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# The Discipline of Rankings: Tight Coupling and Organizational Change

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*This article demonstrates the value of Foucault's conception of discipline for understanding organizational responses to rankings. Using a case study of law schools, we explain why rankings have permeated law schools so extensively and why these organizations have been unable to buffer these institutional pressures. Foucault's depiction of two important processes, surveillance and normalization, show how rankings change perceptions of legal education through both coercive and seductive means. This approach advances organizational theory by highlighting conditions that affect the prevalence and effectiveness of buffering. Decoupling is not determined solely by the external enforcement of institutional pressures or the capacity of organizational actors to buffer or hide some activities. Members' tendency to internalize these pressures, to become self-disciplining, is also salient. Internalization is fostered by the anxiety that rankings produce, by their allure for the administrators who try to manipulate them, and by the resistance they provoke. Rankings are just one example of the public measures of performance that are becoming increasingly influential in many institutional environments, and understanding how organizations respond to these measures is a crucial task for scholars.*

A central insight of institutional theory is that formal organizational structures often look quite different from informal practices. Work is often “loosely coupled” to or “decoupled” from the strictures of an institutional environment. To secure legitimacy and conform to general expectations, organizations may develop symbolic responses to environmental pressures without disrupting core technical activities. For example, organizations may create offices to give the appearance of legal compliance

(Edelman 1992), implement ineffective programs (Kalev, Dobbin, Kelly 2006), or develop policies that may or may not be adopted (Westphal and Zajac 2001).

The pressures generated by educational rankings, like those published by *U.S. News & World Report (USN)*, would seem to offer powerful incentives for organizations to buffer their activities. Rankings are a relatively recent feature of the educational environment, emerging as an important influence in many fields during the

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late 1980s and early 1990s. Although they are popular with external constituents, such as prospective students and employers, rankings are widely resented by administrators and faculty. Moreover, rankings are expensive to manage and manipulate. A new, contentious and largely uncontrollable external pressure like rankings would seem to create a situation ripe for buffering, one likely to cause symbolic rather than substantive reactions, such as the implementation of superficial changes at the periphery of organizations, public pronouncements of ranking goals, or the formation of committees to create the appearance of taking action to address rankings. But schools have not protected their practices from the influence of this new environmental pressure. Rankings have changed the fundamental activities of schools, transforming, for instance, how actors make decisions, do their jobs, and think about their schools (Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Espeland and Sauder 2007; Johnson 2006; Morriss and Henderson 2007).

Drawing on an intensive case study of law school rankings, this article explains the value of Michel Foucault's concept of discipline for understanding why these organizations are unable to buffer themselves from this new institutional pressure. Analyzing rankings as a form of disciplinary power reveals that rankings, through processes of surveillance and normalization, change how internal and external constituencies think about the field of legal education. These new understandings of legal education, in turn, encourage schools to self-impose the discipline that rankings foster. Rankings also offer external audiences a means for compelling law schools to meet their demands. Rankings change perceptions of legal education through incentives that are simultaneously seductive and coercive.

An investigation of how discipline impels organizations to reinterpret practices and internalize new self-conceptions advances institutional theory by improving our understanding of the factors that promote and sustain tight couplings, even in situations where buffering would be desirable. This focus on internalization builds on recent research that examines how meaning is negotiated inside organizations by drawing attention to how cognitive and affective processes mediate members' responses to environmental pressures. In this

way, Foucault's framework expands upon arguments for the significance of symbolic and sense-making aspects of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Powell and DiMaggio 1991) by demonstrating the complex processes of accommodation organizational members adopt in response to external pressures that may be plural, contradictory, or reinforcing (Friedland and Alford 1991).

The application of Foucault's concept of discipline to rankings complements recent studies of public assessment and accountability. Most institutions now confront growing pressure to demonstrate accountability by formal, quantitative measures (Espeland and Vannebo 2007; Power 1994; Strathern 2000).<sup>1</sup> While previous research emphasizes the coercive effects of measures, Foucault's focus on internalization explains the appeal that underlies these measures for members and outsiders alike. Specifically, Foucault shows how coercive disciplinary pressures devolve into forms of "self-management" (Covaleski et al. 1998) that amplify institutional influences by changing members' perceptions, expectations, and behavior. In addition, this approach helps explain how efforts to control rankings, whether through strategic manipulation or resistance, propel the institutionalization of rankings and extend their power.

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<sup>1</sup> Accountability has become an expansive and elastic term for transparency, improving decision making, containing bias, and enhancing productivity. Audits, assessments, measurement-driven instruction, management by objective, new public management, total quality management, risk assessment, clinical guidelines, and best practices are a few of the strategies devised for achieving accountability. All rely on performance measures such as service statistics, indicators, standardized test scores, score cards, ratings, cost-benefit ratios, and rankings. See Shore and Wright (1999), Meier (2002), and Neyland and Woolgar (2002) on the organizational effects of measures. On the effects of rankings, see Elsbach and Kramer (1996), McDonough and colleagues (1998), Sauder and Espeland (2006), Sauder and Lancaster (2006), Stake (2006), Espeland and Sauder (2007), Morriss and Henderson (2007), and Stevens (2007).

## BUFFERING AND TIGHT COUPLING

One theoretical aim of this analysis is to expand knowledge of the conditions that determine the extent and nature of the relationship between environmental pressures and the activities of organizations.<sup>2</sup> Despite longstanding calls to identify factors that promote or inhibit decoupling and other buffering strategies (see, e.g., Oliver 1991; Orton and Weick 1990), there remains relatively little empirical research on when and why buffering occurs (Hallett and Ventresca 2006a; Westphal and Zajac 2001). Early work addressing variation in decoupling (see especially Oliver 1991; Powell 1991) emphasizes types of organizations, showing that decoupling occurs more often in organizations, like schools, where information about productivity is difficult to observe and measure (Rowan and Miskel 1999; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

More recent work examines the influence of organizational environments and practices. Environmental factors shown to affect decoupling include the relative power of external constituents (Basu, Dirsmith, and Gupta 1999), legitimacy threats (Suchman 1995), and legal contexts (Edelman 1992). Research on organizational dynamics demonstrates that the fit between imposed goals and existing organizational identities and structures (Dobbin and Kelly 2007; Espeland 1998; Kalev et al. 2006), the power of a CEO relative to directors, and knowledge of prior decoupling strategies (Westphal and Zajac 1998, 2001) influence whether an organization will buffer technical activities.

Our research departs from prior scholarship by approaching the relationship between environment and organization from the opposite direction; we explore factors that precipitate tight coupling and discourage buffering. This shift in perspective emphasizes the significance

of the characteristics of institutional pressures on members' capacity to enact buffering. Instead of asking why some organizations in some environments can decouple from institutional pressures, we ask why some environmental pressures are less "decouple-able" than others. We suggest that rankings, as commensurate, relative, and broadly circulating measures, are more difficult to buffer than are other types of institutional pressures. We also show how Foucault's conception of discipline helps unpack the power and influence of rankings as a peculiar type of environmental pressure. According to this view, tight coupling is not determined solely by the external enforcement of institutional pressures or by organizational actors' inability to protect core activities. Members' capacity to *internalize* external pressures, whether because of the anxiety they produce or the allure they possess, also determines the relative tightness of the links between institutional pressures and organizational activities.

