

**Origins and trends in national rankings:  
The U.S. News Experience:  
How it all began and Where it's heading**



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# The Very Beginning

- ◆ The U.S. News Best Colleges rankings started more than 25 years ago in 1983
- ◆ No one involved in those early years imagined the Best Colleges rankings would evolve to be the 800 pound gorilla of American higher education they are today.
- ◆ The U.S. News Best Colleges rankings have become important enough to be the subject of PhD dissertations, many academic papers, countless higher education conference sessions, entire conferences-IREG Bratislava--are dedicated to rankings, endless debate and constant media coverage.
- ◆ U.S. News was not the first to do academic rankings, but we have played a leading role in popularizing them for the mass market both in the U.S. and globally.

# The Rankings Evolve From The Very Beginning

- ◆ The U.S. News Best Colleges rankings have been one of the leading catalysts that has spawned “national” college rankings in dozens of countries around the world. Many are in this room today.
- ◆ It’s hard to imagine there was ever an information void that needed to be filled in order to help parents and perspective students make both qualitative and quantitative comparisons between colleges.
- ◆ There was such void-a big one-in the United States in 1983 when U.S. News first ventured into doing the Best Colleges rankings.

# Why Did U.S. News Start the College Rankings?

- ◆ U.S. News started the rankings for the same reason we do them today: A college education is one of the most important –and most costly investments-- that people ever make. Prospective students and their parents need evaluative measures to compare schools as one tool to help make that choice.
- ◆ This perspective is more relevant today, than 25+ years ago, since in the U.S. some private colleges now cost +\$200,000 US for BA degree.

# America's Best Colleges rankings: Historic Timeline

- ◆ In 1983, 1985 and 1987 the America's Best Colleges rankings: reputation only. The first ranking; simple methodology surveying 1300 college presidents; pick their top 10 from school lists; ranked by most top 10 votes. Beauty contest.
- ◆ Starting in 1987 published annually in U.S. News magazine; guidebook.
- ◆ Since 1988 the America's Best Colleges ranking methodology: combination reputation and quantitative school data
- ◆ Since 1997 America's Best Colleges rankings online [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com). More online.
- ◆ Other academic ranking: Best Grad; Best High

# The Rankings Methodology Evolves From The Very Beginning

- ◆ Of course, we have changed our ranking methodology formula over the years to reflect changes in the world of higher education.
- ◆ We make it clear that we are not doing social science peer review research. We do maintain very high survey and data standards; with many quality control measures.
- ◆ We have always been open and transparent. We have always said that the rankings are evolving and not perfect.
- ◆ Generally-we have shifted weight from inputs (quality of students and resources) to outputs (success in graduating students).
- ◆ We operate under this guiding principle: the methodology is only altered if a change will better help our readers/web users compare schools as they're making decisions about

# Higher Ed's Critical Response To the Rankings

- ◆ It has helped us a great deal to have these principles to focus on as we have faced the inevitable and continuous criticisms from academia about our rankings, their methodology and their growing influence.
- ◆ One main critique remains: that it is impossible to reduce the complexities that any given college has to offer to one numerical ranking number.
- ◆ The criticism from academia has helped improve the rankings. We constantly meet with our academic critics and listen to their point of view. We debate them on the merits of what we do and make appropriate changes.

# The Rankings Now Have a Big Impact on Higher Education

- ◆ U.S. News is keenly aware that the higher education community is also a major audience and consumer of our rankings.
- ◆ We understand how seriously academics, college presidents, top administrators, trustees and governing boards study and analyze our rankings and data.
- ◆ They use them in various ways, including benchmarking against peers, alumni fundraising, and advertising to attract students.

# The U.S. News Rankings in 2011

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

# The web is the present and the future.

- ◆ U.S. News provides many colleges a great deal of free exposure to potential applicants from the U.S. and abroad. U.S. News is on balance helping not hurting colleges.
- ◆ The rise of the internet as info source.
- ◆ In September 2011. The Education Section of U.S. News had 4.5 million unique visitors +18% YOY; 45 million page views +32% YOY both records for the education section

# U.S. News Ranking experience-

## Where it's heading

- ◆ Best Colleges rankings are now a part of the still evolving U.S. higher education accountability movement.
- ◆ Universities are increasingly being held accountable for their educational policies, funds expended, the level of student engagement and how much graduates learn.

## U.S. News ranking experience- where it is heading

- ◆ The college rankings will continue to fill large void caused by greatly reduced college counseling resources at many U.S. public high schools.
- ◆ The number of students per counselor at U.S. public high schools has risen sharply due to cutbacks. Fewer U.S. public high schools students now getting school based guidance.
- ◆ As a result many prospective students and their parents have been left to educate themselves about college and the college admission process. They increasingly turn to

U.S. News ranking experience- Where it's  
heading

College Rankings impact on consumer  
information:

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

## U.S. News ranking experience- Where it's heading

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

# U.S. News Ranking Experience- where it's heading

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

# U.S. News ranking experience- Where it's heading

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

# U.S. News ranking experience-

## Where it's heading

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

# U.S. News Rankings Perspective-Where it's heading

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

# Future of Rankings

- Rankings are here to stay.....
- Controversy will continue..
- Academic community will remain highly interested in national and global rankings.
- Main audience will remain consumers: prospective students, parents and alumni
- Rankings are now a worldwide phenomenon and will continue to evolve on a country-by-country basis.
- The internet will continue to evolve as primary tool to access the rankings and it allows for new forms of interactivity: personalized rankings.

# Future of College Rankings

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

# Morse Code: Inside the College Rankings

- ◆ On June 1, 2007 U.S. News started a blog called:  
**Morse Code: Inside the College Rankings**

link:

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

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

# U.S. News ranking experience

## Rankings versus Accreditation

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

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

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

# Why have rankings become a global phenomenon?

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

# Why have rankings become a global phenomenon?

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

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

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

# Global Growth in Rankings

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

# Global Growth in Rankings

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

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

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

# Rise of World University Rankings

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

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

# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

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

# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

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

# National Ranking Systems vs. Global Ranking Systems

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