

Reality check

BY DALE ROGERS MARSHALL

Graduates of earlier decades often say they probably couldn't get admitted to their own alma mater today. Indeed, college admission has become much more competitive in recent decades as the population of 18-year-olds has grown and financial aid has increased the number of students who can afford to apply to the very limited number of excellent private colleges and universities. And college rankings fuel the competitive race. Before the 1980s, rankings weren't the rage; no one published a list of the top 50 liberal arts colleges in the country. In fact, *U.S. News & World Report* originally published a ranking of the top 100 liberal arts colleges in the country, a group that includes Wheaton. When the magazine chopped the list in half, some Wheaton alumnae/i mistakenly believed the college had declined in quality.

In his new book, *The Gatekeepers*, *New York Times* writer Jacques Steinberg provides an important reality check, taking readers behind the scenes of the admission process at a private, selective college. Steinberg tracks applicants to Wesleyan from their college search to decision day, and follows the admission officers charged with choosing among these young adults. The book reveals just how much chance and individual judgments shape who is admitted, who is denied and who is placed on the waiting list.

Steinberg's book clearly demonstrates the undue pressure that is created by the college ranking system devised by *U.S. News*. Students and their parents cause themselves needless anxiety when they measure the success of their college search by the ranking of the college that accepts them. The rankings say nothing about which school is best for any individual student. Steinberg underlines this point. "I'm one of these people who thinks that you really can't rank colleges like you can rank college football teams," he says. "I'm one of these people who thinks that the most important things that happen at a college are in the classroom, and I don't see how you put a ranking on that."

What do I think? As a social scientist, I am acutely aware that quantitative measures of quality are inherently imperfect. Combining many disparate measures into a single ranking does students a disservice by pretending it's possible to reduce the multiple dimensions of a college experience to a single number. This can make schools of similar quality appear far apart. The difference in scores between Wheaton and many of the schools among the "top 50 national liberal arts colleges" is so small as to be meaningless. At the same time a single ranking can obscure real differences. For example, admission to our



President Marshall with Provost Susanne Woods and Dean of Admission and Student Aid Gail Berson.

college is more competitive than a number of the institutions in the magazine's top tier. Wheaton accepted just 44 percent of the 3,600 students who applied for admission to the Class of 2006, making the college more selective than such schools as Smith (ranked 13), Mount Holyoke (23), Macalester (26), Colorado and Kenyon (tied at 29), and Dickinson (44).

Equally important is the fact that the rankings reflect a skewed picture of higher education. The ratings are overly reliant on measuring each college's wealth and reputation, "measuring inputs such as faculty salaries, test scores of incoming freshmen and alumni giving rather than what kind of learning is really taking place on campus," according to an article published by *U.S. News* itself. Wheaton is not as wealthy as many of the schools with which it competes and that is one of the factors that has kept it out of the "Top 50 Colleges."

For these reasons, some college presidents strongly oppose all rankings and refuse to submit data to the magazine. I don't subscribe to that approach, however. As educators, we should provide data to the public while also making the effort to inform them about the limitations of college rankings. I have been active in several efforts by liberal arts college presidents to raise public awareness about this issue and to develop better data on educational outcomes.

Wheaton is one of roughly 350 colleges and universities participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a project that seeks to discover how students actually benefit from the programs and resources each institution offers. The survey asks first-year students and seniors about such things as academic challenge, student interaction with faculty, and the extent to which the school helps students to succeed. Early results from this survey affirm Wheaton's high quality; our students, more than their peers at other institutions, believe their college experience has helped them to think critically and analytically, and to express themselves effectively.

I am committed to making this information available on the Web for high school students, their parents and anyone else who is interested. Higher education depends on a society that values access to information and so we need to honor that commitment ourselves. Other colleges and universities, including Beloit, Sweet Briar and Seton Hall, are also using this approach.

In the end, what matters is the quality of the educational experience and the many ways students' lives are transformed. Students' accomplishments, along with those of our graduates and of our faculty, bring Wheaton its most meaningful renown.