

The Future of Ranking Systems  
The U.S. News Experience and its impact  
on colleges. The rise of global rankings.  
Accreditation versus Rankings



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# America's Best Colleges rankings: A Brief History

- ◆ U.S. News America's Best Colleges rankings are now over 25-years old
- ◆ In 1983, 1985 and 1987 the America's Best Colleges rankings: reputation only
- ◆ Starting in 1987 published annually in U.S. News magazine and in a separate newsstand guidebook
- ◆ Since 1988 the America's Best Colleges ranking methodology: combination reputation and quantitative school data

# U.S. News academic rankings: A Brief History

- ◆ Since 1997 America's Best Colleges rankings online [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com).  
More rankings/data online.
- ◆ America's Best Graduate Schools rankings: annually starting 1990
- ◆ America's Best High Schools ranking: annually started in 2007
- ◆ World's Best Universities rankings: annually starting late 2008

# The Editorial Philosophy Behind the U.S. News America's Best Colleges Rankings

- ◆ Consumer oriented mission-To provide prospective students and their parents with key evaluative information they need to make an informed college choice that has important job and career implications.
- ◆ This choice is heavily influenced by the ever rising bill for tuition, room & board, travel, clothes, entertainment and other expenses.

# The Editorial Philosophy Behind the U.S. News America's Best Colleges Rankings

- ◆ Total costs are now around \$50,000 per year or \$200,000 total for an undergraduate degree at some U.S. private colleges like Harvard, Yale and Princeton. Does not include pizza, beer, clothes, entertainment
- ◆ Many students graduate U.S. colleges with large student loan debts-since they had to borrow to pay for their education.
- ◆ There is real need for information to determine the relative merits of schools given their cost.

# The Editorial Philosophy Behind the U.S. News America's Best Colleges Rankings

- ◆ Provide the public and prospective students with an understanding of higher education
- ◆ Give practical advice on many aspects of applying and financing college education
- ◆ As one part of our ongoing editorial reporting on educational issues
- ◆ Transparency in how the rankings are done- U.S. News publishes clear detailed methodologies.

# Why are the U.S. News Rankings Helpful to Consumers?

- ◆ The U.S. News rankings are based on accepted measures of academic quality.
- ◆ Many U.S. colleges use the same ranking data U.S. News uses for their own internal peer analysis and to do peer-to-peer comparisons against other similar colleges and universities
- ◆ U.S. News' ranking process is totally independent of the information published by a college or university

# Why are the U.S. News Rankings Helpful to Consumers?

- ❑ What does all of this mean in today's global information marketplace?
- ❑ U.S. News--over the last 25-years--has become a trusted, respected and unbiased source of rankings and assessments that the college going public in the U.S. and worldwide turns to for reliable advice and guidance.



# The U.S News ranking experience

- ◆ The academic peer reputation survey, which is a heavily weighted part of the Best Colleges rankings, has been the focus of criticism by some U.S. academics.
- ◆ U.S. News response to critics of the peer survey is:
  - ◆ We take any criticism seriously
  - ◆ Reputation for academic quality is very important to prospective students in determining why they attend a particular college (Per the UCLA Freshman survey).
  - ◆ Reputation does matter.

# The U.S News ranking experience

- ◆ Reputation for undergraduate academic excellence does help new grads get that all-important first job.
- ◆ The reputation of where a graduate earns their degree as an undergrad does play a very key role in getting into top graduate school
- ◆ Academic reputation allows U.S. News to measure “the intangibles” that aren’t covered by the statistical data.

# The U.S News ranking experience

- ◆ The critics of rankings in the U.S. and world wide always ask why we don't we use other indicators that measure and compare the student experience and learning?
- ◆ If comparable outcome measures or student engagement data were available, we would collect them and use them.
- ◆ At least in the U.S. colleges don't have this information, and if the do it's not made public on a widespread basis.

