Introductory Remarks of Jamie P. Merisotis
President
Institute for Higher Education Policy

Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Commission
January 26, 2006
San Francisco, CA USA

Ranking of higher education institutions and programs is a global phenomenon. With the massification of higher education and its increasingly market-based orientation across the world, many of the players in the higher education system—students, parents, higher education institutions, employers, and governments—have taken a more vested interest in the "standing" of particular universities, colleges, and other higher education entities. When *U.S. News and World Report* began its annual ranking of "America's Best Colleges" in 1983, it launched a frenzy of activities, first in the US and Canada, and then eventually in other nations. Over the last 15 years, publishers in numerous countries have developed their own hierarchical measures of providing consumer information and institutional marketing while attempting to impact the quality of higher education. In the course of these last two decades, higher education ranking and league tables have emerged not only from the private, media-based sector, but also from professional associations and governments.

Today, there are now at least 15 different nations where large-scale ranking systems are present, including Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Nigeria, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. There are two well-known systems that rank institutions on a global scale; that is, on a cross-national basis—The *Times HE*

Supplement in the UK, and the Academic Ranking of World Universities project at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. And there are numerous other ranking systems that look only at particular programs, such as MBAs, law, and medicine, or that look at specific characteristics of institutions—whether they are technology-savvy (Yahoo!'s Most Wired), or socially responsible (*Washington Monthly*), or just good places to meet people and have a good time (the so-called party school rankings).

Ranking approaches and systems, like higher education institutions, vary extensively and are often tied to the unique higher education context of a nation. However, each system or approach tends to include a logical set of elements. Data is first either collected from existing data sources or, in some limited cases, original data is collected. Following this, the type and quantity of variables are selected from the information gathered. Next, in most cases the indicators are standardized and weighted from the selected variables. Finally, the calculations are conducted and comparisons are made so that institutions are sorted into a ranking order or band.

I come to the dialogue about rankings with a good deal of skepticism about their ability to serve as effective indicators of institutional quality. But I think it's fair to say that whether or not colleges and universities agree with the various ranking systems and league tables findings is largely irrelevant. Ranking systems clearly are here to stay. As a result, I've come to the conclusion that it is important to learn all that we can about how these ranking systems work, and to provide a framework for those who do ranking so that they can improve and enhance their methodologies.

A key issue in the global dialogue on ranking is methodology. Current ranking methodologies exhibit various strengths and weaknesses. Different rankings/league tables include indicators that students may overlook when thinking about an institution's quality. These rankings allow institutions to distinguish themselves based on who they are and what they do for consumers of higher education. Similarly, I believe that rankings methodologies often indirectly impact quality in higher education because of their ability to promote competition.

Nevertheless, the inherent weaknesses of these rankings/league table methodologies often overshadow their strengths. The most significant flaw of these rankings/league tables may be their continual changes in methodology. For instance, my two decades-plus of involvement in higher education has led me to the startling (!) conclusion that universities are often difficult enterprises to change. Decisionmaking processes that ultimately impact quality—forming committees to do work, then referring the work of the committees to deans, then referring the work of the deans to the board, and then actually implementing all of this work—are often years in the making. Yet most privately published ranking systems, driven by the need to sell more publications, are produced annually, and often fluctuate year-to-year because the weights assigned to different indicators have changed. This is not a reasonable standard for accurately assessing quality.

Annual changes in methodology are certainly not the only broad concern about rankings. Another problem is that many rankings come up with a single number that summarizes the overall ranking of an academic institution. This practice makes it difficult for students to distinguish among institutions based on the characteristics they find most important. Additionally, much of the objective data used in the rankings/league tables is self-reported by the institutions. We've seen in the U.S. the severe limitation of these institutionally-reported systems, with extraordinary efforts taken to impact the ranking through the manipulation of the data.

A big challenge for most ranking systems is data. Most ranking systems do not involve themselves in extensive, independent data collection exercises, working to develop data that will conclusively link to whatever the pre-determined measure of quality might be. The result is that most ranking systems use data that happen to be available. As American analyst Marc Chun at the Council for Aid to Education has pointed out, this is comparable to the situation of a drunk person who loses his keys in the middle of the street but looks for them only under the streetlight because the light is better there. Just because the most light is being shed on certain data elements doesn't mean that they are necessarily the best ones to use.

In June 2002, the UNESCO-European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES) in Bucharest, Romania organized the first ever international discussion of its kind to look at the "functioning" of higher education ranking systems and league tables. The meeting, which took place in Warsaw, Poland, featured papers and presentations from countries

such as Japan, Germany, Nigeria, Poland, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Some forty participants from twelve countries who represented journals that regularly publish ranking/league tables of universities and higher education institutions, along with top-level experts from national bodies and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, discussed various issues related to ranking/league tables. The key outcome of that initial meeting was that further work on many different aspects of ranking and league tables is sorely needed.