A second, and related, aim of this article is to develop a better appreciation for the complex relationship between environmental pressures and organizational responses. In particular, we emphasize how cognitive and emotional factors mediate or amplify these pressures. Despite the emphasis in institutional theory on the symbolic and sense-making aspects of organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Edelman 1992; Powell and DiMaggio 1991), relatively little attention has been paid to how external pressures become absorbed, negotiated, and embodied within organizations (Coburn 2004; Hoffman and Ventresca 2002; Scott 2005; but see Maines 1982).

Compelling recent research addresses this deficiency by depicting institutions as "inhabited" by actors who negotiate the meaning of institutional pressures and responses (Hallett and Ventresca 2006b). This work demonstrates how variations in decoupling often derive from the agency of local actors who negotiate environmental pressures. For example, Coburn (2004) shows how teachers mediate the influence of the institutional environment on classroom instruction: new policies and guidelines are more likely to be adopted if they correspond to teachers' beliefs. Similarly, Binder (2007) finds that local staffs of direct service organizations use distinctive logics to determine whether and how much decoupling occurs in

<sup>2</sup> Given our focus on conditions that promote tight coupling, we highlight the similarities rather than the distinctions between decoupling and loose coupling (Orton and Weick 1990). We are most concerned with why some external pressures are less amenable to organizational buffering, either through the symbolic responses associated with decoupling or through the variable intraorganizational responses that characterize loose coupling.

reaction to increases in funding opportunities. Finally, ongoing negotiations can sometimes lead to the “recoupling” of institutional pressures that were once decoupled, as local conditions, politics, or leadership change (Espeland 1998; Hallett 2008).

A general insight of this work is that contemporary institutional theory understands institutions primarily as broad macro-symbolic systems encompassing many organizations. According to Hallett and Ventresca (2006a), this conception of institutions neglects how organizational members interpret and respond to cultural logics that may be widely shared or unique to particular fields. Nor does it account for institutional pressures that are plural or contested. A macro view of institutions as generalized cultural structures, they argue, is itself decoupled from the micro-orientations of earlier theoretical statements on institutionalism (e.g., Gouldner 1954; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

In light of this argument, Foucault’s insights about disciplinary power offer a compelling account of how cognitive, normative, and affective processes mediate members’ responses to environmental pressures, including multiple or coercive pressures from powerful outside organizations. Law schools’ reactions to rankings are best understood as the evolving responses of an assortment of actors who struggle to reconcile their sense of themselves as professional educators with an imposed market-based logic of accountability.

Furthermore, actors’ ongoing interpretations and responses highlight the nuanced range of interactions between institutional pressures and organizational reactions. Institutional pressures, for example, may be plural, they may be contradictory or reinforcing, or they may emerge from different constituencies and have dissimilar effects on different parts of organizations. Likewise, organizational reactions may vary over time and within organizational units, as well as being more or less tightly coupled to external pressures. In other words, processes of accommodation are complex, continuous, and often unfold on the ground. Looking inside organizations to understand how meaning is negotiated and sense-making takes place is a valuable and necessary complement to contemporary institutional explanations.

## METHODS AND DATA

To analyze how rankings discipline, one needs intimate knowledge of organizational practice. We thus conducted an in-depth case study of the effects of *USN* rankings in one educational field: law schools. We selected law schools because the disciplinary effects are especially clear there. Unlike other graduate programs, all accredited law schools are ranked, so ranking effects are more comprehensive. Also, law schools vigorously resisted rankings, which makes more explicit the link between members’ assumptions and behavior. Although some aspects of law school rankings may be distinctive, research on undergraduate and business school rankings indicate that patterns of effects are similar (McDonough et al. 1998; Sauder and Espeland 2006; Thompson 2000). More generally, these patterns are directly relevant to understanding how quantitative performance measures influence organizational behavior in other realms. “Accountability movements” have propelled the global proliferation of assessment measures in many institutional domains, including healthcare, nonprofits, governance, and primary and secondary education (see Espeland and Vannebo 2007; Strathern 2000). Research on rankings can be mobilized in comparisons across fields and techniques, but doing so first requires an understanding of how disciplinary practices operate in particular contexts.

Our research incorporates a multimethod approach. Along with open-ended interviews of law school personnel (described below), we conducted 92 brief interviews with prospective law students, visited seven law schools, observed and participated in professional meetings and conferences, analyzed 15 years of admissions and yield statistics (Sauder and Lancaster 2006), monitored online bulletin boards for prospective law students weekly for an entire admissions cycle, and analyzed the content of Web sites, newspaper stories, and organizational documents (including strategic plans, marketing plans, promotional brochures, and internal memoranda). To identify distinctive effects on law schools, we interviewed 35 business and dental school administrators (Sauder and Espeland 2006) and reanalyzed evidence from two other research projects: an ethnographic study of college admissions (Stevens 2007) and research comparing the profession-



**Table 1.** Interviews by Rank of Respondent's School

	Top 10	Top 25	First Tier	Second Tier	Third Tier	Fourth Tier	Total
Wave 1	6	7	13	13	12	8	59
Wave 2	10	10	19	13	13	7	72
Total	16	17	32	26	25	15	131

*Notes:* School rank is from the time of the interview. We conducted six interviews with leaders of national legal education associations. Interviews include 39 deans or ex-deans; 49 other administrators, primarily deans or directors of admissions and career services; 34 faculty members; and 9 other positions (e.g., directors of marketing, librarians, and staff).

al socialization of law and business students (Schleef 2006).<sup>3</sup>

These disparate data permit the triangulation of sources, which allows for the corroboration, elaboration, and disconfirmation of evidence, as well as a more sophisticated understanding of motivations and context. Comparing sources allows us to examine patterns across different units of analysis: individuals, groups, organizations, and networks. While much of our evidence is derived from interviews, our quotations illustrate patterns confirmed by multiple sources and may be treated as exemplary. Consequently, each data source informs our interpretation of findings and conclusions.

As indicated in Table 1, our primary source of data is 137 semistructured interviews conducted with law school administrators and faculty in two waves. The majority of respondents, whose careers include positions at 75 of the approximately 190 accredited law schools, were deans, associate deans, or faculty. The first wave of interviews (N = 65), conducted by telephone during 2000 to 2001, examined the range of rankings effects across law schools. Our sample emphasized variations in rank, ranking trajectory, mission, location, and size. From this initial data collection, we generated hypotheses about causes and consequences of rankings, including those pertaining to the disciplinary aspects of rankings, and devised an initial coding scheme. We conducted the second wave of interviews (N = 72) at seven "focal" law schools that we visited from 2002 to 2004. At these schools, selected for variation in region, mission, and rank, we interviewed as many key person-

nel as possible, focusing on the distribution of effects within and across different types of schools.

We conducted open-ended interviews that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes; all but five were taped and transcribed. This format provided the flexibility to probe responses, adapt questions to the unique experience and expertise of informants, pursue emerging insights about processes for which there is, as yet, little systematic empirical evidence, and corroborate suspect information. Since respondents were not asked identical questions, we coded interviews for themes rather than precisely predefined variables. Our initial coding scheme, derived from the first wave of interviews, focused on the effects of rankings on different organizational units or groups (e.g., deans, career services, admissions, and prospective students) and broad themes (e.g., encroachment of market ideologies, gaming strategies, positive effects of rankings, and problems of quantification).

