

**Report of the University Senate
Research and Graduate and Professional Education Committee
(RGPEC)
on Charge S-1009
Report on National Research Council Rankings of Graduate
Programs**

March 2011

The Charge:S-1009 Examine and respond to the report by the United States National Research Council, specifically, its ratings of Rutgers' graduate programs. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by March 2011.

Summary: Rutgers participated in the National Research Council study released in the fall of 2010 entitled “A Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States.” Unlike the 1995 study that provided sometimes simplistic and subjective rankings this study is far more complex and compares a far larger set of institutions. Rather than provide a simple ranking the report offers ranges of rankings with confidence intervals. This makes it possible to gain a sense for the “neighborhood” in which our programs seem to fall and to engage in discussions about which schools are our “real” peers and how we might improve to move into a better neighborhood. However, the complexity of the report, the data, and the rankings make it considerably more difficult for the average user to understand. Additionally a number of serious problems with the data must be kept in mind in order to avoid some misconceptions that could emerge as a result of the rankings.

Data collection: The committee read through copious online materials available at the National Academies press page for the report, which includes an Excel Spreadsheet of the rankings <http://www.nap.edu/rdp> , numerous analyses and commentaries available on the Chronicle website and in particular their user friendly online program for comparing programs and institutions <http://chronicle.com/page/2010-Rankings-Doctoral/335/?=CS84957HE2010ord> , information available on the Rutgers Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning website <http://oirap.rutgers.edu/instchar/NRCrank.html> discussions with various deans, and commentary from our various units.

Observations: Rutgers appears to be finding ways to use the report to its advantage, highlighting the aspects of the report that bolster the programs that did well in the study (see <http://news.rutgers.edu/medrel/news-releases/2010/09/national-report-rate-20100927>). Among the Humanities and Social Science programs that did well in the S-Rankings (which were derived from survey questions similar to the approach of the 1995 study and understood to be “subjective”) were Philosophy History, Comparative Literature, English, and Mathematics. Among programs that did well according to the R-ranking (a regression analysis derived from data collection on a host of “objective” quantitative variables) were Philosophy, Linguistics, English, Art History, History, Sociology, and Mathematics.

There is no harm in using the report in this way, as certainly our peers are doing the same. However it would be wise to bear a number of problems with the report in mind so that programs that did not do quite as well in the rankings are not undervalued. Furthermore these problems are worth noting so that future data collection can be improved and so that units can have useful discussions about how the report can and can not be used for future planning.

Programs in the sciences in general did not fare as well as those in the Humanities and Social Sciences, although there are some standouts. In both the S and the R Rankings Food Science, Microbiology and Molecular Genetics, Planning and Public Policy, and Nutrition did relatively well, for example.

Among the most serious problems with the report across the board and not simply at Rutgers (beyond the report's complexity) are:

- The survey data collected dates from 2005-2006, which means that the rankings do not reflect sometimes significant changes in faculty, funding, publications and so on. In effect programs that have made major improvements in the past few years are penalized because of the age of the data.
- Some variables were poorly measured. Faculty research productivity was poorly captured, particularly for programs in the Humanities where data was collected from curriculum vitae.
- Some variables were stronger reflections of how institutions are structured than they were of the characteristics they purported to measure. This is particularly true of "interdisciplinarity" which was measured by the percent of associated faculty who are outside the graduate program's department.
- The size of any given program had a significant effect on how it appeared in the regression rankings. Larger programs fared better than smaller programs.
- Student placement in academic positions was highly weighted, favoring programs with strong data collection on student placement.

Nevertheless the report provides an occasion for reassessing our priorities, thinking about what variables we ourselves think are important, reflecting on how those variables can in fact be measured, and perhaps most importantly, taking stock of which institutions are in fact our peers. Because many of the problems with the report have been noted by other institutions as well as Rutgers, those of us in academia are probably clear sighted about the limits and relevance of the rankings. Our task is to make clear to outsiders any strengths that might be less evident to a less informed reader of the rankings exploring sites such as <http://graduate-school.phds.org> (which potential graduate students are likely to frequent).

The provision of confidence intervals rather than rigid rankings makes this report far more helpful than previous reports in offering a general sense for the "neighborhood" in which we find ourselves. Wherever Rutgers does not appear to fall where it would like to be, the report offers us opportunities to reflect on how we can become more visible, how we can highlight our strengths, how we can effectively collect the data we need in order to project our programs to advantage, and how we can make adjustments in response to perhaps unwelcome but occasionally accurate assessments of our current weaknesses.

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