

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education®

June 18, 2010 • \$3.75
Volume LXI, Number 38

chronicle.com



On their Web sites, a growing number of student-service colleges encourage colleges to outsource a wide variety of functions—not just residence-hall management but also spiritual advising.



Staff members at InsideTrack engage in student-success coaching under contract with more than 50 colleges.

Student Services, in Outside Hands

By SARA LEPK

SERVING STUDENTS is big business. Third-party vendors sell orientation sessions, curricula for first-year-experience courses, training and support for RA's, drug- and violence-prevention programs, financial and spiritual advising. They offer software to manage housing assignments, student-conduct cases, retention programs, campus groups. That is to say, almost the full range of what student-affairs officers do.

Enhance your offerings, the marketing pitches go. Save time and money. Make your life easier.

Vendors promise to deliver results, but independent data on whether they live up to their claims are hard to come by. Nevertheless, the industry is growing larger—and colleges' decisions trickier. A few years ago, one firm may have advertised a student-service product. Now five do.

Companies' wares can look more attractive as colleges grapple with accountability and budget pressures.

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At Oregon, Sports Turmoil Marks Leader's First Year

By ERE KELDERMA

WHEN Richard W. Lariviere became president of the University of Oregon last summer, many on the campus here were hopeful that he would raise the priority of academics and rein in an athletics department with a reputation for running amok.

Instead, Mr. Lariviere has struggled for much of his first year to contain the fallout from a string of sports-related scandals, including on- and off-the-field misbehavior by athletes and, more recently, his ouster of the athletic director, who left this spring with a \$2.3-million severance after it was discovered he had never had a written contract in his nine months on the job. Also relieved of her job was the university's general counsel, who says she was left out of the back-room negotiations yet blamed for not completing the contract.

The latest episode in the soap opera surrounding Oregon athletics has left some here wondering how the department has been allowed to spiral out of control, and

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Doctoral-Program Rankings, Delayed Years, May Be Merely a Historical Record

By DAVI D GLEN

IF YOU ASK a dean or provost about the National Research Council's long-delayed assessments of American doctoral programs, you might hear this: "The NRC report? That's so last decade."

That line, which apparently circulated on an e-mail list this year, isn't the greatest witticism. But somehow the very staleness of its humor signals how weary university

leaders are of the multimillion-dollar project.

The NRC report—a sequel to the research council's widely cited 1982 and 1995 rankings of doctoral programs—has been in the works since 2003. And in the works, and in the works. In November 2007 the research council booked space at a Washington hotel for a public unveiling of the report. But that release date came and went, and so did several subsequent ones. The most recent delays have sprung from peer reviewers' concerns about the report's complex statistical apparatus.

Now there are signs that the report may finally see the light of day. At a conference in Chicago last month, the study's director, Charlotte V. Kuh, said the report would be released "soon," though she declined to be more specific.

"This report is going to come out, or I'm going to die trying," said Ms. Kuh, who is the research council's deputy executive director of policy and global affairs.

But at this late hour, it is not clear how reliable the report will be. The survey data that underlie the program assessments were gathered way back in late 2006 and early 2007—and many of the survey questions concerned

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Fresh from Iraq, students at Cuyamaca College, near San Diego, crowd into classrooms for courses in English as a Second Language, crucial to their future in the United States.

Iraqi Refugees, Desperately Seeking English

By JENNIFER GONZALI

ALICIA MUÑOZ remembers when she began to notice something unusual at Cuyamaca College. In November 2008, Ms. Muñoz, the lead instructor of English as a Second Language, was surprised to see that classes for the following spring semester were already full—odd,

since ESL students usually registered late. That December, 60 students were shut out of the assessment test required for enrollment in the classes, because there were no more seats available. In fact, students had started lining up at 7 in the morning for the 1 p.m. test.

"That is when I knew something was going on," she says.

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Zach Cofran, a graduate student at the U. of Michigan, highly ranked by the NRC in 1995, compares skulls of different hominids.

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THE FACULTY



New Doctoral Rankings May Be Out of Date

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the 2005-6 academic year. A lot may have changed since then.

"In five or six years at a research university, people come and go," says Karen L. Klomparens, associate provost for graduate education at Michigan State University. "They retire. They die. They get hired away. And if you're going to have a rating based largely on faculty research productivity, it almost becomes moot because those aren't the same faculty anymore."

Ms. Klomparens has some kind words for the NRC project. Some universities, including her own, have already used the data they gathered internally for the project to improve their stipend systems and their students' average time-to-degree. When the NRC report finally emerges, she hopes to use its national analyses to guide similar improvements.

But alongside such hopes lies deep frustration.