After the first wave of interviews, we refined coding categories and, using Qualrus, recoded all interviews for more precise themes.<sup>4</sup> Rather than representing "findings" or the end point of our analysis, our coding served as a guideline for interpretation and further analysis, revealing, for example, sources of variation, motivations, and how patterns impinged on one another.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed descriptions of our data sources and the advantages of the multiple method approach for this study, see Espeland (forthcoming) and Sauder and Espeland (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> After the second iteration of coding, for example, the general category "problems of quantification" included 26 subthemes (e.g., "exaggeration of small differences," "nonexperts defining criteria of excellence," and "a single rubric evaluating all schools"), while "the positive effects" category contained 12 subthemes (e.g., "increased accountability," "improved career services," and "more information for constituents").

Consequently, a theme's frequency is only a rough indicator of its significance and is less central to our analysis than efforts to understand the meaning, context, and variations in who makes claims, as well as how themes are expressed or ignored within different units or across different kinds of organizations. Again, the findings we report represent general trends in our data. Derived from multiple independent interviews, they are consistent across sources.

### THE CONTEXT FOR RANKINGS

Rankings are a lucrative and relatively recent institutional pressure in legal education. In 1983, *USN* began the rankings as a feature on colleges; it expanded in 1990 to include annual rankings of colleges, professional schools, and graduate programs. Law school rankings are based on four general factors: reputation, selectivity, placement, and faculty resources. Each factor is comprised of several other weighted measures to create a composite score that is then scaled to create a school's overall rank.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the top 100 law schools are listed in rank order, with the remaining 90 or so schools divided into tiers and listed alphabetically. Rankings issues are so popular that some call them *USN*'s "swimsuit issue" (Parloff 1998). Rankings now influence many constituents: prospective students use them to decide where to apply and which schools to attend, employers use them to evaluate job candidates, trustees use them to evaluate schools and deans, and both local and national media report them as news.

Although popular with external audiences, rankings are widely resented by law schools. Responding to the first annual ranking of law schools, Yale's dean called the rankings "an idiot poll," while Harvard's dean described them as "Mickey Mouse," "just plain wacky," and "totally bonkers" (Parloff 1998). Many consider the rankings "too stupid to be taken seriously." Administrators soon learned, though, that even if they view rankings as poor measures, others do take them seriously. Almost all law schools have since adopted strategies to manage rankings. Even so, dramatic improvements in rank are rare because reputations are slow to

change and competitor schools quickly imitate successful innovations.

The newness of the rankings, their appeal to outsiders, their resistance to easy management, and the disdain powerful insiders feel toward them are all conditions that would seem to deter tight coupling. Instead, rankings have prompted broad changes in legal education, affecting how resources are distributed, decisions are made, and status is defined (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Johnson 2006; Stake 2006).<sup>6</sup> Despite educators' objections, rankings have become naturalized, shaping the cognition and activities of even their harshest critics. Respondents describe rankings as having "changed everything," as informing "every decision," and as "shaping people's identities" (see also Morriss and Henderson 2007). Rankings are a perennial feature of professional meetings, and professional leaders publicly chastise educators for their obsession with rankings (Whitman 2002). One dean explained that until she became dean, "I didn't really understand . . . the integral nature of the rankings to everything about the law school's reputation, its admissions policies, how it allocates money, how it budgets." Educators use rankings to evaluate subordinates, colleagues, and themselves, to motivate and interpret their activities, to coordinate work, and to formulate goals and explain outcomes.

These effects raise important questions about why rankings have proven to be so generative, why they have penetrated legal education so thoroughly, and why powerful educators have become complicit in the activities they criticize. Foucault's analysis of discipline, particularly his depiction of how surveillance and normalization facilitate a discipline that is both imposed by outsiders and internalized by insiders, offers a helpful framework for engaging these questions. Not only do rankings transform how external constituents view law schools, but the discipline rankings impose changes how law school administrators think about legal education and their relationships to their own and other law schools.

<sup>5</sup> For more on ranking history and methods, see Sauder and Espeland (2006).

<sup>6</sup> For more on strategies schools use to improve rankings, see Sauder and Espeland (2006) and Espeland and Sauder (2007).

## ANALYZING RANKINGS AS DISCIPLINARY PRACTICES

In his most comprehensive treatment of discipline, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault traces the transformation of prisons from sites where state power is projected onto bodies to sites constituted by a carefully proscribed set of disciplinary practices enacted by experts. Foucault distinguishes disciplinary power from earlier forms of sovereign power. Sovereign power is centralized, possessed by visible agents, displayed in public rituals, and exercised intermittently with clear effects. Disciplinary power, however, is neither a unified force nor a characteristic of individuals or institutions. Rather, it is “capillary”; it is continuous, diffuse, and comprises complex relations enacted through subtle practices and banal procedures (Foucault 1977:170).

Disciplinary power is a central, constitutive feature of modern selves. In investigations of mental institutions, medicine, prisons, schools, and sexuality, Foucault describes an array of disciplinary techniques through which people become the objects of particular kinds of knowledge that construct them as mad, ill, criminal, sexual, or, most generally, as individuals. The creation of ranks is one such technique:

In discipline, the elements are interchangeable, since each is defined by the place it occupies in a series, and by the gap that separates it from the others. The unit is, therefore, neither the territory (unit of domination), nor the place (unit of residence), but the *rank*: the place one occupies in a classification, the point at which a line and a column intersect, the interval in a series of intervals that one may traverse one after the other. Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations. (Foucault 1977:145–46, original italics)

The distribution of bodies, in both a fixed physical space and the dynamic analytical space constructed through quantification, is a key mechanism of discipline.

A hallmark of Foucault’s analysis of discipline is his focus on mundane practices, the “how” of discipline. He attends to the “prescriptive” and the “codifying” aspects of conduct: “what is to be done” and “what is known” (Foucault 2003:134). Disciplinary practices

simultaneously create kinds of people, knowledge about those people, and types of interventions appropriate for those people. Both the internalization and the coercion of rankings are derived from these changes in how ranked actors are perceived and categorized by themselves and by influential constituents. An analysis of surveillance and normalization, two of Foucault’s central disciplinary techniques, shows how these cognitive changes encourage a tight coupling between rankings and organizational activity.

### SURVEILLANCE

Meticulous surveillance is a key feature of disciplinary power. Foucault’s famous panopticon, where surveillance is continuous, anonymous, invisible, and encompasses both regulators and the regulated, represents the ideal. Spatial surveillance is complemented and often supplanted by conceptual arrangements such as statistical or actuarial surveillance (Miller and O’Leary 1987; Simon 1988). As simplified and widely disseminated media products, rankings dramatically magnify the visibility of law school reputations, making it difficult for schools to buffer their effects. Three characteristics of surveillance structure this visibility: its unremitting nature, its orientation to details, and its broad scope.

CONTINUOUS SURVEILLANCE. *USN* orchestrates the annual release of rankings as a media event. New rankings are widely publicized, and newspapers regularly report local schools’ standing, especially if a school’s rank changes. Because of the attention new rankings create, many deans dread the day they are released. One dean described her coping strategy this way:

I have to be frank. I hate to say this but when the *USN* comes out, it reminds me of when I used to live in an apartment that had roaches. I developed this protective instinct, which is that I would close my eyes before I turned on the light to give them time to run away so that I didn’t really have to see them. The last time the *USN* came out, I just closed my eyes and I looked in the fourth tier just to make sure that we weren’t there, because I live in dread fear that we will fall to the fourth tier on my watch. That’s ridiculous! We’re a wonderful law school.



