

The College-Rankings Game

by Frank DiMaria

College rankings – some love them; some hate them. But loved or hated, they have been woven into the fabric of American higher education over the last two decades and will remain there for a long time to come.

The *U.S. News and World Report* made its first list of best colleges available for public consumption back in 1983. Today it is arguably the most recognizable college-rankings list in the country.

“We were the first to make information about colleges available,” says Cynthia Powell, its public relations director.

Since *U.S. News and World Report* first published its list of best colleges, a wide range of college rankings and guidebooks have flooded the shelves of America’s bookstores, each offering college-bound students and their parents its own spin on rating, ranking, and choosing a college. *Washington Monthly’s* ratings system is different from that of *U.S. News and World Report*. And *The Princeton Review’s* is different from both of those.

Sometimes two systems will return similar results for the same college. For example, *Washington Monthly* ranked Massachusetts Institute of Technology No. 1 in 2006 while *U.S. News and World Report* ranked it No. 7. Not much of a disparity. Sometimes two sets of rankings, however, offer quite different results for the same school.

In 2006, *Washington Monthly* ranked Penn State No. 3 on its list, and *U.S. News and World Report* ranked it No. 48.

The reason for such great disparity is a difference in research methodology. Each ranking system considers its own set of specific variables.

Robert Morse, director of data

research at *U.S. News and World Report*, says, “The public is intelligent enough to know that different variables provide different results. A

multitude of variables show a school’s strengths and weaknesses.”

That’s why college-bound students and parents who are consulting a specific set of college rankings need to be aware of exactly what variables researchers are measuring in a particular ranking system.

“Penn State has high rates of national service, students receiving Pell Grants, and science Ph.D. students. For a student who values that, the ranking system is useful,” says Avi Zenilman, who compiles the data for *Washington Monthly’s* rankings.

Washington Monthly’s ranking system looks different than that of others, according to Zenilman, because it measures commitment to social equality and national service. “The question we ask,” says Zenilman, is “On a larger level, what is this school doing for America and the American people?”

Morse applauds *Washington Monthly*, calling the magazine’s rankings transparent and a welcome addition to the growing number. But he is critical of its system because in his view, it weighs social equality and national service too heavily. “Should that be the reason to choose a school?” he asks. “It’s more important to look at the data, how successful a student will be in the school.”

In contrast, the *U.S. News and World Report’s* methodology rests on two pillars: quantitative measures that education experts have proposed as reliable indicators of academic quality and the researchers’ nonpartisan view of what matters in education.

U.S. News’ rankings look at the following seven indicators to measure academic quality: peer assessment, retention, faculty resources, financial resources, graduation-rate performance, alumni-rate giving, and student selectivity.



Robert Franek, *The Princeton Review*, encourages college-bound students to look at all the ratings they can so when they visit college campuses, they are armed with so much information they can then ask really pointed questions.

The Critics

One opponent of college-ranking systems says that the difference between the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings and *Washington Monthly's* rankings illustrates the inherent problem with college rankings. Paul Marthers, dean of admissions at Reed College in Portland, Ore., says, "What *Washington Monthly* did was quite interesting and good. The one exception I would take with it is that it weighted ROTC too heavily, making it equivalent with community service. I think a lot of people would question that because many institutions do not have ROTC programs." Those that do not offer ROTC programs could find themselves listed lower in the rankings.

Reed College has a long history of opposing college rankings. In 1995, Stephen Koblik, then its president, refused to participate in the *U.S. News and World Report* best-colleges rankings and actively questioned the methodology and usefulness of college rankings in general, despite having been ranked among the top 10 national liberal arts colleges by *U.S. News*.

Another knock on college rankings is that they tend to pigeonhole schools, placing colleges in specific categories with other colleges with which they have little in common. Marthers points to the *U.S. News and World Report* university category as an example.

"Cal Tech is a very different institution than Dartmouth, yet they are in the same category," says Marthers. One of the strengths of the American educational system is its diversity and pluralism, says Marthers, and these get flattened out with the idea that schools can be ranked against each other.

But Morse says that those categories offer national visibility to a variety of otherwise little-known schools. He says everyone knows about Harvard, but how many people would know about Providence or Creighton if not for the *U.S. News* rankings?

Another outspoken critic of college rankings is Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to help students, colleges, and high schools overcome

commercial interference in college admissions. Thacker compiled essays from college presidents who oppose rankings into a book called *College Unranked: Ending the College Admissions Frenzy*. He says there are a lot of problems with ranking systems. For one, he says, numerically ordering schools is contrary to his sense of the way one should think about education.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't try to evaluate, but rankings imply a false sense of precision that

is not justified," says Thacker. "Education is a very precious process. The more it is measured, the more it becomes a commodity. We need to be careful about how we steward that resource, that process — and it naturally resists market-imposed kinds of rationality."