# The U.S News ranking experience

- ◆ U.S. News provides many colleges a great deal of free visibility from potential applicants from the U.S. and abroad since our Best Colleges web site's monthly traffic is a 8 million page views.
- ◆ Best Colleges averages around 2 million page views per week.
- ◆ U.S. News is on balance helping not hurting colleges.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ America's Best Colleges rankings should be viewed as part of the growing U.S. higher education accountability movement.
- ◆ Universities are increasingly being held accountable for their educational policies, funds expended, the level of student engagement and how much graduates learn.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ The college rankings have filled a large void caused by greatly reduced college counseling resources at many U.S. public high schools.
- ◆ The number of students per counselor at U.S. public high schools has risen sharply due to cutbacks. Fewer U.S. public high schools students now getting real college guidance at their high school.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ This trend has meant that many prospective students and their parents have more and more been left to educate themselves about college and the college admission process.
- ◆ U.S. News has filled this information void and has become a trusted source of advice and planning that millions now use to help choose the right college.

## U.S. News ranking experience

College Rankings impact on consumer information:

- ◆ Prospective applicants have become more active consumers as the result of having much more higher quality comparative college information to make independent judgments.
- ◆ Internet has facilitated much more transparency and information access.



# U.S. News rankings experience

1. Common Data Set-U.S. News has been a leader
2. IPEDS collecting more consumer data and posting it on <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/> IPEDS College Navigator; even more statistical data soon resulting from HEA -2008
3. U-CAN “University and College Accountability Network”. <http://www.ucan-network.org/>. Profiles of private schools, no side by side comparisons. Low 700s schools participating.
4. Voluntary System of Accountability --College Portrait another common data template--more promising since learning outcomes and student engagement data are eventually required. 500 public universities in the U.S. possible with more than 300 participating (<http://www.collegeportraits.org/>) .
5. A factor in the spread of the assessment movement in U.S. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was originally started to be a counterweight to U.S. News.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ Created a competitive environment in higher education that didn't exist before. Some college presidents say that this competition makes everyone better and helps students.
- ◆ The U.S. News rankings have become the annual public benchmark to measure the academic performance of U.S. schools.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ Moving up higher in the U.S. News rankings has become a very public goal of some college presidents, boards of trustees and deans.
- ◆ Notable U.S. examples: Clemson, SC; Arizona State, University of Kentucky, Northeastern, MA
- ◆ Colleges presidents and boards are able to say if they move up higher in the rankings..... “that means that our educational policies have worked and as a result the college has made “real measurable progress” ...and therefore the implications is that we are good administrators...

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ Do college rankings “make” school administrators do the wrong thing?
- ◆ Do college administrators regularly make education policy choices for the sole purpose of doing better in the rankings, versus making policy decisions that are good for students and foster learning?
- ◆ There is certainly evidence that at some U.S. universities education policy makers do take into account what impact their policies will have on the school’s standing in the U.S. News college rankings.

# U.S. News ranking experience

- ◆ At those institutions whose leaders are taking rankings into account in managing their schools--- are those policy choices that target U.S. News rankings variables a good or bad thing?
- ◆ When a school improves graduation and first-year retention rates, faculty salaries, funds more small classes and fewer large classes (all U.S. News ranking variables) students benefit.
- ◆ When schools rise in the rankings they can attract better faculty and students, more research funding and more visibility on the global higher ED stage.

# U.S. News Rankings Perspective

- ◆ Some call the rankings a case of extreme and unintended consequences.
- ◆ It's true that there have been some unintended consequences...
- ◆ On the other hand, it can be argued that rankings' time has come and now they are in the forefront of higher education discussions in the U.S. and around the world.
- ◆ The biggest issue in academia surrounding rankings is the still the most basic one. Can complex institutions be numerically ranked?

# U.S. News ranking experience

## Rankings versus Accreditation

- ◆ At least in the U.S. rankings should never be considered as a substitute for accreditation.
- ◆ Accreditation is a separate peer review process that judges the school against its own goals and a set of external standards.
- ◆ Rankings by their very nature are one school compared other schools. Top to bottom.
- ◆ Rankings and accreditation serve very different roles in higher education. At least in the U.S. those roles will remain very separate.

# Global growth in rankings After U.S. News started them in 1983

- ◆ Over the last 25 years higher ed rankings and league tables have emerged in dozens of countries worldwide.
- ◆ These rankings are conducted not only by the private for-profit sector media, but also by professional associations, non-profits, universities, government funded centers, accrediting bodies and government agencies.



