



**National Association for
College Admission Counseling**

Guiding the way to higher education

**Report of the NACAC Ad Hoc Committee
on U.S. News & World Report Rankings**

September 23, 2011

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Introduction

In 2010, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) convened a group of members to form an Ad Hoc Committee on U.S. News & World Report Rankings. The Committee was convened to conduct discussions with U.S. News staff for the purpose of offering an organizational conduit through which to exchange ideas, convey concerns, and respond to questions about each organization's respective constituency.

To help inform the Ad Hoc Committee, NACAC conducted a survey of association members in May 2010 to gauge attitudes of college admission counseling professionals toward the U.S. News & World Report rankings publication, "America's Best Colleges."¹ This final report incorporates survey findings from the member survey, as well as information gleaned from committee discussions and meetings with members of NACAC's state and regional affiliates from around the country.

For purposes of this report, the term "Committee" refers only to the NACAC members who serve on the Ad Hoc Committee. Representatives of U.S. News & World Report meet with the Ad Hoc Committee to ensure an open dialogue with the association, but their views are not represented in this report. For the official public summaries of meetings between both NACAC and U.S. News & World Report representatives, visit the Ad Hoc Committee's Web page at <http://www.nacacnet.org/AboutNACAC/Governance/Comm/Pages/NACACUSNewsAdHocCommittee.aspx>. The Committee would like to express its appreciation to Robert Morse, Director of Data Research at U.S. News & World Report, for his participation in discussions with the Ad Hoc Committee.

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Rankings History and Background

The Evolution of Modern Rankings

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the U.S. Bureau of Education published annual reports containing statistical data on colleges and universities across the nation. Following the discontinuation of these reports in 1890, various (and varied) attempts have been made to rank institutions of higher education based on academic quality.² The U.S. News & World Report's rankings publication, though unprecedented in its popularity, is in many ways a product of the rankings that came before it.

Table 1. Timeline of Major Developments in Academic Quality College Rankings³

1910	Psychologist James Cattell publishes the first American college rankings in <i>American Men of Science</i> based on the number of identified "eminent men" who had earned degrees from, or were employed at, the ranked institutions.
1925	Chemistry professor Raymond Hughes publishes the first reputational rankings in <i>A Study of the Graduate Schools of America</i> .
1934	Hughes, now chair of the American Council of Education, publishes a second, more extensive, set of reputational rankings of graduate schools.
1957	Journalist Chesly Manly publishes six college rankings in the <i>Chicago Tribune</i> : ten best universities, co-educational colleges, men's colleges, women's colleges, law schools and engineering schools.
1959	Humanities professor Hayward Keniston reintroduces reputational rankings in the appendix of a report prepared for the University of Pennsylvania.
1966	Allan Cartter, with the American Council for Education, publishes <i>An Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education</i> , also known as the <i>Cartter Report</i> . It is based on reputational surveys, features improved methodology and sells approximately 26,000 copies.
1967	Jack Gourman begins publishing a college ranking titled <i>The Gourman Report</i> , which applies an undisclosed methodology and is widely criticized for its statistical anomalies.
1970	Kenneth Roose and Charles Anderson replicate Cartter's methodology in <i>A Ranking of Graduate Programs</i> and attempt to downplay the "pecking order" of institutions.
1973	Peter Blau and Rebecca Margulies publish a reputational ranking of professional schools.
1977	Allan Cartter and Lewis Solomon publish another reputational ranking of professional schools in response to dissatisfaction with the Blau and Margulies rankings.
1981	Lewis Solomon and Alexander Astin publish an undergraduate reputational ranking.
1982	The National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council publish the <i>Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States</i> , which includes ratings, rather than rankings, of institutions, and is based on both reputational survey responses and quantifiable data.
1983	U.S. News & World Report first publishes its college and university rankings.
2003	Shanghai Jiao Tong University publishes the first global university rankings.

Historically, it was common in Europe to count the number of eminent men associated with a university in order to measure its worth. This method was used in the first American college rankings in 1910 and remained influential through the mid-1960s.⁴ At least nine such rankings were published between 1910 and 1964 by James Cattell, the first to rank U.S. colleges and universities, and by others.⁵ Reputational rankings were introduced by Raymond Hughes in 1925. Their prominence developed slowly over time, eventually eclipsing that of the previous "eminent men" rankings. Regardless of the methodology, however, most early rankings were used primarily within institutions of higher education and associations of colleges and universities. They garnered only minimal attention from the public up until the introduction of the U.S. News & World Report rankings publication.⁶

²Walleri, R. Dan and Marsha K. Moss, *Evaluating and Responding to College Rankings*, 1995.

³Compiled from Walleri, 1995; Meyers, Luke and Jonathan Robe, "College Rankings: History, Criticism and Reform," Center for College Affordability and Productivity, 2009; Rauhvargers, Anrejs, "Global University Rankings and Their Impact," European University Association, 2011; and Webster, David, "Reputational Rankings of Colleges, Universities, and Individual Disciplines and Fields of Study, From Their Beginnings to the Present," Agathon Press, 1992.

⁴Meyers, 2009.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Walleri, 1995; Meyers, 2009.

Encouragingly, the history of reputational college rankings is marked by various improvements in methodology and expansions in scope. Early reputational surveys were carried out on a very small scale and therefore produced less reliable results that were less inclusive. For example, Hughes' first ranking (1925) was based solely on the responses of Miami University faculty members who were asked to list 40-60 instructors who taught in their discipline and to rate the quality of the departments of only 36 institutions.⁷ Alan Cartter's 1966 rankings, conversely, were based on surveys sent to senior and junior scholars and department chairpersons from across the nation. Respondents were asked to rate institutions separately on the quality of their graduate faculties and the quality of their doctoral training programs, adding a layer of specificity to the rankings. Cartter's final product included 106 institutions, more than any previous ranking.⁸ In 1982, the National Research Council's ratings combined quantitative data with the results of reputational surveys regarding 228 institutions, making it more comprehensive than any previous effort to measure academic quality at colleges and universities in the U.S.⁹

The U.S. News & World Report rankings publication has, since its first publication in 1983, gone through significant changes and developments. The first three editions were based entirely on reputational surveys sent to college presidents and were released every other year (1983, 1985 and 1987). In 1988, a number of important precedents were set: the rankings publication began to be released on an annual basis, its reputational surveys were sent to academic deans and admission officers as well as college presidents, and it based 75% of the rankings on non-reputational input and output variables. Around the same time, U.S. News also began releasing their rankings in a standalone guidebook, which provided more information than the rankings issue of the magazine.¹⁰

Since they began ranking colleges, U.S. News has improved the integrity of the rankings by confirming self-reported data with other sources and standardizing and clarifying variable definitions. They also began including information on unranked institutions and rounding aggregate scores up to whole numbers (rather than first decimal places) to determine ties. During the mid-1990s, output measures received added emphasis, as the weight on the graduation rate variable was increased and the "value added" (now referred to as "graduation rate performance") variable was added. In the 2004 edition of "America's Best Colleges," U.S. News responded to growing criticism from those in higher education and abandoned the use of the yield variable in determining selectivity.¹¹ The popularity of the publication grew as the methodology was refined. According to *College Rankings: Democratized College Knowledge for Whom?*, "USNWR sold 485,000 reprints of that first issue and currently sells an estimated 2.3 million of its regular college rankings issue and an estimated 700,000 copies of its stand-alone college rankings guide."¹²

The Effects of Rankings and Our Desire for Order

Rankings seem to fulfill two demands in modern society, one perhaps more understandable than another. First, consumers view rankings as a method for determining value. Information abounds in the Internet age, though finding a trusted source to make sense of the information can be a difficult task. Indeed, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) notes that "stakeholders gravitate toward systems that provide some interpretation of the information" available about postsecondary education.¹³ Second, many people, as evidenced by the commercial success of U.S. News' "America's Best Colleges," crave an authoritative source to tell them what is 'best,' who is number one. Rank ordering toasters or cars may make some sense in this context, as there are more or less tangible outcomes which depend less on human tendencies and more on mechanical precision. However, colleges and universities are complex institutions with multiple purposes that, to a large extent, rely on human interactions and individual determination to function.

⁷Meyers, 2009.

⁸Walleri, 1995; Meyers, 2009.

