I think that the questions that you are asking are appropriate because it seems like so many people are focused on this not just here but across the country. When I go to conferences, people are like "Hey, did you see the rankings?" and we chuckle… but you know if faculty get too caught up in that…well, I don't want them to lose the sense of why they are here and that can easily [happen].

– Marcus, Professor at Belle University

Introduction

The current cultural, ideological, and socio-political climate for education and its valuation has been described as neoliberal, market-centered, and underpinned by a strong post-positivist bent (Archer, 2009; Bansel, Davies, Gannon, & Linnell, 2008; Gildersleeve, Kuntz, Pasque, & Carducci, 2010; Lather, 2004; Luke, 1997, 2011; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Rhoades, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Interestingly, for all of the market ideologies that are projected upon and that circulate within higher education, it is widely accepted that U.S. universities and colleges constitute a cultural or institutional field (Bourdieu, 1988; Gonzales, 2013) where the maximization of cultural resources, such as prestige, rather than hard-nosed economics still hold heavy sway (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Brint, Riddle, & Hanneman, 2006; Gardner, 2010; Jencks & Riesman, 1968; Morphew, 2000, 2002, 2009; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Toma, 2012; Tuchman, 2009). Historically, higher education professionals, such as scholars or administrators, have been the ones to develop the rules for cultural resource attainment (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Brint et al., 2006; Bourdieu, 1988; Jencks & Riesman, 1968). However, the neoliberal climate has spawned new rules for cultural resource acquisition, many of which are located in ranking systems like the *U.S. News and World Report* (*USNWR*).

To this end, ranking systems are used unabashedly to define colleges and universities as more or less prestigious, more or less valuable, and so forth. Policy-makers use ranking outcomes to point to quality while the public consumes rankings to identify which postsecondary organizations offer the best higher learning (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). As a result, the higher education literature is increasingly filled with examples of administrators who set as their goal the attainment of a higher ranking, suggesting that one's ranking makes for a better institution (Arnone, 2003; Brint et al., 2006; Epseland & Sauder, 2007; Gardner, 2010; Gonzales & Pacheco, 2012; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011; Taylor & Morphew, 2010; Tuchman, 2009).

Higher education scholars have come to define this incessant attempt to move up the rankings as "striving." In a synthesis of the literature, O'Meara (2007) drew out the consequences attached to striving. Specifically, O'Meara pointed to the mounting evidence that a reliance on rankings narrows admission selection processes and reshapes faculty expectations and norms by rewarding faculty for knowledge production that is fundable as well as highly marketable (also see Leslie, Slaughter, Taylor, & Zhang, 2012). She also highlights evidence that suggests that resources are often redirected from student services towards administrative and grant-related infrastructure (Morphew & Baker, 2004).

The above scholarship demonstrates the need for a critical interrogation of rankings and striving. In this paper, we do so by studying how rankings are constructed by a key group of higher education actors: faculty members. However, we depart from the "realist" approach to the study of rankings as we combine post-structuralism, post-modernism, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to focus on faculty discourse. Assuming these theoretical perspectives means that we set aside "the assumption shared by many quantitative and qualitative approaches to sociological research that observable realities, truths and social facts have an essential existence prior to discourse" and instead we "recast all data and research artefacts [*sic*] as discourse" (Luke, 1997, Conclusion section, para. 3). In this way, we want to understand how faculty members, as central actors in the field of higher education, have a hand in empowering rankings through daily, mundane conversations because, as post-structuralism instructs: the way we talk (and write) constitute action, reflect the world we have produced, and help us understand the organization of that world.

Before moving forward, it is important to state our positionality in relation to this topic, as post-structuralism "raises the question of self-reflexivity by making researchers' own uses of discourse a key problematic in design and inquiry" (Luke, 1997, Conclusion section, para. 3). As first-generation college students who are now women-of-color scholars and who entered higher education via open-access institutions, we ground our work in concerns of access, inclusion, and the defining as well as the rewarding of legitimacy within academia. Rankings and striving among universities, we believe, are detrimental to these concerns in myriad ways. Above all, we see rankings as a key piece to the marketization of higher education (Marginson, 2010; Pusser & Marginson, 2012; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012), and as with any competitive market, the likelihood of exclusion is high.