# Why have rankings become a global phenomenon?

1. The push to become a “world class university.”
2. More and more students and faculty are crossing their own national borders to go to schools outside their home country
3. Some countries including like: Australia and New Zealand have a national strategy to attract big percentages of international students as a significant income/revenue source. Global rankings help validate quality attract students.

# Why have rankings become a global phenomenon?

4. Global and national rankings create highly visible benchmarks that show standing and progress

5. Rankings are used in marketing to attract students and faculty in the global competition to have “the best and the brightest.”

6. Currently over 30 countries now have some form national rankings. More are added each year.

# Global Growth in Rankings

- ◆ Globally rankings are increasingly being used and accepted as a measure of quality, which may be defined in different ways and may be measured by a variety of indicators, depending on the perspective of a ranking's creators.
- ◆ The goals of rankings systems may differ by region, by the higher education system's stage of development, and by the entity conducting the ranking.

# Global Growth in Rankings

- ◆ Given the impact on the structure of higher education systems throughout the world, as well as their role as a tool of accountability, it is essential to think about rankings within their own national context.
- ◆ What works in the U.S. doesn't necessarily work in most other countries.

# International Ranking Experts Group (IREG)-What role?

- ◆ U.S. News founding member and a member of IREG's executive committee: <http://www.ireg-observatory.org>
- ◆ Berlin Principles on Ranking of Higher Education Institutions created by IREG: international standards to conduct ranking
- ◆ Berlin Standards hold producers of rankings: accountable for quality in their own data collection, methodology used, and dissemination of results.
- ◆ IREG conducts international ranking conferences and hopes to audit rankers to see if they are conducting their ranking to meet the Berlin Standards

# Rise of World University Rankings

Starting around 2004 world university rankings have been published. They are very popular outside U.S.

- The Times Higher Education (THE) - QS *World University Rankings* (UK) THE is no longer going to publish the QS rankings
- Academic *Ranking of World Universities*... Shanghai Jiao Tong *University (China)*
- *World Universities' ranking on the Web-Webometrics (Spain)*
- HEEACT rankings: *Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities*
- *World's Best Universities* based on QS-THE rankings (U.S News 11/2008 and 10/2009) THE is no longer going to publish the QS rankings

# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

- ◆ National and Global rankings will both continue to play growing roles as information sources for students, parents and academics
- ◆ For example, in the U.S. the world university rankings have very little visibility among prospective students since few U.S. students go abroad to earn actual degrees.

# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

- ◆ U.S. research universities are competing and becoming more and more international as a result they are starting to pay more attention to global rankings.
- ◆ In some developing countries global university rankings are far more important since having third party validation of that country's standing among the world's universities is important for both the country's: general public, academics, its higher education policy makers and politicians.
- ◆ World university rankings will continue to have far more impact and visibility outside U.S



# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

- ◆ Problems with international data comparisons will limit the methodology sophistication of world university rankings
- ◆ As result of these limits on what school level data can be compared across international borders-global rankings will always be more based on the research mission of the school and not on student to student comparisons.
- ◆ National rankings can more easily evolve into methodologies that compare a country's student data, and learning outcomes.

# Future of Rankings

- Rankings are here to stay.....
- Controversy will continue..
- Academic community will remain highly interested in both national and global rankings.
- Primary audience will continue to be consumers: prospective students, parents and alumni
- Rankings are now a worldwide phenomenon and will continue to evolve on a country-by-country basis.

# Future of College Rankings

- ◆ Rankings are now being done or studied for various reasons.
  - Consumer guides
  - Public policy—benchmarking and education policy
  - Academics study them as a discipline or for education/public policy reasons
- ◆ Rankings, more and more, are becoming a positive force around the world.
- ◆ Rankings have found their place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a tool that can be used for consumers, assessment, accountability, peer analysis, and as a public benchmark to compare education performance and to set goals.

# Morse Code: Inside the College Rankings

- ◆ On June 1, 2007 U.S. News started a blog called:

## Morse Code: Inside the College Rankings

link:

<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/college-rankings-blog/index.html>

- ◆ *Morse Code* provides deeper insights into the methodologies and is a forum for commentary and analysis of college, grad and other rankings.
- ◆ I try to write at least one entry per week. Around 15,000 to 20,000 page views each month.
- ◆ Future plans for this blog