



What Do College Rankings Really Mean?

Various magazines, websites, and listicles publish their college rankings every year, generating a lot of anxiety from college-bound students and their families. But what are they really telling you? Should these rankings have any influence on what college you choose? And, why do they generate such anxiety?

Our panel of experts from the National Association for College Admission Counseling will take a closer look: **Earl Macam**, college counselor at Mary Institute/St. Louis Country Day School (MO); **Nancy Gibson**, senior director of admission at Denison University (OH); and **Tevera Stith**, vice president for KIPP Through College & Career (DC).

Mary Stegmeir:

Hello, and welcome to the College Admissions Decoded Podcast, an occasional series from the National Association for College Admission Counseling, or NACAC. NACAC is an association of more than 15,000 professionals who support and advise students and families through the college admission process. I'm Mary Stegmeir, assistant director for editorial content and outreach in NACAC's communications department. I'm joined today by three long-time members of the association and experts in the field of college admission.

We have with us Earl Macam, college counselor at Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School in St. Louis, Missouri.

Earl Macam: Hi. Hey. Happy to be here.

Stegmeir: Nancy Gibson, senior associate director of admission at Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

Nancy Gibson: Thanks for having me.

Stegmeir: And Tevera Stith, vice president for KIPP Through College and Career in Washington, D.C.

Tevera Stith: Great to be here.

Stegmeir: Various magazines and websites publish their college rankings every year, generating a lot of attention from the media, colleges, and college-bound students and their families. But what are they really telling you? Should these rankings have any influence on what college you choose? And why do they generate so much anxiety? Thank you all for joining me today. Let's dig in.

Starting us off, Earl, what are rankings?

Macam: Well, you know, they're a way to kind of order things together, and depending on what publication you subscribe to, I believe rankings simply is a way to launch somebody into more research. Hopefully not necessarily fixated on the numbers necessarily, and the names, but a way for students that I counsel to produce a list, and then really go from there.

Stegmeir: Nancy, what exactly then do rankings measure, and what do they mean?

Gibson: Yeah, so resources like U.S. News and World Report use 16 different metrics to measure areas like graduation and retention rates, student-teacher ratios, endowment, which are the financial resources, faculty salaries, alumni giving, and each of those areas are given a specific percentage of weight. So, for example, a large percentage can typically go to graduation and retention rates. Recently, they added a social mobility score, as well, for a college's success in graduating students who receive Pell Grants, as well. And obviously there are a lot of different opinions on college rankings.

Stegmeir: Is there useful information that the rankings give to students and families?

Stith: Certainly. I think the downside is that people are looking at that overall number, and what it means about a college, instead of really digging into the meat of how colleges score on some of the metrics that Nancy was just mentioning. So, I think it's important that as we look at the useful information they might have, a great example is social mobility. Of the students who come from the most under-resourced backgrounds, how often are those students graduating from college and graduating from that particular college in six years, which is the number that we measure across the United States, and measure most colleges by?

When we look at that number, we might be astounded by how some schools are doing with their overall rankings when we think about students who are well-resourced, but when we really dig into whether or not they're providing opportunities to change the trajectory of student families in certain communities, we'll see that they might not be succeeding as much. And so, what I would advise is that a student not just look at that big old number, you're ranked number one, or 22, or 302, but that you go into the details of what each number means and make those useful.

The other thing is a ranking is only gonna be as useful as that piece of information being useful to you. And so, for a student who's well-resourced, the Pell graduation rate number might not be so important to them, but for a student who knows they're gonna access Pell, that would be an important number for them. So, as you look at the rankings, you also have to search yourself first.

Stegmeir: But we know that there are also some pitfalls, and sometimes students and families rely a little bit too heavily on rankings. What are some words of warning that you may have for students who are listening or for parents?