For students, exclusion comes in the form of narrowed access, which is particularly concerning for underrepresented students. Yet, there is mounting evidence that broader-access institutions gearing up to climb the rankings often do so by adjusting admissions criteria

(Gardner, 2010; Gonzales, 2013; O'Meara, 2007; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011), making admittance more competitive. For scholars, exclusion, as shaped by rankings, is likely to be delivered through the evaluation process, particularly when one's scholarship counters majoritarian knowledge, metanarratives anchored in dominant paradigms, or, relatedly, appears in "non-mainstream" formats (e.g., positivism, science, objectivity) (Hart & Metcalfe, 2010; Lather, 2004; Stanley, 2007). Finally, as an early career faculty member and a graduate student personally navigating a striving university context, we often find ourselves moving in and out of discussions regarding rankings, interrogating them at times, but also reproducing them through our mundane talk, sensemaking, and actions. To set up our paper, we provide a brief review of literature that addresses rankings; we then discuss our theoretical lens before moving into research design and analysis.

Discussion of Literature

According to O'Meara and Meekins (2012), there are multiple ranking systems that influence the field of higher education. Among these ranking systems are *U.S. News and World Report, Times Higher Education*, Webometrics, and lesser-known systems that claim to evaluate very particular higher education sectors (e.g., land-grant universities, universities in particular regions). Writing about the behaviors that rankings inspire in universities, Toma (2012) stated:

> Institutions know there is a 'next level' and understand fairly well the steps required to reach it. They are not bashful about announcing their intentions, even if only marginally plausible, as simply doing so tends to place an institution among others, thus adding legitimacy. (p. 124)

In light of Toma's comments, it seems that ranking systems have been accepted as a suitable way to judge the quality and fundamental legitimacy of universities to serve in particular capacities. Additionally, although the differentiated approach to U.S. higher education long preceded rankings (Clark, 1978; Riesman, 1956), rankings seem to further accentuate differentiation and the hierarchy that stems from differentiation (Clark, 1978; Labaree, 2010). For example, O'Meara and Meekins (2012) pointed out that ranking systems, especially the popular international ranking body, *Shanghai University Rankings*, privilege research-related activity above all other forms of faculty contributions. Consequently, this leads many colleges and universities to increase expectations for research and research-related activities (Gardner,

2010; Gonzales, 2012; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007; Tuchman, 2009) in addition to adopting other behaviors and functions that will allow them to appear similar to dominant research models (Gonzales, 2013; Tuchman, 2009). When making such adjustments, these university leaders often announce that they are on their way to excellence and quality (Gardner, 2010; O'Meara & Bloomgarden, 2011; Wangenge-Ouma & Langa, 2010).

Additionally, since universities at the top of many rankings tend to maintain stringent admissions practices, universities that desire a higher position in the hierarchy/rankings often adjust their admissions practices to attract those deemed as "high-quality" students (Gardner, 2010; Longanecker, 2008; O'Meara, 2007). Bastedo and Bowman (2011) showed how admissions and acceptance processes are impacted when rankings shift (also see Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). Meanwhile, Kirp's (2003) work, in addition to several recent news stories (Jaschick, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Solomon & Rapoport, 2009), revealed how university officials manipulate admissions criteria and processes in order to advance in the rankings. He explained that universities move application deadlines to earlier dates and weigh standardized test scores more heavily in order to yield an elite freshman enrollment (also see Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). This is because higher-scoring freshman classes earn more points in ranking procedures.

