Chapter 16

Embedded Colonial Power:
How Global Ranking Systems Set Parameters for the Recognition of Knowers, Knowledge, and the Production of Knowledge

Leslie D. Gonzales
Michigan State University, USA

Chelsea Waugaman
Clemson University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we carry forward the work of Gonzales and Núñez by analyzing one specific component of the ranking regime—global ranking systems—to consider how they impact the recognition of knowledge, knowers, and the production of knowledge within academia—issues and activities that are at the heart of faculty work. Using insights from Critical Policy Analysis and Anti-colonial theory, we find that global ranking systems create limits concerning the recognition of knowledge and knowers by: 1) a reliance on Western modes of legitimization; 2) rewarding those that achieve celebrity, massive reach on the basis of numerically calculated impact; and 3) equating knowers to resource generators and knowledge as something that is fundable. Implications for practice and future research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Gonzales and Núñez (2014) recently developed and introduced the concept the "ranking regime" into the higher education literature to describe how various entities, such as ranking systems, government accountability systems, and accreditation and evaluative systems work together for the "ostensive purpose" of organizing "postsecondary education into a competitive transnational market" (p. 2). The overarching contribution of the ranking regime concept is that it compels researchers to simultaneously consider how various (and different) kinds of entities collectively work in tandem, across public and private sectors

and across national boundaries, to standardize the work and worth of colleges and universities across the globe. To illustrate the impact of the ranking regime, Gonzales and Núñez reviewed several papers that addressed how faculty work experiences and work habits are shaped by the attention that universities give to ranking systems, new technologies for estimating faculty research impacts, the growth in efforts to evaluate teaching, and pressures stemming from accreditation bodies. Gonzales and Núñez made clear that in order to improve the usefulness of the ranking regime as a framework, future scholars should further study its individual component parts, and their effects, as well as ranking systems holistically.

With this in mind, we extend the work of Gonzales and Núñez in distinctive ways. First, we focus on one specific component of the ranking regime—*global ranking systems.* Second, we aim to understand how global ranking systems impact the *recognition of knowledge, knowers, and the production of knowledge within academia* rather than faculty work habits or experiences. Third, we view global ranking systems as a sort of global policy and take a critical policy analysis approach, informed by anti-colonial theory, to interrogate global rankings systems (Shahjahan, 2012; Shahjahan & Torres, 2013).

The rationale for approaching this work in these ways is as follows. We chose to focus on global ranking systems (also called world ranking systems), specifically, rather than the ranking regime, as a whole, because rankings are an especially powerful component of Gonzales and Núñez's ranking regime concept. When ranking systems release reports that suggest excellence or quality can be "found" in a certain set of places, limits or boundaries are created. In creating boundaries, there is an inevitable process of rendering something, someone, some people, and/or some practices invisible, or at least less valuable. As a result of ranking reports, administrators and policy makers use the information provided by ranking systems to allocate resources and make strategic decisions, and families draw on rankings to make college application and selection decisions. These factors make rankings an especially powerful and important component worthy of careful study.

In choosing to focus on global ranking systems, we are particularly concerned with how rankings set limits around the knowledge production process because the production and dissemination of knowledge has long been the core mission of higher learning (Homer Haskins, 1926). When ranking systems suggest that they can provide policy leaders, as well as the public, with information about who, what, and where valuable knowledge work is being accomplished, there are reasons to study the basis and implications of such judgments.

Given their global reach with resource implications, we position global ranking systems as a form of global policy, and take a critical policy analysis approach. By employing a critical policy analysis approach, we understand that global ranking systems are more than annually published outcomes; when understood as global policy, rankings can be understood as setting forth discourses, rules, and evaluative frames that get used to assess higher education over and over again. As global policy, these frames get taken up and implemented across national borders and often in spite of local context or history (Shahjahan, 2012; 2013). With this, we analyze global ranking systems through an anticolonial lens (Kaba; 2012; Shahjahan, 2013). Anti-colonialism rejects the idea that colonialism has ended, and assumes that colonial or colonizing relations remain intact but manifest in different forms—where power and privileges are expressed more implicitly, often through softer methods (see Lo, 2011). In applying an anti-colonial lens, we aim to understand if and how global ranking systems are implicated in the current manifestations of historically oppressive conditions and relations of power that privilege Euro-centric and/or Western histories, epistemologies, values, and general life experiences (see Shahjahan, 2013, esp. p. 677).

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