⁹Walleri, 1995;

¹⁰Sanoff, Alvin P., "The U.S. News College Rankings: A View from the Inside," Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009; Meyers, 2009.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²McDonough, Patricia M., et al, "College Rankings: Democratized College Knowledge for Whom?" Research in Higher Education, 1998, Vol. 39.5.

¹³Sponsler, Brian A., "Issue Brief: The Role and Relevance of Rankings in Higher Education Policymaking," Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2009.

The trouble with ranking such complex institutions using simple measures is well-documented. Rankings can be self-fulfilling prophecies, the process by which reactions to social measures confirm the expectations or predictions that are embedded in measures or which increase the validity of measures by encouraging behavior that conforms to it.¹⁴ Evidence of the self-fulfilling prophecy is found in the influence of prior rankings on responses to peer review surveys, a core component of the USNWR rankings.

Rankings can also improperly reduce and simplify complex concepts, decontextualizing information that could be essential to consumers. An excellent example of the decontextualizing effects of the USNWR rankings was expressed by numerous respondents to the NACAC member survey. In response to the question, “Does the title ‘America’s Best Colleges’ accurately describe the contents of the publication?,” NACAC members responded, “Best for whom?” Rankings, according to Sauder and Espeland, are “the culmination of many commensurative practices,” where complex concepts are reduced to single data points that are deemed indicative of quality or success.¹⁵ Such commensuration leads to scrutiny over miniscule differences, a phenomenon commonly ascribed to the rank ordering of institutions using the USNWR methodology.

The cumulative effects of the rankings, combined with the distillation of judgments about quality into data points of varying degrees of defensibility, create questionable incentives for institutions and lead to significant confusion among consumers about the differences between institutions. Such confusion among consumers risks creating mismatches between students and institutions, as well as reputational biases that may discourage students from pursuing an education at an institution that may be the “best” college for their needs or tastes.

¹⁴Sauder, Michael and Wendy Nelson Espeland, “Rankings and Reactivity: How Public Measures Recreate Social Worlds,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 2007, Vol. 113.1.

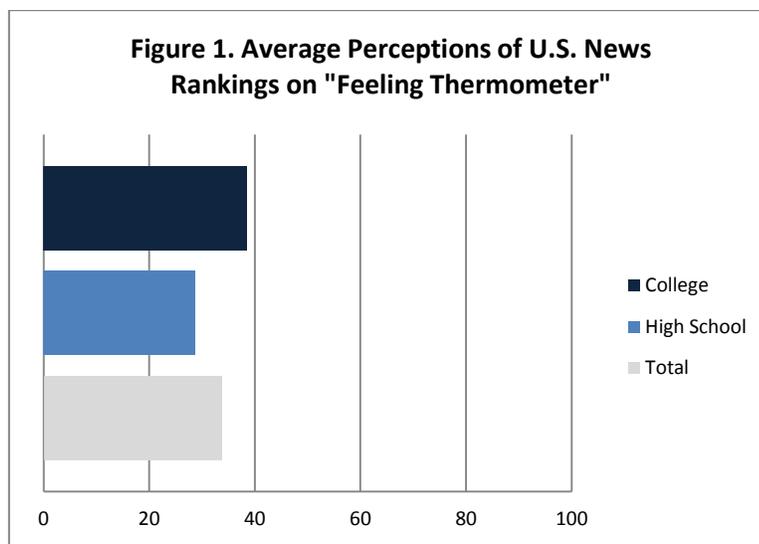
¹⁵*Ibid.*

The NACAC Discussion

The Ongoing Discussion

The discussion about academic rankings and their effects is extensive and ongoing. Throughout much of the last decade, members of NACAC, as well as other observers, have expressed a myriad of concerns about rankings on a consistent basis. The NACAC Board of Directors viewed the appointment of an Ad Hoc Committee as an opportune moment to consolidate the members' concerns into a single, organized effort.

This committee's observations and recommendations are best seen as symptomatic of long-standing concerns that linger in our professional community, as well as others. An initial and expected observation of the committee was a general dislike for the rankings overall. As part of the Committee's survey, NACAC members were asked to indicate, on a scale from one to 100, their general attitude toward the U.S. News & World Report rankings. A score of one represents a strenuous objection to the U.S. News rankings, while 50 represents a completely neutral attitude and 100 indicates strong support. The mean scores, which are presented in Figure 1, reveal generally negative opinions of the rankings among respondents.

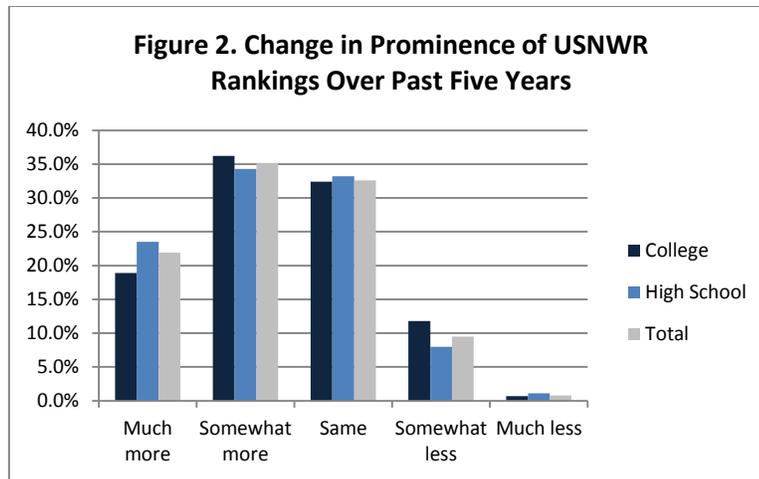


High school counselors (mean score of 28.67) expressed lower regard for the rankings than college admission officers (mean score of 38.54), but both groups held negative views (mean score under fifty) toward the rankings.¹⁶ Public high school counselors viewed the rankings slightly more charitably (mean score of 35.11) than private high school counselors (mean score of 23.92).

How Influential Are the Rankings?

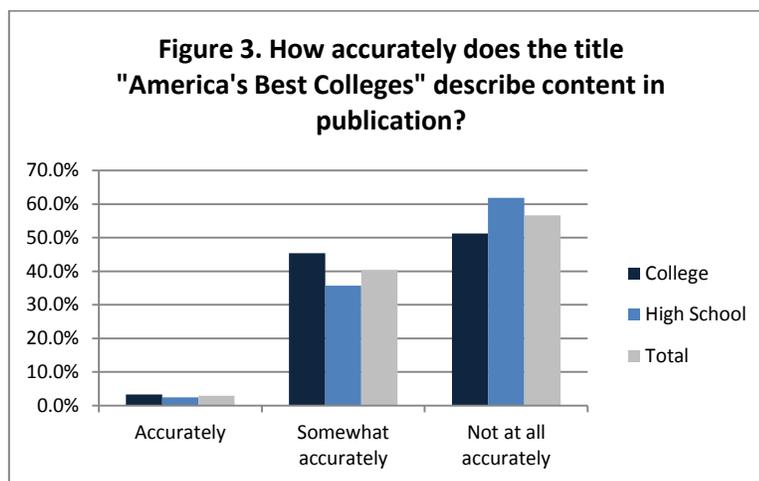
If college admission counseling professionals are, on the whole, negatively inclined toward them, is the influence of rankings such that we should be more concerned, or less concerned, about their effects on college admission and counseling? NACAC members were asked about their opinions on the change in prominence of the U.S. News & World Report rankings over the last five years. As Figure 2 suggests, a majority of NACAC members believe that the prominence of the U.S. News & World Report rankings has increased over the past five years.

¹⁶To ensure that the mean was not masking highly polarized opinions, we examined the median scores as well. High school counselors' median feeling thermometer score was twenty five, while college admission officers' median score was thirty five.



Best for Whom?