"When you put this much work into something, you'd like for it to end up being a good project," says Mary M. Sapp, assistant vice president for planning and institutional research at the University of Miami. In that role, she spent countless hours in 2006 and 2007 prodding departments to accurately respond to the NRC's surveys.

"I think we're just kind of all worn out," she says. "We wait, and then we think it's coming, and then it doesn't. We wait, and—I mean, it's become a bit of a joke."

ATTEMPTS AT OBJECTIVITY

By all accounts, the problems with the latest NRC report were born from the best of intentions. The 1982 and 1995 editions of the report had been widely embraced: even 15 years later,

doctoral programs occasionally boast about having been highly ranked in the 1995 report. But many scholars were concerned that those reports were too heavily based on subjective, reputational factors that unfairly privileged larger, well-established doctoral programs.

So for the third edition, Ms. Kuh and her colleagues have tried to rely on objective measures of faculty research productivity, student completion, and other factors. They have weighted some of those factors on a "per full-time-faculty-member" basis, so that strong, small programs can be duly recognized.

They also decided that giving programs a specific ordinal ranking—for example, the sociology department at the University of Michigan

is the fourth-best in the country—is foolish. It is impossible to be so certain about rankings, Ms. Kuh's committee decided.

They chose instead to devise "ranges of rankings" that would more realistically reflect the statistical uncertainties in their data. So readers might be told, for example, that there was a 50-percent chance that Michigan's sociology program was between second-best and sixth-best in the country.

But all of those new approaches turned out to be more cumbersome than the research council had expected. Collecting the data was hugely labor intensive. Among other things, Ms. Kuh's staff had to make sure that different programs defined faculty members the same way.

The NRC's surveys asked programs to break their instructors down into three categories: "core faculty," "new faculty," and "associated faculty." Core faculty members were people who had served on at least one dissertation committee between 2001-2 and 2005-6, or who had served on the graduate-admissions or curriculum committees. The new faculty comprised people hired in tenure-track positions between 2003-4 and 2005-6, who did not meet the criteria for the core faculty. Associated faculty members were people in other departments or programs who had served on at least one dissertation committee for the program under scrutiny between 2001-2 and 2005-6. In the report's analysis of professors' publication and citation records, core faculty members are weighted more heavily than associated faculty.

If all of that sounds complicated, it is. A major reason for the report's delay in 2007 and 2008 was that Ms.

Kuh's committee realized that in their survey responses, universities were not using those faculty definitions in consistent, comparable ways. So the NRC staff spent hundreds of hours on the phone with various programs, trying to fix those discrepancies.

"They made very good efforts to try to fix it after the fact," Ms. Sapp says. "But it obviously would have been better to have done it correctly from the beginning." Even after all of the data cleaning, Ms. Sapp says, she worries that the study may still harbor anomalies.

Ms. Sapp and others are also concerned about measures of student retention and the time it takes them to complete their degrees. Some universities seem to have used inconsistent definitions of the starting line. Imagine a student who entered graduate school in 2002 intending only to earn a master's degree, but who decided in 2004 to continue into the doctoral program. Should this student be counted as a first-year doctoral student in 2004, or as third-year? Here, too, the NRC made extensive efforts to iron out inconsistencies, but Ms. Sapp is not entirely confident about the accuracy.

A HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Timeliness, not accuracy, is the major concern among people awaiting the report.

"We aren't the same institution that we were five years ago," says F. Douglas Boudinot, dean of graduate studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. "We're interested in the report, but we've grown so much that it has less meaning for us. We have 33 percent more doctoral students than we did then, and we have about 57 percent more



KAL TRIM



NATASHA BAHAGARINA



MARCO AGUIERA, SCRIPPS

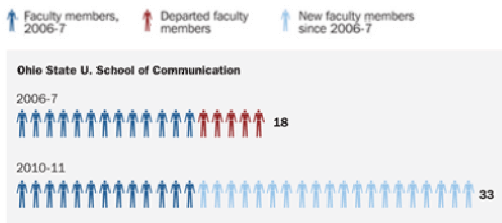


MICHAEL MARSHLAND

Scholars in a broad range of fields are awaiting the National Research Council's overdue assessments of American doctoral programs. Above, images from programs that were highly ranked in the NRC's previous report, in 1995. From top to bottom: a geologist at the California Institute of Technology; an anthropologist at the U. of Michigan at Ann Arbor; oceanographers at the U. of California at San Diego; and physiologists at Yale U.

The Shelf Life of a Doctoral Survey

The National Research Council's study of U.S. doctoral programs is based on surveys that were sent out in 2006—but the results of the study have still not been released. Some university leaders are concerned that those survey data are getting stale, especially where doctoral programs, such as this one at Ohio State U., have seen heavy faculty turnover.



SOURCE: OHIO STATE U. BY BIN CHONGMIN AND DAVID GREEN