

U.S. News & World Report: AMERICA'S BEST COLLEGES

A Case Report for Getting Tools Used



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GTU research was supported by The Changes in Health Care Financing and Organization (HCFO) initiative, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the California Healthcare Foundation and the Foundation for Informed Medical Decision Making.

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Background

America's Best Colleges is the annual college rankings published in *U.S. News & World Report* using data from more than 1,400 accredited four-year undergraduate colleges and universities. This case study includes the following print and electronic editions of the 2009 undergraduate rankings and consumer guides that help students and parents compare higher education options:

- September 1, 2008, newsstand issue of *U.S. News & World Report*
- *Ultimate College Guide*, a wide-ranging guidebook with more than 1,700 pages of rankings, profiles and guidance
- *America's Best Colleges 2009*, the USNews.com free college portal at <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/college>
- Premium online edition of *America's Best Colleges 2009*, a subscription service (log-in access provided at the same URL as the free portal)
- *America's Best Colleges* comprehensive package with the premium online edition and the *Ultimate College Guide*, which together enable access to the full set of content and tools

Companion rankings of higher education institutions include 12,000 graduate degree programs at 1,200 schools. However, this case study focuses only on the undergraduate rankings (and related tools), which many high school students and parents take into account as they make decisions about “purchasing” a college education.

America's Best Colleges has:

- National scale, with the inclusion of most undergraduate, four-year institutions
- National scope, with more than 15 million page views on the day that U.S. News released its 2009 rankings on its Web site.

Sponsor

U.S. News Media Group (U.S. News) is the publisher of *U.S. News & World Report* and *America's Best Colleges*. The company niche is “service journalism and news.” By “service journalism,” U.S. News means providing consumers with valuable information they can act on.¹

U.S. News has built an “America's Best” brand for its popular rankings. In addition to undergraduate colleges, the privately held company also ranks the nation's “best” hospitals, health plans, cars and places to retire. U.S. News editor Brian Kelly describes the America's

Best franchise as powerful journalism that is “hard-data driven” to give consumers useful facts as well as products that enable them to look at the details themselves.ⁱⁱ

Business Model for *America’s Best Colleges*

U.S. News aims to increase sales and advertising revenue from year to year on the *America’s Best Colleges* print and electronic products by being an authoritative source of information that students and parents read to inform their choice of college.

To obtain content for its information products and comparative tools, U.S. News aggregates data from external sources, conducts an analysis using its proprietary ranking methodology and produces annual college rankings. It repackages the data into rankings tables and lists, individual college and university profiles, other lists and an interactive online database. The latter enables users to access detailed information about a single institution, compare schools or perform a customized search.

Advertising in the newsstand print edition and the USNews.com college portal generates significant revenue. U.S. News can charge premium rates for the newsstand issue, so with 82 pages in the 2006 issue, the company secured significant advertising revenues.ⁱⁱⁱ To further boost advertising proceeds, U.S. News publishes the college rankings in regional newsstand editions. Updating the *America’s Best Colleges* products each year helps assure future U.S. News sales and advertising revenue.

These activities aim to preserve and grow the U.S. News market share of the lucrative college-prep industry. (In 1998, *Time* magazine estimated consumers would buy \$400 million (about \$537 million today) in college-prep materials.^{iv, v}) According to Jeffrey Selingo, the editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

The annual ‘America’s Best Colleges’ issue of U.S. News & World Report has long been referred to as the magazine’s swimsuit issue. Last year, the magazine’s college issue was among 17 perennial “moneymakers,” according to a list compiled by min: Media Industry Newsletter, and only one other of the magazine’s issues (“America’s Best Hospitals”) made that perennials list.^{vi}

Started as a one-time experiment, *America’s Best Colleges* has evolved into a signature product for U.S. News and is foundational in the company’s overall brand strategy. Publicity related to *America’s Best Colleges* helps keep U.S. News & World Report as a household name in a market dominated by its rival newsweeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*.^{vii}

Historic Milestones for *America's Best Colleges*

| | |
|------|---|
| 1983 | Hoping to “garner attention and sell magazines,” as described by Alvin Sanoff (2007), U.S. News first publishes its groundbreaking college rankings based on a survey of college presidents.viii (Sanoff was managing editor of the U.S. News college rankings from 1992-1998.) |
| 1987 | U.S. News releases the first annual newsstand issue of <i>America's Best Colleges</i> and a new separate guidebook. |
| 1993 | U.S. News feeds content to CompuServe Information Services. |
| 1995 | <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> newsstand content (in general, which would include the annual college rankings issue) becomes directly available online at USNews.com. |
| 1997 | USNews.com debuts the online <i>America's Best Colleges</i> , with additional content than the guidebook, along with sorting functions. |
| 2008 | U.S. News updates USNews.com, including the college rankings portal. |

Consumers' Decision Making on Colleges

Many Americans put considerable time and effort into selecting a college or university, whether for themselves or with a child. They do so because a college education:

- Is an experience good in which the actual value or quality cannot be fully known until the individual enrolls and progresses through an academic program. For some, the value may not be known until s/he graduates with a degree and begins a career. Even with many sources of information, including campus visits, most people find it difficult to prospectively evaluate one college, let alone compare multiple schools.
- Is an expensive purchase, including the opportunity cost of reduced employment earnings while the student is obtaining the college degree. The desired return-on-investment is higher earnings, increased career mobility and an improved quality of life than would be possible without a four-year degree.^{ix, x} Recent College Board data indicate that tuition, fees, and room and board for a four-year degree will top \$55,000 for in-state students at a public institution and \$130,000 at a private school.^{xi} Although financial aid such as grants and scholarships may reduce the actual outlay, the average student leaves college with about \$20,000 in loans.^{xii}

The college choice process is a new experience for many traditional students (i.e., high school graduates in their late teens or early twenties). Most Americans make only one or a few college decisions during their lifetime.

The selection process facing prospective college students today is different from what their parents experienced. Today's students and families:

- Begin the college choice process earlier in the high school years, because compared to the mid-1970s:
- The decision is increasingly complex.
- A plethora of information exists.
- Competition for admission to prominent institutions is intense.
- Early-admission and early-decision options are widely available and used.
- Feel substantial pressure to choose and be accepted by the “right” college.
- Seek out the best value for their education dollar and consider college quality or academic reputation as an important factor.
- Use more information sources in their decision making.
- Apply to more colleges.^{xiii, xiv, xv, xvi, xvii}

College-Choice Process for Traditional Students

After making a preliminary decision to attend college, a typical college-choice process for traditional students has four phases.

