Scandal on campus: Why our national penchant for rating everything has gone too far
By Al Gini
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Lately higher education has been getting a lot of bad press. Close to home, the University of Illinois has been accused of creating a separate admissions track that allowed sub-par but politically connected students to be admitted into the undergraduate program and the law school. The Tribune reports that over 800 students received preferential treatment from 2005 to 2009.

Farther from home, in Southern California, Claremont McKenna College was rated the ninth best liberal arts school in the nation by U.S. News and World Report’s “2012 Best College Rankings.” But the school recently admitted that a “senior administrator” had been inflating the SAT scores of its admitted students for over six years in order attract a higher caliber of prospective students.

Frankly, as an educator and as citizen of Illinois, I’m not entirely shocked by the accusations of political clout at the State’s flagship institution. Although it’s sad, revelations of lawmakers intervening in “the system” to help the friends and relatives of lobbyists, fund raisers and other connected buddies is hardly news in the Land of Lincoln.

The Claremont case, however, bothers me much more.

That situation is symptomatic of a larger problem in higher education. The college experience has become very competitive; both for applicants—who want to get into the best schools – and for colleges – who want to entice the best students to apply.

Colleges may be “temples of knowledge,” but they are also businesses. They need their student customers, paying their tuition and helping attract donations. They need to fill their classrooms and dormitories; they need to pay faculty and staff. And it’s largely dependent upon reputation, reputation, reputation.

Successful graduates with high paying jobs enhance the school’s reputation. An enhanced reputation continues to draw the best students. That in turn results in the best faculty, the best amenities, the highest tuition costs, etc. etc.

As a nation we are obsessed with ratings. We rate everything from football players to presidential candidates, from restaurants to partners on Dancing with the Stars. There’s nothing wrong with ratings, per se. But when colleges feel compelled to lie to help achieve better ratings, then to paraphrase the Bard, “There’s something rotten in education!”

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