

Michael Poliakoff:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now. I'm Michael Poliakoff, the President of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. I am delighted and honored to welcome today, Colin Diver. He's had a distinguished career in higher education as a Professor of Law and in Administrative Leadership. He served as the President of Reed College from 2002 to 2012, and before that as the Dean of Penn Law School. In 1998, Colin Diver's predecessor, president of Reed college, President Koblik, made a very bold move in that he refused to cooperate with U.S. News & World Report's system of college rankings. Since 2005, Colin Diver has continued that tradition, throwing down the gauntlet to the higher education rankings industry. Starting with an article in The Atlantic and culminating with his book published this year by Johns Hopkins Press, *Breaking Ranks: How the Rankings Industry Rules Higher Education and What to Do about It*. I like that last clause particularly.

I hope I won't be overbold in saying that in this, Mr. Diver has made common cause with ACTA. Listeners to Higher Ed Now will be familiar with ACTA's longstanding opposition to the notion that wealth, selectivity and prestige are proxies for quality. I note that Mr. Diver kindly took note of our rating system. I stress out a rating system, not a ranking system, namely, *What Will They Learn?* Which has been around since 2009. As our 10 interns and our staff are busily working on the 14th annual edition of core curriculum requirements, it's particularly appropriate to discuss with Mr. Diver his bold and articulate critique of U.S. News & World Report and other attempts to rank colleges and universities.

I think, Colin, of your chapter 10 where you invoke Bowen's law and give figures for the staggering spending per student in, especially at elite universities. As you write the rankings industry fuels the overspending and the overvaluing and I think back to some of my experiences in Denver at the University of Colorado when one of the community leaders told me that he's known families that lost their homes going into debt over college. So with that, let me turn it over to you, the damage that the rankings industry has done. And then we'll turn to what we can do about it.

Colin Diver:

Well, thank you, Michael. I sympathize with your concern about the spending spree that higher education has been on. I commend ACTA for its recent report on that subject. As you point out in that report, a great deal of the spending that has occurred in recent years in this spending race is only questionably helpful to students. Much of it goes for various kinds of non-academic pursuits, the hiring of more executive vice presidents and the provision of non-academic frivolity to students and so forth. Yes, I think that is one of the many things that rankings has driven. When I talk about rankings, I have to be careful to be inclusive. There are many different rankings and they use many different approaches. My primary target in the book is what I call the one size fits all best college rankings best exemplified by the U.S. News Rankings, which are still by far the most powerful and potent form of ranking.

And that form of ranking has become synonymous with measuring the prestige and wealth of institutions. And not surprisingly, given that the way to move up in the rankings is to be wealthier and to spend more, it creates a pressure on schools to do that very thing. And as Howard Bowen talked about in his so-called Bowen's rule, the competition in higher education has become essentially a competition for more money to spend on creating a greater surplus, that is producing a product that costs way more than you're actually charging students for.

Michael Poliakoff:

There are many eloquent moments in your book. I simply have to compliment you on magnificent, clear writing and effective, effective rhetoric. But at one point you point out, you were talking about Caroline

Hoxby's study of the massive surpluses. And you muse what would happen if that were used to double enrollments rather than doubling spending per student, more students would've benefited from access to their talented faculties, campus facilities and generous support services. And then you get to the zinger, but that would have lowered these schools rankings. That seems to be the ultimate in dysfunction that we're not serving the purpose of what I hope will continue to be the envy of the world or higher education system non-system, its diverse collection.

Colin Diver:

Collection. Yes. And the fact that it's a collection is to me, one of the most striking and laudable features of the American higher education scenery. We don't have a single top down system imposed by the state. We have enormous variety of educational institutions that have grown up literally from the soil inspired by centuries of educational entrepreneurship. And preserving that diversity is something that I consider terribly important. It's one of the many reasons why I rail against this tendency to use a single straitjacket template to evaluate all institutions. In effect, what the rankers are doing is forcing all these wonderfully diverse institutions to become similar, to essentially become the same. And that is at the heart really of my criticism of this form of ranking.

