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Rankings madness

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Quad 136

Rankings Madness

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Rankings Madness



It is rankings season at colleges and universities around the country, and I don't mean football rankings (not that those aren't important!). This is the time of the year when various organizations and publications come out with their rankings of academic institutions. The rankers use various quantitative measures to compare institutions to one another. Usually the schools are divided into various categories for an apples to apples comparison, though occasionally all institutions are lumped together, as *Forbes* did recently as they concluded that Williams College was the best educational institution in the US.

There are two basic methodologies. One uses publicly available data, assigns some weights and comes up with a score for each institution. *Forbes* used this method, gathering data from places like Rate My Professor and Payscale. While some public data is high quality, the non-random and therefore dubious nature of many of these sources renders the outcomes equally dubious. Garbage in, garbage out. (Sorry Williams.)

The second method involves the ranking organization gathering its own data more systematically and proprietarily, often from the schools themselves. The granddaddy of all rankings is done by *US News and World Report*. They hit upon this clever idea in the early 1980s and it has kept a publication afloat that most observers believe would have died long ago absent their college rankings. A *New Yorker* story on the history is [here](#). *US News* gathers data by soliciting information directly from schools, most of whom grudgingly give it up, fearing what would happen to their rankings if they did not. Not surprisingly, this second method has significantly more credibility, though even these results are still widely disparaged in academia for at least three reasons.

The first criticism is about which inputs or outputs to measure. Do you value public service from alumni, as the *Washington Monthly* does? Do you focus on economic outcomes like *Fortune* does? Are inputs most important as the *US News* rankings emphasize? Each choice affects and often determines the outcomes. For example, the *US News* emphasis on inputs basically serves as a proxy for endowment per student and leads to anomalies like the College of Saint Benedict being rated lower than Saint John's University, despite a common academic program and faculty.

The second concern is that some weighting system must still be applied even to systematically gathered data and everyone has their own idea of how to weight the different inputs into educational quality.

The *US News* model is as follows:

1. Undergraduate academic reputation, 22.5 per cent
2. Graduation and freshmen retention rates, 20 per cent
3. Faculty resources, 20 per cent
4. Student selectivity, 15 per cent
5. Financial resources, 10 per cent
6. Graduation rate performance, 7.5 per cent
7. Alumni giving, 5 per cent

The explanation goes on:

We use six factors to assess a school's commitment to instruction. Class size has two components, the proportion of classes with fewer than 20 students (30 percent of the faculty resources score) and the proportion with 50 or more students (10 percent of the score). Faculty salary (35 percent) is the average faculty pay, plus benefits, adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living. . . . We also weigh the proportion of professors with the highest degree in their fields (15 percent), the student-faculty ratio (5 percent), and the proportion of faculty who are full time (5 percent).

Clearly *US News* makes an attempt to create a broad based measure of quality, but equally clearly, there are many possibilities to disagree with their methodology.

Of course both of these problems are true in all ranking systems that use multiple variables—I recall a *Money Magazine* ranking of the best places to live that had Rochester, MN as number two. I knew without reading the article that their measure included – and heavily weighted – high quality healthcare and did not place much emphasis on weather.

The third criticism is more substantive. Faculty and administrators argue that some of the most important aspects of educational quality and the student experience are not quantifiable. *US News* attempts to address this concern by asking presidents and deans their opinions about academic quality, a not unreasonable idea, but it can become circular as academics may know little about most of the institutions they are asked to rank, save their *US News* ranking! For things like commitment to teaching or the nature of the community or quality of the residential experience, there is simply no good way to measure such educational inputs. Furthermore, students and families that try to use rankings to help select the right college can be led seriously astray if qualitative factors are not included.

The President of Denison College, Adam Weinberg, wrote a [nice piece](#) in the *Huffington Post* entitled, “What Matters Most About College Isn’t Rankable,” in which he makes similar points.

There have been various attempts to make these rankings go away. Some schools have colluded in an attempt to cut off the source of data or to at least promise not to use rankings in their admission and marketing materials. All these efforts have come to nothing as there are always schools who see it in their interest to use rankings, especially if they are moving up (see

story about Northeastern University). Furthermore there seems to be an almost insatiable demand for such rankings from students and parents. (I suspect this is partly regional, with the demand coming primarily from the eastern seaboard and from abroad. I have not observed undue emphasis on rankings in the Midwest—though one might argue this is because midwestern schools are often underrepresented

[unfairly, IMHO] in most rankings.)

Do rankings contain some information that is useful to students and parents and even educators? Yes. So what is the harm? I think there are two legitimate concerns that have arisen in the three decades since *US News* started this craze.

1. Playing to the rankings. Some schools have clearly made their educational choices with an eye to the rankings. I know of institutions that have altered the caps on courses in ways that harm students and faculty because *US News* includes this in their rankings. Some schools appear to have encouraged many students to apply even as they know they will deny them admission in order to raise their selectivity scores. Worse yet, there has been lying about student grades and test scores because of the rankings (see [this article](#) from 2013). As soon as an institution makes a single decision that is driven by *US News* and not by consideration of the best interests of its students, the rankings do harm, though the fault is with administrators, not *US News*.

2. College choices. With a plethora of rankings, the temptation for some parents and students is to simply use them to make the college choice. Get into the highest ranked institution you can and go there. As noted above, there are many qualitative factors that are part of every student's college experience. Rankings, by necessity, ignore these. Despite the implicit apples to apples comparison in any ranking system, schools are different and the best fit for any individual student includes many factors. Rankings should only be one, small, consideration in this decision.

So prospective undergrads, go to the *US News* site if you must. Read the college guides. Peruse the magazine articles. But then come to campus, meet current students, engage with faculty and talk to alumni. Do these things, and you'll be just fine.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | September 22nd, 2014 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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