The “news” of new rankings travels at Internet speed. According to one professor, “In five seconds, the whole school knows. In five minutes, the whole world knows.” New rankings generate a flurry of activity within law schools. Deans send detailed e-mails offering explanations and analyzing shifts to faculty, staff, students, and sometimes even alumni and prospective students. Improvements elicit congratulations, celebrations, and perhaps bonuses, while a drop means long discussions at faculty meetings, power-point presentations to boards of visitors, anxious e-mails from alumni, and town meetings to reassure students.

The publicity and trepidation accompanying the annual release of rankings may be episodic, but the scrutiny they promote is continuous. According to one dean, “Obsessed may be an overstatement, but it’s not much of an overstatement. Law school deans are obsessed with those rankings. None of us like them but all of us are obsessed.” One manifestation of this obsession is that rankings become a key reference point in decision making. A new dean described his evolving reaction this way:

I was one of those [faculty] . . . who would say that we should disregard the rankings completely, and we should do whatever we need to do to make this a great place for our students and faculty. Now [as dean], I don’t think I have any choice but to think in terms of the rankings.

As this dean learned, administrators are forced to consider how decisions affect rankings. This was a common theme in our interviews. A more experienced dean explained:

What happens, unfortunately, is that I end up making decisions with an eye toward those rankings rather than—I’m overstating this to make a point—rather than what’s best for the school. The best thing for the school might not be student–teacher ratio right now. Maybe I should be putting the money I’d pay a faculty member into something else. But I’m thinking, “Oh man, if I can get that student–teacher ratio from 14.6 to 13.6 that will look very, very good in the rankings.”

The vigilance that rankings produce informs even relatively trivial decisions, an effect that prompts administrators to describe rankings as “omnipresent.” As one faculty member said, “No matter what the issue is, there always seems to be a connection to rankings.” A proposal to tighten the grading curve, or discussions of how to change curriculum, lead to long discussions

about how this might affect a school’s rank. Faculty members at many schools report pressure to publicize their work by “papering the world with reprints,” writing op-ed pieces, or cultivating reporters. Sometimes this pressure is explicit, but often it is subtle. As a faculty member explained, “Now I can’t prove it, but when I get a memo from the dean encouraging us to write more op-ed pieces, I can’t help but think that rankings are somehow behind it.” Rankings are used to interpret a disparate range of motives and behaviors even when their connection to rankings is ambiguous.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL. “Discipline,” Foucault (1977:139–40) wrote, “is a political anatomy of detail,” involving mastery over even the smallest and most insignificant-seeming elements: the bend in a soldier’s leg, how a child grasps a pen. Because of the scrutiny that rankings generate, formerly insignificant or irrelevant information now seems deeply consequential to new kinds of people. Rankings force people to examine details that were previously ignored. One manifestation of this “eminence of detail” is the meticulous recordkeeping that rankings encourage. Schools create intricate rules about how to conform to *USN* criteria. Directors of career services, for example, are responsible for producing the placement statistics for *USN*, which one director described as an “enormous undertaking”:

I’m so careful now to keep track of absolutely everything. When someone got a job. That was never an issue before, and now it is an issue. [Before rankings] I would keep track for myself and tell my incoming students how many students got their jobs through on-campus interviewing, how many students got their jobs through our job listing or our resume collecting. But that was internal, for us. Now all kinds of things become important because I never know what kinds of questions I’m going to be asked by [*USN*].

Generating placement statistics involves extensive monitoring of former students to assess their employment status. “I track them down any way I can,” one director said. “I call old boyfriends. I call parents. I am not ashamed to do that. I go on the Internet and look up whatever I can. . . . I do it all. I hunt them down.”

Schools analyze these details because even small changes in rankings criteria can change their rank. As one administrator said, “It’s time

consuming, and the punishment for not doing it is really high.” This is especially true for career services personnel. A dean of career services described a colleague’s dismissal:

She was just fired as a consequence of low numbers. I just think the job has changed so drastically. It’s not about professional, top-notch career counseling; it’s about getting the numbers. And there is no dean on the planet who doesn’t know what the numbers are.

Discipline becomes embedded in schools’ administrative routines through schools’ ongoing production of statistics. The new “facts” generated by these routines become the object of intense internal inspection. Administrators may resent the effort and resources needed to compile these numbers for a for-profit magazine, but they comply because they cannot afford to drop in rank.

Rankings also generate new ways of attending to detail when actors try to maximize rankings criteria. A new dean reported:

I actually found myself this year, for the first time, looking at what are the elements of faculty resources . . . because most of those numbers now *USN* takes out of the ABA [American Bar Association] questionnaire that law schools have to file every year. And I actually sat down and quizzed the person who is primarily responsible for doing that document about how they do it. For example, we do have one endowed fund that lets us bring a visiting professor every year, and we usually aim very high in terms of the kinds of people, so we pay that person probably as much for a semester almost as we pay some of our faculty for a year. And I actually found myself saying, “Larry, now when we do the instructional budget, we do include money from the endowment that goes to instruction, right?” Because I just am finding myself thinking that we have never thought about the elements of it in terms of *USN* [rankings] and I realized that, “Oh God, I’m getting the disease.”

Such attentiveness allows deans to pinpoint where their schools could reallocate resources to try to improve their rank. One administrator explained:

The dean made some investments in career services staff. She put an emphasis on getting a full survey return for placement purposes so we didn’t have any uncounted graduates. She bolstered scholarship resources so that the investment per student figure would be improved; she argued that . . . certain expenditures that ought to be counted in the

per student expenditure figure might not be counted.

In forcing schools to scrutinize even the smallest details that might influence their rank (e.g., the number of students responding to a survey, which budget categories are used, or whether faculty take fall or spring sabbaticals), rankings extend their discipline over law school members and constituents. Such vigilance promotes tight coupling. It encourages organizational members to internalize the control that rankings elicit and reinterpret their work, their organizational identity, and their relations with peers.

**SURVEILLANCE FROM A DISTANCE.** Rankings extend the surveillance of law schools to distant and diffuse parties. Prospective students around the globe use rankings to quickly gauge a school’s status; student law review editors use rankings to vet professors’ manuscripts; faculty use rankings when considering job prospects; law firms use them to determine where to conduct campus interviews or which class ranking to use as a threshold for interviews; university presidents, trustees, and boards of visitors use rankings to evaluate a dean’s performance, allocate resources, and create strategic plans; and alumni use rankings to monitor the trajectory of their alma maters, whether for bragging rights or concern over the value of their degrees.

The easy scrutiny that rankings create makes evaluating law schools a more populist project, just as *USN* intended. Disparate, dispersed, and sometimes ill-informed audiences now feel qualified to assess the performance of each law school over time and in relation to other schools. This new form of scrutiny changes how law schools are held accountable by different constituencies, making it possible for schools to be governed “at a distance” (Miller and Rose 1990). One dean explained:

Deans would naturally think that [rankings] are important because any time their school moves in either direction, they hear a lot about it from their alums and their provosts and people who are important in their lives. And so they know the world is paying attention and they know that this generates interest. And . . . they respond to the publicity.

This dean emphasized that it is not just students who use rankings, but also “boards of

trustees, central administrative officials, legislators, and everybody else. I think they all understand that these are imperfect instruments, but there are so few measures of output that these things just count more than they should.”