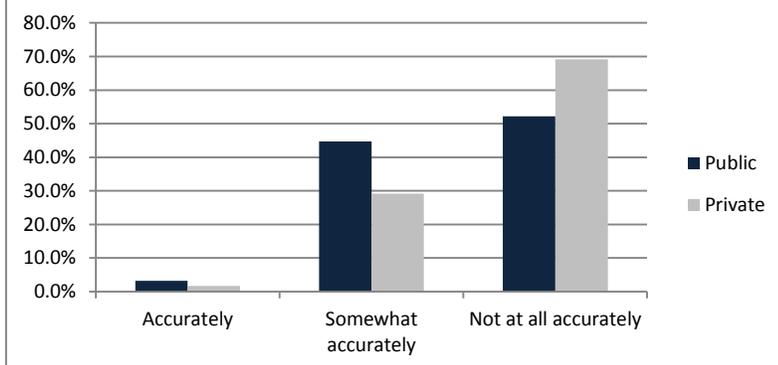
NACAC members expressed something approaching a consensus on the question of whether the title of U.S. News & World Report's annual publication, "America's Best Colleges," accurately represents the information presented therein.



Only 2.9 percent of all respondents (2.4 percent of high school counselors and 3.3 percent of college admission professionals) believed that the title of the publication accurately represents the content delivered by the publication. The majority of college admission officers (51.3 percent) and high school counselors (61.9 percent) reported that the title is not at all accurate (Figure 3).

As Figure 4 indicates, public high school counselors were slightly more likely to believe that the title at least "somewhat accurately" describes the content in the publication.

**Figure 4. How accurately does the title "America's Best Colleges" describe content in publication?
HS Results Only**



More than 600 NACAC members offered comments on this question in addition to their multiple choice responses. The most common themes in the open ended responses add substance to the general notion that the title of “America’s Best Colleges” does not accurately convey the information contained in the publication to consumers. Common themes included:

- “The Best for Whom?”—Many members stated that the best college for an individual student will be determined by the quality of fit between institution and student.
- “What’s in a Rank?”—Members argued that the difference in numeric rank between colleges is at least somewhat arbitrary by virtue of the weighting system used in the methodology, that making subsequent rank order distinctions between colleges does not prove that one college is “better” than another, and that the weights of the factors, when changed, have produced and will produce different rankings.
- Inputs vs. Outputs—Members find it difficult to explain what the term “best” describes—many believe that the rankings’ use of “input” variables (including selectivity and test scores) and other variables not related to directly measurable outputs (such as the peer assessments) lead consumers to make decisions based on information unrelated to the quality of education provided at the institution.

Overarching Themes

During the committee’s discussion, review of the member survey, and review of the academic literature, three overarching themes emerged.

- 1) **Methodology matters.** Ordinal rankings create flawed conclusions and resulting misperceptions about differences in college quality.
- 2) **Distorting Effects and Professional Practice.** While there is little conclusive evidence of widespread gaming of rankings, the tendency to conform to rankings methodology creates incentives to focus disproportionate resources on data elements that can change rankings without necessarily changing the quality of the institution. Moreover, survey results and Committee discussions suggested the need for more professional education and consumer resources with regard to rankings publications.
- 3) **Taking the Next Step.** As the history of rankings suggests, change is a gradual and incremental process—but one that takes place nonetheless. There are many recommendations for change, including recent recommendations from the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), that the Committee supports. This Committee found particular interest in the idea of correcting for methodological flaws by de-emphasizing the single, ordinal list that U.S. News & World Report publishes, and instead encouraging more ‘open access’ use of the data to allow students and families to create their own college lists using criteria they find important.
- 4) **Committee Recommendations.** The final section of the report offers the Committee’s recommendations as a result of its discussions.

Methodology Matters

According to a National Opinion Research Center (NORC) evaluation of the U.S. News & World Report rankings of undergraduate institutions, “the principal weakness of the current approach is that the weights used to combine the various measures into an overall rating lack any defensible empirical or theoretical basis.”¹⁷ Indeed, there is no objective way to select of criteria for inclusion in a ranking method. Once the criteria are selected, there is further no objective manner for assigning weights to each criterion. As a result, there are an infinite array of possible rankings for colleges and universities. Moreover, because the criteria used to rank colleges often do not differ widely, the placement of weights to differentiate institutions with similar characteristics makes specific placement in a ranking “essentially arbitrary.”¹⁸

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) notes that “ordinal rankings are inherently misleading...[T]rue differences among closely ranked institutions may be minimal or quite large, but all ranking are presented as having the same magnitude of difference.”¹⁹

IHEP further notes that “[t]he inputs in common ranking systems—and the indicators selected to measure them—reflect implicitly value-laden decisions about how to appropriately define educational quality. Most of the indicators used in the construction of college rankings have little to do with policy goals relating to access and equity; they create uniform notions of educational quality and overlook important distinctions in educational preparation, personal experiences, and historical treatment of various student populations in higher education. Policymakers and the public are ill-served by rankings that rely on data indicators that by their nature are exclusionary.”²⁰

Student Selectivity

With its ranking methodology, USNWR turns a highly subjective collection of intangibles into one quantifiable value that can be arranged against other like values. The resulting ordered list attracts an eager population of information seekers with its simple approach to quantifying a very important, and expensive, decision. The methodology is the backbone of the “Best Colleges” publication, and consumers of the information should understand its components before using it as a college search tool. To understand the methodology is to understand which educational variables USNWR deems the most important measures of institutional quality. In a companion piece to the 2010 rankings issue, USNWR editorial staff called the rankings a “starting point for the college search.” The rankings actually reflect more of an opinion of one news source about the appropriate measures of educational quality.

The current USNWR “Best Colleges” ranking formula is broken down into several primary components: undergraduate academic reputation, student selectivity, faculty resources, graduation and retention rates, financial resources, alumni giving, and graduation rate performance (the difference of the actual six-year graduation rate and the rate predicted by USNWR). Each of these categories is broken down into “subfactors” that occasionally differ according to the institution type. Table 2 focuses on the selectivity and reputational components.

¹⁷ National Opinion Research Center, “The NORC Report on U.S. News and World Report,” Washington Monthly, 1997.

¹⁸ Huggins, Peter and Lior Pachter, “Selecting Universities: Personal Preference and Rankings,” Cornell University, 2008.

¹⁹ Sponsler, 2009.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Table 2. Weights of Selectivity and Reputational Components of USNWR Methodology²¹

Ranking Category	Category Weight		Subfactor	Subfactor Weight	
	National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges	Regional Universities and Regional Colleges		National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges	Regional Universities and Regional Colleges
Undergraduate Academic Reputation	22.5%	25%	Peer assessment survey	66.7%	100%
			High School Counselors' rating	33.3%	0%
Student selectivity for fall 2010 entering class	15%	15%	Acceptance rate	10%	10%
			High school class standing in top 10%	40%	0%
			High school class standing in top 25%	0%	40%
			Critical Reading and Math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT scores	50%	50%

This assemblage of factors and subfactors represents the data chosen by USNWR staff to measure institutional quality, but the presence of these variables also highlights the absence of other intangibles. Data on teaching quality, student involvement, and ability to obtain a job does not exist in a publication-ready format, so USNWR finds other measurable factors to represent academic rigor. USNWR combines input variables (standardized tests and class rank), process variables (faculty resources) and output measures (graduation rates) to generate a final rating. However, the news publication does not include detailed statistical analysis that would lend the necessary scientific credibility. Jeffrey Evans Stake makes this point in an analysis of the impact law school rankings have on institutional policy:

Like many rankings, those published by U.S. News are based on a number of factors, most of which make use of readily available data. Many of these criteria are of no inherent interest to the readers of the rankings. A prospective law student wanting to work as a lawyer has no particular interest in the amount of money a school spends, the number of volumes in the library, the grades of the other students in the class, or even the reputation of the school among academics because such reputations are built primarily on faculty publications and not teaching quality.²²

Furthermore, the heavy reliance on input variables suggests a misinterpretation of the purpose of higher education. When interpreting the rankings as a true measure of institutional quality, one equates the educational inputs the same as the educational outputs.²³ Thus, the mission of the university becomes irrelevant.

²¹U.S. News Staff, "Best Colleges 2012: About the Rankings/Methodology," U.S. News & World Report, 2011.

²²Stake, Jeffrey Evans, "The Interplay Between Law School Rankings, Reputations, and Resource Allocation: Ways Rankings Mislead," Indiana Law Journal, 2006, Vol. 81.299.

²³Henderson, William D. and Andrew P. Morriss, "Student Quality as Measured by LSAT Scores: Migration Patterns in the U.S. News Rankings Era," Indiana Law Journal, 2006, Vol. 81.163.