In light of the findings noted above, Pusser and Marginson (2012) described ranking systems (e.g., the *USNWR*) as incredible forces of power that stretch internationally to shape the field of higher education. Specifically, they wrote, "Rankings allocate rewards, stratify institutions, establish hierarchies between nations, and *impose agendas, norms, and values* on all who come within their purview" (p. 87, italics added for emphasis). To this end, Pusser and Marginson (2013) argued that ranking systems have a "normalizing" (p. 555) and "homogenizing" (Pusser & Marginson, 2012, p. 107) effect. Universities and colleges of assorted histories and purposes seek to achieve the look, function, and operation of those universities that sit atop the hierarchy, and often do so by letting go of key practices, characteristics, and missions that have served a nuanced purpose, a broader demographic, or both (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Morphew, 2000, 2009; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007; Tuchman, 2009). In this way, it is clear that rankings have an impact on practice and policy in higher education.

As noted earlier, to date, most scholars have approached the study of rankings from a realist perspective. What this means is that scholars acknowledge - and often lament - that rankings are there (Labaree, 2010; Marginson, 2010; Pusser & Marginson, 2012) and that they

are accepted, on some level, as measures of value, quality, excellence, and so on (Epseland & Sauder, 2007; Gonzales, 2012; Tuchman, 2009). Consequently, the body of scholarship on rankings and striving suggests that the higher education field/actors are merely reacting to an environment shaped by the pressures wrought of prestige attainments and neoliberalism.

Thus, there is little work that has taken the perspective that higher education actors, particularly faculty members, contribute to the (re)production of rankings as a system. Few scholars have suggested that the pressure of rankings is made possible *partly* because of the power inscribed in them by higher education actors who so carefully tend to them, such as the administrators who tinkered with mission statements in Taylor and Morphew's (2010) work or the adjustments made by faculty members in Gonzales's (2012) study. However, we begin from the fundamental assumption that rankings have taken hold of the field partly because of the ways we talk, write, and make meaning of them. To focus our analytical energy on discourse, we employed what we call a post-theoretic lens, which draws heavily from both post-modernism and post-structuralism. This lens is described below.

Theoretical Motivations

A post-theoretic lens (Allen, 2008; Appelrouth & Edles, 2008; Best & Kellner, 1991; Bloland, 1995) informed this work. A "post-theoretic" perspective pulls from both post-structuralism (Peters & Burbules, 2004) and post-modernism (Best & Kellner, 1991; Bloland, 2005). With post-structuralism, the scientific pretensions typically used to point to and understand the effect of "structures" are eschewed and an emphasis on language takes its place. This is helpful because it motivates us to focus on the talk that people use to explain rankings or striving. In her book on post-structuralism, Belsey (2002) pointed out:

> … [F]ew issues are more important in human life [than language]. After food and shelter, which are necessary for survival, language and its symbolic analogues exercise the crucial determinations in our social relations, our thought processes, and our understanding of how and what we are…Post-structuralism proposes that the distinctions we make are not necessarily given by the world around us, but instead produced by the symbolizing systems we learn [through language]. (pp. 6-7)

This observation inspired us to go beneath the notion that rankings are real-already-out-there systems that yield effects on the field of higher education and compelled us to instead ask: How do faculty, a key group within higher education, help to make rankings real? How do faculty

power up rankings through their discourse? On this note, it is also important that post-structuralism recognizes the "inevitable slipperiness of social constructs and language" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 368). This latter insight is important and is the entry point for most "deconstructionist" work (Rogers et al., 2005).

On the other hand, post-modernism takes as its theoretical object "modernism" (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 7). Post-modernists reject the notion that history is "a smooth, rational, progressive unfolding of events" (Bloland, 2005, p. 124). In this way, modernist assumptions about the inherent progressivity of climbing upward on a ranking system that holds only temporary meaning are called into question. Post-modern theory suggests that such modernist orientations and conditions are not better or innately positive, but merely different (Belsey, 2002). Bloland (1995) suggested that post-modern bents could sharpen queries into the field of higher education by helping us to be wary of metanarratives that are presented as normative or wholly unproblematic, particularly in relation to proposals for change and progress. This lens helped us remain aware of the everyday, taken-for-granted discourses that are often mobilized about the merit of advancing on a hierarchy (in this case, rankings). Below, we describe our research design and then show how we paired, as is common, our post-theoretic stance with critical discourse analysis to conduct our analysis (Luke, 1997, 2011; Rogers et al., 2005).