Initial exploration: college-bound students, often in the junior year or earlier, explore their options and identify factors important to their choice.

Consideration-set: students, towards the end of the junior year, narrow their options to a smaller number of appealing schools to which they might apply or enroll if accepted.

Application: students further reduce the number of colleges in their consideration set and submit applications as seniors.

Enrollment: students compare offers and enroll in a school.^{xviii, xix, xx}

Traditional students commonly use these information sources in the college-choice process. (Listed in no particular order.)

- In-person campus visits and virtual tours
- Marketing promotions from colleges, including their Web sites
- College ranking guides
- Input from parents, friends, teachers, guidance counselors and others
- Multi-media DVDs, Web sites and teleconferences (varied sources)^{xxi}

National survey data on entering college freshmen indicate increased use of online information.^{xxii} In focus groups, high school students reported using search engines for general inquiries, consumer Web sites for background on different institutions, and colleges' Web sites for institution-specific information.^{xxiii}

For African-American students, studies have found that inadequate access to information, particularly about college costs and financing at different colleges, is a significant barrier to pursuing higher education.^{xxiv, xxv} Many low-income students first need background knowledge about college, such as differences among types of higher education institutions and aspects to consider when choosing a school. Rankings focused on academic reputation tend to be less useful to this group.^{xxvi}

College-Choice Factors for Traditional Students

Traditional students tend to consider a complex mix of factors when choosing a college. These factors can be grouped into four areas.

Academic quality, such as objective data on and subjective perceptions of academic reputation, quality of academic program in the chosen field and student-faculty interaction

Practical, such as proximity to home, college cost, financial aid and job and graduate-school placement rates

Social, such as input and encouragement from parents, siblings, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, college admissions officials and mentors

Environmental, such as campus life outside the classroom, student body composition, social atmosphere and campus facilities and services^{xxvii, xxviii, xxix, xxx, xxxi}

Within the above factors, college rankings can be one of several information sources about academic reputation. *America's Best Colleges* and other sources of college profiles often present multiple indicators of academic reputation.^{xxxii}

Students' individual characteristics – such as their academic abilities, gender, religion, academic and personal interests, career goals and more – may affect how students weigh various factors.^{xxxiii} For example, high-achieving students are more likely than lower achieving students to report academic quality to be an “important” factor, but also to describe many other factors as equally or more important.^{xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi} In terms of race and ethnicity:

- An empirical study of Asian-Pacific American respondents in a 1997 national survey of college freshmen revealed ethnic subpopulations varied widely in their college-choice process, factors and ultimate enrollment decisions. Socioeconomic status had differential effects, but there was no clear pattern within or across subpopulations.^{xxxvii}
- For African Americans, faith communities may influence college choice. A small qualitative study of African Americans in 20 California high schools found churches helped them get information about choosing a college and raising awareness about historically Black colleges and universities. Some churches offered scholarships.^{xxxviii}
- Many Hispanic and African Americans prefer to go to a school close to home, according to a National Postsecondary Education Coalition report. Caregiving responsibilities for a sibling or a family member with a disability could be one factor.

Navigating the complex process of selecting, applying to and enrolling in college can be particularly challenging for first-generation and low-income groups.

First-generation students (i.e., those who are the first in their families to go to college) tend to have fewer college-educated role models and have less starting knowledge of about colleges and selection.^{xxxix} Proximity to family; influences from parents, role models, guidance counselors and teachers; and financial assistance have a major influence on choice.^{xi, xli} Also, some first-generation students, especially those with less academic preparation, initially decide to not pursue college; after a few years of work, they may reconsider that choice.^{xlii}

Low-income students are more sensitive to college costs and financial aid in their decision about college. They may have a small consideration set.^{xliii} A Lumina Foundation for Education report suggests low-income parents, particularly those who never attended college, may have inadequate “ability, time and insight to provide guidance on the college-choice process.”^{xliiv}

Nontraditional Students: A Different College-Choice Process

The college choice process for nontraditional students (such as persons age 24 or older) is different. Based on a literature review and focus groups, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative found that nontraditional students have a condensed college-choice process. Often they “decide to attend or return to college and decide on a particular college at the same time.”^{xlv} They base the decision primarily on convenience, including scheduling and class location; costs of attending; and the availability of their chosen course of study. Because many nontraditional students have work and family responsibilities, other influences may include employment, support from spouse and family considerations.^{xlvi, xlvii, xlviii}

U.S. News Objectives for its College Rankings and Consumer Guides

U.S. News is a journalistic enterprise. In the 1980s, its editors considered the initial college rankings as a potential opportunity to boost *U.S. News & World Report* subscription and newsstand sales, increase its market share among newsweeklies and attract advertising.^{xlix}

Today, U.S. News describes its objective for *America’s Best Colleges* as to “provide a comparative measure of the quality of the academic program at each institution” as part of its “News You Can Use®” mission of providing readers with useful, relevant information.^{l, li}

Audience and Use

The chief audience for the U.S. News college rankings and consumer guides are college-bound students and their families. Specific segments include “parents and students looking for the right school”^{liii} and readers in middle- and upper-income households who are attractive to potential advertisers. Guidance counselors and other people who assist students in choosing and applying for college are a secondary audience. The higher education sector is an additional audience.

Current Use

Education Week describes *America’s Best Colleges* as “probably the best-known” of the college-ratings guides.^{liii} It has national visibility.

