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Rankings articles: Silly season for The Academy

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Rankings Articles: Silly Season for The Academy

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Rankings Articles: Silly Season for The Academy



Image: Paul Middlestaedt for CSB/SJU

British and American journalists often refer to the late weeks of summer as the “silly season,” a time for light and often frivolous articles. We in academia have our own version of the silly season, which starts in early September when various organizations and publications reveal their college rankings in an attempt to garner media attention and readers.

The granddaddy of these rankings are the [U.S. News and World Report College rankings](#), which were released this week.

One has to admire the creativity and savvy of the folks at *U.S. News*, who took a publication that was in a journalistic death spiral (see also [Newsweek](#)) and cleverly found a market demand for college rankings,

filled that need and now have colleges and universities all over the country making educational decision not on pedagogical grounds but on *U.S. News* determined variables. Attempts to game the system have even led to scandals as schools cheat in an attempt raise their ranking ([Claremont McKenna SAT scandal](#) and [CBS News: A new college ranking scandal](#)).

I certainly understand the desire of students and their families to have as much information as possible to make college choices and a ranking system gives a nice shorthand way of capturing lots of complicated information. But by the same token, that is exactly the problem with rankings. They must, by their nature, leave out lots of important information about the college experience that is relevant for individual students.

Typical rankings choose three to five different metrics and use them to rank schools. *U.S. News* does a bit more, using a dozen or more factors, including some objective ones like alumni giving, class sizes, retention rates and proxies for endowment, as well as subjective ones like peer assessments and high school counselors’ ranking. All of these individual measures have some value but even using them collectively, students and families are left with the problem of the proverbial [Blind Men and the Elephant](#) : they only see a piece of the total educational experience, which, of course, varies by individual student.

I certainly do not advocate ignoring rankings. As an economist, I’d never encourage throwing out good data. But I would simply

recommend taking any ranking with a big grain of salt. A ranking is one piece of data to be considered from among a wealth of available information. The best information about any school comes from talking to students, parents, alumni and faculty (maybe even presidents). Multiple conversations can provide nuance and depth that no ranking system can match, as students seek the best fit for their educational journey.

This year Saint John's University (Collegeville, MN) was ranked #76 in the National Liberal Arts College Rankings in *U.S. News*, almost identical to where we have been for many years. For those who are interested, the CSB/SJU webpage on rankings is [here](#).

P.S. I reserve the right to completely change my view of rankings when one comes out that puts significant weight to the presence of monks, the ratio of students to lakes, and the engagement of highly qualified faculty members!

By | September 11th, 2013 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | | [0 Comments](#)



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).