

Geography by the Numbers?

Reading the National Research Council's new ratings of doctoral programs in October was a bittersweet experience for me. Certainly I'm pleased that my own department did well in the ratings but, at one time, so too did my alma mater. Geography at the University of Chicago was at the top of the rating tables for decades, until its doctoral program was closed in the 1980s. So I have been left wondering—yet again—about the rationale for these rating games. If high ratings didn't impress Chicago administrators, what is the value of reducing such a far-reaching intellectual and scientific enterprise as geography to rankings, ranges, and numbers? Will the study actually lead, as the NRC claims, to further reflection on the underlying data or will we simply see preening among highly ranked departments and a rush to game the system by those wishing to raise their ranking when the study is repeated. Critiques of the study's methodology and data have already appeared, including an excellent article in last month's *AAG Newsletter*, but I would like to focus on three issues that go beyond the details of the methodology and data.

First, the NRC study ranks 49 programs in geography, less than a fifth of the approximately 278 or so bachelor's, master's, and doctoral departments in the U.S. and not even all of the approximately 75 doctoral programs listed in the AAG directory. So, in some respects, the NRC study is implying that the work of faculty in these other programs doesn't count in the same way as their colleagues in doctoral programs. Yes, doctoral programs play a different role than MA/MS and BA/BS programs and need to be evaluated differently, but why are these others never evaluated or ranked? At the moment, tremendous innovation and expansion is occurring among many geography MA/MS and BA/BS programs and their faculty are making substantial contributions to the discipline, yet these accomplishments go unrecognized. Furthermore, the NRC

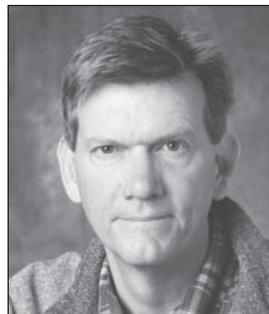
study has turned metrics such as "average number of publications," "average citations per publication," and "percent of faculty with grants" into the coin of the realm. The implicit message of the study is that these are the metrics to which all geographers and geography programs should aspire, despite the radically different roles and missions of these other programs.

Second, the study makes no distinction among doctoral programs in terms of their very different missions. The recent revision of the Carnegie classification (<http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/descriptions/basic.php>) distinguishes among three types of doctoral institutions: research universities (very high research activity); research universities (high research activity); and doctoral/research universities. Is it meaningful to rank on the same scale programs of such varied missions? I can think of a number of programs, like the University of Cincinnati, which have re-invented themselves over the past decade as well as other programs which have recently begun to offer doctorates. These are programs which should be earning kudos for all that they have accomplished and for how well they serve their students. Instead, they find themselves ranked against some of the traditional powerhouses of doctoral education.

Finally, these ratings provide little indication of the overall health of a particular discipline within U.S. higher education, nor does the methodology allow for comparison with previous NRC ratings. I don't think I am alone in asserting that geography has experienced a remarkable renaissance in the past 10-15 years. Enrollments are up in the AA/AS, BA/BS, MA/MS and doctoral programs, as are the number of degrees awarded. And the number of programs has also increased—including those at the doctoral level. But, instead of celebrat-

ing these accomplishments, the NRC study will lead I think to a sense of gloom, even among some of the strongest departments in the country. Instead of encouraging the cooperation needed to build and sustain a vital discipline, the ratings will feed the notion that scholarship is just another college sport.

For me, the irony of writing this editorial is that I believe in the value of effective evaluation and assessment. Without evaluation and assessment, we can't improve our programs or our work. But is this NRC study the way forward? The authors claim that they are simply producing ratings based upon how



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faculty themselves view doctoral quality. But when faculty say they value research performance and influence, does this mean they agree with the way the NRC study operationalized these in terms of very narrow categories and measures which tend to conflate quantity with quality?

Perhaps my greatest worry is that, in the rush to improve their rankings in the future, departments will focus on boosting their scores in the categories weighted the most heavily in the methodology. But is that really the way to improve the quality of doctoral education or the discipline? To do so encourages departments to lose sight of their missions and how best to build upon their unique institutional settings and serve their students more effectively. It discourages the sorts of long-term efforts in professional development and curriculum innovation needed to make strategic improvements in program quality, equity and diversity. I hope these ratings will not distract us too much from the accomplishments geography has made over the past decade and from the steps we can take to extend this trajectory of success into the future. ■

Ken Foote
k.foote@colorado.edu