- Most people access *America’s Best Colleges* rankings online rather than in print. On the August release day for *America’s Best Colleges* 2009, USNews.com had 15 million page

- views of its college portal.^{liv} Compared August 2007, USNews.com page views rose 50 percent and unique visitors doubled in August 2008.^{lv}
- About 1.8 million people have a weekly subscription to *U.S. News & World Report*, which includes the annual college rankings (see Figure 1). This subscription base has been steady for the past five years.^{lvi}
 - Colleges and universities with high national or regional U.S. News rankings publicize their standing in regional media and in marketing materials for students, alumni and donors. In 2003, *The Atlantic Online* reported *America's Best Colleges* has a reach of 11 million people and is the most widely read of all college guides and rankings.^{lvii}

Other data suggest the splash from *America's Best Colleges* is limited. In 2007, U.S. News indicated the college newsstand issue only tops sales of the average issue by 5,000-10,000.^{lviii} (In the first half of 2008, the company had more than 32,000 in total single-copy sales.^{lix}) About 50,000 people buy premium online subscriptions to *America's Best Colleges*, or less than 1 percent of USNews.com visitors.^{lx}

As depicted in Figure 1, the audience of *U.S. News & World Reports* and USNews.com tends to be middle-aged, upper income adults (median age is 49 years, median household income is \$64,000). The current audience profile also indicates 30 percent have professional or managerial job titles, and three quarters of *U.S. News & World Reports* have used the Internet in the prior month.^{lxi}

Figure 1. U.S. News & World Report's Audience Profile, 2008

| Demographics | Percent Composition |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Age | |
| 18-49 years | 53% |
| 25-49 | 43% |
| 25-54 | 53% |
| 55+ | 22% |
| Annual Household Income | |
| \$75,000+ | 41% |
| \$100,000 + | 28% |
| \$150,000+ | 13% |
| Gender | |

| | |
|--------|-----|
| Male | 59% |
| Female | 41% |

Source: MRI Doublebase 2007, as reported in *Audience Profile*. (2008). Retrieved Nov. 24, 2008, from U.S. News Web site at <http://mediakit.usnews.com/audience/profile.php>.

Descriptions of Users

Student and family characteristics affect use of college rankings. The Lumina research review indicates higher socio-economic groups carefully consider college rankings as a way of identifying top institutions.^{lxii}

National surveys indicate that college rankings (source unspecified) are not a primary influence on college choice, but that some student groups pay attention to rankings. In the Higher Education Research Institute's survey of entering college freshmen:

- In 2006, 16 percent described college rankings as "very important" in why they chose their particular school. In the 1995 survey, only 10 percent described rankings in national magazines as "very important."^{lxiii}
- Rankings tended to be more important to and used by students who are from higher income families.^{lxiv, lxv}
- Relative to other student groups, college rankings were important to high-achieving students and students who cared about academic reputation, sought advice from adults in making their decision and had college-educated parents.^{lxvi}

A national survey in 2006 of high-achieving seniors obtained similar results.

- In deciding where to apply, 34 percent reported that college rankings (source unspecified) played a role, but to a lesser degree than 13 other information sources.
- Students who decided to enroll at an out-of-state college were more likely to have considered *U.S. News & World Reports* rankings in their college application decision than their peers who chose an in-state college.
- In the enrollment decision, 55 percent rated high *U.S. News & World Report* rankings as being important. At least 10 other factors had a more prominent role.^{lxvii}

A longitudinal study of high-ability students entering Colgate University found the U.S. News ranking, along with net college cost, influenced enrollment decision.^{lxviii}

In an Education Sector forum in 2006, Kelly interpreted these types of survey results as an indication that students use the rankings responsibly. Rankings are just one of many factors in the college choice process, and students often consider other factors to be more important.^{lxi}

It is unknown whether students and parents are aware of the controversy about U.S. News's ranking methodology (see Constraints section). If they have some awareness, they may still view the rankings and scoring as a useful indicator of school prestige.^{lxx}

Descriptions of Non-Users

In general, both young people who self-select to not pursue higher education and also adults who lack a high school degree or equivalent do not use college rankings, guidebooks and associated tools from any source. Low-income populations are disproportionately less likely to attend college than students from families with higher incomes. For example, half of low-income high school seniors do not pursue postsecondary education right after high school graduation; in contrast, 80 percent of high-income students do.^{lxxi}

Nontraditional and first-generation students are less likely to rely on or use college rankings from any source.

- Among nontraditional college freshmen (25 years and older) in the 1995 Higher Education Research Institute's survey, only 14 percent said rankings were somewhat or very important in their decision making.^{lxxii}
- Nontraditional students often apply to only one institution, which is chosen on the basis of cost and convenience. School prestige may factor into the decision if two institutions are similar in terms of cost and convenience.^{lxxiii}
- First-generation students tend to not use college rankings. They tend to prefer colleges where other people from their hometown attend; their enrollment decision tends to focus on which school offers the most financial assistance.^{lxxiv}

In general, *U.S. News & World Report* is not a leading information source for lower income Americans. This group may be more likely to read *Woman's World* or *National Enquirer*. Advertising in *U.S. News & World Report's* college rankings issue suggests, as do U.S. News's data in Figure 1, that the primary audience is higher income audiences. Further, U.S. News guidance about the college choice process, which economically disadvantaged students may need most, is a less prominent feature of its *America's Best Colleges* products.^{lxxv, lxxvi}

Resources

In 1992, U.S. News's college rankings were more prominent than *Money's Best College Buys*, according to David Webster (1992), a higher education scholar. Webster identified the following four advantages that contributed to the success of *America's Best Colleges*. Supporting data accompanies the first of Webster's points.

First, by 1991 U.S. News had published seven rankings, while *Money* had published two.^{lxxvii} Other scholars and professionals agree that first-mover advantage helped U.S. News sustain its leading position among college rankings. Prior to 1983, most college guidebooks focused on school profiles and application tips.^{lxxviii} U.S. News was the first mass-media company to not only create a single overall rating score for colleges but also to publish college rankings for academic reputation, which U.S. News described as academic quality.^{lxxix} The first competitor, *Money*, only entered in 1990 when that magazine began publishing its own rankings.^{lxxx} Additional competitors moved in afterwards as recognition spread that students and parents were paying more attention to academic quality and potential outcomes because the cost of a college education had risen so much.^{lxxxi, lxxxii}

Second, U.S. News had almost 2 million subscribers in the early 1990s, while *Money* sold only 300,000 guidebooks.^{lxxxiii}

Third, U.S. News made its college rankings a prominent feature, while *Money's* rankings in its college guidebook could be easily overlooked.^{lxxxiv}

Fourth, U.S. News published its methodology and welcomed opportunities to discuss rankings with college officials and other media, while *Money* did not disclose its methodology and provided limited access to its editors.^{lxxxv}

Other resources that U.S. News has employed include the following.