Student selectivity accounts for 15% of the overall ranking. Aside from the acceptance rate, two unreliable metrics wield most of the input variable's emphasis on the rest of the ranking: class rank and standardized test scores. In a 2009 survey of admission professionals, only 16 percent of respondents attributed considerable importance to class rank,²⁴ a factor that comprises 40 percent of the selectivity rating. The inclusion of class rank in the methodology promotes a criterion that penalizes students for selecting academically rigorous secondary schools.²⁵

While significantly more respondents rated standardized tests as considerably important (58 percent) in the admission process, industry experts have agreed on their exclusion from any evaluative measures of educational systems. The two principle test developers, the College Board and ACT, discourage the use of their test data as measures of educational quality. The NACAC Testing Commission, made up of 19 admission and counseling professionals from both public and private institutions, concluded “that the continued use of admission test scores as a ranking-related measure creates pressure on admission offices to pursue increasingly high test scores.”

Because USNWR must rely on quantifiable measures like standardized test data and class rank to offer a numerical school rating, intrinsic ethical dilemmas arise from the collaterally produced incentives. As the prevalence of rankings increases, so does their pressures on the policy decisions of postsecondary administrators. Admission deans and directors are faced with the choice of leading their college or university according to institutional philosophy or to ranking methodologies.

The impact of the Law School Admission Test (LSAT) on law school admission policy provides a template for polluting the holistic admission process. Law schools have been clinging precipitously close to their ranking in the USNWR guide, and one of the easiest methods to improve an institution's standing in the annual list is through the median LSAT score. “Not only is it tangible and internal in a way that the other variables are not, it is certain, and that certainty makes it important in ways different from the other variables.”²⁶ When institutions need a bump of several points in their median score, they can quickly turn their attention to next year's applicant pool. Lending undue significance to test scores in an evaluative formula encourages the subjects of the evaluation to do the same.

While test scores provide a solution to the largely immeasurable metrics of the college experience, rankings publications would be ill-advised in using them for their ratings. Since there is a standard error of measurement for standardized tests, using them comparatively in a ranking formula is reckless. The standard error of measurement for the SAT Mathematics and Critical Reading sections is 30 points and about 1 point for the ACT composite score. The College Board's Guidelines on the Uses of College Board Test Scores and Related Data clearly state that the practice of “making decisions about otherwise qualified students based only on small differences in test scores” should be avoided. Because the rankings publications measure thousands of postsecondary institutions, they face the very real possibility of characterizing institutions based on statistically insignificant score differences.

Reputational Survey

The reputational survey comprises a sizeable proportion of the overall USNWR ranking. For National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges, the reputational survey carries a 22.5 weighting, making it the most influential category. For Regional Universities and Regional Colleges, it represents one-quarter of the overall rating, which is only equaled by graduation and retention rates. In the context of USNWR's ranking history, the weighting seems appropriate. The very first attempt from USNWR to rank colleges in 1983 relied entirely on a reputational survey. The “Best Colleges” guide, however, has grown in relevance since then, increasing its sales of its regular college ranking issue by over 2 million copies in its first 15 years.²⁷ The annual issue soon outgrew a standalone reputational survey, and the publication began updating its methodology.

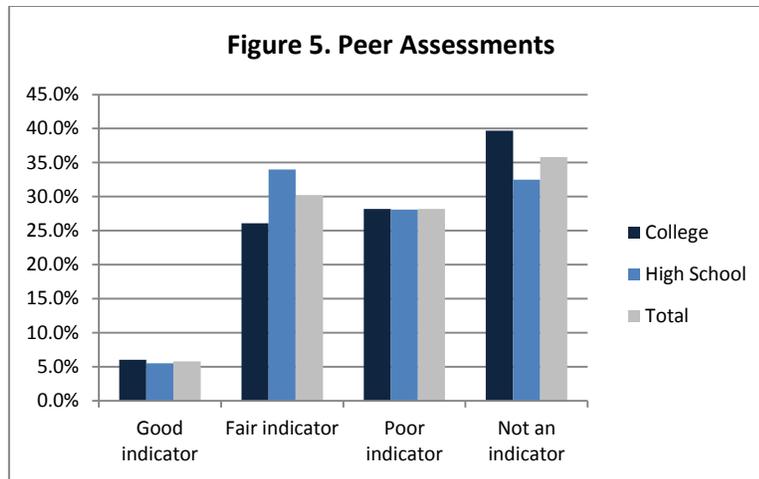
²⁴NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2009.

²⁵Ehrenberg, Ronald G., “Reaching for the Brass Ring: The U.S. News & World Report Rankings and Competition,” *The Review of Higher Education*, 2002, Vol. 26.2.

²⁶Johnson, Alex M., Jr., “The Destruction of the Holistic Approach to Admissions: The Pernicious Effects of Rankings,” *Indiana Law Journal*, 2006, Vol. 81.309.

²⁷McDonough, 1998.

Secondary and postsecondary professionals are overwhelmingly skeptical of the reputational survey component of the USNWR rankings methodology. In the committee's survey of NACAC members, only five percent of respondents called the peer assessments a "good indicator" of college quality. By comparison, nearly 40 percent of NACAC members agreed that graduation and retention rates, similarly weighted factors in the USNWR rankings, were good indicators of college quality.



The peer assessments are inherently subjective, which might explain the low opinion rating in the member survey compared to a quantitative factor like graduation rates. The NORC review of the USNWR undergraduate rankings methodology highlights the limitations of using academic reputation as a proxy for institutional quality. In addition to addressing the fact that academic excellence alone does not define the entire spectrum of student needs, the report also pointed out that "it is generally assumed that reputations change more slowly than real change in institutions, thus overvaluing institutions that, in fact, may be declining and undervaluing institutions that are improving." In other words, the reputational survey does not serve as a good indicator of institutional quality in a given year because the respondent's assumptions may be based on past evaluations.

While some institutions have experienced positional mobility in the rankings from year to year, whether from a change in institutional policy or a change in the USNWR methodology, the relatively static nature of the top tier is revealing of attitudinal trends of university administrators. In the USNWR law school rankings, which also weight the peer assessments at 25 percent²⁸, nine out of 10 institutions from 1987 to 2004²⁹ remained in the top 10.²⁹ Assigning the largest or one of the largest weights to a measure like the reputational survey is dangerous because the responses submitted to USNWR may in fact be part of a self-perpetuating system. The schools ranked highly in the widely distributed "Best Colleges" publication benefit from the reflexive nature of the reputational survey, while schools in the lower tier are penalized based on previous, and potentially outdated, critiques. This "echo effect" tends to pull the ranking in the direction of the previous year's assessment.³⁰

One major flaw in including a peer assessment in a rankings methodology involves the inability of respondents to identify meaningful change at other institutions. As stated in the NORC evaluation, "The great variance both across and within institutions makes it very difficult to get consensus on quality criteria or on measures for undergraduate programs in general, or even for groups of colleges or universities that might appear similar." With no clear method of identifying educational quality, reputational survey respondents are encouraged to focus solely on more easily identifiable metrics, like standardized tests. As William Henderson and Andrew Morriss address in their research on changes in median LSAT scores, the fluctuations in visible factors like standardized tests have more of an impact

²⁸In the law school rankings, only selectivity equals the peer assessments in terms of weight. The law school rankings also include an assessment score by lawyers and judges weighted at 15 percent, which brings the total "quality assessment" to 40 percent of the total ranking.

²⁹Henderson and Morriss, 2006.

³⁰Stake, 2006.

on academic reputation than other intangibles like curriculum improvements. Therefore, the reliance on peer assessments places additional weight on the selectivity rating. One might ask whether standardized tests data started to affect reputations or reputations started to affect selectivity, and ultimately standardized tests. Since the rankings publications have pervaded the consciousness of the college admission culture, it no longer matters which came first. The reputations have been firmly established through annual publication.

