

JLSC

ISSN 2162-3309 | JLSC is published by the Iowa State University Digital Press | <http://jisc-pub.org>

Volume 11, 1 (2023)

Brief Reviews of Books and Products

Danny Kingsley

Kingsley, D. (2023). Breaking Ranks—How the Rankings Industry Rules Higher Education and What to Do About It. [Brief Reviews of Books and Products]. *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*, 11(1), eP16892. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jlsc.16892>



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BRIEF REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND PRODUCTS

Book Review: Diver, C. (2022). *Breaking Ranks—How the Rankings Industry Rules Higher Education and What to Do About It*. Johns Hopkins University Press. 346 pp. 6 x 9 hardcover (available as an e-book), ISBN 9781421443058, USD27.95.

Breaking Ranks was written by Colin Diver, who is a former president of Reed College, trustee of Amherst College, and the dean of University of Pennsylvania. This experience has led him to the position he is arguing in the book, and he sprinkles relevant anecdotes from his working life throughout. Overall, this is a well-written, well-referenced book putting forward multiple arguments about why university rankings not only are highly problematic but also potentially cause damage to the quality of the education institutions provide.

The book focuses on the *US News & World Report* college rankings, which were first published in 1983 and have steadily gained importance and influence since then. The rankings are based on a large range of variables such as “spending per student” and “graduation rates.” One of Diver’s contentions is the arbitrary nature of these variables, the overlap across them, and the weightings assigned to them. He discusses in some detail how problematic many different factors are in how the rankings are calculated, not least the constant “fiddling with the formula” and the sheer illusion of a “best college” at all.

As someone based outside of the US, I was slightly disappointed to discover the book was specifically focused on the *US News & World Report* college rankings and in turn focused specifically on undergraduate education in universities that accept a low percentage of applicants. This selective component of the higher education landscape in the US is relatively small. This means the audience for the entirety of content in the book is mostly US-based practitioners, such as people working in university marketing departments and research offices. Library staff are often involved in bibliometric analysis of research output and therefore have direct investment in the process. That said, it is useful for any member of the global university environment to understand the extent to which a commercial product such as the *US News & World Report* college rankings has on the operation and strategy of the university landscape in the US.

Despite this narrow focus, there are some parallels with the global ranking industry, providing relevance to a wider, non-US audience. The rankings industry internationally is highly problematic, spawning entire industries. Common criticisms include the heavy focus on research over teaching, the bias toward large and English-speaking institutions, and the preference for



those that are strong in medicine and life sciences. On a more philosophical level, there is an argument that there simply is no meaningful relationship between a ranking, on the one hand, and what a university is and does in comparison to others on the other (Brankovic, 2021). There is a groundswell against this growing industry (of which this book is part), with organisations such as the More than Our Rank initiative from the International Network of Research Management Societies, building on the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). *Breaking Ranks* could be significantly stronger if it made more direct connections to the international situation, particularly given many of the parallels. Perhaps a second edition?

Diver's argument comes from the perspective that the costs of rankings have outweighed their benefits. I share Diver's incredulity that the academic community, whose entire *raison d'être* is to question, test, and provide evidence to support claims, seem to have not only swallowed the fairy dust of rankings but actively changed strategy and activities to serve them.

The book is easy to navigate and well-structured, including a comprehensive bibliography and a useful index. There are four parts, each focused on a different area. The first part, which I found the most compelling, discusses the evolution of college rankings to where they are now. Part two explores the "widely held view that the most influential college rankings, especially those published by *US News & World Report*, are fundamentally designed to measure—and perpetuate—prestige and wealth" (page XI). Part three investigates the practice of judging the quality of the colleges by the characteristics of their students—who they do or do not admit. The final section is more speculative, considering different factors that could be used to judge a college's quality.

As a reader who has lived and worked in Australia and the UK, many of the references in the book were unfamiliar. There are multiple times specific colleges are presented as examples of how skewed the system is. Having never heard of most of the colleges, I could only make assumptions about the intended point based on the context of the narrative. Part three in particular provided a great deal of information about how US universities work—and underlined that in the US there are different drivers for rankings, given the way that universities are funded there.

Diver has written an excellent analysis of how rankings became so powerful and has clearly identified why they are problematic and do not measure what they claim to. He describes why and how rankings have become so pervasive in the US and makes a strong argument for rejecting the rankings industry as it stands. He also proposes some ways of actually measuring the quality of education institutions provide.

Breaking Ranks was published in April 2022. By March 2023, a revolt had truly begun, with the *Wall Street Journal* reporting (Brankovic, 2021) that Yale Law School would no longer

share data with the *US News* rankings, spurring a tsunami of withdrawals from other schools (Korn, 2023). Diver's book might not be the reason, but clearly he is not alone in his criticism. Any college administrator considering following Yale's example would do well to read this book.

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Danny Kingsley is an Australian-based thought leader in the international scholarly communication space and is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science. She has worked in research administration for two decades including as the Deputy Director of Cambridge University Libraries from 2015 to 2019. Her research centres on scholarly communication including the academic reward structure, scholarly infrastructure, and open access advocacy. She established Open Access Australasia in 2013 and is a member of the Australian Academy of Science National Committee for Data in Science and the FORCE11 Board of Directors. She served on the editorial board of *JLSC* for seven years.