Rankings make remote surveillance possible by creating numbers that circulate easily. Because rankings are abstract, concise, and portable, and because they decontextualize so thoroughly, they travel widely and are easily inserted into new places and for new uses. Rankings often seem most objective to those remote from the messiness of their production. If rankings are “omnipresent” to administrators, most constituents are mindful of them only episodically and are largely unaware of the constant hum of machinery that produces them. But the transparency and simplification that rankings create are fundamental to their discipline. External audiences can now “see” inside law schools more easily, and this transparency expands the rankings’ influence and ensures tight coupling. As one student posted on a pre-law Web site: “Rankings track reputations and reputations really matter in law. You’d be nuts not to go to the highest ranking school you got into.”

### **NORMALIZATION**

Normalization, “one of the great instruments of power at the end of the classical age” (Foucault 1977:183), is a second mechanism by which rankings discipline law schools. Disciplinary power is based on normalization. For Foucault, “the penalty of the norm” functions, paradoxically, by defining a class of subjects as the same and then using normative criteria to establish individual differences. This process of simultaneously linking and distinguishing is a distinctively modern form of power.

Normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels to fix specialties and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. . . . It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity . . . the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (Foucault 1977:184)

Normalization serves a “double function” by creating a classificatory system that immedi-

ately rewards or punishes those it classifies. Foucault identifies five processes of normalization that shape discipline: comparison, differentiation, hierarchization, homogenization, and exclusion. Each of these processes clarifies how rankings simplify and stratify information about law schools, and each helps explain how people interpret and internalize the assumptions about legal education embedded in rankings.

**COMPARISON.** Rankings organize law schools as explicit objects of comparison, reinforcing the idea that all law schools belong to the same class of objects. Although ABA accreditation procedures classified law schools as comparable units long before rankings, rankings intensify this comparability by commensurating performance. Applying a common metric to all schools implies that schools have common motives, goals, and missions, concealing important differences among schools. One dean reported:

I think it’s very unfortunate because [USM] lumps everybody in together, and some of what their tiering system does is graduate based on how national a school is likely to be. And it drives that pattern . . . if the question is really quality, you can have the best regional school which is doing something different than a generic national school. . . . [Or] if you want to do clinical-type work, if you want to work with poor people, if you want to do family law, if you want to do trial work, you may not find a very good program . . . at a more elite school.

Rankings, in commensurating law schools, shape organizational cognition, changing how people notice and what they notice. Differences among schools are expressed solely as intervals on a shared metric. The number of books in a law library is directly connected to the percentage of students employed at graduation, which is linked to faculty salaries, and so on. A change in one characteristic reverberates through others, and knowledge of this interconnectedness heightens the significance of each. Many deans see this weighing and integrating of variables as especially pernicious:

I could have the top 50 law schools by percentage of women on faculty, the top 50 by number of library books, the top 50 by getting public services scholarships . . . the top 50 in terms of student-teacher ratio. And then you could go out and

make a list of what's important to you. And of course, what I've created is not really a ranking, but different tables, right? . . . It's when you start connecting these things that it has the flaws.

I'm not against reputational surveys. They could survey lawyers, they could survey professors, just the way they do. But then they've done this pernicious thing of introducing the formula . . . which presupposes a single norm, and a norm they've determined.

Rankings create a single norm for excellence in legal education and then evaluate each school based on how well it measures up to this standard. Ranking pressures become internalized and change behavior by imposing a metric of comparison that obscures the different purposes law schools serve.

**DIFFERENTIATION AND THE CREATION OF HIERARCHY.** Because the normative standard imposed by rankings is a metric, qualities are turned into quantities and difference is expressed as an interval. This commensuration produces and exposes hierarchy. In combining, weighting, and ranking differences among law schools on many dimensions, *USN* creates an "optimal" law school against which all others are compared. Rankings make clear which schools are at the top and the bottom and the exact difference between *all* schools.

Rankings reflect what is happening not only at one's own school but also every other school in relation to one's own. Rankings are a zero-sum technology; a school's success comes at the expense of others and small differences matter.

We have actually taken a bit of a hit versus [a peer school]. We were pretty much head-to-head in the rankings for a period of time, and all of the sudden the last three or four years they have been ranked up [2 to 3 spots higher], and we have had a little change but not as much as them. And we have found that we have lost more students to them. So it definitely makes a difference.

Pitting one person's or one institution's performance against all others is a central and deeply consequential aspect of the discipline imposed by processes of normalization.

**HOMOGENIZATION AND EXCLUSION.** Normalization encourages homogenization and precludes competing definitions. Difference is now value laden, a shortcoming rather than a viable alternative, and many law schools feel intense

pressure to conform as closely as possible to the norm. This pressure has many manifestations, but administrators worry most about the effects on mission and student diversity. Deans fear that student bodies may become homogenized, as admissions officers select for high LSAT scores and GPAs instead of, for example, students with unique career goals, leadership experience, or diverse backgrounds.

I think the rankings push you to give less weight to an applicant who has done something really interesting if they don't have good LSAT numbers. So that might make for a less interesting class. . . . There is pressure to take people who've got good numbers and give less weight to other factors. . . . Certainly it has an impact on racial diversity because of all the well-known information about how Blacks tend to do not as well on standardized tests and that [effect] is not good.

Pressures to homogenize also encourage some schools to adopt missions that conform to assumptions embedded in rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2007), which can discourage innovation.

[Rankings] have been enormously destructive to the project of law schools trying to figure out how to provide creative and innovative legal education. [It's] a moment in history when there are a lot of important developments which have challenged the traditional model of legal education. So at a time when there are lots of currents in legal educational thought pushing for change, pushing experimentation, and pushing for diversity, you see this brake on those efforts, which I think *USN* reinforces.

Finally, Foucault's concept of exclusion helps explain why law schools conform to normative standards they purport to reject. Schools that stray too far from the optimum set by *USN* are stigmatized and punished. Law schools with missions promoting public service or schools serving disadvantaged students, for example, must either compromise their missions or be excluded from the category of "good law school." Administrators and faculty often criticize *USN* for elevating one definition of quality over all others, neglecting many schools' unique attributes and strengths. As one dean explained, "In terms of the whole identity process, each school is really unique. And what *USN* does is come in with a template, and it lays it on all law schools and says, 'Well, you're a



shitty school because you're not in the first tier.' Well, that's not true."

Despite meeting rigorous ABA standards of accreditation, poorly ranked schools are judged inadequate. Faculty, students, and alumni all feel demeaned. With his choices confined to third-tier law schools, one student, using the vivid vernacular of the chat room, referred to himself as a "TTT kinda guy" (TTT is an acronym for "third-tier toilet").

Understanding how processes of surveillance and normalization affect law schools is critical to appreciating how schools attain a particular form of visibility. Visibility is crucial for interventions of any sort. To be improved, something must first be visible, and to be visible, it must be organized as a coherent entity. As James Scott (1998:183) puts it:

Legibility is a condition of manipulation. . . . The units in question might be citizens, villages, trees, fields, houses, or people grouped according to age, depending on the type of intervention. . . . [They] must be organized in a manner that permits them to be identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated, and monitored; . . . the greater the manipulation envisioned, the greater the legibility required to effect it.

Rankings make, filter, and disseminate knowledge that constructs law schools as distinctive objects amenable to particular kinds of manipulations. This knowledge is descriptive, corrective, and saturated with power. Unlike state knowledge that aspires to control, rankings were intended to evaluate law schools, not change them. Yet, the legibility, simplification, and stratification that rankings create generate strong incentives for similar kinds of manipulations and aspirations of control. The type of visibility that disciplinary processes confer shapes the kinds of interventions that seem possible or valuable. Rankings can be understood as a standardized norm of excellence; they create a calculable law school by producing an abstract, ideal law school comprised of discrete, integrated components. By depicting how well and how poorly schools adhere to this abstraction, schools are encouraged to conform to this ideal. Knowing your school is ranked 49th and that your median LSAT scores are slightly lower than those of your peers is knowledge that simultaneously identifies a problem, suggests a response, and makes it easy to judge a solution's effectiveness.