Common Misconceptions

The committee found that there was some misunderstanding of ranking methodology, as well as some perceptions that were not entirely accurate, among survey responses and in conversations with members. Respondents occasionally cited the need for measures that are currently included in the USNWR methodology and criticized the inclusion of criteria that have been dropped or changed. For example, one respondent stated, “I think the 4 year graduation rate is absurd,” when, in fact, USNWR uses a six-year graduation rate. Similarly, some respondents cited the need for a measure that takes incoming student characteristics into account when comparing institutions’ graduation rates. Such a measure is currently included in USNWR’s methodology under the name “graduation rate performance.” Yield was repeatedly cited as a source of negative pressure on institutions despite the fact that it is no longer included in the rankings methodology. Respondents also occasionally listed retention rates, student-to-faculty ratios, and the percentages of faculty with terminal degrees as criteria that should be included in the rankings methodology. Though these factors are already included in the USNWR rankings methodology, the misunderstanding among members may be in part attributable to their relatively minimal weight.

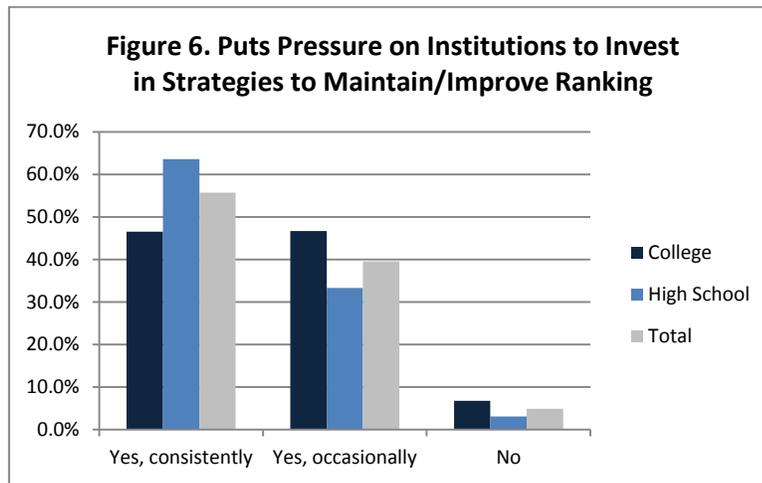
Distorting Effects and Professional Practice

Institutional Responses to the Rankings

In a report on the effect of rankings in higher education policymaking, the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) noted:

Rankings have the potential to shift institutional behaviors in ways that may negatively affect policy goals. Rankings create incentives for institutions to take actions designed to improve their positions. This reactivity creates conditions in which institutions respond to the concept of educational quality embedded in rankings, which is not always aligned with public policy goals, such as equity and diversity.³¹

Figure 6 demonstrates that an overwhelming majority (95.1 percent) of NACAC members believe that the U.S. News & World Report rankings “put pressure on institutions to invest in strategies and practices primarily for the purpose of maintaining or strengthening position in the rankings,” either consistently or occasionally.



High school members are more suspicious of institutional responses to the rankings. Nearly two-thirds (63.6 percent) of high school respondents believe that the rankings “consistently” put pressure on institutions, compared to only 46.5 percent of college respondents.

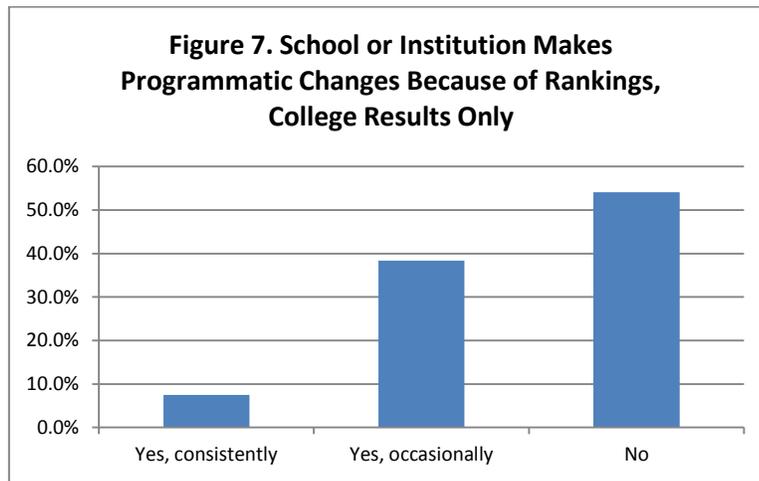
More than 300 NACAC members offered comments on this question in addition to their multiple choice responses. The most common themes in the open ended responses add substance to the general belief institutions and schools are pressured to make programmatic changes in efforts to improve their rankings. Common themes included:

- **Manipulating numbers**—Many members believe that schools manipulate the data that is used to calculate the U.S. News & World Report rankings, especially admit and yield³² rates, with wait lists, fast-track applications, and early decision programs.
- **Outside pressure**—Members commonly reported being pressured by their institution’s presidents, trustees, and faculty to adopt strategies that would increase their rank.
- **Benefits**—Some members argued that the pressure to improve rankings can benefit schools, colleges, and students by encouraging policies that improve certain student-centered features, including retention rate and class size.

³¹Sponsler, 2009.

³²Yield rates are no longer used in the U.S. News rankings formula.

In contrast to the data shown in Figure 6, 54.1 percent of NACAC members representing colleges reported that their particular institutions do not make any programmatic changes based on the rankings, as seen in Figure 7. Because the U.S. News & World Report high school rankings are less prominent and influential than the college rankings, only responses from NACAC members representing colleges are discussed for this question.³³



Very few NACAC college members (7.6 percent) report that their institutions consistently “make programmatic changes at least in part because of their influence on the rankings.” Over one-third of college respondents (38.4 percent) report that their particular institutions do so occasionally. Comparing Figures 6 and 7 yields an interesting contrast. College respondents’ beliefs that institutions are “gaming” the rankings generally seems to apply to other colleges, whereas they are less likely to perceive their own institution as manipulating the process. The Committee will explore this finding further as they meet and share information with members over the coming months.

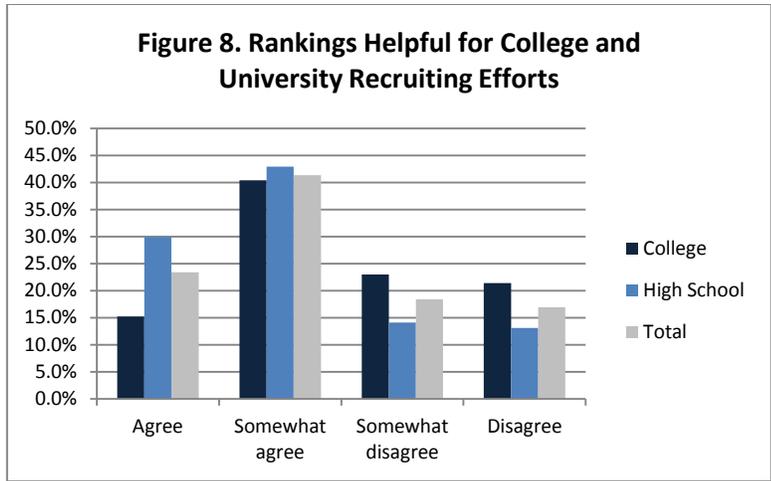
Useful to College and University Recruiting Efforts?

As the IHEP report notes, “[t]he use of rankings by postsecondary institutions has contributed to their popularity.”³⁴ Indicative of the complex relationship between rankings and institutions, the diversification of distinctions conferred by USNWR has had the double-edged effects of addressing (albeit only partly) concerns about a one-sized-fits all ranking and affording more institutions the opportunity to promote their ranking to the public.

The majority of NACAC members agreed with the statement, “U.S. News rankings are useful to college and university recruiting efforts.” Colleges were relatively evenly divided on this question, as 55.6 percent either somewhat agreed or agreed and 44.4 percent either somewhat disagreed or disagreed. Nearly 73 percent of high school counselors, on the other hand, either somewhat agreed or agreed that the rankings are useful to college and university recruiting efforts (Figure 8).

