

# Letters to the Editor

## What's Fair?

President Elizabeth D. Capaldi's column in the January 2000 issue of the *Observer* titled "What's Fair to Compare?" is fundamentally flawed. On its face, it seems compelling by suggesting that "Single-score ranking is the wrong idea for universities and psychology departments. There are many dimensions to quality, and no single number reflects everything universities or departments can do." Most of the column is about comparing universities, and dimensions for comparison are listed, such as, external funding, number of merit scholars, sizes of endowments. Capaldi offers a University of Florida website (<http://thecenter.ufl.edu/>) where rankings based on nine dimensions, including the three just mentioned, as well as a kind of composite ranking of the "top" public and private universities may be seen.

However, the flaw is that the databases of individual universities are not equal. For example, many of the "top ranking" universities have medical and/or colleges of engineering on their campuses, and they are being compared with universities that do not (mine for example). While some adjustments to the data are described and reported for about 60 percent of the public universities, seemingly significant adjustments such as these are not made. For that matter, should universities with significantly different faculty and student population sizes be compared without adjusting for such differences? It is a shame that people take such rankings seriously as indicators of quality.

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