Rankings expand and organize the surveillance of law schools, producing scrutiny that is continuous, selective, and portable. Normalization creates a definition of an ideal law school that not only produces homogeneity and exclusion, but also encourages the naturalization of this definition. These disciplinary processes help explain how people interpret and manipulate rankings, why rankings pressures are hard to buffer, and why, over time, rankings become tightly coupled to many organizational practices. Disciplinary processes also help explain the variation in strategies different schools adopt in their attempts to manage this external pressure.

### THE INTERNALIZATION OF RANKINGS: ANXIETY, RESISTANCE, AND ALLURE

Rankings provide both members and other constituents with a basic framework for making sense of an organization and its environment, and it is the internalization of this framework that promotes tight coupling. But what factors facilitate internalization? Internalization is mediated through people's emotional and cognitive responses to rankings, and through their distinctive and evolving interpretations of rankings. To support this claim, we show how three interpretations of rankings, each with a particular emotional tenor, are important conduits of internalization: rankings as sources of anxiety, as objects to resist, and as pressure that becomes, for some, peculiarly seductive.

#### ANXIETY

Foucault's conception of disciplinary power highlights how uncertainty and anxiety stoke the dynamism and internalization of rankings. As relative, unstable, and highly visible measures, rankings are engines of status anxiety. Because schools are often separated by minuscule margins, seemingly negligible changes sometimes produce dramatic shifts in overall rank. No school is secure so long as others strive to boost their rank. The meticulous monitoring of one's own school and one's peers produces more exhaustive interventions and explains why strategic innovations, such as changes in how employment statistics are calculated, diffuse quickly and widely (Morriss and Henderson



2007). If a peer school no longer restricts employment statistics to legal jobs, schools that do not adopt this definition may see their ranking plummet (Brooks 1998). Some administrators compare this situation to an “arms race” in which schools must spend heavily to maintain their rank, and many educators worry about the distrust and moral compromises that rankings encourage.

Another anxiety-inducing aspect of rankings is that administrators’ ability to manage them is limited. Work that demands responsibility without control is especially stressful (Marmot 2004). A dean cannot control what other schools do, and recourse to normative sanctions is difficult when strategic practices, like compiling accurate statistics, are hidden and ambiguous. Some rankings factors, such as reputation scores, are hard to manipulate, and even those factors that seem amenable to control can be hard to manage. For example, schools can admit whomever they choose, but competition for students with high test scores is fierce, and being turned down depresses yield statistics. Distinguishing between the aspects of rankings that can and cannot be controlled is the mark of a sophisticated dean. As one dean told us:

Two law schools I know of—one has a new dean and the other a dean with a short tenure—were tying their fate to the rankings, which is idiotic. [One school] has mounted a campaign to make it a first-tier law school; it is quite clear that they mean as validated by *USN*. . . . A new dean at [another school] has moving up in the [*USN*] rankings as his goal. This is a relatively inexperienced dean. It’s a rookie mistake, if that’s his vision. I would want to sit down with him and tell him, “Look, this is out of your hands.”

New rankings are released annually, which exacerbates anxiety and uncertainty. Even administrators at highly ranked schools feel they cannot afford to relax their vigilance. According to one admissions director, if your ranking improves, “you feel good for about 15 minutes before you start to worry.” The insecurity rankings foster, although unevenly distributed, is perennial; over time, this chronic stress and uncertainty can be dispiriting and draining for the most energetic administrators.

A final source of the instability and anxiety associated with rankings is that they are not static objects. Ranking scores are so tightly compressed that even small changes in one

school can affect the rankings of many others (Sauder and Lancaster 2006). In addition, although the general structure of rankings has not changed since 1990, *USN* regularly modifies details of its methods (e.g., increasing the number of schools it ordinarily ranks from 25 to 100 and modifying how it reports test scores and employment rates). Priding itself on remaining accessible and responsive to law schools, *USN* willingly listens to complaints, answers questions, and sometimes alters its measures. *USN* presents these changes as part of a continual effort to improve the rankings in response to feedback, but many educators interpret these adjustments as intentional efforts to “shake up” the rankings to maintain their marketability and newsworthiness. No matter the motive, these changing evaluative criteria make it difficult to craft coherent strategic responses, heightening administrators’ anxiety.

### RESISTANCE

For Foucault (1980), resistance offers a crucial perspective for understanding power relations. Resistance is not prior to or opposed to power, but constitutive of power relations that are ubiquitous, multiple, and local. Conceived this way, resistance is not antithetical to the internalization of discipline but a central feature of it. One general form of resistance is to challenge the particular type of subjectivity that discipline imposes. Because individuals and organizations never fit neatly into the particular identity that discipline imposes, the resulting friction can spark resistance. While Foucault’s focus is on how discipline shapes self-understanding, rankings can be construed as a compulsory organizational identity, one that members first rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Few people in legal education are neutral toward rankings, and we were initially surprised at the vehemence of people’s reactions. When rankings were first introduced, some deans tried to organize a boycott of *USN* by withholding information. This failed, though, because many schools provided *USN* with the requested information and for those that did not, *USN* used con-

<sup>7</sup> On how rankings shape members’ self-understandings, see Elsbach and Kramer (1996) and Schleef (2006).

servative estimates of missing information, yielding lower rankings. When evidence of robust demand made ignoring rankings unrealistic, deans and leaders of professional organizations denounced them in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and at professional meetings. The Association of American Law Schools (AALS) commissioned a study critiquing rankings methodology, which they released at a well-publicized press conference. Since 1997, most deans have signed a letter condemning the rankings, which is published on the Law School Admission Council's (LSAC) Web site and sent to everyone who registers for the LSAT.

Rankings, according to these arguments, are deeply flawed measures that neglect important dimensions of legal education. Moreover, the job of defining excellence is best done by professional educators and not a for-profit magazine. Members' outrage reflects what feels like an attack on their professional and personal commitments, as well as their schools. Their efforts to define their own organizations, to represent their schools in terms that capture their distinctiveness, are overwhelmed by the blunt fact of their ranking. Rankings fundamentally misrepresent their schools and cede too much power to outsiders with dubious motives. As one assistant dean told us, "We hate them . . . we just hate them." While such condemnation of rankings is a significant part of the profession's response, a related strategy is to meet with *USN* editors in an effort to reform rankings or lobby for changes that might portray one's own school more favorably. Some of these meetings do yield small changes in methods, but the magazine has been reluctant to transform one of its most lucrative products.

While strategies aimed at decoupling or creating loose couplings are also possible forms of resistance, they are more difficult to enact when environmental pressures are likely to be internalized. Some schools, however, did initially respond to rankings with a dramatic form of this strategy: they prepared two sets of numbers, one for the ABA, the other for *USN*. In its next issue, *USN* countered by publishing the names of 29 schools that reported higher LSAT scores to *USN* than to the ABA (*USN* 1995). Public shaming proved to be an effective rejoinder as law schools quickly fell in line. Over time, rules for compiling *USN* statistics grew more elabo-

rate and conformed more closely to ABA guidelines. Despite deans' influence, rankings proved too popular, and *USN* too able to retaliate, for schools to stop them. A handful of deans have always accepted rankings as a legitimate form of accountability, a position unpopular with their peers, but now even the harshest critics concede that rankings are irrevocable.