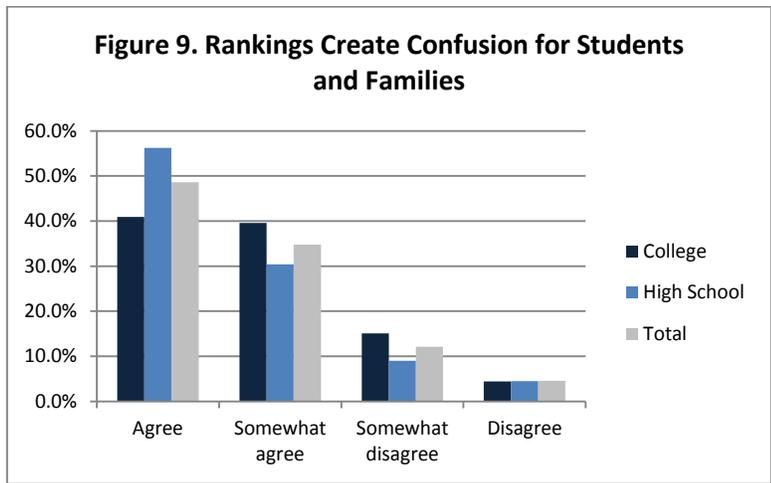
³³The high school member responses for the question regarding the promotion of rankings were as follows: 6.7 percent consistently make changes based on the rankings, 20.4 percent occasionally make changes based on the rankings, and 72.9 percent do not make any changes based on the rankings.

³⁴Sponsler, 2009.

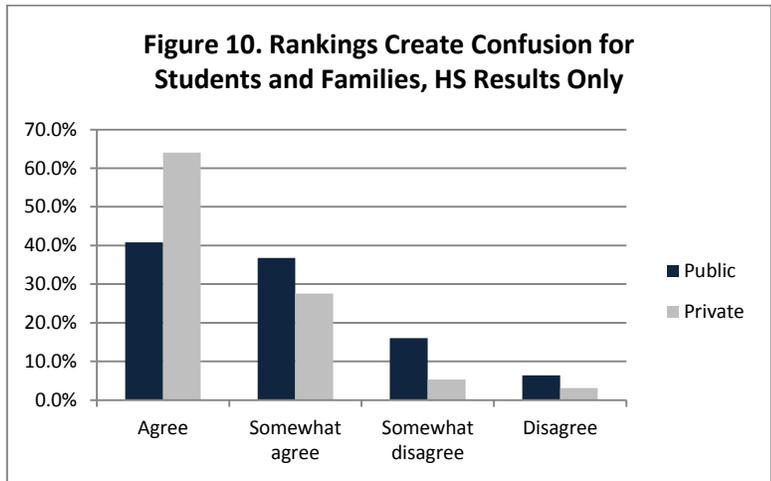


Rankings Create Confusion for Students and Families?

A large majority of respondents from all groups agreed that the U.S. News rankings create great confusion for students and families interested in college information. Overall, 83.4 percent of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed, versus only 16.7 percent of respondent who expressed some level of disagreement. High school counselors (86.6 percent) were most likely to suggest that the rankings create confusion for students and families (Figure 9).

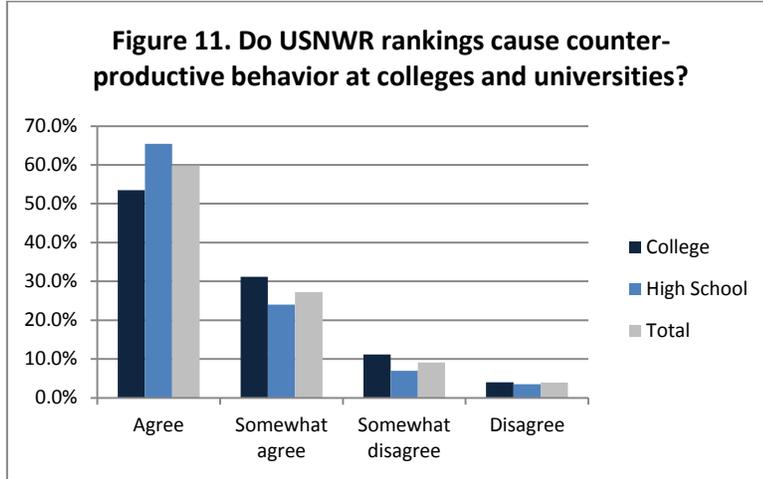


Private high school counselors were slightly more likely to believe that the rankings create confusion for students and families (Figure 10).

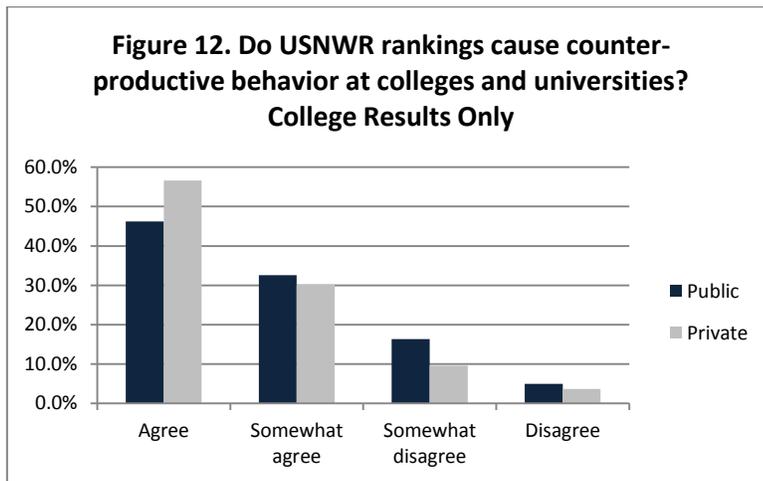


Do Rankings Encourage Counter-Productive Behavior Within Colleges and Universities?

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (87 percent) either “somewhat agree” or “agree” that the U.S. News & World Report rankings encourage counter-productive behavior within colleges and universities. High school respondents were most likely to either “agree” or “somewhat agree” (89.4 percent) that rankings cause counterproductive behavior at colleges and universities, though college respondents were similarly inclined (84.7 percent either agreed or somewhat agreed) (Figure 11).

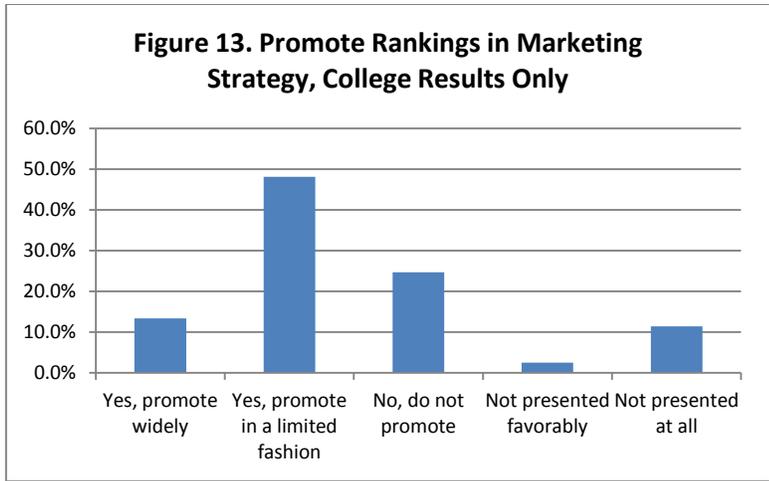


Among colleges, admission officers from public institutions were slightly less likely to believe that the rankings caused counter-productive behavior than admission officers at private institutions (Figure 12).

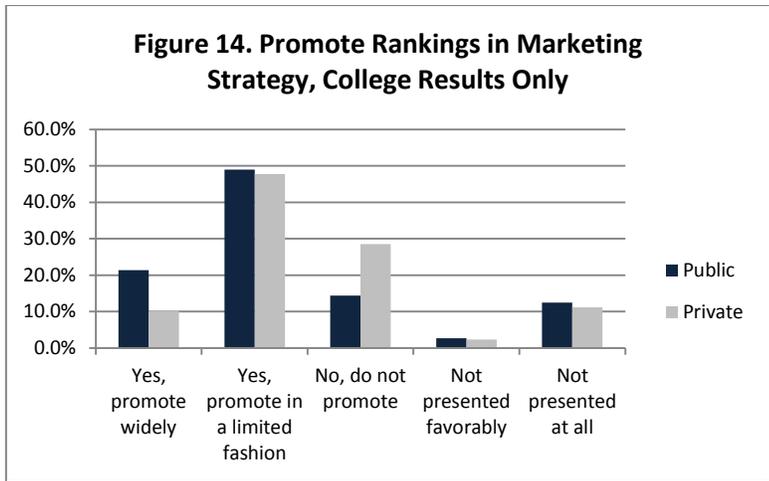


Rankings and Recruiting

A majority of NACAC members believe the rankings are, generally speaking, useful to college and university recruiting efforts. A specific example of the rankings’ utility for colleges—the promotion of an institution’s rank in its marketing materials—is shown in Figure 13. Because a majority of NACAC members representing high schools are not presented at all in the U.S. News & World Report rankings, only responses from members representing colleges are discussed for this question.