- Macam: I would say just don't be so fixated on the number. As Tevera said, whether it's one, 22, or 302, that particular college, no matter what rank it is, and no matter what publication it's ranked in, could be an excellent match and fit for the student if they took the time to actually investigate all the factors, and all the aspects of that particular college. For some students, number 502 would be the greatest fit in the world.
- Stegmeir: That's number one for them.
- Macam: Exactly. That would be number one in their book. That's exactly right. And you know, I think students and families really should use it just as one tool in an overall college search process. There's so many different other tools that they can use. One of the other factors, one of the other rankings used is a student engagement, and I think that that's crucial to get some anecdotal feedback for the students who, the current students at that school, who are in the trenches, and perhaps an anecdote or two, a story or two may catch the student's and family's eye, and encourage them to do a little bit more digging at that particular college.
- Stegmeir: Like you said, using rankings is a starting point. A way to learn about different colleges.
- Macam: Yes.
- Stegmeir: And perhaps get some good information from some of the factors within the rankings, but the big numbers themselves, not so helpful?
- Stith: We also have to be mindful that ranking lists are often done geographically, or by size of school, and so I think we have to think about who the schools are being compared to, and what other subgroups we're comparing them to. One of the best examples is the Best Colleges list has rankings of colleges in lots of different groups, but a group that we don't always talk about are Historically Black Colleges and Universities. What they've done is instead of just comparing those schools to other universities, they've done some rankings and comparing those schools to themselves, and I think that's important, because of the majority of students that they serve.
- And so, I think there are a thousand examples where a student can't just say, "Here's how a school is ranked," but who's it being ranked against, and then going deeper into that information. But if our emphasis is just on the number, we're always gonna get a little bit lost in that not really being useful information.
- Gibson: I think one other thing that's important to keep in mind, too, is that on lists like U.S. News and World Report, colleges are actually asked to rank each other, and sometimes that can be challenging as you think about it and can create problems, because a lot of times people are looking at other schools based on supposed reputation, and things like that, and it makes it very difficult, so you've got that as an element, too, that's actually in that score.

Stegmeir: That brings up a really interesting point. What are some things about rankings that you wish students knew, that we just don't often think about?

Gibson: Yeah, I think for me, I would love to see more on outcomes, on what students are actually going on and doing, the experiences that they're having. That's hard to measure. I know there was a Gallup poll out there that said that it's all about the relationships, and that those connections, basically, that are the most important things that are happening on campuses. And that can be tough to measure.

Stegmeir: To put a number on. Right.

Stith: I think if we could use another analogy, something else that we rank all the time, and that's cars. I'm a car person. I enjoy a good vehicle. When you look at the rankings of cars, they're sometimes based on things that the average driver isn't gonna pay attention to, and so this car is ranked best in class for back seat room. I never sit in the back of my car, so I don't really care about that.

But this car is ranked for best gas mileage, or how it tested in collision testing and that kind of thing. When you look at these rankings, you don't look at the methodology and what they mean, you may end up with a vehicle that is very fine, but it doesn't suit your needs. And I think that's true of the colleges themselves when we think about this piece around the best fit for me. When I'm talking to students, one of the things I do harp on is this idea of outcomes. And so, when we're looking at the rankings, we don't always see numbers, like how many of the students who majored or were interested in pre-medicine actually went off to medical school? That requires a much digger deep into what happens with schools, and what the numbers really are for a particular school.

So, I think rankings in most cases are a great starting point. I think they seldom are sort of that ending point for a student. But if they get you kind of thinking about schools you never thought about before, then they're somewhat doing their job, like, "Hey, I've never heard of this school." When I worked at Swarthmore, we used to joke that no kid walks around with a Swarthmore t-shirt on, because that's a lot of words for a little tiny t-shirt, and so sometimes kids know schools for arbitrary reasons, but this idea of when we look at just the rankings of a school, does it tell the whole story of that university? Oftentimes, students will say, "Well, I'm gonna apply to school that's ranked 2nd, 3rd and 4th." And I'm like, "Those schools couldn't be more different!"

And so, have you really done your research?

Stegmeir: So, doing the research, what then are some of the questions that students should ask when they're going through that process?

