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Clinical psychology Ph.D. program rankings: evaluating eminence on faculty publications and citations

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Abstract

Program rankings and their visibility have taken on greater and greater significance. Rarely is the accuracy of these rankings, which are typically based on a small subset of university faculty impressions, questioned. This paper presents a more comprehensive survey method based on quantifiable measures of faculty publications and citations. The most frequently published core clinical faculty across 157 APA-approved clinical programs are listed. The implications of these data are discussed.

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The marketing of universities and departments has grown exponentially in recent years. As a natural outgrowth of this trend to emphasize accomplishments relative to peer institutions, program rankings have become a central theme. Without a doubt, the most visible and most frequently updated of these systems are the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, largely because they are published in a popular magazine that reaches a large general audience. When these rankings appear, universities throughout the U.S. rush to highlight graduate and undergraduate programs that are in “the top 10”, “top 50”, etc.

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Faculty quotes about how these rankings show their program or department competing with “the very best” in the country typify reaction (Chitty, 2004). Faculty gush that top rankings help attract graduate students and confirm program eminence.

The *U.S. News & World Report* surveys present a list of programs and ask faculty to rate each from distinguished (5) to marginal (1). Specific faculty within clinical departments are not identified as raters, but rather materials are addressed to one or two graduate faculty, director of programs, etc., per program. Thus, not only are a small fraction of faculty sampled, but they are not necessarily in the area evaluated. In the latest *U.S. News & World Report* on Clinical Psychology Programs (2004), a 20% return rate on the questionnaires was reported. Assuming two forms were sent to each of the 183 APA-approved programs, 366 forms would have been sent and 73 returned. These are maximum numbers.

The National Research Council (NRC) ranking system is less popular but has received attention, although much less than the *U.S. News & World Report*. The NRC also uses subjective methods, but has not put out a ranking since 1995. The methodology is not specified for the NRC ranking system. The American Psychological Association emphasizes its role ‘behind-the-scenes’ to assist in a new NRC effort (Bullock, 2004). Their emphasis is on ensuring that ‘surveying’ occurs for the many areas of psychology.

It seems inconceivable that any given faculty member has the necessary data or knowledge to compare programs. In clinical psychology, for example, there are 183 APA-approved programs. If one makes a conservative estimate of 7 faculty per program, a rater would need to be aware of 1281 faculty, many of these moving or retiring from one year to another. In effect, faculty are asked to sort, in their mind, where these faculty are and their scholarly contributions along with the quality of Ph.D.’s they produce, and then rate the program relative to the many others that exist. Additionally, with *U.S. News & World Report* rankings (which at least reports a methodology), the return rate is unacceptably low. Furthermore, 130 of the programs rated achieved a score of 2.5 or higher, thus the range of scores is highly restricted. To suggest that these data are highly suspect seems self-evident. Recently, The Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and the Harvard Business School have indicated that they will no longer participate in these popular ranking systems. Their main objection is rooted in a fundamental disagreement with the validity of these rankings (Tomsho & Golden, 2004), supporting our contention. Having said this, many universities are making internal resource allocation decisions based on this ranking information. Public relation concerns appear to be putting a great deal of pressure on those responsible for what programs to support.

Rankings then, if used at all, should be done with caution. Similarly, if they are done, objective data based on outcomes and uniform across all programs should be used. To that purpose the present study was undertaken to expand and further objectify the rankings of clinical psychology Ph.D. programs. Mean number of publications per faculty member was used along with mean citation count per faculty. Publications are largely peer reviewed, thus indicating creativity, quality of work, and cutting edge developments in the field. It has been argued that publication rate does predict program impact (Feist, 2000). Certainly, it says something about research activity in a program and the likelihood that Ph.D. students will be involved in publishable research, which is an important part of their education and an asset in the job search. There is a professional standard set by the journal.

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