What does it mean to be rational? What makes knowledge credible and expertise authoritative? How do we reconcile diverse forms of authority, including the authority we grant to numbers, and what difference does this make for how we express our values, define our identities or conduct politics? These are some of the core questions that have guided Wendy Nelson Espeland’s work since she completed her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

Dr. Espeland’s first book, *The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality and Identity in the American Southwest* (Chicago, 1998) analyzed a controversial decision about building a dam in Arizona from the vantage point of three groups: older engineers who had spent careers in a federal agency designing and promoting the dam; younger planners committed to improving agency decision-making; and a small Native American community facing forced resettlement from their ancestral land. The decision models used required that the dam’s impacts be made commensurate in cost benefit analyses and trade-off schemes. This commensuration challenged the substantive investments of engineers in a dam they loved, and the values of the Yavapai, for whom the commensuration of their land was a repudiation of their culture. The professional authority of engineers, the cultural authority of the Yavapai, and the bureaucratic authority of the planners were mobilized in complicated ways in contesting the terms of rationality. Dr. Espeland’s book was awarded the 1999 Rachel Carson Book Prize from the Society for the Social Studies of Science; the 1999 Louis Brownlow Book Award from the National Academy of Public Administration; and the 1999 Distinguished Book Prize from the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association [ASA].

Dr. Espeland’s second book, (with Michael Sauder) *Fear of Falling: How Media Rankings Changed Legal Education in America*, under contract with Russell Sage Foundation, and a series of articles, analyze rankings as a powerful, public form of commensuration. As explicit and unstable measures of performance, rankings foster an exacting discipline on administrators who fear the consequences of “falling.” Rankings popular image as handy measures of educational quality hardly suggest their influence as powerful technologies of social control. In catering to rankings indicators, many law schools have changed admissions policies, re-allocated their budgets, and reorganized positions inside the organization. Rankings have reorganized the status system of legal education, shaping how members and colleagues understand their organizational and professional identities. The book examines the processes by which rankings—widely considered to be poor measures—accumulate authority and influence as they find new audiences who use them in new ways.