- The U.S. News position as trusted source of news and information. This position contributed to people perceiving *America's Best Colleges* as credible information.
- The development and control of its college ranking methodologies, which enables U.S. News to foster its position as journalistic institution that is an impartial and credible authority.^{lxxxvi, lxxxvii, lxxxviii, lxxxix}
- Regular changes to the U.S. News methodology. This practice stirs up the rankings, encourages broad media coverage and protects market share.^{xc, xci} Modifying its methodology in response to feedback from higher education helps U.S. News maintain working relationships with schools and tell students that the new methodology provides

improved information for their use.^{xcii} The trade-off with making incremental adjustments is that the rankings ought not be used for longitudinal comparisons.^{xciii}

When *America's Best Colleges* started, the primary input was its survey of college officials asking them to rate peer institutions; the survey was conducted with minimal staff resources. Over the years, U.S. News added new data points, created a more complex methodology and began using the Internet to facilitate data collection and verification. The company also expanded the product line, such as creating a college portal on USNews.com. One constant has been that U.S. News updates the rankings, college profiles, and guidance only once a year.

Producing the college rankings and consumer guides today requires more staffing resources than in the past. Even so, U.S. News has no full-time dedicated staff for *America's Best Colleges*. During peak periods:

- Two analysts, four data collection specialists and a computer programmer develop the college rankings.
- Two or three employees focus on the design of the *America's Best Colleges* portal.
- Three staff members attend to web publishing.
- Many regular editorial staff and freelancers prepare content for publication.
- Public relations staff and an outside contractor spend a couple of weeks publicizing each year's new results.^{xciv}

Constraints

The U.S. News ranking model depends on widespread voluntary participation from college administrators.^{xcv} In 2006, 58 percent of institutions submitted reputational ratings; in 2007, only 51 percent completed it.^{xcvi} About 70 schools currently refuse to rate peers.^{xcvii} For non-reputational data, U.S. News has multiple sources that it can tap if schools will not directly provide their information. (See also Tool Data section.)

Another major constraint is the need to maintain public perception that *America's Best Colleges* is a reliable source of information, especially when many higher education scholars and college officials have criticized the U.S. News ranking methodology.^{xcviii}

The primary areas of criticism are:

- *Validity*: questionable correlations between academic quality and the variables. Some experts decry the use of subjective information, especially "reputation" as rated by

administrators at peer institutions. Also, ranking position is based on the overall score, even if there are no statistically significant differences.

- *Reliability*: the quality of data used for ranking is uncertain, with allegations that some college officials provide inaccurate data because they are under pressure to improve their own schools' ranking positions or they are inadequately informed about their peer institutions to rate them.
- *Oversimplification*: the practice of producing an overall score disregards the need for most students to consider a wide range of factors in making a choice.
- *Arbitrariness*: the methods have been viewed as arbitrary given the lack of empirical support for weighting. Changes in the assigned weights add to doubts about the subjectivity of the weighting. Regular methodological modifications alter the rankings from year to year, creating shifts in rankings, even in the absence of actual change in academic quality.^{xcix, c, ci, cii, ciii, civ}

(Notably, the higher education community has raised similar or even more serious criticisms about other sources of college rankings.^{cv})

U.S. News has responded to this criticism. For example, the company:

- Revised its methodology in 1988 to incorporate “objective” variables and include additional administrators in rating peers. As recalled by Sanoff (2007), higher education leaders at that time were portraying the rankings as a “beauty contest.” The magazine editors altered the methodology to preserve brand credibility and bolster the future of what was becoming a successful enterprise.^{cvi} (See also Lessons Learned section for another change in response to sector pressure.)
- Altered data collection so as to better verify institution-provided data against other sources in 1995 in response to a *Wall Street Journal* article reporting how colleges manipulated their submissions. The editors made the changes to protect the credibility of the rankings.^{cvi} (See also Tool Data section.)

Barriers

In promoting *America's Best Colleges*, U.S. News has encountered, and continues to face, three primary barriers.

- The availability of data on which to base ratings and rankings. At the 2006 Education Sector forum, panelists acknowledged the lack of a standardized, coherent system of data on academic learning outcomes. They characterized as “inputs” the public data that is

-
- available on all undergraduate institutions: rates on applications, enrollment and selectivity; applicants' test scores and grades; faculty and financial resources.^{cviii}
- Competition for the attention of students, families, teachers, and guidance counselors is intense. The college-prep industry continues to grow.
 - A sizeable share of college enrollment growth is from nontraditional college-bound groups – such as adults 24 years or older, persons wanting to attend part-time, independents without parental financial assistance and students with dependent children. Nontraditional students are less likely to consider rankings in college choice.^{cix, cx}

Facilitators

Prior to 1983, students and parents who wanted to consider the quality of the academic learning experience and potential outcomes had limited standardized data that was readily available for most colleges and universities. The *America's Best Colleges* helped fill this gap. As the U.S. News college rankings and guides evolved, they provided comparative information about school resources, faculty, academic reputation, graduation rates, class size and more – all possible indicators of the potential value of the education offered.^{cxii}

Each year, *America's Best Colleges* attracts a lot of attention (see Audience and Use section). Many media impressions about U.S. News occur as colleges and universities publicize or react to changes in their rankings from year to year (see Publicity section).^{cxiii} Criticism, although negative in nature, may perpetuate awareness of *America's Best Colleges*.

The use of U.S. News rankings in college and university marketing materials not only provides additional visibility, but also may appear as an indirect endorsement of the ranking outcomes. This external validation reinforces students' and parents' perceptions that *America's Best Colleges* offers reliable, helpful information.^{cxiv}

Historic Facilitators

U.S. News first released its college rankings in 1983, a time in U.S. history when:

- Most Americans deemed postsecondary education or training as essential to economic mobility and labor market success. Many parents had attended college and aspired the same for their children. Increasingly, students and families associated attending a prestigious college with a desirable lifestyle and with economic and career mobility.
- The college-choice process was more complex than in the past. Students and families had more college options than ever, encountered more sophisticated marketing from schools and were more aware of what the Lumina report calls the “admissions game.” As a result,

students and families invested unprecedented levels of time, money and effort in their decision-making process.