Michael Poliakoff:

We may want to get into this a little later on in our discussion, it's also one of the things that I've worried about with the accreditation system. I certainly understand profoundly the need to make sure that diploma mills are not allowed to be fruitful and multiply, but on the other hand, the idea of an accrediting agency laying down certain expectations could really restrict that diversity. I actually got involved in a delegation. We went to visit Secretary DeVos because HLC was floating the idea that they would specify what appropriate standards of diversity and inclusion should be. And the leaders of conservative Christian colleges recognize that they could conceivably be put in a position where they'd have to choose between Title IV funding and the standards of biblical morality that they wish to keep. I would not myself have flourished at such an institution, but I feel very strongly that that was what they should have the liberty to do.

Fortunately, HLC did back down, but it reminded me as well of what happened when WASC tried to tell Thomas Aquinas College that its storied rigorous Great Books curriculum was not academically inclusive enough. To his credit, Gerhard Casper, who again was not this sort of person that would've fit into Aquinas really railed against the accreditor for trying to do something that would erode the diversity of opportunities. But I just mention that as a frustration that we don't seem to have the institutions that really are going to help us let our colleges and universities be who they should be.

Yeah. I am not as much of an expert on accreditation as perhaps others are and I'm not as much of an expert on accreditation as on rankings, but I do have plenty of experience with accreditation and I understand the concern. There is a natural tendency of accreditors to try to replicate themselves and to thereby impose their educational philosophy on everyone else. And that is antithetical, I think, to the whole notion of institutional diversity that I celebrate in the book.

Michael Poliakoff:

Absolutely, which I was really rather inspired to read. Again, to the subject of your wonderful writing, you were talking about Robert Morris, the CEO of U.S. News college rankings, who famously said that U.S. News & World Report is the 800-pound gorilla of American higher education in the sector increasingly populated by chimpanzees, bonobos and the occasional orangutan, U.S. News is still the 800-pound gorilla. That got me to thinking on the more serious line of, how do we really drill down to

what's the major theme of your book? Ways to foster educational quality to identify it, and to be able to give prospective college students the ability to make really informed choices. What demonstrates quality? I want you to talk a little bit more please about that.

Colin Diver:

Well, I acknowledge the difficulty of composing a ranking based on academic quality. As we all know, academic quality is one of those extremely elusive concepts that really doesn't lend itself to the kind of statistical precision that the rankers need to create their ranking formulas and their ordinal listings. That's one of the reasons why all of the rankings are using proxies. Some of the proxies are better than others, I think. We've talked about spending. I don't think spending is a good proxy for academic quality. Spending is an encouragement for profligacy, wastefulness. It's also a reflection of a kind of institutional wealth that is often associated with institutional laziness, frankly. And so what are the proxies that could be used to evaluate and measure academic quality? Well, I talk about graduation rate, which is one that your study of educational spending used as a measure.

I point out that yes, graduation rate is important, but what's really important is graduation rate performance. That is the extent to which a school is graduating students at a rate higher than would be expected given their entry credentials. If you simply look at graduation rates, what you see is that the schools that attract the already academically and economically privileged students have high graduation rates, well, that's no surprise. Those students would graduate no matter where they went to school. So what we need is measures that tease out the differential effect of attending that school. I like the use of Pell student graduation rates for example. I like the attempt to come up with graduation performance rates and so forth, but that's one example. Another output that people focus on is postgraduate income. Well, again, the problem with postgraduate income is that the rich kids tend to be programmed from almost from birth to get into high paying careers. So it's no surprise that the graduates of Princeton have a very high postgraduate income.

What we need is to look at social mobility measures that focus on the extent to which students are moved up in their economic ranking, their economic status from the status occupied by their parents. With regard to the quality of the actual academic program of all the measures that are used, I like the small class measure the best, although it's imperfect. But at least it tries to get an indicator of what I think correlates with good teaching and good learning. The more you study in small classes as a general matter, it's been shown, the more you learn and the more effort you invest. So that's a good measure. I was intrigued by ACTA's What Will They Learn attempt to grade schools on the basis of their curricula. While I think it's wildly oversimplified and not necessarily the best measure in the world, I give you credit for coming up with an attempt at least to measure the quality of the curriculum.

Right now in American higher education, curriculum is dead. There's almost no curriculum. About the only thing you see is a requirement that students major in something. And nowadays in a lot of schools, they double and triple major just because you can. There's almost no required courses. There's almost no core curriculum. There's almost no progression in what you learn, starting from introductory and moving up to advanced. Anybody's attempt to measure those things I think is commendable, but it's going to be challenged because we no longer can agree on what the canon is and what the essence of a good curriculum is. That's too bad. I feel badly about that. But that's the kind of thing that I'm glad to see at least somebody trying to measure.