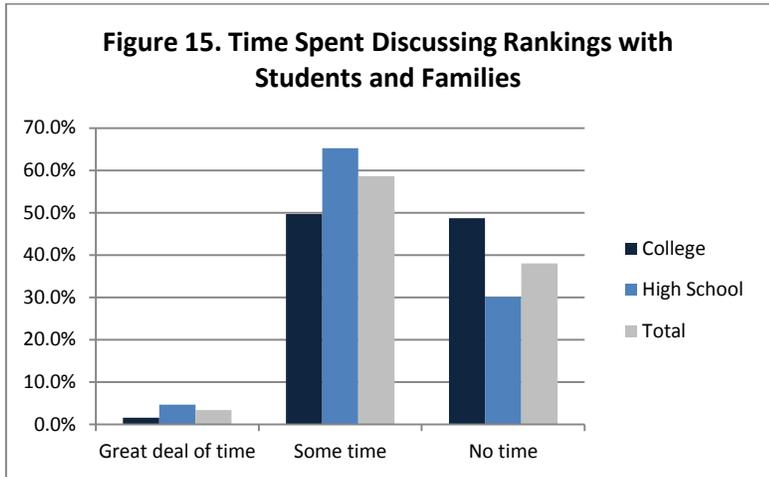


Of the 88.6 percent of college members who are included in the rankings, only 2.8 percent report being presented unfavorably. Among the remaining 79.8 percent of college members who are presented favorably in the U.S. News & World Report rankings, over two-thirds (71.3 percent) promote their rank, though most do so in a limited fashion. Among colleges, public institutions were slightly more likely to promote their ranking than private institutions (Figure 14).



Rankings in Counseling and Admission Offices

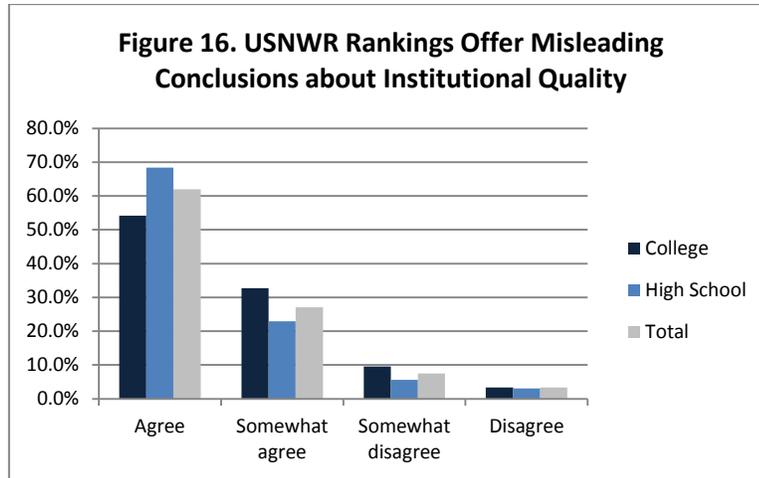
NACAC members were asked whether they spend “a great deal of time,” “some time,” or “no time” discussing or answering questions about the U.S. News & World Report rankings. As Figure 15 shows, a majority of members spend at least some time discussing U.S. News rankings with students and families.



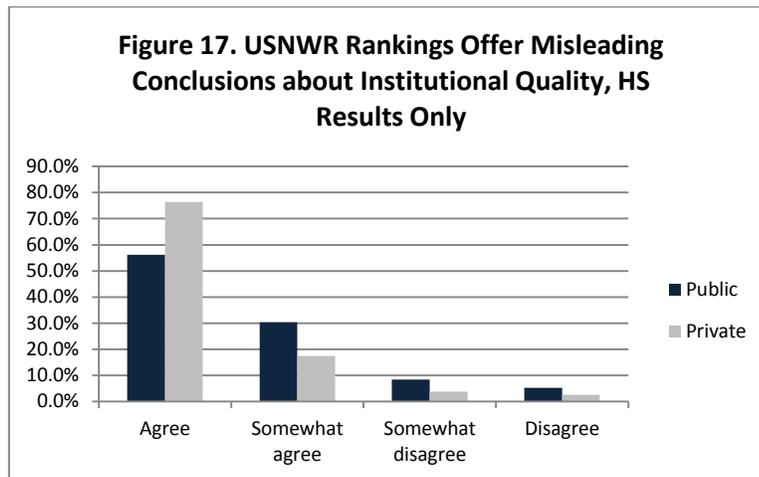
Taking the Next Step

Misleading Conclusions About Institutional Quality?

An overwhelming 89.1 percent of all respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that the U.S. News & World Report rankings offer misleading conclusions about institutional quality. As Figure 16 shows, opinions did not vary substantially between college and high school members.



Disaggregated results among high schools again reveal a slight difference between public and private high school opinions about the conclusions drawn by the rankings about institutional quality, though the differences in this case are slight (Figure 17).



These results, combined with the responses to the question about the accuracy of the title, “America’s Best Colleges,” offer the clearest indication of where NACAC member concerns are grounded.³⁵

The Case for Personalized Lists

“The publication of a single ranking provides readers with a summary that may be misleading and fails to properly account for personal preference and uncertainty in weights.”³⁶ As referenced earlier, the “real problem,” according to a number of academic analyses of the rankings and among many survey respondents, is USNWR’s “arbitrary” assignments of weights to each category and subcategory.³⁷

³⁵There was a strong and statistically significant correlation (-.521, $p < .01$) between responses to the feeling thermometer question and the question about the accuracy of the title “America’s Best Colleges.”

³⁶Huggins and Pachter, 2008.

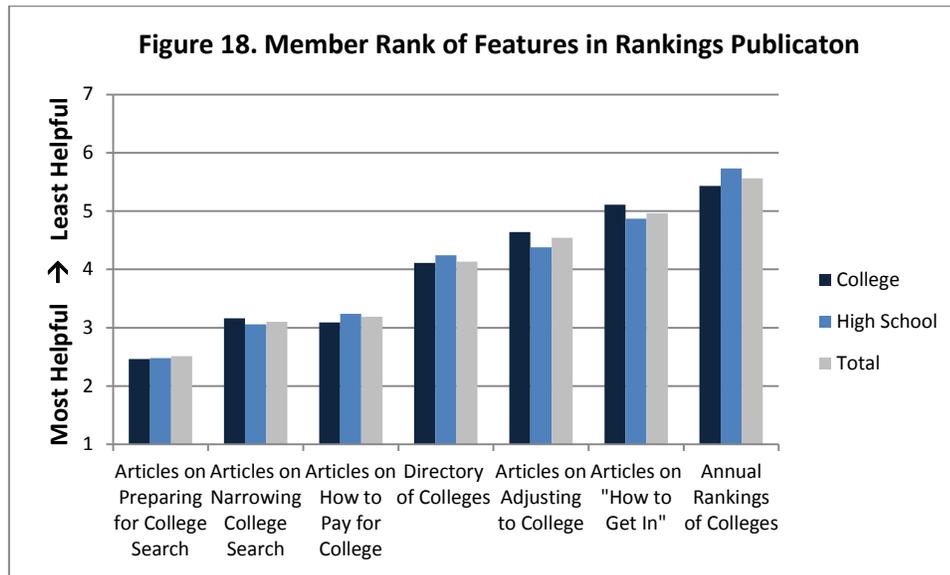
³⁷Ehrenberg, Ronald G., “Method or Madness? Inside the U.S. News & World Report College Rankings,” *Journal of College Admission*, 2005, Vol. 189.

In 2004, Marguerite Clarke, at the time an Assistant Professor of Research at Boston College, offered four recommendations based on her research worth repeating in this committee's report:

- 1) The editors at USNWR need to reexamine the validity of the indicators and weights used for each ranking.
- 2) The editors should refrain from using an overall score to rank schools. These scores are not reliable enough to allow fine distinctions among schools. A more defensible approach would be to use schools' overall scores to place them in "quality" bands, listing them alphabetically within each band.
- 3) USNWR could allow consumers to create their own ranking formulas.
- 4) Consumers need to become more critical of the assumptions underpinning rankings as well as the value system behind the choice of indicators and weights.³⁸

The Committee believes that the research and discussion about the imprecision of ordinal rankings in the "Best Colleges" list has reached a point where not proactively acknowledging the limitations of the ranking formula through vigorous consumer education and flexible 'ranking' options risks misleading consumers and has compromised the journalistic integrity of the publication.