Research Design and Analytical Process

The primary sources of data for this paper are faculty interviews gathered at Belle University (a pseudonym), which is a self-identified striving university. Although Belle, a land-grant university, is already positioned among the top 30 research universities in the country, its leaders have set the explicit goal of moving up further in the *USNWR* rankings. In fact, this goal has been consistently articulated, reframed, and reenergized for public consumption for almost 15 years. The university has clearly, persistently, and publicly committed to "moving up" in order to earn more "national recognition" as an "excellent" or "quality" institution. Given the context, it seemed that faculty would be familiar with rankings and striving to attain a higher ranking.

Participants

I (first author) conducted interviews with 14 faculty members at Belle University. Interviewees included both tenure-line (7) and non-tenure-line (7) faculty. Of the tenure-line faculty, four were tenured professors and three were tenure-track, but not-yet-tenured faculty members. Given the increased reliance on non-tenure-line faculty across the field of higher education, we view non-tenure-line faculty members as academic professionals contributing to

the overarching work of any university (Kezar & Sam, 2011). Additionally, both groups of faculty are key players in striving universities. While tenure-line faculty members often learn about their striving universities due to changes to faculty evaluation systems (Gardner, 2013; Gonzales, 2013; Rusch & Wilbur, 2007), non-tenure-line faculty are likely to be hired to teach larger, labor-intensive courses to relieve the tenure-line faculty who are expected to carry out more research and grant writing activities. Conversely, non-tenure-line faculty may face difficult hiring scenarios because ranking systems account for the ratio of tenure-line faculty to students. It is important to note that all seven non-tenure-line faculty held full-time teaching loads at Belle, meaning they are more likely to spend significant time at the university interacting with colleagues and receiving information about the direction of the university (Levin & Shaker, 2011).

All faculty participants had appointments in applied fields (e.g., counseling, education, and nursing; see Table 1). We were narrow in our selection process in order to limit some of the potential distinctions in faculty dispositions, including values, attitudes, and beliefs that are often associated with certain disciplines (Leslie, 2002). This decision was further supported by an earlier study conducted by the first author, who noted that faculty within applied fields interpreted and reacted to their university's striving context in a manner differently than those within non-applied fields (e.g., sciences) (Author, 2012). All participants received an invitation to participate via email. The invitation provided details about the project and consent forms.

Table 1
Faculty Participants

Pseudonym	Field/Discipline	Gender	Tenure-Status
Sara	Applied Health	F	Tenure-line
Matthew	Applied Education	M	Tenure-line
Brandy	Applied Health	F	Tenure-line
Martin	Applied Education	M	Tenure-line
Martha	Applied Education	F	Tenure-line
Marcus	Applied Health	M	Tenure-line
Diane	Applied Health	F	Tenure-line
Jaylin	Applied Health	F	Non-tenure-line
Tracy	Applied Education	F	Non-tenure-line
Richard	Applied Education	M	Non-tenure-line
Sally	Applied Education	F	Non-tenure-line
Caroline	Applied Health	F	Non-tenure-line
Mindy	Applied Health	F	Non-tenure-line
Nora	Applied Education	F	Non-tenure-line

Interviews

Interviews were loosely structured (Alvesson, 2011). In accordance with qualitative inquiry where the participants' views and sensemaking are of the utmost concern, the

particularities of the interview reflected interviewees' tone and dialogue (Alvesson, 2011). I (first author) always began interviews with a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 1979) about their work. For example, I asked faculty members, "What motivated you or inspired you to pursue a career in academia?" Then, I asked them to describe how they came to work at Belle University. Next, I focused on what faculty knew about their university's desire to improve its status via rankings. For instance, I asked faculty members if they had heard about the university's desire to achieve a higher ranking. I inquired about this in various ways depending on the flow of the interview. I asked, "Have you heard or read anything about the university's hopes to move up in the rankings?" Depending on the faculty member's response, I asked them to explain how they first learned of the university's aspirations.