- Acting like consumers, students chose colleges by obtaining and using information from college guidebooks, campus visits and college prospectuses. Influential factors included academic programming and reputation, costs and financial aid, and campus characteristics, especially proximity to home, social atmosphere and enrollment size.
- Parents tended to set early parameters about cost and distance.
- The Higher Education Act of 1965 and ensuing reauthorizations, federal affirmative action policies and other federal higher education services substantially expanded low-income and minority students' access to college education. These policies created federal student financial aid, banned discriminatory practices, increased funding for historically black colleges and universities, and created programs that helped disadvantaged students pursue college.
- As a funding condition for institutions and their students, federal and state governments began requiring that colleges develop accountability systems in the late 1970s and 1980s. These systems provided data that could be used for ranking.^{cxv, cxvi}

In subsequent years, external facilitators for the use of college rankings included:

- Continued growth in secondary and postsecondary student populations.^{cxvii}
- Expansion of college options with the advent of e-universities offering online degrees.^{cxviii}
- Heightened competition for admission to selective schools.^{cxix, cxx}
- Cutbacks in guidance counseling resources in high schools.^{cxxi, cxxii}

Public Policy Facilitators

As noted in the prior section, federal policy changes in the mid- and late 1990s increased access to college education and ushered in standardized data about higher education institutions. Changes in public policy continue to shape college choice factors and process. For example, ballot initiatives and court decisions have affected affirmative action policies at colleges. A small qualitative study of African Americans in Southern California identified renewed interest among students and parents in historically Black colleges and universities after the California university system ended affirmative action.^{cxiii}

Tool Design

America's Best Colleges started in 1983 when a small set of college rankings appeared in *U.S. News & World Report*. Initially, the editors approached it as an interesting idea to try. After the

first three editions generated considerable newsstand sales and public attention, the company decided to make the college rankings an annual feature.^{cxxiv}

In ensuing years, content expanded as U.S. News added institutions, comprehensive tables, actual scores, new datapoints, college profiles, guidance about selecting and applying to a college, information about financing higher education, online search and comparison tools, multimedia, consumer-generated contents and more. Today, college rankings and individual school profiles remain core content, but U.S. News promotes *America's Best Colleges* as a tool that helps students (and parents) with useful information and suggestions for this stage of life. At the Education Sector forum, Kelly described the rankings as a “good first step” in making a responsible college choice.^{cxxv}

Because the college-prep industry continues to grow and is profitable, other groups – such as *The Princeton Review*, U.S. College Search, *Money* magazine and StudentsReview.com^{cxxvi} – have developed and promoted their own rankings and consumer guides.

Tool Data

Each year U.S. News collects data from colleges and universities through a statistical questionnaire. U.S. News poses the questions using standardized formats and definitions established by external organizations, including the U.S. Department of Education. U.S. News analysts review submissions for potential errors and notable changes in data from the prior year. Participating schools then receive a data report noting potential problems. They can either amend the data or sign off on it; without this action, U.S. News will not publish or use the data for rankings. After U.S. News updates its database, schools receive a data verification report for a college official to officially validate. As an additional step to attain data integrity, U.S. News cross-checks submitted data with those from established sources, such as the National Center for Education Statistics. The final step is to review preliminary rankings results to flag schools that have a markedly different rank compared to the prior year. Analysts then take steps to identify or rule out potential data errors.^{cxxvii}

Ranking Methodology

U.S. News rates colleges and universities by creating a composite weighted score drawing on two types of data.

- “Academic quality” indicators include the acceptance rate for applications; enrollees’ standardized test scores and class rank; student retention; faculty resources (including compensation, terminal degrees); student/faculty ratio; institutional expenditures on

student education; and alumni giving rates. For national universities and liberal arts colleges, another indicator is graduation rates.

- Subjective measures are college administrators' assessments of academic quality at peer institutions.

Most schools have 15 indicators, to which U.S. News assigns a specific weight to each based on the editors' "judgment about how much a measure matters."^{cxxviii} Each year, it pretests methodological changes to learn if the revisions will upend ranking outcomes. Too much change in rankings would generate doubts about reliability.^{cxxix}

Using the resulting ratings, U.S. News ranks schools in each institutional mission category (such as national universities, liberal arts colleges) from "best" to "worst." Additional rankings are developed for geographic regions, popular undergraduate degrees and specialty categories.^{cxxx} Ranking exclusions include specialized higher education institutions, micro-colleges, schools primarily serving nontraditional students and private, and for-profit universities.^{cxxxi}

The company alters its methodology every year with substantive, cosmetic, or both types of changes.^{cxxxii} Three advisory committees – college admissions deans, high school counselors and institutional researchers – provide a formal mechanism to obtain stakeholder input and get feedback on potential changes. Editors also meet regularly with college administrators and attend higher education conferences with the aim of having the methodology reflect current standards of practice for admissions and enrollment.^{cxxxiii, cxxxiv} (See also Resources, Constraints, and Use of Data sections.)

Tool Description

Figure 2 provides an overview of the features of each electronic and print version of *America's Best Colleges*. The *America's Best Colleges* products provide two information sets. The best-known set is rankings tables of colleges and universities.

- Core rankings tables are "Best National Universities" and "Best Liberal Arts Colleges." Besides the overall school score, on which the rankings are based, these tables offer the peer assessment score, average freshman retention rate, graduation rates, faculty resources rank, percentage of classes by size, student/faculty ratio, percentage of full-time faculty, SAT/ACT scores of entering class, percentage of enrolling freshmen who were in the top 10 of their high school class, acceptance rate, financial resources rank, alumni giving rank and average alumni giving rate.

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- Core rankings lists are “Top 50 Public National Universities,” “Top Universities for Master’s,” “Top Baccalaureate Colleges” and “Up-and-Coming Schools.” These lists only include the names of the institutions in ranking order. As portrayed in Figure 2:
 - *Core-Plus* (in the free college portal) include the core rankings, as described above, plus some additional rankings lists, such as “Best Undergraduate Business Programs,” and rankings of undergraduate business specialties.
 - *Supplemental* rankings (in the *Ultimate College Guide*) provide rankings tables on schools by selectivity, higher acceptance rates for early-decision or early-action applications, best-value schools, cheapest public schools, schools offering the most need-based financial assistance, and more.

The second information set is college profiles for more than 1,800 institutions.

- *Partial* profiles provide top-line information, including the composite score, rank and tier (based on rank).
- *Expanded* profiles (*Ultimate College Guide*) provide an overview textbox with location, URL, public or private status, enrollment and key statistics, such as U.S. News ranking, tuition and room and board, average student debt, selectivity category and student/faculty ratio. Detailed information, in summary format, provides an overview of the undergraduate student body, admissions facts and figures, academic programs and faculty, costs and financial aid, campus life, student services, and college facilities. One section provides information about transfer and international students.
- *Full* profiles (in the subscription portal) let visitors access the widest array of information about each school.