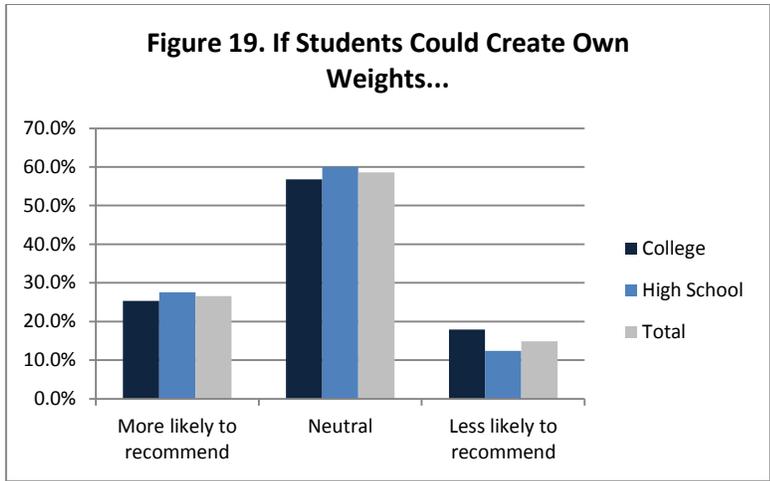
The Committee's survey research clearly indicates that college admission counseling professionals find the data and information available through the USNWR rankings publication useful. NACAC members were asked to rank the features of the "America's Best College" publication from one to seven, one being the most helpful and seven being the least helpful. Perhaps reflecting their disapproval of the process of placing things in ordinal rank, about a third of members rated, rather than ranked, the features (i.e. used the same number for two or more features). For the purposes of this report, their responses were excluded (Figure 18).



Articles on preparing for and narrowing the college search, as well as those on how to pay for college, received the highest mean scores, with average mean scores of 2.51, 3.1, and 3.19, respectively. Unsurprisingly, the annual rankings of colleges are believed to be the least helpful feature of the publication with an overall mean score of 5.56.

NACAC members were lukewarm to recommending the rankings if students could create their own weight, possibly due to lingering suspicion or dislike for rankings in general. If given the option to select individual weights for various elements of the U.S. News & World Report rankings, most members (58.6 percent) would be neither more or less inclined to recommend the rankings to their students. Over a quarter (26.6 percent) of members would be more likely to recommend the rankings, given the option to choose their own weights (Figure 19).

³⁸Clarke, Marguerite. "Weighing Things Up: A Closer Look at U.S. News & World Report's Ranking Formulas," College and University, 2004, Vol. 79.3.



However, the Committee believes that offering consumers the opportunity to create their own lists by weighting data elements according to *their* preferences would simultaneously inform the public that such rankings are highly objective, and allow USNWR the opportunity to feature lists created by students, counselors, colleges, and other consumers according to criteria they have devised.

Ad Hoc Committee's Recommendations

Given the long and punctuated evolution of rankings in the U.S., the Committee believes it is important to promote recommendations for positive change that follow the direction that adaptational paths seem to lead. Moreover, the Committee believes that professional practice is an obligation and a prerequisite for college admission counseling professionals, who are responsible for the interpretation of rankings to students and families, the maintenance and construction of rankings through participation in the surveys, and the perpetuation of rankings by using them in professional settings. As such, the Committee's recommendations are directed at both NACAC and the USNWR rankings publication. Our intent is also for several of these recommendations to apply to undergraduate institutional rankings of any type.

To that end, the Committee wishes to draw attention to a set of recommendations put forth by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), which convened a special committee at almost the same time as NACAC's Ad Hoc Committee. (See Appendix)

For NACAC

Develop professional education resources for members about rankings.

- The committee found that there was some misunderstanding of ranking methodology, as well as some perceptions that were not entirely accurate, among survey responses and in conversations with members.
- The committee recognized the need for trusted, accurate information to convey to students and families about rankings.

Work with education publishers and data outlets to encourage development of do-it-yourself lists for consumers.

- A substantial amount of academic research suggests that rankings are highly sensitive to the underlying methodologies. Accordingly, consumers should be able to establish their own 'weights and measures' that can result in lists that produce better "fit" for students.

For Rankings Publications

Remove the "class rank" and "standardized testing" metrics from rankings methodologies in favor of factors that measure student satisfaction and engagement.

- The selectivity rating counts for 15 percent of the overall ranking, with high school class standing and standardized test scores making up 90 percent of that rating.
- Only 16 percent of Admission Trends Survey respondents attributed considerable importance to class rank.
- The NACAC Testing Commission recommended that U.S. News & World Report eliminate test scores as a measure of institutional quality, and highlighted statements from the College Board and ACT discouraging the incorporation of standardized tests in ranking methodologies.

Reduce the weight of the reputational survey.

- Peer assessments make up 22.5 percent of the U.S. News National and Liberal Arts rankings and 25 percent of the regional rankings.
- The peer assessments are highly subjective and may be disproportionately influenced by social factors that do not measure institutional quality.
- In a NACAC survey, only five percent of respondents agreed that the peer assessments serve as good indicators of institutional quality.

Encourage emphasis on fit through customized rankings.

- NACAC consistently encourages the focus on fit in college counseling. A user-based methodology would allow students to examine institutions based on their own notions of institutional quality.

Continue to evolve rankings methodologies through the association's communication channels.

- NACAC will provide educational information that supports the proper interpretations of data found in ranking reports.

Appendix

On November 7, 2010, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) hosted a national executive forum during its annual Strategic Enrollment Management Conference. Titled “The College Rankings Debate and Future Implications: Assessing the Value of an Institution’s Undergraduate Experience,” the executive forum was designed to stimulate thoughtful discussion of and consensus building around how best to provide the public with meaningful data about institutions’ dedication to, and success at, student learning. Thus, the desired outcome was a clear set of principles for college assessments that would lead to meaningful reforms of current ranking programs. The discussion leaders and whitepaper authors were George Kuh, Chancellor’s Professor of Higher Education at Indiana University and Director of the Center for Postsecondary Research and the College Student Experience Questionnaire Research Program; John Pryor, Director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and Managing Director of the Higher Education Research Institution (HERI) at UCLA; Watson Scott Swail, CEO of the Educational Policy Institute (EPI); Jay Goff, Vice Provost of Enrollment Management at Missouri University of Science and Technology; Bob Bontrager, Senior Director of AACRAO Consulting and Strategic Enrollment Management Initiatives; and and [sic] Jason Lane, Assistant Professor and Senior Research [sic], Institute for Global Education Policy Studies (IGEPS) at SUNY-Albany. Approximately 75 practitioners participated in the forum. Participants were asked to discuss the challenges of college and university ranking programs. The summary that follows provides an overview of the executive forum’s primary areas of discussion. The concluding principles are intended to help guide development of an assessment system that would better aid students in the college selection process.

AACRAO - principles for the creation of a rating system

- 1) Rating without Ranking
- 2) Recognize Institutional Difference
- 3) Create Common Post-Admission Milestones
- 4) Transparency through Agreement on Definitions, Data Instruments, and Collection Processes
- 5) Account for the Value-Added Features of an Educational Experience
- 6) Governance by a Non-Profit Entity

AACRAO - goals of the new approach

- Create public understanding that hundreds of quality colleges and universities exist and that they meet students’ learning and developmental needs in different ways.
- Focus on value-added outcomes by types and numbers of successful students and by graduates’ satisfaction with their overall undergraduate experience. This should mitigate the focus on traditional measures of prestige and selectivity.
- Provide students, parents, and employers with comparative learning data and information about the particular learning objectives/skill sets that are emphasized, thereby motivating schools to embrace their missions rather than align their efforts with current ranking systems.
- Provide a meaningful alternative to existing ranking systems.

(Available online at http://www.aacrao.org/Files/Publications/CUJ8604_WEB_L.pdf)

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