I then asked faculty if they could tell me what earning a particular rank meant. I posed this question in a few different ways. I often asked them to talk about what the goal meant to them, to their work, and to the university's work. At the conclusion of every interview, I asked interviewees if they had any additional comments or questions to add to the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the second author. All interviewees were later sent transcripts to check for accuracy and to give participants the opportunity to amend the document if they felt the need to do so.

Analysis and Trustworthiness

It is common for studies motivated by a post-structural and/or post-modern theoretical perspective to use critical discourse analysis (CDA) for analytical purposes (Luke, 1997, 2004; Rogers et al., 2005). According to Luke (1997), CDA builds from three broad theoretical orientations:

> First, it draws from poststructuralism the view that discourse operates laterally across local institutional sites, and that *texts have a constructive function in forming up and shaping human identities and actions*. Second, it draws from Bourdieu's sociology the assumption that actual textual practices and interactions with texts become "embodied" forms of "cultural capital" with exchange value in particular social fields. Third, it draws from *neomarxist cultural theory the assumption that these discourses are produced and used within political economies, and that they thus produce and articulate broader ideological interests, social formations and movements within those fields.* (para. 23, italics added for emphasis)

In this paper, the post-structural and neomarxist underpinnings of CDA are particularly helpful to our analysis. As described by Luke (1997), the post-structural bent in CDA reminds us that discourse helps to "form up" and "shape" identities and actions. The neomarxist bent in CDA, on the other hand, helps us connect discourses to the larger political economy, which we recognize as a neoliberal one that prizes competition, and yet, also often yields homogenization. Taken together, these insights helped us to analytically consider how discourse was reflective of and re-inscribes power relations, how it extends political economy, and how it enables or constrains social practices. In this study, we considered how faculty discourses reflected the reproduction of rankings as a meaningful system, how they connected them or talked about them in ways that reflected neoliberalism, and how their discourse then shaped actions in relation to striving.

Specifically, using these CDA underpinnings, we asked "How do faculty members generally talk about rankings? How do faculty members give rankings meaning?" Then, we sought to link discourse to action in the world as we asked, "How does this discourse lead to evaluative practices within higher education?" Finally, following the connection between power relations and discourse, we asked "How do these discourses rule in or rule out possibilities for students or for faculty as knowledge workers?" We worked together through this analysis, with the first author primarily taking the lead and the second author providing comments, counter-arguments, and suggestions.

To establish trustworthiness of this analysis, we used practices aligned with the epistemological bent of post-theoretic and discourse-based inquiry (Aguinaldo, 2004; Bloland, 1995; Fairclough, 2003; Lather, 1986). "Face validity" (Lather, 1986) was achieved by sharing transcripts with all interviewees. "Catalytic validity" (Lather, 1986) was stimulated via the actual interview and member checking. For example, in the presentation of findings below, we show how interviewees sometimes explicitly reconsidered their own answers, which indicated that a new level of awareness (catalytic validity) was achieved via interviews. Several interviewees commented that the questions were "hard" and that they were likely to continue to think about the exchange afterwards.

Findings

Again, the purpose of this paper was to consider how faculty members, a group core to the higher education field, construct rankings through their discourse, which connect or lead to action taken in the social world. As a reminder, the research question guiding this work was: "How do faculty members, as central actors in the field of higher education, empower rankings through their daily, mundane talk?"