Michael Poliakoff:

Well, thank you. We do feel sometimes like Sisyphus pushing that rock up the hill. We're making progress. What I think we really need to do is to continue to sound that wake up call that it's not okay.

The open curriculum can work in very special circumstances where there's a lot of mentorship, a lot of direction. But even there, I question it. I go back to the most frightening statement in Arum and Roksa's book, *Academically Adrift*, that the level of cognitive gain, the difference in the level of cognitive gain is greater within institutions than between institutions. I hear my mother's voice when I was a child saying, "It doesn't matter where you go, it's a question of how hard you work." Now, like you, I did go to an elite institution. I went to Yale and you went to Amherst. I think it's probably true for both of us. We worked very hard.

Colin Diver:

Yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

I felt that I had to repay my parents' investment by working very hard. But I certainly knew people who majored in the tank up at Yale, in other words, drink within half an hour, which I found appalling to be in that great place of learning. We didn't have the CLA then to show how many brain cells they lost over those four years, rather what skills they acquired. I do want to come back to the CLA because you mentioned it in your book. I think it's a very intriguing concept. But the beauty of the core curriculum is that it doesn't provide quite as many outs. Again, forgive me if I'm sounding mean spirited by raising Amherst again. But I had a little sort of on the radio debate, that's to say opposing statements with NPR some years back. The Dean of the Faculty, Catherine Epstein, you might have known her.

Colin Diver: I do know her. Yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

I don't personally, but this is what she said, "You can do whatever you want. If you never want to take a math class, you don't have to take a math class. If you never want to take a science class, you don't have to take a science class." ACTA's disposition has been, "That's wrong." That we need that level of challenge. Heaven knows, in age when scientific illiteracy is actually dangerous for the wellbeing, not to tell students you need that experience in empirical hands on science. You may not like it, but you need to do it. I'll give a personal anecdote. My daughter, I think, will forgive me for this. But when she was in high school, she saw our *What Will They Learn* publication and said to me, "Dad, thank you. Now I can pick out F schools where I'll never have to take a math class again." I said, "Well, let's talk about it."

And I'm very proud of my daughter. She's now in a PhD program in philosophy. She chose Christopher Newport in Virginia, which has the most rigorous core curriculum of any public university in the nation. I think her only non A grade was in statistics, but she was very happy to have the science and math. Well, maybe I'm exaggerating. Maybe this is dad projecting. Certainly my own experience at Yale whose curriculum wasn't open but it was close to that. Where if not for my father's desire for me to become a doctor, I would never have had the background in natural science. My great skill was in languages so I was a classics major. These are good things. At this point is that we want adults to be providing a structure where students actually will be put in that position whether they like it or not. You wanted to say something.

Colin Diver:

I sympathize with your statements about Amherst College, my alma mater. As I say in the book, I attended Amherst in the dying days of the so-called new curriculum. Roughly the first year and a half of my curriculum was required, or at least involved a small selection from among courses in particular

fields. So I had a choice of which math course to take, but I had to take math and we had to take courses in multiple disciplines. I've seen over the course of time since then how that required curriculum, that core curriculum gradually eroded to the point that now Amherst boasts of having a so-called open curriculum. When I was a trustee at Amherst, being a curmudgeon, I would occasionally engage the faculty with interrogation about what the educational philosophy of the open curriculum was. Their answer was always, "It's very popular with the applicants who come to college at Amherst, that's why they come to Amherst because they have a free choice." And I say, "Yes, but what's the educational philosophy?"

And the basic answer seemed to be students learn best when they take whatever they want and faculty teach best when they teach whatever they want. Because obviously one of the problems with the core curriculum is you have to have a lot of faculty teaching stuff that they probably don't really want to teach. But then I went to Reed College which does have a pretty restrictive, a pretty rigorous core curriculum. At the time, it had a year long humanities course which focused on Ancient Greece and Rome, and to some extent, the Biblical Mid East and Egypt. While it wasn't a requirement of American studies, which I know ACTA would like to have in it, it was a wonderful introduction to the basis for much of Western thought. I found when I taught a course in American Constitutional theory that it was invaluable to have had in my class students who had all studied Plato and Aristotle, and were familiar with many of the inspirations for the Founding Fathers, if you will.