Gibson: Yeah, I mean I think one of the important things I always say to students is think about where you want to spend the next four years of your life. And then obviously, it's really about doing a personal assessment, and like, "What do I actually want?" I went through the process with my kids. One of my children

stayed close to home, went to a small school. My son went to a large school far away. And just even siblings have very different things that they're looking for in a college, and to really do that personal assessment, to figure out what exactly is it that I want makes a huge difference.

Macam: When I work with students at my school, we start with them very early in the process, in their freshman year. By the time they get to that eleventh grade year, where we really start putting pen to paper in the search process itself, we're hoping over the course of those two and a half years they have done an investigation of what they like and what they dislike, what they can check in the box and what they can check out of the box, so that when we start to have the conversation about, "Yes, this might be your list, or this might be your launching pad to more research," we have an understanding of what types of schools might be attractive to that particular student.

I think it's important for them to really understand where they can live for four years, what's going to make them happy, and what's going to make them flourish, because I'm a true believer in this fit, where if it does fit like a glove, you'll flourish like a flower. I mean, that is one of those things-

Stegmeir: I like that.

Macam: Well, you know, and I didn't invent it, okay? I'm not gonna coin it. Not gonna trademark it. It's just been something that's been driven into us as college counselors, is that it's gotta fit. It could fit in the middle of wherever. As long as it is home to them, and they can call it home for four years, they'll sink their teeth into the experience, they'll take advantage of everything that is on that campus, and their end result outcome will be successful to them, and that success is truly and honestly defined by the student. Not by a ranking.

Stith: One of the things I have students look at is kinds of schools, like right there in the heart of the U.S., she's in Ohio, if a student says, "I really want a big school," we know that you can throw a stone and hit a big school in Ohio, right? But you might say, "Well, that's a kind of school. I don't know if I can get all the way to Nebraska, or if I can get to California to look at some of those schools, but I know I can look at a kind of school that's that size." Or a small liberal arts college, or those kinds of things, and so as students are exploring in the search, particularly having a mind on students who might not be as well resourced to go and fly all these different places to see schools, they can certainly explore with what's online, there's so many videos, and social media posts, and other things about schools, but they might start off with a kind of school, and the rankings might be the first way to do that.

This school is ranked first when it comes to this kind of program. I'm interested in international business. Wait, I didn't know this school had a great international business program. Let me compare these. The flip side of that is sometimes when students say what they're interested in and they'll say, "Well, I want to be a psychology major." Well, we know under psychology, there are a thousand

different things, so what does the number one ranked psych program really mean when there could be neuroscience, or developmental science, or how are those things being broken down? So, the first part is maybe allowing students to sort of go, “Aha!” about a school they hadn’t thought about. And then as they dig deeper, what they may find are questions that they’re now asking of schools they knew a whole lot about, that they didn’t know to ask.

Stegmeir: Do you ever have, especially Earl and Tevera, have you ever worked with students where it’s hard to get them or their parents to look past the rankings? And in those cases, what have you done to try to flip the conversation, to open up more viewpoints?

Macam: All the time. There are students and families who, again, are married to the numbers in that particular publication. My job, and I say this often to the students I work with, is just to broaden their perspective. To dig deep and find out why a certain school might be a decent match for them. If I am constructing a research list for them, I often say to my students that you might not have heard of this school, but I know based on your factors, I know that it fits one, or two, or three of those factors, and now my job is to tell you about it and your job is to research it. I try hard to finesse that particular conversation. Knowing our families well and knowing the values and the thoughts behind higher education in the families we work with is key to be able to have that type of conversation.

Stith: I also think colleges are so nimble, and they’re changing and growing all the time, and so I always want to be careful when a student says, “This is the best program for X,” because there could be an opportunity that a college is doing, they’ve always had a music program, but now they’re trying to expand that to music industry work, and they’re using the sort of real great foundation they have in one area to explore another area. Now, if I went solely by the rankings, because of the infancy of that program, a student might not actually... It might not be very high ranked. But when you look at the individual and attention a program that’s relatively new, already accredited but relatively new is going to get, that student is going to really connect with the best of the best when it comes to that.