As a follow up to the Warsaw discussion, a second session was held by the Institute for Higher Education Policy and UNESCO-CEPES in Washington, DC, in December of 2004. The meeting included more than two dozen top-level experts directly involved in rankings. Participants represented the major media organizations involved in publishing rankings, including *US News and World Report* and the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, representatives of research funding and accreditation organizations, and other leading organizations such as the RAND Corporation. In addition, individual experts involved in the development or assessment of ranking systems in Australia, Canada, China, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, and Spain provided updates on recent developments in ranking methodologies. Participants also offered an understanding of the differences between ranking systems that are primarily aimed at information for students and parents and those that are assessing excellence in university research.

Coming out of this meeting in Washington, UNESCO-CEPES and the Institute for Higher Education Policy have decided to join forces over an extended timeframe to provide an ongoing forum for discussion and debate about higher education ranking systems. Known as the International Rankings Expert Group (IREG), the initiative includes a distinguished group of individuals who develop or analyze ranking systems and involves the leading media and other organizations that publish ranking systems along with researchers and others who scrutinize the rankings of colleges and universities as well as their study programs and research activities.

IREG is planning to focus on several important issues in the global dialogue about ranking systems, including:

- Providing innovative research on a rapidly growing global phenomenon that has received relatively little attention in higher education research;

- Contributing both a framework and a process to the understanding of how to assess existing higher education ranking systems and league tables;

- Contributing to international comparative analysis of the ranking/league tables and their methodologies;

- Ultimately, through setting a framework for collaboration, improving existing rankings/league tables and informing future rankings methodologies.

In May of this year, the IREG group will meet in Berlin, hosted by the Center for Higher Education Development, or CHE, which you will hear more about in a moment. At this meeting, we hope to focus less on the evaluation of various national ranking systems,

which has been the main focus of our work since 2002, and more on concerns about the application of ranking systems—who the audiences for the ranking systems are, what impact they have on institutions, and how they can be improved methodologically by learning from the experiences of other systems.

Around the globe, one of the biggest concerns that has been raised by those who are being ranked—the institutions themselves—is that most rankings schemes use weighted aggregates of indicators to arrive at a single quality score. This in turn permits institutions to be ranked against one another. By choosing a particular set of indicators and assigning each a given weight, the producers of these rankings are essentially dictating a specific definition of quality for the institutions that are being ranked. The fact that there may be other indicators, or other combinations of indicators, is usually not considered.

Interestingly, an examination of the methodologies of these diverse ranking systems shows that there is little if any agreement as to what indicates quality. The world's different ranking systems use very different indicators and very different weightings to arrive at a measure of quality. This might suggest that the position of certain institutions in their national rankings systems is as much as anything a statistical aberration. Using some other methodology, a very different result might emerge. But in nations where multiple ranking systems exist, and in the emerging cases of global rankings, we see that certain institutions repeatedly come out on top no matter what system of indicators and weights are used. This suggests that there may in fact be some set of underlying

characteristics that result in a consensus of what quality means. What these characteristics might be are an important part of what IREG will be exploring in the next few years.

A key element of this multi-national dialogue about ranking systems and their relationship to and impact on quality is to examine efforts that take a different approach to ranking. One that has received a great deal of interest and attention is the one that you will hear about shortly. The Centre for Higher Education Development in Germany, in conjunction with the DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service, which serves to assist international students in coming to Germany) and a media partner (*Die Zeit* magazine) has taken a radically different approach to ranking. The CHE rankings do not rank institutions, but rather departments. In doing so, the CHE ranking does not weight or aggregate individual indicator scores. Each department's data on each indicator is allowed to stand independently, and no attempt is made to rank departments on an ordinal scale. CHE does this because it believes that combining widely disparate indicators into a single overall hierarchy is often meaningless. Using the internet as the primary dissemination device, the CHE ranking makes it possible for consumers to, in effect, create their own weightings and rankings by selecting a restricted number of indicators and asking the website's database to provide comparative institutional information on that basis. In so doing, the CHE approach effectively cedes the power of defining "quality" to the consumers of the ranking system—that is, prospective students and their parents.

Another unique aspect of the CHE ranking is that even within each indicator, no attempt is made to assign ordinal ranks. Each institution's department in a given discipline is simply classified as being in the "top-third", "middle-third" and "final-third" of all institutions with respect to that specific indicator. Schools within each of these three categories are considered qualitatively equal, apparently on the grounds that for many indicators, ordinal rankings are relatively meaningless since the actual amounts by which institutions differ from one another on most measures is quite small.

The key to the CHE system is its extensive data collection system, and I will let my colleague Gero Federkeil tell you much more about that. Suffice it to say that approximately two-thirds of the indicators are independent survey-based, with the remaining data points all coming from other third-party sources. The CHE rankings do not make use of university-provided data.

So let me now turn to Gero Federkeil, our main speaker for this session, who will tell you about the CHE ranking and about the CHE's efforts to link their innovative ranking system to the debate about quality of university education in Germany and beyond. Gero Federkeil is a sociologist by training and received his degree from the University of Bielefeld. He worked for the German Science Council for 7 years and since 2000 has been the principal analyst and manager of the CHE rankings.

Thank you.