Faculty Talk About Rankings: Normalizing Markets, Science, and Hierarchy

When asked to talk about rankings and/or striving, faculty members generally described striving for a higher ranking as an attempt to achieve some crystallized state of value, quality, or excellence. In doing so, faculty often reproduced the idea that quality, excellence, and value are, in fact, concepts that can be standardized and, indeed, measured. For example, when asked to talk about rankings, Diane said:

> Well, I guess, like probably everything else especially here in our society, there's always that continuum of bad, moderate, good, and the best. And everyone, especially here, would want to subscribe to the best and whatever those indicators are and certainly there are probably some indicators that indicate the best.

Diane, like most faculty members, was not deeply informed about the specific indicators used to rank universities. However, this did not stop her from assuming the value inherent in striving for a higher ranking. This reflects and reinforces two related bents: (1) the dominance of science, where "the reductionism of positivism, empiricism, and objectivism are assumed" (Lather, 2004, p. 16) and (2) the neoliberal impetus to draw in as many competitors as possible into a market where all can be categorized by a standardized measure. In this way, the link between discourse and the evaluative approach to universities via rankings is articulated and made legitimate.

Jaylin was somewhat skeptical about the striving mission, but referred to rankings in her description of a respectable education:

> Providing a quality education is important…The most important things about [being higher in the rankings] would be that it would bring benefits to our students: that they go out into the real world and they can say my degree is from a well-respected, well-recognized school, that's important to me…

Marcus offered a similar take on striving in his explanation of Belle University's ranking-focused behaviors:

> I think it's about a combination of the mission statement, you know, trying to produce the best institution in the state, in the nation actually, not just in the state...striving to produce quality…

In the quote above, Marcus builds rankings up as something valuable, as the stuff quality is made of, and, like Jaylin, he suggestively notes that, by being the "best," students will have a better chance at success. Thus, faculty members constructed rankings as a way to gauge the competitiveness of their university.

Martin was probably the faculty member that was most informed about the technicalities of rankings. When asked to discuss his level of support for Belle's striving aspirations, Martin constructed rankings as measures of "excellence." It is important to note how Martin's comments about striving and rankings, like others' comments, were based on modernist as well as science-like assumptions. Martin said:

> We can complain about [the metrics for rankings] all we want, but the reality is, if you're doing a good job as a unit and as a faculty, you're going to do well on those metrics.

Martin was quite clear that following the metrics used in rankings was the key to ensuring that university faculty members are doing a "good job."

Brandy also positioned the idea of striving as a strategy to value. Specifically, when asked if she viewed the university's land-grant designation as compatible with some of the measures involved in ranking systems, Brandy said:

> Yeah, I think it's just a matter of helping people understand, I mean it's hard work, you have to show that you're excellent, and so many of the faculty here are excellent, and so many of the students, are just high caliber, very bright, a lot of potential. And so yes, I do think it's compatible. And you know, I think it's exciting that I know in some of the departments there are students that deliberately want to come to [Belle] and I guess when you say, "How would I define success?" That would be success. If there are students in California that say I want to go to [Belle] because they have that amazing [said program] pushing beyond a low program.

Brandy's comments are illustrative of the ways in which striving and rankings allow some universities to be seen as more valuable and attractive than others. In line with neoliberalism, Brandy also talks about rankings as a way to spread information about a market widely, attracting the "best" students from afar without considering what that might mean for local students.

Each of the comments in this section suggests that ranking systems and the striving to climb rankings are representations of progress, value, and excellence. In fact, at one point,

Martha, a faculty member at Belle, explained that if the university "really wants excellence in everything," they should not "make it impossible." Martha went on to describe what it takes to develop excellence:

> I mean, look at the people who are coming in…for the searches, [and who we are hiring]; I mean they'll do just fine - any of them in terms of [top ranked universities]. Right? If it's going to be about where you publish and how much external funding you get...