Figure 2. America’s Best Colleges Features by Product Type

| Tool Feature | <i>Electronic Products</i> | | <i>Print Products</i> | |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | Free College Portal | Subscription College Portal | Newsstand Magazine | Ultimate College Guide |
| College Rankings | Core-plus | Full set | Core | Supplemental set |
| School Comparisons | Interactive with some content | Interactive with expanded content | Static lists and tables by rankings | Static lists and tables by rankings |
| College Profiles | Partial | Full | Partial (9) | Expanded |

| Tool Feature | <i>Electronic Products</i> | | <i>Print Products</i> | |
|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| | Free College Portal | Subscription College Portal | Newsstand Magazine | Ultimate College Guide |
| | | | schools only) | |
| Personalized Search | Partial | Expanded | | |
| Guidance: College Admissions | 4 | 4 | | 4 |
| Guidance: College Financing | 4 | 4 | | 4 |
| User-Generated Content | 4 | 4 | | |
| Multimedia Content | 4 | 4 | | |
| Index of Schools by Major Fields of Study | | | | 4 |
| Advertising | 4 | | 4 | 4 |

^aOnly the premium online edition profiles have complete data.

The free-access USNews.com college portal offers:

- 100,000 pages of content on higher education in general, specific schools and rankings, all aspects of getting into and paying for college, standardized college admissions test dates, glossaries and study abroad opportunities.^{cxxxv}
- Interactive selection guides so users can customize their search by location, major or graduate program, financial aid and costs, academics, campus, sports and activities.
- Blogs on developments throughout the education sector, news reports from campus newspapers, college financing and college rankings.
- A student center, described as a “one-click stop for forums to discuss college options, videos about campus life, an interactive calendar of test deadlines and college fairs, and more.”^{cxxxvi}
- Open discussion forums for consumers, professionals and organizations to interact.

In the premium online edition, subscribers can access these additional features.

- Expanded profiles with in-depth information on more than 1,800 colleges and universities
- Additional search options to obtain results personalized with the subscribers’ interests; however, subscribers cannot customize the composite score weighting
- Comparative search functions that produce tables enabling subscribers to compare schools that they select on up to 14 points (including location, tuition costs, enrollment, peer assessment score, acceptance rate and more)

(For a contrast to *America's Best Colleges*, see Appendix B for a brief overview of Princeton Review's college ratings, rankings and consumer guide.)

Updating

Nearly all of the *America's Best Colleges* content, both print and online, is updated once a year to accompany the release of the current year's rankings. U.S. News frequently adds supplementary content on its college portal, such as sector news on its higher education blog.

In 2008, U.S. News upgraded and transformed the USNews.com Web site to attract new viewers and extend the time they spend on the Web site, which online advertisers want.^{cxxxvii} This redesign extended to the college portal and other *America's Best* rankings to create some consistency within the brand and facilitate updating and maintenance by U.S. News's information technology team. From a user perspective, the redesign sought to provide users with a multi-layered and searchable content, expanded sorting capabilities, additional content, new interactive features and improved information accessibility.^{cxxxviii} The redesign did augment search functionality for the college portal. A reported trade-off was diminished sorting interactivity.

Marketing, Promotion and Dissemination

Positioning and Branding

U.S. News has a layered approach to branding.

- U.S. News & World Report is "the leader in delivering reliable information that our audience can act on, whether it's voting for a president or selecting a healthcare plan."^{cxxxix}
- *America's Best* offers authoritative information that "provide[s] readers with a wealth of relevant information that they can access and use daily, supporting many of life's most important decisions."^{cxli}
- *America's Best Colleges* is the authority on and pre-eminent source of college information.^{cxli}

Pricing

Figure 3 displays the pricing structure for the various *America's Best Colleges* products. Accessing the full set of U.S. News college rankings, profiles and associated tools requires buying both the print guide and premium online edition. Students can access much of the U.S. News college content for free in guidance counseling offices and libraries. They might also look through print editions at grocery stores and bookstores.

Figure 3. Pricing for America's Best Colleges 2009

| Product | Price |
|---|---------|
| USNews.com – college portal with basic content and functionality | Free |
| Newsstand issue of <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> with coverage of the new college rankings (included in an annual subscription, which costs \$20 for print and \$15 for digital edition only) | \$4.99 |
| Print edition | \$9.95 |
| Premium online edition | \$14.95 |
| Print edition + premium online service | \$19.95 |

Placement

- The newsstand issue is available at grocery and book stores, pharmacies and other retailers
- The guidebook is available at traditional bookstores or by ordering from USNews.com and other e-commerce sites
- The electronic version is at USNews.com

In addition to the main channels above, U.S. News:

- Links with influential education websites.
- Partners with YouTube for the “Why My School Rocks!” college video contest in which college students can produce videos about their school. This YouTube page has a sponsored link to the USNews.com college portal.^{cxlii}
- Has Gradzilla and Undergradzilla, Facebook applications with *America's Best Colleges* content and search features, plus student ratings.

Promotion

U.S. News releases the annual rankings and updated consumer guides in late August or September, when high school students' mindsets can shift from summer fun to serious planning for college.^{cxliii} To keep the guidebook on the newsstand for a year, U.S. News titles

the edition with the upcoming year and refreshes the cover after six months without any content changes.^{cxliv}

U.S. News purchases few, if any, print, direct mail, or television advertising for *America's Best Colleges* because the rankings receive a lot of publicity in the mass media and in college and university communications (see Current Use and Facilitators sections).^{cxlv} U.S. News facilitates this process by providing colleges and universities with its press release announcing new rankings. Schools may use the press release in communicating with local or regional media.

The company uses search optimization strategies to attract Web site visitors. The goal is to have the U.S. News college portal appear in the top results of popular search engines.^{cxlvi} (Note that U.S. News does not pay for sponsored links on Google.)

Messages

U.S. News promotes its journalistic products as “News You Can Use.”^{cxlvii} Messages about *America's Best Colleges*, particularly the complete online and print package, include the following.

