Are University Admissions Involved in Ethical Issues for Gaining a Higher Rank?

Team B7 – Obliviate

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A) Introduction

We both take ranking as a major considerate when decide which school we want to apply for — no matter which degree we are purchasing. A higher ranking can bring us better alumni resource, better academic atmosphere, stronger faculty team, even potential better chance of job seeking. We cannot help thinking that whether these rankings can be manipulated.

There are three major university ranking systems used widely — U.S. News & World Report, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), and Forbes. They all have different methodologies and factors they weigh to build the ranking. As we may know, some may pay attention to academic reputation, some may focus on graduation rate, while other may focus on money. Their ranking factors and the corresponding weights remain unchanged for most of the parts but have been modified every year.

There are some factors they all considered in common. For example, U. S. News and Forbes all take graduation and retention rates into account. Forbes, as a business magazine, ranked colleges and universities in the U.S. based on the return on investment and outcomes they delivered for their students. Schools placed well if their students graduated on time, secured high salaries and low debt, and went on to have successful careers. The QS World University Rankings, on the other side, compiled using 6 simple metrics to capture university performance.

The highest weighting of any metric is allotted to an institution's Academic Reputation score. Based on the Academic Survey, it collates the expert opinions of over 130,000 individuals in the higher education space regarding teaching and research quality at the world's universities.

B) Problem statement with ethical and social perspective, principles, and objectives.

a) Use rankings as proxy for multiple factors can create feedback loop.

People as usual may think a higher ranking represents better performance. No matter for schools themselves, students looking forward to being admitted or companies tend to recruit potential employees, they all tend to rank higher. Higher rank can be representative for better academic performance, better students' resource, much more funding, or higher possibility of being hired into big names. However, this kind of trend can lead to vicious competition. Ranking and these desired achieved results can create feedback loop together, making good school to be better, while universities with lower ranking extremely hard to go up. Consequentially, schools and related social agencies may take unethical actions for gaining higher ranking.

b) The possible benefit a great ranking may lead to unethical use of data.

There are several potential unethical uses of data in school ranking algorithms, such as improving student resources, boosting prospective financial resources, and improving academic performance by buying students' grades. Like ETS and Common Application. From either the test center's or the school's

perspective, the leaking and purchasing of student information should not occur, however it can be justified under the influence of consequentialism. This is due to the fact that it is done for profit and this is totally acceptable. On the contrary, this is utterly unethical action from a deontological standpoint. It infringes on students' privacy and causes a leak of personal information, and all data is used without their knowledge or permission.

c)   Stubborn ranking may result in inequality.

There are plenty of examples that top schools prefer students from wealthier families, even universities like Harvard and Yale. Some students have been discriminated against by others in college admissions, especially by those in power and wealth. According to the Equality of Opportunity Project, many top universities, including Princeton and Yale, admit more students from the top 1 percent of earners than the bottom 60 percent combined, which means the systems create incentives for universities to favor wealthier students over less wealthy applicants.

Also, top schools can always get better resource of students, so we have multiple feedback loop here. Moreover, they are easier to gain funding from companies or rich alumni, so they have better means of development. The research indicates that more than 40% of students in Harvard who have siblings or other family members attended before (Wermund). All these criteria are unofficial guidelines for universities' admission decisions, as well as in the ranking system. The system is not fair to students with lower-income and normal backgrounds.

d)   Fascinating about ranking can lead to consequentially fake news.

Besides these ranking systems created by major press, there are also some unknown rankings led by some untrustworthy press. For example, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology ranks 27 in QS world ranking. But it ranks separately 47, 122, 250 in THE, U.S. News, ARWU. What's more, the ranking variance is 100.9835. As a result, the possibility of inequality has increased. This in another word is fame chasing.

What's more, there can even be scandals of universities paying for a higher ranking. These unethical issues are all related with our fascinating about rankings. The company that makes the annual Best Colleges rankings said that the University of Oklahoma gave "inflated" data on its alumni giving rates for two decades.For the 2019 Best Colleges rankings, the university originally said its two-year alumni giving rate was 14% but later informed U.S. News that the correct number is 9.7%.

C) Summary, Limitations and Looking Forward

To sum up, as the university rankings play a large part in students' choice of schools, with a possible thirst to gain a higher ranking, in order to raise their selectivity, universities tend to reach out to more students by buying students' information from various education-related websites which is in fact an invasion of student privacy, which is definitely un-recommended.

Besides, one should be aware of the instance of cognition bias which suggests that our impressions of universities are so confined by all the news and rankings around us that we might not actually know what these schools have a good reputation for, and we fail in suitable choice ourselves. The limitation of our research remains that we only know the surface of their methodology, but we don't know how they actually perform the procedure. Looking forward, we hope that whoever is reading this report and about to enter a university, you will pay less attention to the rankings.