For Foucault, resistance creates a relationship, and regardless of its effectiveness, resistance prolongs entanglements by evoking new forms of engagement, which in turn elaborate and extend discipline (Covaleski et al. 1998).<sup>8</sup> Resistance facilitates the internalization of discipline because it expresses an investment in a relationship, one that can be simultaneously resented and alluring. By making rankings a point of reference around which action and beliefs are organized, resistance helps internalize the discipline of rankings.

#### ALLURE

There are powerful inducements for administrators to manipulate rankings, apart from coercive pressures that rankings generate. Many organizational members develop deeply ambivalent responses as rankings create new incentives that evoke novel strategic thinking. When efforts to suppress rankings failed, some responded by trying to tame rankings. Understood this way, efforts to manage rankings are a rational reaction to changing institutional demands. This reaction can be an almost existential response, an attempt to reassert agency in the face of vulnerability. This desire to control rankings, to make them seem less like an imposed fate, is seductive. As a previously quoted dean reflected, almost without realizing it, you catch "the disease."

"Gaming" is one example of how resistance extends discipline by restructuring relations both among law schools and between law schools and the rankings. We define gaming as cynical efforts to manipulate the rankings data without addressing the underlying condition that is the target of measurement. Gaming can be understood as a form of decoupling, an effort

<sup>8</sup> Simmel (1971) makes a similar point in his analysis of conflict, suggesting that the opposite of conflict is not harmony but apathy.

to manipulate appearances in ways that leave internal practices intact. Used this way, decoupling is not motivated by concerns over legitimacy because the legitimacy of rankings is broadly disputed. Rather, gaming offers a chance to protect one's school from the penalties of a poor ranking and, reassuringly, to do something in the face of great uncertainty.

Like other forms of decoupling, gaming is a symbolic response that occurs at the margins of organizational practice. In addition to reporting different numbers to *USN* and the ABA, or defining employment as any job rather than a legal position, some schools encourage underqualified applicants to apply to boost their selectivity statistics, "skim" top students from other local schools to keep entering first-year cohorts small, reject stellar candidates to protect their yields, or "track" students with lower LSAT scores by admitting them to their part-time or evening programs, which do not report their scores to *USN* (Espeland and Sauder 2007; Whitman 2002). Such gaming strategies prompted *USN* to change its methodology and reporting, develop more explicit rules about how to measure rankings criteria, and monitor information more closely. The result, predictably, is a more precise and stringent discipline and more ingenious forms of gaming. The allure of rankings emerges from the desire to manipulate them. Although it is a more subtle form of resistance, one that counters the visibility and transparency that rankings confer, it also reinforces their hegemony.

Burawoy's (1979) analysis of labor relations in a manufacturing firm illustrates a comparable process. Despite his sophisticated critique of capitalist production, Burawoy, like other workers, was compelled to produce at a pace defined by the "game" as "making out." This game organized workers in ways that stabilized production, displaced conflict, and ensured consent. Making out was not just a means to maximize wages; it was also a way to gain some small measure of control over the terms of work and status on the shop floor, and to relieve boredom. Without pressing the comparison too far, efforts to manage rankings resemble a game with some similar consequences. The machinists' game constructed workers as individuals competing against each other. It created a public arena for expressing skill and creativity, and for sending clear signals about one's success. Conflict was

directed at workers who impeded one's chances for making out, rather than at managers concerned with cutting labor costs. Attending to the narrow rules of the game meant construing the interests of workers to be the same as managers and owners; it meant neglecting bigger contradictions.

Rankings depict law schools as institutions competing against one another within a shared status hierarchy with clearly defined measures of success and failure. In sharp contrast to the machinists, success is strictly relative. Complicity in the game involves accepting the competitive terms of this status hierarchy, where one school's ascent requires another's descent. Many deans described how rankings exacerbate competition among law schools in ways they find disturbing. As one dean told us, "I think [rankings put] a kind of unwholesome kind of competition between institutions of higher learning; there shouldn't be any competition between lighthouses, and I think we have that."

Burawoy's "game" represents a discipline invented and enforced by machinists, and if some managers were complicit, this was the tacit acceptance of outsiders. In sharp contrast, rankings are imposed by outsiders, and if the gaming that results is the creation of administrators and faculty, its terms are policed by *USN*. Focusing on ranking criteria deflects attention from other matters, including disputes with *USN*, which increases the control that rankings exert by allowing them to penetrate the organization more thoroughly. Chronic resistance is demoralizing. Efforts to manage the numbers, while hardly an endorsement of rankings, is a form of begrudging accommodation. This intimacy breeds neither contempt nor complacency, but rather discipline that is increasingly self-imposed and internalized, a process that naturalizes rankings. As law school rankings become taken for granted, people are less aware of their influence and less critical of their effects. As one dean said, "We're not going to get rid of them so we *have* to adapt."

There can be a thin moral line between sensible adaptation and compromising one's values. If administrators believe that a particular strategy is unethical, reactions can be fierce. One director of admissions reported that in his former position, he was pressured to reject stellar candidates who seemed unlikely to accept

admission. He believed this was unfair to candidates and told the dean he would quit rather than comply. This dean backed down, but others may not draw the same moral boundaries. Many administrators complain about what they see as their colleagues' hypocritical responses to rankings.

I think schools spoke out of both sides of their mouth very early on. They said that they weren't important publicly, but then would get together with their staffs and do two things: rail on the process of the rankings but stress how important it was to go up in those rankings.

A conventional explanation of gaming and *USN*'s response to it might view gaming as the unsurprising strategic action of rational actors trying to maximize their gains in an evolving enterprise. This account leaves out much about the motives and consequences of gaming, as well as how rankings become internalized as references, norms, and even forms of resistance. Gaming challenges the legitimacy of rankings by subverting their appearance as accurate representations of the schools they measure, the basis of their authority as scientific measures. But gaming simultaneously reinforces the legitimacy of rankings by furthering educators' investment in them. It is hard to resist manipulating rankings, and the more effort expended on manipulation, the more naturalized rankings become as arbiters of status. Rankings simultaneously seduce and coerce, and that this complex interplay of co-optation and resistance is conducted in the bland language of numbers makes it all the more compelling. At schools with improving rankings, even critics may find it hard to avoid a flush of pride, along with relief and anxiety about next year. The allure of rankings may be subtle, but it shapes resistance while securing the engagement of critics and supporters alike.

## CONCLUSION

We have described an array of strategies that law schools use in their efforts to manage rankings and mitigate their effects. We have also shown how disciplinary processes unfold differently depending on features of context and constituents. Such variability shapes schools' willingness to buffer their work from the influence of rankings and determines how well they can do so.

Not all schools respond to rankings in the same way, and reactions change over time. Most administrators initially ignored rankings, a reaction reflecting the novelty of rankings as a salient feature of their organizational environment. Perhaps this response also reveals how administrators' confidence, and the insularity of their professional power, made it hard for them to conceive of rankings as threatening. When this stance proved untenable, many administrators publicly opposed rankings and tried unsuccessfully to renegotiate their terms. Others began to manipulate statistics, and these efforts took many forms. A few deans redefined their goals in terms of rankings. For them, rankings are legitimate measures of progress, and they worked to improve the attributes that rankings are designed to capture. But the pressure to improve rankings statistics is enormous, and the qualities they measure are ambiguous and hard to change. Even those who view rankings as valid are often forced to focus more superficially on indicators rather than on underlying qualities. This detachment of measure from attribute need not reflect on the sincerity of respondents.