Martha's comment is similar to statements made by Brandy and Martin in that she suggested that excellent universities have particular forms and functions. In Martha's example, it is suggested that rankings have captured what "top universities" do. Thus, they are places where faculty members focus on research, publish their research in particular places, and pursue and receive external funding. More specifically, Martha's discourse links rankings to the neoliberal environment described in the introduction to this paper: where knowledge production and dissemination are conceptualized as profit-generating tasks (Cantwell & Slaughter, 2012; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and where knowledge is valued according to its publication home. Consequently, it seems that if the impact is not high and wide, and "if you can't count it, it doesn't matter" (Archer, 2009, p. 272).

In a variety of ways, faculty members loaded rankings with power. Their comments suggest that a university might achieve excellence through rankings, which implies that excellence is objectifiable and recognizable locally, regionally, nationally, and perhaps globally. The assumption is that the pursuit of a higher ranking allows students to attend a better program or university. In all these ways, faculty members turn striving into a laudable, hard-to-question goal.

Drawing from post-structuralism, post-modernism, and CDA, we argue that the value of hierarchy and competition, as well as the assumptions of science, run through these faculty discourses about rankings. Rankings are used to divide the higher education field in ways that damage access and opportunity while rewarding market-friendly, hegemonic performances by faculty members. Through mundane talk, individuals within higher education construct rankings as a way to organize and evaluate the field, defining what excellence should look like and how faculty members should behave in "top universities."

Rankings as Games for Resources

Drawing from the post-structural insight that discourses and constructs are slippery (Peters & Burbules, 2004), Martha, who was just quoted in the last section, explained:

[Rankings are] not at all what excellence is. However…I appreciate the game because if we hit top [of the rankings]…we get raises, we get more stuff, more people…So, no, no, I do not think excellence and a [top ranking] have much at all to do with each other.

Interestingly, Martha noted that excellence does not lie in the rankings, but she still produced higher education as a game, turning herself and her colleagues into competitors who need resources that must be won through this game. The idea that higher education is a competition for resources emerged again in Martha's interview:

…you're not letting in more [state residents] and I definitely see that as a problem. I do not think excellence and [being in the top 30] have much at all to do with each other, but I do see the reason why you would want to aspire to [that]: because of the financial gain that can come from it.

Martha suggested that the rankings represent a larger game or competition that higher education and higher education actors (i.e., faculty and students) must play. In her statements, there was a sense of acceptance that the only way to thrive in higher education was, in fact, to engage in this game of play. Indeed, as noted earlier, the higher education field is filled with increasing numbers of reports about universities' attempts to climb the rankings and play a game that will supposedly yield greater resources (Arnone, 2003; Gardner, 2010; 2013; Taylor & Morphew, 2010).

For the most part, faculty talked about rankings as an inevitable game, and one that provided measures of excellence that could be widely accepted or that were transportable. However, there were a few faculty members who spoke at length, *not about the winners*, but about those who lost out in this "game." In this way, it seemed that just as faculty might construct the rankings as a valuable system, they could also deconstruct them. For example, Richard said:

My most sincere conviction about [the goal to move up the rankings] is negative. I mean, you know, I understand it because I've always, I wanted to be the top… [but] I have known [kids that] could be successful here that would not be able to get in [because] you have got to have that high degree of test scores…that has been frustrating… I can think of this one young lady that's in [a doctoral program at another university] and doing really well right now. She would have never

gotten into [Belle]…There are a lot of those kids out there that would do well and so that's frustrating…

Similarly, Sara noted:

We are becoming so selective of who our students are, the average student…from a school like [Washington] High School, just three miles from my house, most of those students would never have a chance to get into this school… I definitely think that we are, to some degree, limiting the number of people from our own community…My kids would have never made it into [Belle]. I think that's a problem. I really do. And, especially maybe, because I worked at community colleges and I saw a lot of students who came in, older students, they came from poor backgrounds, they would never get in; they could never meet the criteria.