So I appreciated that, but I also particularly appreciated the fact that it was a multidisciplinary course and it had faculty from many different disciplines, sort of introducing the methodologies of their disciplines to the students in a rigorous way. It was also the vehicle for required composition writing, which I thought was missing in most education now. One of the reasons why people write so badly is because they don't have to write at all in college. I have a dear friend who resigned a position as a trustee at an Ivy League institution when he discovered that you could graduate from that institution without ever writing a paper longer than 10 pages, which I found just staggering, staggering.

Now, all of this is very difficult to capture in a ranking. It's one of the reasons why I talk about it in two chapters in the book. I end up kind of throwing up my hands and saying, if we're going to rank schools, we need obviously objective, mostly statistical data. The best we can do is survey data. And there are rankings. For example, the Wall Street Journal has a portion of its ranking based on what it calls engagement. Most of that is based on student surveys. Well, good for them. You know, the surveys may be unreliable, but at least there's an attempt made there to evaluate schools based on the extent to which students are actually engaged in the learning experience. That's just one example. There are many others.

Michael Poliakoff:

Actually, I think you may be referring to the National Survey of Student Engagement. That is a very interesting indicator. The average of a little over 11 hours per week of study outside of class is a wake up call. I really would be very happy if every board would ensure that they knew what their institution's figure was and do something about it. I venture to say that you and I had the same mantra told to us that three hours of study outside of class for every class hour was kind of a minimum. I remember a lot more. But the idea that college life could be academically so unrigorous is deeply disturbing. That's a reasonable figure. I wanted to talk a little bit about these value-added assessments, which you talk about, although you do point out that they've not caught fire. But I think there could be quite a future for them. Surely, it should be part of the accreditation process, maybe even a requirement for Title IV funding that schools be transparent about the level of cognitive gain that typically the institution provides.

You can do both institutional and individual. Roger Benjamin made a very, very strong case for how this could level the playing field. That is to say he points out that in the CLA world, more high scores are at non-selective institutions than in selective institutions so that a badge or a credential could be a powerful tool in the hiring process. That kind of clicked in my mind when I remembered the article, the little spade of articles actually around 2014 that pointed out that Bain and McKinsey and Goldman Sachs and not surprisingly Amazon take note of SAT scores for their residents. They're so fed up with transcripts and with great inflation that they ask for the high school level entrance exam. The thought that we could actually have information about cognitive gain and real collegiate skills seems very alluring. I would love to see more, more support coming from businesses, from industry, and indeed even in the Title IV access process.

Colin Diver:

Yeah. Well, the CLA as I point out in the book is an attempt to measure general skill advancement during college. It's controversial like any method of doing that. Many people feel as though it's replicating the cognitive skills that are measured by the SAT or the ACT. And given the enormous controversy about the SAT these days, a lot of schools are probably not going to adopt the CLA. I know a number of schools that have adopted the CLA as an experiment on a single occasion just to see how it goes, but they don't rely on it. They don't use it regularly. It may be that if there were more pressure perhaps from Title IV, perhaps from accreditors to document cognitive gain, that enterprising educators might come up with something even better than the CLA. And that could be, or a number of different types of tests that measure different sorts of cognitive gain. That would be perhaps a desirable development.

The problem is that, talk about Sisyphus. When we talk about these things, rolling a very large rock up a very large mountain, we are fighting against a degree of credentialism that has taken over higher education. By that, I mean that nowadays people are selecting colleges based almost entirely on what they see as the credential they will get that is the pedigree that they will learn. And not at all on the basis of how hard they will work, how much the curriculum will challenge them, how many hours they will have to study. This is really troublesome. It is really troublesome. If you look at the latest data, for example, on college attendance. In the last two years, college attendance is down considerably, and the number of applications are down considerably, except where? Except at the elite institutions. Everybody now is applying to get into Brown and Princeton and Amherst and Williams, and they're forsaking all of the other places, many of which would be wonderful places for them to learn.

State schools, some of the lower tiered private schools, some of the specialized private schools. Like the Great Books schools, for example, they're all suffering. Everybody wants to go to a school like Brown where the current, I believe the current average grade point average is 3.75 or something like that, which means that you almost have to work hard to get a B. You really have to go out of your way to get a B at a place like that.

