Jersey, require by law—beyond federal standards—that colleges and universities regularly publish much of the data found on rating websites. These required institutional “consumer information” sites providing basic accountability information may prove more useful and reliable to many students and families. *College Reality Check* and the *Voluntary System of Accountability* (VSA) are among sites that include tools such as College Navigator, Portraits and Net-Cost Calculator; these sites stand out for their utility.

Choices about where to attend college evolve from life circumstances beyond cost, including age, employment, family status, experience and personal aspirations. HESIG survey research in New Jersey indicates that the top three factors affecting college choice are location, program availability and cost, in that order. Accordingly, complex national comparative schemes to measure college cost and affordability seem to be unnecessary. In practice, few students need to be able to compare the cost of a public college in California, to that of a two-year college in New Jersey, and a private college in Ohio. Even when some websites, such as *College Measures*, attempt to make such comparisons available, they do so incompletely; not providing the user with enough capability to navigate the website easily to compare information across colleges, or states.

Finally, although some rating sites try, few do a very good job getting at what students and families need to know beyond net cost: the expected value of a particular college experience. Again, HESIG survey research suggests that college value, measured by outcomes, trumps cost and price for those attending. For example, in New Jersey, even though about one-half of citizens surveyed see college as unaffordable, 90 percent of college graduates view the value of the degree earned as worth the cost. What students and families want to know is not simply what a college costs, but more importantly, its value in terms of expected outcomes. HESIG surveys indicate that top outcome measures of college value include gaining specific demonstrable academic and workplace skills and abilities (such as writing and

problem solving), and preparation for jobs and careers that lead to a more prosperous life.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

These generalizations cannot be applied equally to each report card website that HESIG reviewed. Certainly, many provide useful information and will continue to improve, and new developers will enter the field, given the importance of college access and affordability. HESIG's analysis suggests that it is time to shift some of the focus from the affordability/debt challenge to shed light on the more elusive matter of college value, a proposition that brings together the economic reality of paying for college with important matters of quality and outcomes from the experience. Some of these value measures might include:³

- **Programmatic quality**, assessed by student, faculty and administrative performance tied to specific academic competencies, workplace skills and practical experiences, measured at the college level, and compared to regional peers;
- **Measures of demonstrated abilities** of college graduates on essential learning outcomes, especially regarding writing, speaking and problem solving, as reported by colleges and employers;
- **Where college graduates are working** after one, three and five years, and the relationship between job, career choices and academic studies;
- **Number of graduates engaged in community and public service**, and enrolling in post-graduate/professional studies after one, three and five years;
- **Number of internships offered by academic field**, and number of students participating;
- **Extensiveness and intensity of academic advising and career counseling** for new and transfer students, based on college surveys;
- **Total degree credits earned**, compared to those required for graduation, and how long it takes to earn a degree; and
- **Credit awarded for prior learning** as a percentage of total credits earned required for graduation.

College in America is highly valued. Citizens are willing to pay for what they value, but they expect colleges to be accountable about access, affordability, completion and outcomes. Placing more emphasis on the college value proposition as we tackle the big questions—who goes to college,

how we pay for it, and the expected outcomes that benefit the individual and society—seems to be the right step in helping students choose and succeed in college. **P**

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- 1 Michael W. Klein. "What Counts: The Policy and Politics of the Proposed College Rating System in the United States;" Higher Education Forum; Volume 12, March 2015, Hiroshima University.
- 2 Philip B. Levine. "Transparency in College Costs." Economic Studies Working Paper; Brookings Institute, November 2014.
- 3 Another example of such "value measures" beyond price is offered by Tim Harmon and Anna Cielinski. "Transparency and Accountability: Implementing Postsecondary Rating System That Empowers Students While Avoiding Unintended Consequences." Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, November 2014.

About

Higher Education and Strategic Information Governance (HESIG)

HESIG serves as an agent for constructive higher education policy change, by recommending strategic policy action aligned with a public agenda to serve the public good. Guiding principles include: enhancing college access, affordability, completion, productivity, accountability, and building partnerships to achieve these ends.

William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The Center is named for William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, ambassador to Panama, and as a distinguished visiting professor at Stockton. For more information, visit <https://www.facebook.com/StocktonHughesCenter> and follow on Twitter @hughescenter.