It's not that higher education shouldn't try to improve, but the indicators and predictors are very difficult to measure and compare, says Thacker. He believes that college rankings are less about inform-

ing the public and more about filling the pockets of the companies that create the ranking lists. But Powell says that by publishing college rankings, *U.S. News and World Report* is fulfilling its mission as a journal.

"*U.S. News and World Report* is a news magazine, and its endeavor is journalism. It is designed to be a service to its readers. We gather information and provide it to the consumer. What they do with that information is up to them," says Powell.

College Guidebooks

Although Marthers opposes rankings, and in particular the discrete number that researchers assign to a specific college, he values the many college guidebooks that have burst onto the scene in the last few decades. Reed College has not participated in the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings since 1995, but it does participate in any number of other well-established college guides that do not assign numerical rankings to institutions, including *Barron's*, the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Peterson's*, *Colleges That Change Lives*, *Newsweek's College Guide*, and the *College Board's College Handbook*.

Marthers draws a clear distinction between ranking lists and college guidebooks. "*Barron's* and *Peterson's* are guidebooks that have essays that describe the institutions. All they do is list statistical information and describe the schools. There are a few guidebooks that come up with their own rankings, but that doesn't require us to participate," says Marthers.

One of those in which Reed participates is *The Princeton*



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Review's Best 361 Colleges. Robert Franek, who oversees *The Princeton Review's* publishing program, a line of more than 200 titles, is the book's lead author. He calls the *Best 361 Colleges* "a substantive guide because it has student narrative in it as well as 62 different top-20 ranking lists." The difference, says Franek, between *The Princeton Review's* guidebook and other guidebooks and rankings on the market is that he bases its rankings and its narrative on student opinion.

"Although I know a great deal about undergraduate schools and *The Princeton Review* in breadth knows a great deal about schools, we yield to the experts, the students in college classroom seats. Therein lies the difference. *U.S. News* is quantitative data supplied by the school, and they make a ranking out of those things – SAT, GPA, and so on," says Franek.

Whether in favor of college rankings, opposed to college rankings, or opposed to a specific set of variables used in a ranking system, most in higher education would agree that the more information college-bound students can gather on America's colleges, the savvier they are as college shoppers.

"People should consult as many rankings and guidebooks as they can. *The U.S. News and World Report's* set of rankings is one tool of many. People who are shopping for schools are making the biggest financial decision in their lives," says Powell. For that reason, they should draw from a range of information. They should consult materials published by colleges, and they should visit the college campuses themselves.

Morse adds that "the public is smart enough to know how to use college rankings." He says that choosing a school based solely on rankings can be a costly mistake; some pay \$200,000 for an education. People have to take into account other criteria, like location and success of a school's students.

Zenilman advises college-bound students to buy *The U.S. News and World Report* guide and skim some others, especially *The Princeton Review*.

"Don't take them too seriously," he says. "Make a list of schools that seem interesting and seem to focus on the things you are interested in, and go from there," says Zenilman. He warns college-bound students that the difference between No. 1 and No. 50 on a list of colleges can be smaller than it appears on the printed page. "Formulas for calculating these things can

be funky. Rankings capture general trends, not the specifics of every individual school," says Zenilman. He also advises students to "use the lists as a clearinghouse of data, not a hard-and-fast source of advice. "But when all is said and done, it usually comes down to personal preference and personal comfort."

Marthers advises college-bound students to create a list of their individual strengths, weaknesses, and interests, bearing in mind that college is an educational experience. "You should pick a place where you think you are going to thrive. What's really great about our country is the many, many wonderful colleges. There are more than 100 that are fine; there are many more than that," says Marthers. The *U.S. News* approach, he says, tends to really emphasize a small number of schools. "It's perfectly fine to have rankings; it's just that if one ranking is dominant, then that gets to be problematic. We at Reed feel if we are going to have rankings, then have lots of rankings. While we don't like the idea of rankings," he says, "we'd like to have more than just one."

Marthers advises those students who are consulting the rankings to look at many different sets and to disregard the number assigned to each school. "If you were to take the top 100 national universities or the national liberal arts colleges and remove the numbers next to those, most of us would not object to the idea that we can make some qualitative judgment," says Marthers.

Franek says information about colleges should be supplied by a range of voices, and he encourages college-bound students to look at all the ratings they can so when they visit college campuses, they are armed with so much information that they can then ask really pointed questions.

"*Princeton Review* is one voice. We think we are hitting the right note to serve our community because it hits our mission statement, which is to provide college-bound students, their parents, and counselors with good information they are not going to read in a college-view book. There are other folks who do that as well. Some might approach it from the quantitative perspective, and that is one. We approach it from the qualitative perspective, by student opinion," says Franek.

"College-view books and college-sponsored Web sites are one way to glean good information," he says; "however, they're not the only way. There are other folks, like *The Princeton Review*, that supply information – and we are not taking money from a school, and we are not marketing for a school.

"We are just saying, 'We wish we had this when *we* were looking for a school.'"