Michael Poliakoff:

You write quite eloquently about the damage that grade inflation is doing, which actually starts as you point out earlier in secondary school and essentially rendered the college transcript. So suspect. One can well imagine why certain major industries want some kind of nationally normed figure. It is highly disturbing to think that first of all, a student can, in most places. I doubt it would be true at Reed, but most places can gracefully skirt around difficult courses and pump up the GPA. Having learned relatively little, of course, Arum and Roska point out that about a third of the four year college graduates show relatively little cognitive gain on the CLA. Which by the way, I have to disclose is a pretty rigorous test. I

was part of the standard setting for the CLA+. I thought it was kindness they didn't show my paper sample questions.

I think you're quite right. These things can become very, very powerful tools. Coming back to core curriculum, it's certainly true that a college math class can be pretty, pretty shaky. We've seen some and we don't give them credit in *What Will They Learn*. We've seen some that are essentially warmed-over algebra one, junior high school mathematics. But most of them are not, most of them are going to provide the student who takes that gen ed math class a pretty rich experience. Some of them will be the traditional college algebra. Some of them will introduce them to things like topology and fair apportionment, things that will really stretch the mind and ways that other kinds of courses don't. And then there's an issue that you touched upon when you were talking a little bit about Humanities 110, the absence of study of American history and government. I am heartened that we're seeing a broadening consensus. Ron Daniels called for a democracy requirement for all students, and that very wonderful book, *What Universities Owe Democracy*.

Derek Bok said much the same thing to *Inside Higher Ed*, that it's not okay. As we point out in *What Will They Learn*, only 18% of the schools that we study actually have such a requirement for a single foundational course. And I will note, legislators are beginning to pick up on this for public universities that this is not intrusion into the classroom, God save us, never. But it is laying down the fact that at least understanding the constitution and the federalist papers and being cognizant of these things is a basic requirement.

Colin Diver:

Yeah. I think to me, the most important requirement is disciplinary breadth to go, obviously to go along with the disciplinary depth that you get in a major. But I think that all colleges should require some instruction in mathematical thinking and particularly statistics, frankly, which I think is one of the most valuable tools for a lifetime. I know many people who have said in their adult years, gee, I wish I had studied statistics, science. Yes, at least some serious introduction to the scientific method. And history, rigorous sort of quantitative social science, whether it's sociology or political science or economics, the requirement of studying democracy or American government or American history is something that I'm sympathetic with. I think it's going to be more controversial in a global environment, but I understand the fact that many legislators, particularly in red states want to see some of these courses introduced into their public universities as requirements.

There's another form of diversity that I don't talk about that I know is of great interest to ACTA, and that is intellectual diversity, viewpoint diversity on campus. I was thinking as I prepared for being interviewed by Michael Poliakoff of ACTA that the question of intellectual diversity might come up, and I don't talk about it in the book. And you know, I do think that it would be wonderful if somebody could figure out a way to evaluate schools based on their intellectual diversity because I do think it's important. We at Reed did try to fight against the prevailing liberal perspective that dominated the campus. We did it in various ways, but it is a challenge. It really is a challenge.

Michael Poliakoff:

Thank you for that. Yes, we're working on this one. It is one of the great frontiers. Again, anecdote is not data, but I think back to my own experience at Yale. When people were put into their dorms, which then were involved more people than I think they do now. You know, typically three or four people in freshman year. It was done pretty randomly. So we got to meet people who were different and to learn to share and to get along. For me, coming from a reasonably traditional Jewish home, to have a sweet mate who was a deeply committed evangelical Christian was a profound experience. We became very

good friends. I visited his family. I went to a church service with him. I think one of the reasons why I understand conservative Christian colleges so well is that I had this wonderful opportunity to engage. It was a kind of at least religious diversity, if not, intellectual diversity. But you know, when we look at these figures of the breakdown of opportunities for students to study with a classical liberal or conservative, the joke is made, we don't even know any Republicans around here. This is not wholesome. It's not wholesome for the liberal students. It's not wholesome for conservative students. And it really would be a wonderful thing if admissions departments would keep an eye on that. Here's a radical idea. We're straying a bit from your book, but it's occurred to me that no hiring committee would ever be made up entirely of Caucasian males. It would be intolerable. It would be a recipe for confirmation bias. It would deserve every bit of criticism that it received. But why in social sciences or humanities is it okay not to have anyone who is conversant with classical liberal or conservative ideologies?