- “[T]imely, relevant, and useful information about the college selection process”^{cxlviii}
- A “fundamental resource for those families facing one of the most challenging financial decisions”^{cxlix}
- The “most comprehensive look at how more than 1,400 accredited four-year schools compare on a set of 15 widely accepted indicators of excellence”^{cl}

A less visible message to users is that the college rankings are “one tool, among many, that you should use to make the right college choice. The other factors to weigh include information from the school, campus visits, and the U.S. News college rankings.”^{cli}

Testing and Evaluation

U.S. News is a journalistic enterprise with a mass-circulation consumer magazine and Web site. It does little or no market research on *America's Best Colleges* to learn, for example, who is aware of its college rankings, who is using college rankings and consumer guides, how they are using the information and tools, and what the influence might be. Rather, the company is interested in indicators that directly affect the bottom line, such as:

- Sales of its *America's Best Colleges* print editions

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- Advertising revenue generated by *America's Best Colleges*
 - Publicity generated with the release of each year's *America's Best Colleges* ranking
 - Page views of and unique visitors to the *America's Best Colleges* online portal
 - America's Best College product sales and subscriptions
 - Competitor performance

It also monitors participation by colleges and universities in the annual collection of data.

Data Sources

Sources of qualitative and quantitative data are as follows.

- Reader feedback through e-mails, telephone calls and letters to the editor
- Web analytics for the college portal
- Media coverage of the rankings, both quantity and nature
- Use of U.S. News rankings in college marketing
- Competitors' online portals and products
- Higher education conferences
- Media inquiries
- Commentary or studies on college rankings

Use of Data

To respond to feedback from users and the higher education sector - and to remain a leading resource in the college choice decision, U.S. News continually adjusts its methodology, print and online offerings and marketing strategy. For example, U.S. News:

- Restarted ranking undergraduate business and engineering programs in 1999 after a two-year hiatus based on what it described as "popular demand" from "so many families [who] have called to inquire about great programs."^{clii}
- Added new categories, such as an "Up-and-Coming Schools" list of institutions that have improved their ranking or have notable innovations.^{cliii}

Impact on Consumer Behaviors

Comparing multiple colleges is inherently difficult. As uncertainty increases on any purchasing decision, consumers are more likely to use ratings to inform their decision; they also tend to perceive reputation as a quality guarantee. Thus, college rankings may reduce perceived risk,

increase emotional confidence in college choice or confirm early opinions a student or parent may have about a school.^{cliv, clv}

Data show that college rankings are an additional information source that a sizable minority of traditional students considers in decision making. Among high-ability students and higher socioeconomic groups, the rankings appear to have considerable influence on application and enrollment decisions. Other college-bound students pay little or no heed to the rankings.^{clvi, clvii}

One indicator of influence and use of college rankings is that when an individual institution's U.S. News college ranking noticeably improves, they tend to receive more applications, attract applicants with better qualifications, or both. The converse can occur when a school's ranking drops.^{clviii, clix, clx, clxi}

Broadly speaking, colleges and universities have responded to the U.S. News rankings by altering their marketing, admissions and enrollment practices and policies. Thus, college rankings have contributed to the evolution of the college-choice process, particularly for traditional students.^{clxii} (See Facilitators section.)

America's Best Colleges is more than college rankings, but most external research has focused on this highly visible aspect. U.S. News does not conduct market research on student or parent use of its college rankings, profiles or guidance. Because U.S. News displays not just overall score and rank, but also the data used to develop the rating, it may broaden student and parent awareness of the types of information available for choosing a college.^{clxiii}

Impact on Higher Education

The college business model is directly linked to student enrollment, which generates between 30 and 90 percent of revenues.^{clxiv} Some of the most commonly mentioned impacts concerning college rankings from U.S. News and other sources are as follows.

- Both college presidents and boards of trustees have used rankings as a quantifiable performance indicator to benchmark the school's "success."^{clxv}
- To boost their ranking, schools have developed assertive marketing to attract high-achievers, changed admissions and pricing policies and developed multifaceted financial aid packages.^{clxvi, clxvii}
- Use of favorable college rankings in marketing to prospective students and their families, alumni and other potential donors, and prospective faculty.^{clxviii}

- A longitudinal study by the American Association for Higher Education suggests colleges and universities enrich financial aid when their college ranking falls.^{clxix}
- An empirical study found that institutions that received a lowered ranking had a higher acceptance rate for applications, a lower matriculation rate and a lower average SAT score of its entering freshmen than in the prior year.^{clxx}
- Higher education researchers describe these institutional practices – along with consumer use of rankings – as having the secondary effect of reducing college access and choice for students who are not academic achievers and come from families with lower incomes. Consequences include increased stratification of student academic achievement in higher education institutions and large increases in tuition costs.^{clxxi, clxxii, clxxiii}

The impact of college rankings, by U.S. News and others, on academic quality is unknown. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2007) notes that:

The competition sparked by rankings methodologies also has both strengths and weaknesses. Some will argue that competition indirectly improves overall quality in the higher education market. Others may argue that the same competitive forces skew institutional policies in ways that might cause college or university personnel to work against their own missions.^{clxxiv}

The effect of college rankings is multi-directional. Just as rankings have affected how colleges and students behave, U.S. News has adjusted *America's Best Colleges* to maintain market position, respond to criticism and keep pace with national discourse on higher education.^{clxxv}

The final sections provide crosscutting insights from former and current U.S. News officials as well as from outside experts.

Observations by Insiders

- Sanoff (2007) attributes much of the success of *America's Best Colleges* rankings to good timing: "They came along as the consumer movement in America was reaching full flower. A generation of parents who were college-educated brought both pragmatism and status-seeking to the college search process.... They wanted value for their money."^{clxxvi}
- Kelly, as featured by *USA Today* (2007), says student and parents value college rankings because they want comparability. *America's Best Colleges* enables them to compare and contrast standardized information for an extensive set of schools.^{clxxvii}
- After many years of external criticism of the practice of ranking schools based on scores rounded to the nearest tenth of a point, the editors in 1998 altered the presentation by using whole numbers. This enabled more ties in the rankings, which the editors had kept

