

Losing the numbers game

U.S. News & World Report rankings should not influence University's policies

People often look to magazines for advice. Teenage girls look to Seventeen for dating tips. Investors look to Money magazine before they purchase stock. But, no one makes fundamental changes in his personality or values based on a magazine. That is, unless you are Texas A&M. The A&M administration's reliance on U.S. News & World Report for determining the future of the University is shortsighted and academically dishonest. Vision 2020, in its current state, must be abandoned.



MATT MADDOX

When an official description of Vision 2020 is issued, it always mentions that the purpose of the plan is to make A&M a top-10 school by the year 2020. Mysteriously though, these official proclamations rarely mention what deity determines which schools are top-10 caliber. The introduction to Vision 2020 states that the creators of the plan established U.S. News as the benchmark for what qualities were desired in a university. This makes the aim of Vision 2020 and all plans under it simply a ploy to inflate A&M's magazine ranking rather than make changes in the best interest of education. This summer, deans at 178 law schools wrote an open letter to college applicants urging them to disregard the U.S. News rankings. The letter stated that ranking systems are inherently flawed because different universities are better for some students than others. The letter read, in part, "A ranking system that exemplifies the shortcomings of all 'by the numbers' schemes is the one produced annually by U.S. News & World Report." The National Opinion Research Council issued a report scrutinizing U.S. News

for lacking any logic in how it weighs the factors it uses in ranking universities. One-fourth of a college's rank comes from its reputation among administrators from other schools. Since A&M is the conservative black sheep to education, it is surprising that A&M even takes 67th place.

Deans are just the latest group of experts to decry U.S. News. Peterson's, a leading company in higher education resources, is also an outspoken critic of the U.S. News rankings, so much so, that it released a book titled, "College Rankings Exposed." According to its Web site, "Each year, a glut of publications seduces the entire nation with false assumptions that mislead parents and students and manipulate the entire college admissions landscape. U.S. News & World Report, with its 'America's Best

Colleges' issue, reigns as master of the rankings game."

This is one game A&M should have no desire to win.

Administrators outside of A&M are beginning to realize the absurdity of U.S. News rankings. Reed College and St. John's College have both refused to send information to U.S. News. The student government of Syracuse University denounced U.S. News on the basis that it changed its university's mission from educating to fund-raising. This is parallel to what A&M is attempting to do with its One Spirit, One Vision fund-raising plan.

According to the St. John's Web site, the rankings system is a popularity contest that says nothing about a school's educational experience. A&M, with its unique "other education" and quality learning environment, is the same way. St. John's has been ranked everywhere from in the Top 25 to the third tier by U.S. News, yet St. John's refuses to

compromise its principles to influence its rank, saying "We would rather be ourselves and have our college speak for itself, than be a part of this fluctuating outside analysis."

Sadly, this fluctuating outside analysis is exactly what A&M administrators have bought into and have been trying to sell the student body and former students.

A&M administrators need to follow St. John's example.

Even those ranked best by U.S. News dislike the rankings. Gerhard Casper, former Stanford University president, wrote to the editor of U.S. News, questioning the magazine's ability to stastically measure the quality of a university.

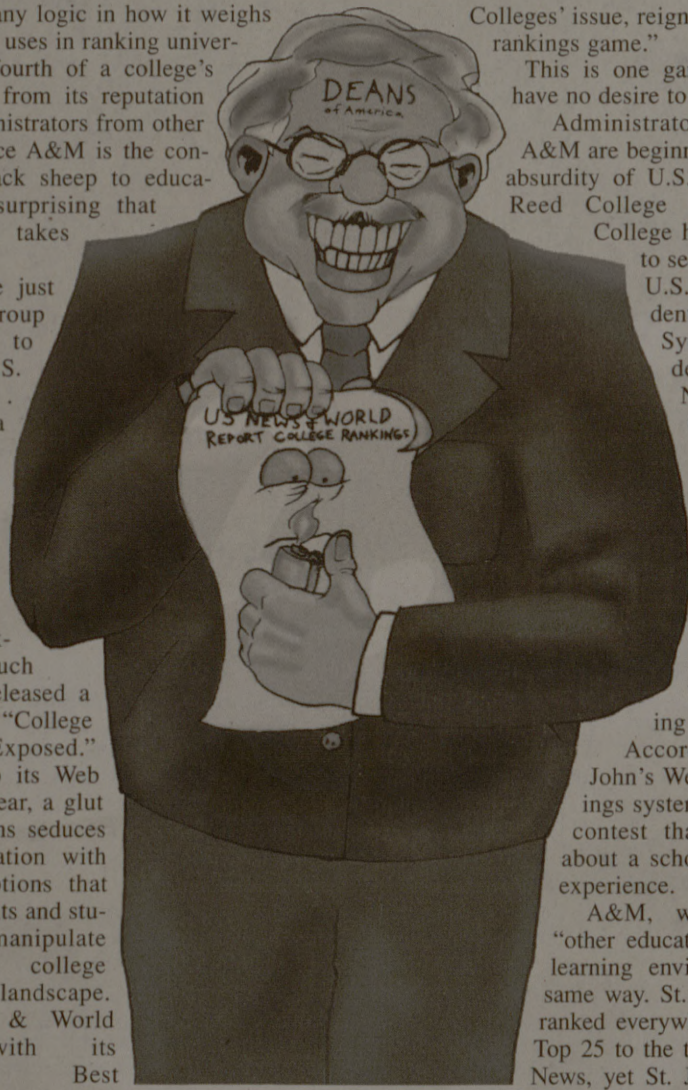
If those already in the Top-10 attest to the worthlessness of the title, shouldn't A&M listen?