In the comments above, Richard and Sara disrupt the notion that striving is always progressive. Richard described how one particular student was not served because of the kind of admission criteria Belle uses as it attempts to climb further up the rankings. This counter-tale complicates the notion of "best" and the assumption that higher ranked universities serve "the best" students. This example, as well as Sara's, are only select cases, of course, but both cases highlight how striving universities miss the opportunity to serve when they make decisions according to rankings, which constitute a neoliberal mechanism underlined by the complementary logic of science brought to life through mundane talk and participation.

Discussion and Significance

The goal of this work was to study how faculty members talked about and gave meaning to rankings and striving. Because all of the faculty members worked in a striving university context, where leaders were explicitly focused on moving up in the *USNWR,* interviewing these faculty members was a prime opportunity to explore the role that faculty play in the (re)production of rankings. In other words, it was an opportunity to explore how we, higher education actors, have a hand in creating, maintaining, or disrupting a system that is anchored in the logic of neoliberalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

For the most part, research on rankings and their influence have been studied from a realist perspective. Even critical work, like Gonzales, Martinez, and Ordu (2013), critiqued rankings rather than attempting to deconstruct or explore how rankings came to be inscribed with power in the first place (Belsey, 2002). To consider this latter question requires a lens that

appreciates the role of ideas, talk, and text (discourse) because, taken together, they give rise to action in the world. Thus, we applied a post-theoretic and CDA approach. Consequently, we showed how even skeptical faculty members construct rankings as useful ways to organize the higher education field. Faculty comments on rankings and striving suggest that excellence or quality can be achieved, measured, replicated, and then made into a competition. This construction seems to be made on the basis of scientific or empiricist assumptions (Lather, 2004) that assume that educational quality or excellence can be measured and categorized across contexts. We also showed how faculty talked about rankings as a game that allowed winners to garner more resources. Here, faculty members accepted and turned themselves, their universities, their colleagues, and their students into competitors.

Despite all this, the latter part of our analysis revealed a couple of faculty members who issued critiques about rankings. Both Richard and Sara, who had longstanding connections to the region, emptied the rankings of their meaning. The fact that these scholars had a historical and personal connection to the region suggests that researchers should consider how personal histories shape faculty views. For example, in recent work, Gonzales (forthcoming) argues that a long-term connection to the community in which a university is situated can deeply shape how faculty view their work and how they believe the university should serve that community.

Just as the rest of the discourse can be linked to practices, Richard and Sara's critiques could inform collective organization among faculty. For example, faculty members might compile current research that demonstrates the ways in which standardized tests (e.g., SAT), considered to be key components of the rankings game, do not predict retention or success. Additionally, faculty could gather substantive research that demonstrates how reliance on such measures can often undercut diversity efforts. Using such literature, they could ask that the admissions process be revised in ways that are not solely driven by ranking concerns. At the least, faculty could request greater control over recruitment and scholarship awards processes. This, in turn, could assist faculty members in disrupting the power of rankings.

Engaging in interviews like the ones in this study provided an opportunity for faculty to step back and speak out loud about rankings and striving in a more intentional and reflective way. Faculty members could continue to voice their thoughts by reaching out to faculty senate and to student service offices to organize department, college, and/or university-wide talks. These talks would be guided by questions drawn from the striving literature, like this paper or O'Meara's (2007) framework. Such questions might include: How does the focus on rankings affect faculty, student, and staff life? How has it shaped programs and priorities? How has it ruled in or ruled out certain practices or populations? Surely, there will be various opinions on

the utility and value of rankings; however, such organized talks can yield on-the-ground insights about rankings and how they influence campuses in many ways (Sauder & Epseland, 2009).

Through our post-theoretic stance and critical discourse analysis, we argue that, when we, as actors in the field of higher education, place great emphasis on rankings and striving as normative systems and as games that we must play, we marginalize multiple instances of excellence as they unfold across this diverse higher education field. Consequently, this analysis warrants that higher education researchers build and engage projects where participants, such as faculty members, have the opportunity to interrogate assumptions and practices related to the taken-for-granted utility and inevitability of rankings as a way to organize and evaluate higher education.

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