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"Technology and Public o and Kwej’s article in this ctive video raises several 1ogy may change the very ch we have in the past called e think that addressing how lic administration education is a re also in the works to address to accreditation in the Fall 1996

Soon after the March 20 issue of U.S. News and World Report appeared, I received a communication from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, my alma mater. The envelope contained a reprint of the cover of the U.S. News issue. A red banner across the cover proclaimed: “Syracuse University’s Maxwell School #1.” On the reverse side of the cover was a reprint of the U.S. News rankings, with Syracuse University’s number one ranking highlighted in yellow. Pictures of key administrators, including Dean John Palmer, were accompanied by a quote from Palmer celebrating Syracuse’s number one ranking.

As the Maxwell flyer illustrates, U.S. News’s publication of rankings for public administration programs is a public relations bonanza for top-rated programs. My own program, the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, Bloomington, was also quick to acknowledge the recognition. The cover of the recent Summer 1995 alumni newsletter prominently highlighted our number four ranking.

Just as the rankings allocate bragging rights for the top-rated programs, they are probably a source of dismay for others. Aside from allocating bragging rights, however, what is it that these rankings communicate and what are the implications for our field?

In a broad sense, the rankings symbolize the growing legitimacy and professionalization of public administration. The U.S. News survey gives public administration the same standing as political science, sociology, economics, and nursing. For this recognition we ought to be thankful. It acknowledges the years of painstaking effort by the member schools of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Public Administration (NASPAA) and other professional organizations.
Ranking Public Administration Programs

Another upbeat aspect of the rankings is the presence of small and specialized programs on the list, together with large, comprehensive schools. The Stene Program at the University of Kansas was ranked sixth despite a relatively small faculty dedicated primarily to preparing students for the city management profession. Columbia, Ohio State, and Virginia Tech are also among the top-rated programs. The diversity of ranked programs is an endorsement of the big-tent philosophy that has existed within NASPAA since the beginning of its self-study and accreditation processed.

Beyond the recognition the U.S. News rankings confer to individual schools and the field as a whole, what other meaning can be extracted from them? We know by comparing the U.S. News rankings with similar rankings published in Public Administration Review in 1981 that reputation is a relatively stable attribute. In the 1981 ranking, Syracuse and Harvard were one and two, as they are in 1995. Princeton, Indiana, and Texas-Austin were rated in the top seven in 1981, as they are in 1995; but there is notable variation between the two surveys. Cal-Berkeley and Michigan-Ann Arbor, which appear in the 1981 rankings, are nowhere on the 1995 list of top 26 programs. Their absence is a reflection that they are not NASPAA schools and therefore did not appear on the 1995 ballot. The rankings contain anomalies, however. For instance, the University of Chicago is ranked 13 and Yale University is 18, although neither university offers an MPA. Cornell University, which dropped its MPA program some years ago, ranked 24.

The persistence of reputational rankings and the anomalies suggest that the rankings be used with caution. Not only do the rankings appear to be an indication of relative program strength, but also they may reflect other factors, such as a university's general reputation and the number of alumni involved in the ranking process.

Although the rankings have obvious legitimating value for the profession and promotional value for particular programs, they might have negative effects to the extent that they focus a program's attention on achieving high rankings rather than producing results for students and other program stakeholders. Because a program's ranking may have a powerful effect on potential students and alumni support, among other resources, it

133/J-PAE, October 1995
Ranking Public Administration Programs

could become the subject of gaming by universities and program administrators. The issue has been raised in conjunction with other disciplines ranked by *U.S. News*, so the scenario is not far-fetched. *U.S. News*'s reliance on assessments by administrators at NASPAA member programs relies heavily on the integrity of respondents and their knowledge of peer institutions. Although I am inclined to believe that most program administrators will respond honestly, I am not equally convinced that these responses are well-informed or valid judgments about program quality. One indication of the limits of program administrator rankings is the disparity between practitioner and academic ratings in a 1982 survey published in *Public Administration Review*. Business school rankings show similar disparities when the ratings of academics and practitioners are compared.

The latter point suggests an avenue for eliminating some of the potential negative consequences of the *U.S. News* rankings. This would be to broaden the criteria used and reported in the rankings. *U.S. News* already uses a more comprehensive set of criteria in rating programs such as medicine, law, and business. Public administration should insist on the same comprehensiveness for its own rankings. Because rankings such as those appearing in *U.S. News* are taken seriously by many readers, we should insist on multiple criteria as a principle for ethical transmission on information.

Associations such as NASPAA and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) can play a significant role in the creation and transmission of reliable and valid information to potential customers of public administration programs. Associations could for example, identify additional criteria that reflect overall program quality. The NASPAA self-study and accreditation process has identified quantitative and qualitative attributes of effective public administration programs. The associations could play a more significant role in transmitting this information to member schools and outside agents such as *U.S. News*, who seek to rate the relative quality of public administration programs.

Previous assessments of MPA program reputations have called for more systematic research about program effectiveness. It is appropriate to repeat this call here, particularly in light of NASPAA's use of mission-driven accreditation. The move toward mission-driven accreditation demands a correspondingly more sophisticated assessment of program effectiveness than is available.
Ranking Public Administration Programs

from reputational rankings. The recent history of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) suggests one avenue we might pursue. In the early 1980s it undertook a large-scale, multi-year study of the status of business education. The study was influential in directing and reinforcing major changes in business education. Public administration should consider a similar study that engages in stock-taking about our collective effectiveness and sets an agenda for continuous improvement of our field.

NASPAA, AAPAM, and other associations could take the lead in developing valid and efficient assessments of program effectiveness among practitioners and employers. This step would begin to move the rankings game away from its sole reliance on academicians and member schools. Our goal as a professional field should be to create meaningful, high-quality information. Now that we have achieved a new measure of legitimacy, it is time to get on with this task.