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- to a minimum with its prior practice. As described by Sanoff (2007), “[W]hatever might have been lost by no longer ranking schools down to one-tenth of a point was more than offset by the credibility and goodwill generated by making the widely desired change.”^{clxxviii}
- U.S. News can do its part, but colleges and universities can still find ways to manipulate the data that they provide for the profiles and rankings. Sanoff (2007) interprets these types of unethical actions as “say[ing] a great deal about the perceived stakes.”^{clxxix}
 - Kelly, at the 2006 Education Sector forum, stated the company looks at college rankings from a:

... consumer-driven standpoint. How can we get some information out there that’s helpful? Would we like to publish more information that’s more helpful? Absolutely. We’ve looked very closely at the NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement]. We’ve published more NSSE data than anybody else – when we can get it out of the schools. I think it’s about 15 or 20 percent of the schools have been willing to share that data.^{clxxx}
 - In a *Higher Education in Europe* commentary, Robert Morse (2008), U.S. News director of data research, posits that “it is the reactions of the colleges themselves that have turned the *America’s Best Colleges* rankings into a powerful juggernaut.” He also claims:

The annual publication of the US News Best Colleges rankings has been a key factor in creating a competitive environment in higher education that did not exist to the degree it does today. Schools clearly care about where they rank and many are taking steps to improve their rankings.^{clxxx}
 - Although U.S. News does not deny its rankings and consumer guides has had an influence higher education policy and practice, Kelly at the Education Sector forum emphasizes that the U.S. News approach is journalistic. The primary job, then, is ferreting out information that will be helpful to the U.S. News audience. He describes a “crying demand on the part of students and parents” for standardized data so they can make rational choices about buying a college education.^{clxxxii}

Observations by Outsiders

About Students’ College Choice Process

- The first “*America’s Best Colleges*” rankings, as portrayed by the Lumina report (2004), “usher[ed] in what now appears to have become a national obsession with college rankings.”^{clxxxiii}
- The Lumina report concludes that across all socio-economic groups, public policy changes and the evolution of college recruitment and enrollment policies together “significantly altered the [traditional] student college-choice process” and “raised the perceived stakes for all involved.”^{clxxxiv}

- Based on its 40-year review of college freshmen survey data, UCLA higher education researchers John Pryor, Sylvia Hurtado et al (2007) describe students and their families as “becoming ‘savvier’ about the best educational value in making their final college choice.”^{clxxxv}
- On a similar note, journalist Nicholas Confessore in *The Atlantic Online* (2003) writes “U.S. News has helped to demystify the admissions process and to create a common vocabulary for parents, applicants, college counselors, and universities themselves.”^{clxxxvi}
- Patricia McDonough, a UCLA higher education researcher specializing in college choice concludes, based on her and others’ research, that “academic reputation is a powerful influence on students, more powerful than the advice of professionals advisors or the influence of families.”^{clxxxvii}
- Writing in the *New England Journal of Higher Education* (2008), Lloyd Thacker, executive director of the Education Conservancy, which promotes a boycott of the U.S. News rankings, notes, “scant evidence has been offered that rankings have improved decisionmaking by students or by colleges, or contributed to education.” He asserts that rankings have contributed to “more dropouts, because students are often lured to colleges with misinformation and front-loaded financial aid packages.”^{clxxxviii}

About *America’s Best Colleges*

- The timing of each year’s release, near the start of the school year, contributes to extensive publicity and awareness. This is the time that many high school seniors and parents start choosing a college in earnest.^{clxxxix}
- Much of U.S. News’s success pertains to being first to market. If another reputable organization had provided college rankings before U.S. News did, then that organization could have had the success that U.S. News has enjoyed.^{cx}
- Director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute, Robert Ehrenberg (2005) has called *America’s Best Colleges* the “‘gold standard’ of the college-ranking business.” He calls attention to three facilitators:

USNWR’s rapid rise to the top derives from its rankings appearance of scientific objectivity (institutions are rated along various dimensions, with explicit weights being assigned to each dimension), along with the fact that USNWR then ranks the top 50 institutions in each category (for example national universities and liberal arts colleges). Each year immediately before and after the USNWR college rankings issue hits the newsstand, stories about the USNWR rankings appear in virtually every major newspaper in the United States.^{cxci}
- Putting the criticism of the U.S. News rankings in perspective, *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* senior reporter Hoover (2007), wrote:

U.S. News rankings are Coke in a world without Pepsi. That is unlikely to change. One reason is that many presidents and admissions deans continue to support the survey, or at least

tolerate it. Despite the passionate rebukes for rankings from some presidents, plenty of others believe academe has far bigger problems than the top-50 lists.^{cxcii}

- U.S. News has been responsive to concerns raised by the higher education community because they have to maintain enough goodwill among college officials to obtain the data used for the rankings.
- In a 1988 comment published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Breneman, then-president of Kalamazoo College, commented on the success of the U.S. News rankings during a dinner with the editors to advocate for changes, “But let’s face it. Americans love lists.”^{cxci}

Appendix A.

Key Informants

The perspectives in this case study have been synthesized from the wide-ranging comments of the people interviewed, the literature and other data sources. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for Advancing Health.

With gratitude, CFAH acknowledges the following individuals who participated in key informant interviews.

- Don Hossler, PhD, Professor of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies (Also, Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services and Professor of Education Leadership & Policy Studies), Indiana University-Bloomington
- Robert Morse, Director of Data Research, U.S. News & World Report
- MaryBeth Walpole, PhD, Assistant Professor, Rowan University

Appendix B.

About Princeton Review

Princeton Review publishes alternate college ratings, rankings and consumer guides as *The Best 368 Colleges*. As portrayed by author Robert Franek, “In our opinion, each school in this book is first-rate academically.... We believe college applicants need to know far more about schools than an academic ranking to identify which colleges may be best for them. It's all about the fit.”^{cxiv}

The rankings are largely based on Princeton Review’s annual survey of 120,000 students at 368 top colleges. The 80-question survey asks students to rate their schools on dozens of topics and report on their campus experiences. For example, the survey collects impressions of their schools’ academics, administration, campus life, campus amenities and aesthetics, student body, social and political scene, sports and location. Using the student survey results, the company produces 62 college-rankings lists of the top 20 schools in a given category.

Using institution-provided data, Princeton Review also creates weighted rating scores from 60 to 99. The scores are academics, admissions selectivity, financial aid, fire safety, quality of life, and green (i.e., environmentally friendly).

The online portal (<http://www.princetonreview.com/colleges-majors.aspx?uidbadge=%07>) offers a “Best Fit College Search.”

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