According to Washington Monthly, a former staff writer who contributed to the U.S. News ranking said, "The rankings are completely ridiculous. But they totally pay your salary."

Even U.S. News issues a disclaimer with its rankings, informing readers that they should not overly rely on the report for their college decisions.

A&M should develop a new vision plan, based not on arbitrary and political surveys, but on the tangible needs of the citizens of Texas. Education, not political correctness and popularity among educators, should be the driving force of A&M's plan for the future. By clinging to Vision 2020, University officials are keeping A&M behind the curve instead of at the forefront of education.

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A&M must focus on academics, not pay raises

Students have felt firsthand the blow of budget cuts and seen programs, funds and entire departments eliminated. Unknown to many of them is that while Texas A&M President Robert M. Gates offers words of condolence and multiple shortcomings are blamed on financial constraints, the professors' salaries are expanding. If the administrators actually plan to achieve the goals set in Vision 2020, they need be less thrilled by comparing A&M to other universities and use their own pay raises to fund dying programs.



SARA FOLEY

For the 2004 fiscal year, \$3 million was allocated for parity pay raises, increments of money aimed at keeping the salaries of A&M professors competitive with their counterparts at other universities, said Assistant Provost for Finance and Administration Terry Lovell. In addition, a 2 percent raise is also available for those professors who the deans of each college determine worthy of a merit-based raise.

This would all be fine if it wasn't for the loss of \$20.5 million in state funding and budget shortfalls that have plagued A&M this year.

Statistically, professors at A&M receive an average of \$11,000 less than their peers at the University of Texas-Austin, Lovell said.

Continually comparing A&M to UT results in inconsistent outcomes because other aspects of the schools are not identical.

When comparing professors at UT and those at A&M, the location of their jobs should be taken into consideration. According to

Sperling's Best Places to live survey, available at www.best-places.net, the cost of living in Austin is 103.5 percent of the average American city. Comparatively, College Station's cost of living ranking is 89.5 percent. In each aspect where the cost of living is assessed, including food, housing, transportation and utilities, Austin ranks well above College Station. Clearly if the cost of living is dramatically different between Austin and College Station, salaries will be proportional to that difference.

In addition to expenditure differences, job descriptions may vary between UT and A&M. Sharing a job title does not necessarily imply equal pay. Each university has different strengths, and to compare the two schools as if programs within them had the same distribution and prestige is unfair.

The way to achieve Vision 2020 is not to play catch-up with salary numbers, but to improve the quality of education. National rankings will not rise solely because the instructors' salaries do.

If A&M is committed to serving the students and community, something that Gates has continued to claim, one must wonder why the University cut departments and various staff positions in favor of paying staff more.

When College of Liberal Arts Dean Charles Johnson reported that financial constraints prevent the improvement and rescue of the

Department of Journalism, administrators said little about the situation. Only \$500,000 would be required to keep the department running, money that has been said cannot be found.

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Perhaps the administrators and professors should look at their own paychecks. The loss of a department which leads into a wide array of professions such as public relations, advertising, writing occupations and broadcast news would be more detrimental to the precious scholastic rankings than professors' salaries.

Clearly Gates is working too hard to please his peers. He promises millions in higher salaries to some, while cutting jobs and the journalism program. It has been stated that without the students, A&M, the programs for research and the positions of these professors, would not exist.

At one moment A&M administrators claim they are barely scraping by on the budget they have, and at the next are offering raises to professors who may not need it. The solution is not pay raises to bring us up to par with UT, nor is it Gates' mixed priorities. A&M must focus on the education of its students and the quality of it instead of the price.

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Baylor president failed to properly lead university

Monday, five members of Baylor University's Board of Regents seconded a Sept. 2 letter written by three former chairmen of the board that demands the resignation of University President Robert B. Sloan Jr. Though Sloan appears to be innocent of any involvement in the scandal involving former men's basketball head coach David Bliss — who has since resigned — as president of the university, the 36 members of the Board of Regents, who are expected to meet today to decide Sloan's fate, must hold him accountable for the actions of his staff.



LINDSAY ORMAN

Regents Carl Bell, Mary Chavanne-Martin, Toby Druin, Jaclanel McFarland and John Wilkerson issued an edict for Sloan's firing as Baylor University continues to grieve the murder of basketball player Patrick Dennehy. Dennehy's body was found in late July with two gunshot wounds to the back of the head. Police indicted former teammate Carlton Dotson for the murder.

Bliss — secretly caught on incriminating audiotapes by an assistant coach — orchestrated a cover-up scheme to conceal unsanctioned payments given to Dennehy. Bliss persuaded at least

one other teammate to corroborate his fictitious claim that drug money financed the player's tuition. Athletic Director Tom Stanton joined Bliss in resignation on Aug. 8. Both have since been replaced.

Alumni, faculty and members of the community rightly hold Sloan responsible for this tragedy and disgrace because he allowed such a man of unscrupulous morals to occupy and abuse a position of power. Furthermore, to be an effective president, Sloan must be constantly and intimately aware of the details of every facet of the university. He has failed tremendously when a murder shrouded in deceitful and suspicious scheming on the part of a university official is allowed to transpire under his authority.

As Wilkerson told The Associated Press, "It's not about Bliss or Dennehy and it's not about (Vision) 2012. It's about leadership and the lack thereof of our president." Sloan's ineffective leadership has long been a problem, and the recent scandal has merely magnified the need for change.

Additionally, the regents' letter criticizes Sloan for irresponsibility and lack of discretion in matters of incurring bonded debt to cover massive construction projects, approving superfluous tuition increases, creating division between research- and teaching-oriented faculty and exhibiting inconsistency in faculty hiring.

The authors of the first letter calling for resig-

nation — Glenn Biggs, Gale Galloway and Randall Fields — seek Sloan's removal from office based on the claim that the university president has failed to "lead, inspire and unite" those affected by the devastating events of the past months, according to the AP. The problem is not that Sloan has done anything wrong, but that he has failed to do anything right.

The attack on Sloan focuses not so much on his character, which supporters strive tirelessly to maintain. Instead, opponents simply argue that Sloan fails the university as a leader. Rather than trying to defend Sloan as an upright Christian personifying all that Baylor stands for, supporters should objectively examine Sloan's leadership abilities — or lack thereof.

The current members and former chairman of the Board of Regents have seen Sloan's leadership firsthand and should be granted credibility.

Galloway, a former Board chairman, defends his anti-Sloan position by referring to a personal poll of alumni across Texas, asserting in The Houston Chronicle that he "didn't find any alumni who were happy. The alumni feel, for the most part, that they've been disenfranchised and abandoned by the administration."

Of a more practical concern, Sloan's continued presidency could adversely affect Baylor financially as alumni withdraw monetary backing of the university in protest, according to The

Houston Chronicle.

While Sloan may have been innocently oblivious to the dishonesty and corruption in his basketball program, his ignorance does not excuse him of responsibility. His failure to respond in a powerful and effective manner to tragedy and scandal has irreparably maimed his claims to an already crippled leadership.

A Baylor spokesman reports that Sloan currently plans to remain in office, in direct defiance of the concerns expressed by members of the faculty, community and Board of Regents. In their meeting today, the Board must remove him from power. Monday's letter expresses the sentiment that "a major step in the process of healing would be a change of leadership at the top," as reported in the Waco Tribune-Herald.

The best Sloan can do for Baylor is to salvage his integrity by putting aside his pride and acting in the interests of his constituency. If Sloan truly possesses the moral fortitude lauded by his supporters, he will take the initiative to realize the detrimental impact of his continued leadership, removing himself before he is forced from office.

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