In other words, we don't know any Republicans. We wish we could find one. I think particularly for economics, for political science, this is really damaging. I actually did a study, wrote an article once with a clinical psychologist on confirmation bias. He pointed out to me that you can actually see on an fMRI the way the brain lights up when familiar things are shared. We hear the voices of our parents, of our friends. It's what Jonathan Haidt talks about. We're riding an elephant. We think that we're steering the elephant, but the elephant steer us. Unless there's somebody to pull us back away from confirmation bias. You raise a really, really important point that needs to be addressed in admissions and in faculty development.

Colin Diver:

Well, yeah, I commend admissions departments for trying to achieve greater socioeconomic and racial and ethnic diversity. They are doing this. There are legal challenges obviously in trying to favor people according to their race. But I think it's beneficial for people to be mingling and interacting with people from other groups. Unfortunately, we are a group-based society so we see each other, we see ourselves in terms of groups. So that's good, but it is the case I think that students are tending to select schools by, so as to achieve a kind of intellectual homogeneity. The libertarians want to go to schools full of libertarians, and the progressive Democrats want to go to schools full of progressive Democrats. I see this in the kids in my grandchildren's generation who are looking to join colleges. One of the things that they focus on is trying to find their posse, as they sometimes put it, or their tribe. That is to say kids who think like them, and that's a problem. I don't know. I don't know if admissions offices can do much about that because you have to admit from those who apply.

Michael Poliakoff:

There are some remedies. Again, there's a little bit of the Sisyphus in this, but I think it's eminently doable. Doug is not on the screen at the moment, but Doug has been the leader of our campus debate program. We've worked with Braver Angels to bring campus debates on the most controversial topics, assault weapons, confederate monuments. Trying to think of some of the other ones.

Doug:

Immigration, abortion.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes. Right. You know, it's the honor roll of things that get people fighting. But in the 80 some odd debates that Doug's been a part of, either leading or organizing, I don't think we've ever had a single instance of incivility. And it's always pro and con and we encourage students to get into that, to habituate themselves. Not, again, forgive me if I'm sounding a little edgy, it's not that Reed is against racism approach. It's the ability to listen to somebody that you disagree with and to come back with a civil fact-driven response. It's not easy when people have strong passions. That's what Justice Holmes told us in *Abrams versus the United States*, fighting faiths want to have their particular viewpoints dominate. At the same time, the top down, when a school adopts the Chicago principles of freedom of expression and makes an institution-wide commitment to saying that we will not silence viewpoints. That I think does begin to permeate the institution both the top down and the cultural change from below. But admittedly, it's not easy when passions run high.

Colin Diver:

No, it's not. The fact is that almost everything we've been talking about in the last several minutes is completely unrelated to the phenomenon of college ranking. I'm saying that not because I necessarily want to drag you kicking and screaming back to the topic, but the fact is that the prevailing methods of evaluating colleges and universities and determining what are the "best" and what are the least best have almost nothing to say about this set of topics. And that is deeply troubling. But I think in some ways the rankings have even, if anything, exacerbated that tendency. For example, in order to do well in the rankings as they exist, it's very important to keep your students happy, right? Because you want them to graduate. You want them to show high graduation numbers. And you particularly want them to be happy alumni, because as alumni, they will fuel the spending race that we talked about, which the rankings reward and encourage.

So you want to keep your students happy. That means you want to have high grades. You want to never flunk anybody out and you don't want them to get involved in nasty arguments and debates. So if anything, it means you want all the students to have basically the same political views so that they'll be happy. And this is I think, as you and I would somewhat agree, poisons one of the important purposes of higher education.

Michael Poliakoff:

I could not agree more. And it does fill me with even more inspiration to be aggressive about helping direct, say consumers. I don't like that term actually, college bound students and alumni focus on what's important. It's not okay that Princeton, which is usually in the top three recently fired a professor purportedly over a sexual indiscretion in the year 2005, but really because he argued that the campus-wide initiatives to combat racism were a threat to academic freedom, to fairness, and maybe even illegal. That doesn't figure. You're quite right into the rankings. The untoward incident most recently at Yale in the law school, the silencing of a perfectly reasonable debate, that's not going to affect Yale's ranking but it should affect people's decision making. Thank you for pulling it back to the issue of ranking. That number. Again, I can only fall back on family things. My daughter had the opportunity to go to Northeastern, which gets an F from ACTA, or to go to Christopher Newport. I think the decision was a very wise one.

And indeed, partly because of the intellectual diversity of that campus, that it really had a pretty vibrant exchange of ideas. How do we do this? I know you've come up with some suggestions at the end of your book. Some would require real courage like Reed College demonstrated and simply saying, we won't play this game. Of course, with Reed, its extraordinary reputation for sending people off to get PhDs in

science, it has a little bit of an edge over a struggling liberal arts college that's more frightened about its future. But how do we give institutions the ability to prevail and to have the courage to get out of this kind of tout and tous that they're in this devil's dance?

Colin Diver:

Well, I wish I could wave a magic wand and achieve the goals that we're talking about. Obviously I cannot, there are huge societal social factors at work here. The dominance of the knowledge economy as they talk about it means that still getting a degree from a college or a university is considered necessary to a successful career. There's a tremendous competition among institutions of higher education, and they are necessarily going to be competing on the basis of what the dominant measures such as the U.S. News rankings use. My only hope really was that there'd be a proliferation of rankings and that U.S. News lose its dominance. It has happened to some extent, and I am hopeful that it will continue. But we need organizations such as ACTA and such as Payscale, such as ratemyprofessors.com, such as Princeton Review to adopt their own methods of ranking and to put them out there and to hope that they will get more attention.

You know, I am exhorting potential applicants and their advisors to start not by saying, well, what's the best college as the rankings would answer that question. But what is it that I want from four years of college? What is the type of school that would best meet my needs? Would I in fact benefit from attending a Catholic school or a historically Black college or university? Or would I benefit from attending an all women's school? Or would I benefit from attending a flagship state university? And then you can find specialized rankings of those kinds of schools. Likewise, you could say, what do I really care about? Do I care a lot about socioeconomic diversity? There are rankings of social mobility. Do I care about racial and ethnic diversity? Well, there are rankings of racial and ethnic diversity. The proliferation of these specialized rankings gives me hope.

My primary hope is that they will gradually increase in their market share and that the dominant best college rankings, particularly U.S. News will lose market share. But as for the courage that it would take for educators to thumb their nose at U.S. News, I think that you're right. Reed could get away with it because it already had a rather distinctive mission. It already had a distinctive niche in higher education, also because it was small. I think it's very hard for large universities to thumb their nose at the rankings because they are omniversities, they are trying to do everything. And if you're trying to do everything, you know, it's very hard to focus students on a selective or one dimensional ranking. You naturally are gravitating toward the comprehensive rankings, the best college rankings. And so U.S. News or Wall Street Journal or Forbes perfectly suit the big universities. They don't frankly perfectly suit the small schools because they tend to have distinctive missions.

St. John's College in Annapolis, a wonderful Great Books school should have its own ranking. Berea College, a fantastic work college in Kentucky should have its own ranking, part of its own rankings. And you know, if you are a student who is motivated primarily by prestige and wealth, be honest with yourself and say, yes, I am, and therefore I'm going to use U.S. News as my guide. Because it does it, it just does it just fine. I had an interview recently with a student editor at The Daily Pennsylvanian, which is the student newspaper at the University of Pennsylvania. At the end of the interview, I said to him, "So tell me honestly, did you pay attention to the rankings?" He said, "Well, of course." And I said, "Do you know anybody who's a fellow student at Penn who didn't pay a lot of attention to the rankings?" He said, "No, I don't know anybody who didn't." Everybody that I talked to followed U.S. News like the Bible. And so, well, okay, fine. That's the kind of student who is attracted to that kind of school. But hopefully there are many, many other kinds of schools and many other kinds of students who will use other means.

Michael Poliakoff:

Thank you for that. I think what I would add too is that some of these other measures, if they could get traction could be powerful. If major corporations, the sought after ones, the Wall Street firms were to say, well, we really do give a lot of credence to a CLA+ badge. We want to see some nationally normed credential. That would probably begin to shift people's decision making. If there were transparency about how schools do on the institutional level in cognitive gain, that could have some real potential. Again, with the large institutions, it could be a very powerful driver. I will come back in my slightly self-serving way, to What Will They Learn? We do have schools that are asking us if they can have a badge for achieving an A or a B and that's great. That's one of the best uses of grades that I have ever seen, because it is saying something about the inputs that are valuable.

Obviously, a curriculum is an input rather than output measure, but it's a pretty valuable proxy. When University of Georgia and the State of the University Speech mentions pride in having an ACTA A, that's a good signal. It's going to encourage something that is academically wholesome. Will people take us more seriously than U.S. News & World Report? Maybe not just yet.

Colin Diver:

No. No. Not in a long shot. I would recommend that the big employers of students with BA degrees inquire what, and perhaps require that they take a course in either statistics or mathematics and a course in science. They don't have to subscribe to the particular curricular line up that ACTA has adopted or anybody else has adopted. But I think that would say a great deal about what they're looking for. I think it might actually spur a lot of the elite schools to start at least informing students. If you want to get a job with an investment bank or a large consulting firm right out of school, then take a course in statistics, take a course in calculus, take a course in chemistry or biology or physics. That would be a very powerful message.

Michael Poliakoff:

We will continue to bring some pressure from the outside. That bottom up would be really valuable. One thing that we've done is to create a certificate program for students who fulfill the ACTA requirements at the A level, even when their institutions don't. We are hopeful that that will do something like what you're describing, to basically present a certification to prospective employers that even though our elite prestigious institution doesn't require these seven courses, we did. But again, this is all part of that pushing the boulder up the hill. You've been enormously generous with your time, Colin. I'm really grateful. It's been a great conversation. Are there other things that we should talk about that I haven't really covered?

Colin Diver:

Well, I think we've covered most of the important subjects. I think my indictment of best college rankings includes a whole lot of talk about things like the arbitrariness of the formulas that are used. The fact that the formulas keep changing every year, and therefore year to year comparisons are essentially meaningless. We haven't talked about the unreliability of the data and the whole problem of cheating and lying and fudging, which gets the news. But I think people are pretty familiar with those critiques. We haven't talked very much about the way in which the rankings have distorted academic policies and practices, except to the extent that I point out that what you want in order to do well in the rankings is to keep your students very happy, which does often distort your policies. I don't think we need to go there. The one thing that I talk about at the very end that is kind of dear to my heart is the notion that

education, college education should be a pathway to a better life, to wellbeing, to a richer, more satisfying life than you would otherwise have had.

I talk a little bit about things like the Gallup-Purdue Index of lifetime wellbeing and job satisfaction. I talk about some of the measures that Washington Monthly uses for its rankings and so forth. This is highly imperfect, tentative, but I ideally would love to see somebody do a more systematic attempt to evaluate schools by the quality of life of their graduates. Because to be sure, not everybody goes to college to have a better life, and perhaps only a minority of students actually go to college to have a better life. But I believe in it, I believe in it because I believe in the liberal arts. I went to a liberal arts college. I was the president of a liberal arts college. And I passionately believe that my life has been better, more fulfilling, richer, in part because of that experience that I had at a liberal arts college. So to the extent that I can put out a plea for somebody, I don't know if it'll be ACTA or somebody else. I give Purdue credit for teaming up with Gallup to try to do this, but somebody to try to evaluate colleges based on the wellbeing of their graduates.

Michael Poliakoff:

Very well said. I was thinking of that wonderful line from the movie about C. S. Lewis, *Shadowlands*. We read books to know that we're not alone.

Colin Diver: Right. Yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

To unite us with the human experience. That's again, one of the things that colleges and universities should take seriously as part of their mission. And often it's something that only surfaces in the consciousness years later that, I remember reading a book.

Colin Diver:

Oh, yes.

Michael Poliakoff:

That really now explain some part of life.

Colin Diver:

Or I remember a wonderful conversation in the dorm, social room.

Michael Poliakoff:

Yes. Yeah. Well, Colin, thank you so much. I really feel like you've become an ACTA friend. I hope we'll stay in touch. You've given higher education a really, really important book. I hope people will read it, take it seriously, and think of ways that they can break out of the stranglehold of the bumper sticker mania that really is running an opposition to quality.

Colin Diver: Well, it's been my pleasure to participate in this conversation.

Michael Poliakoff:

Thank you so much.