Characteristics of schools, measures, and external audiences also influence how schools respond to rankings. A school's rank shapes its response; for example, schools on the cusp of tiers or schools with closely ranked peers nearby will feel strong pressure to improve rankings because the statistically meaningless differences that separate schools can matter enormously. Highly ranked schools may not feel the same stigma as schools ranked lower, but our data show that elite schools often obsess over small changes in rank just the same. Schools with missions that do not correspond with those of elite law schools also respond differently. Some alter their missions, while others embrace their fourth-tier status as a testament of their commitments, reinterpreting the stigma of rankings as an honorable sacrifice. Leadership influences reactions as well, as deans determined to improve rankings exacerbate their effects.

The properties of measures also shape reactions. We described how the relativity and integration of measures heighten effects. These features, along with rankings' publicity and broad dissemination, make it hard for schools to invoke symbolic compliance or erect proven barricades. Such properties transform rankings



into a zero-sum affair that encourages meticulous scrutiny, distrust, innovation in gaming techniques, and pressure for conformity. Moreover, as quantitative measures, rankings are enveloped within the broad, if inchoate, authority of mathematics and social science. Despite vigorous critiques from academics, rankings methodology seems transparent, rigorous, and reproducible, especially to nonexperts. Audiences imagine that the meaning of numbers is universal, interpretable to any numerate person. The characteristics of external audiences also shape schools' responses to rankings. If prospective students, employers, trustees, presidents, or alumni use rankings to evaluate the status of schools or the performance of deans, deans must too.

Schools' and rankings' distinctive features shape the quality and expression of the links between organizations and institutional pressures. A few low-ranked schools may ignore the pressure because they have little to lose and few opportunities to improve. The vast majority of schools, however, have implemented policies to manage the rankings as best they can, and many schools devote extensive resources to manipulating rankings in the face of intense competition with peers. Almost all schools are extremely attentive to how others generate their numbers. Not surprisingly, decoupling and manipulation strategies diffuse broadly and quickly. But efforts to contain rankings pressures, to buffer their impact, almost always fall short: the integration that rankings accomplish, the publicity attending them, and *USN*'s capacity to punish schools who fail to comply, ensure that pressures do not remain compartmentalized for long.

By imposing a shared metric on law schools, rankings unite and objectify organizations, reinforcing their coherence as similar objects. Commensuration strengthens the symbolic boundary that defines the field of legal education as comprised of the "same" organizations. It erodes the boundaries that define law schools' specialized niches, while at the same time establishing precise differences among schools based on an abstract, universal scale. Rankings have become naturalized and internalized as a standard of comparison and success. In changing how law schools think about themselves and pressuring schools toward self-discipline, rank-

ings are now deeply embedded within schools, directing attention, resources, and interventions.

We argued that Foucault's conception and analysis of disciplinary power helps in understanding why rankings have been so transformative. Rankings create a public, stable system of stratification comprised of unstable positions. The result is a social structure exquisitely suited for generating anxiety, uncertainty, meticulous monitoring, and discipline. Processes of normalization and surveillance change how members make sense of their organizations, their work, and their relations to peers. In this way, abstract systems become embedded in organizations and embodied in members and are the reason why organizations cannot buffer the effects of rankings.

Our analysis of law school rankings suggests several lessons for organizational research. First, it is important to develop a comprehensive understanding of the conditions that give rise to or prevent tight coupling. The present study, for example, demonstrates how cognitive and affective processes can promote tight coupling through the internalization of institutional pressures. More generally, this approach shows that characteristics of environmental pressures may play a critical role in the success of buffering (e.g., rankings, which are relative, are harder to contain than ratings, which are not).

Second, a more nuanced conceptualization of buffering tactics is warranted. Buffering need not be a purely symbolic, strategic, or static reaction; it can be a contingent, evolving, and interactive response. For example, the idea that any action could be purely symbolic, or that a symbolic action is the opposite of action with "real" effects, is a caricature of symbolic meaning, ignoring the constitutive power of symbols and the vitality of meaning that is negotiated and adapted in light of new audiences and circumstances. As the iterative discursive responses evoked by rankings illustrate, organizational actors' attempts to create buffers from institutional pressures are best understood as highly mediated responses by strategic and interpretive actors who may not always be fully mindful of why they react as they do. Related to this insight, the case of rankings draws attention to the complexity of the relationship between an organization and its environment and to how this complexity affects an organization's ability to create buffers. Organizations have multiple con-



stituents who often exert diverse and sometimes competing pressures. Understanding and responding to these pressures is an interactive process: which pressures matter most, which audiences take precedence, and which parts of an organization direct the response are relations to explain rather than to assume.

A third lesson for organizational theory involves theorizing change. Contemporary institutional theory often emphasizes the adoption of a particular practice through networks and across organizations, a vital means for understanding patterns of diffusion. This bird's-eye view of change, however, does not penetrate organizations, focusing instead on characteristics amenable to quantification (Stinchcombe 1997). Our analysis of rankings suggests the importance of supplementing this view with analyses attentive to how cognition, meaning, and identification shape organizational change. Put broadly, scholars need to incorporate a more complex, interpretive, and dynamic view of how organizations respond to environmental pressures (Maines 1982). This proscription calls for close, ground-level analyses of relations within schools, between schools, and among key external constituents, and attentiveness to how they negotiate meaning.

Just as importantly, Foucault's approach to discipline needs organizational scholars. If Foucault offers a vital framework for analyzing the effects of rankings, his emphasis on individuals' subjectivity and the production of docile bodies means he is less attentive to how discipline transforms organizations, that is, how discipline is coordinated, distributed, and evaluated among and within organizations. Having written extensively about institutions—clinics, prisons, schools, the military, and monasteries—as *sites* of disciplinary practices, Foucault is less interested in analyzing them as institutions (Foucault 1991). The coordination and diffusion of disciplinary practices within organizations, which Foucault mostly assumes, is explicit in organizational theory, starting with Weber's analyses of bureaucracy.

As helpful as Foucault is in deepening our understanding of rankings, his approach is limited by his focus on individuals as the locus of discipline and his neglect of the organizational dimensions of discipline: how the division of labor, coordination among units, and organizational status of members all shape disciplinary

processes. Foucault's emphasis on discursive practices is less attentive to the meaning of these practices for those who enact them and how it molds their investments and actions. In exchange for his illuminating analysis of discipline, organizational theory can return to Foucault the favor of a more complex understanding of the independent effects of organizational characteristics on discipline.

Our most general point is to underscore the importance of research on the effects of measures, assessments, and indicators. For organizational scholars, such measures will play an increasing role in defining the environment and relations with other constituents. Rankings are part of a global movement that is redefining accountability, transparency, and good governance in terms of quantitative measures. We ignore these trends at our peril. The simplification and formalization that performance measures impose disrupt power relations. Such measures currently mediate access to a broad array of institutions and professions; they diminish the salience of local knowledge and professional autonomy, they absorb vast resources, and they insinuate and extend market logic (e.g., by treating students as consumers evaluating alternative products). Understanding the disciplinary effects of measures like rankings is crucial to understanding changes in professional authority, organizational and political culture, and the experience of work.

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