I think the other thing is when I’m talking to parents about rankings, their information is both correct and slightly false. They’ve looked at the number, and they’ve said like, “This is what the number says,” and they’ve taken a lot of information that they have about schools that they’ve heard of the most, and sort of paid attention to that. The other thing is our students are often looking at schools from an undergraduate perspective, and we know that there’s influence of having large graduate school programs at some of the larger universities, and so I have to say to students sometimes, “If you want to study something like biology, certainly if you go to a large university, you’re gonna interact with some of the best researchers and professors that there are. But you’re more of someone who likes the hands-on approach, and so I would argue that maybe going to a smaller school, where that might not be the first thing they’re known for, but there’s a

professor who chose to work there because they're really excited about interacting with students."

So, sometimes there's so much more information that we learn when we lead with our heart first, and not our head. Anyone who starts with the rankings is leading with their head, but we want to make sure students are making heart and head choices when it comes to college.

Gibson: When you have rankings that are looking like at endowment, but you're doing really amazing things on having students that are thriving, but your endowment isn't high, then you're lower on the list, you know? And it's just not necessarily speaking to what's happening on those campuses. It's also interesting that colleges oftentimes don't move very far on the list, either. It's just hard to put all of the weight into the rankings, just because it's not necessarily a true reflection of everything that's happening on all of these great campuses, and you know that there's a great fit out there for so many students.

Stegmeir: With your work with students, what are the things that really make a difference? What are the factors that impact their experience once they're on campus?

Gibson: Yeah, I mean I think for me, when students are willing to try, when they're willing to step outside their comfort zone, wow, I always say it's just amazing to kind of see students, to be on a campus and to see students grow right before your eyes. When they take advantage of things. It might be a student who came, who never thought they'd study abroad, and then they go abroad with their class in a seminar and have an experience like that. Or they take advantage of an internship, and all of a sudden, they're turned onto a particular career they never thought they'd pursue. It's when they're willing to kind of step outside of those comfort zones that I think you really see them doing incredible things.

Stith: I always tell students when they're looking at their list and they're thinking about schools, a school, a list is only as good as you'll go to the most likely school on the list. So, sometimes students say, "Well, I could get in there anyway." Well, that doesn't make it bad, it just means that you've worked really hard and you can get in there. Why is it because it's something that you could have admission to, you don't want to go? Right? So, that's one thing.

The other thing is we often change our minds. I think students should maybe think about a school in terms of this is gonna be my major, and this is really what I want to do, but sometimes we get there, and we say, "I don't know. Chemistry's not for me." Or, "I think I really want to explore that." Or, "I heard great things about the business program here." So, you want to pick a school that has multiple majors that you can find yourself satiated with and excited about, so once you make those really critical friendships, you know where the dining hall is and where to get the late night pizza, you don't want to transfer. You want to stay, because you have those creature comforts, but you want to make sure a campus is gonna have multiple things that you're interested in, because sometimes we think something is

what we really want to do, but the more we dig in, we might change our minds. And I still want to be in love with my school.

Stegmeir: Well, that was a great conversation. Thank you all. I think you have done a great service to our students out there who are always confused about rankings. Thank you all for listening. Please leave a review and rate us on iTunes, as your feedback helps shape the show. Thank you.

Stith: Thanks.

Black: Thank you.

Macam: Thank you.

Caflin Fonash: Thanks for joining us for this episode. I'm Jayne Caflin Fonash, president of NACAC. College Admissions Decoded is a podcast from NACAC, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. It is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Cedric Wilson is our mixer. Emma Forbes is the show's assistant producer. If you would like to learn more about NACAC's guests, our organization, and the college admission process, visit our website at www.nacacnet.org.

CITATION:

National Association for College Admission Counseling. "What Do College Rankings Really Mean?" *NACAC College Admissions Decoded*, National Association for College Admissions Counseling, April 16, 2020.

Produced by:

