

## Choosing a College

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**Abstract:** An essay that addresses the difficult issue of college quality and provides some advice to prospective students and their parents.

**Essay:**

Louisiana State University's football team is ranked number one this year by the USA TODAY/ESPN Coaches Poll. Ranked number one? It's the middle of summer. How is it possible to rank teams when they haven't even played a game? The answer, of course, is potential. Those who do the rankings try to predict how well a team will do based on the performance of the team last year—even though many players graduated—and expectations about the new players, plus the quality of those who coach them. *U.S. News & World Report* will soon announce its annual college academic rankings. Campus presidents, admissions directors, and others whose campuses may be helped or harmed by the latest listings will no longer need to hold their breath. But are these magazine scales any more reliable than those football rankings?

In many ways, their strengths and weaknesses are similar. Like summer football rankings, the rankings in *U.S. News & World Report* tell something about the potential impact that a college or university may have on a student. They do this because the rankings are based on the resources of campuses on the one hand and their reputations on the other. Just like football rankings. And when a student and that student's parents are looking for "the right campus," resources—including the grades and test-scores of incoming students—should be important. What leaders in higher education say about a campus should also be important. Even though it's largely gossip, it's usually informed gossip.

Rankings do little, however, to tell students how they will react to the learning

environment of a campus, how much they will be stimulated both in and out of class, or how much they will be stretched to excel. By all odds the best indicator of whether a campus will feel right for a student is a campus visit. When possible, prospective students should spend time on any campus they are considering. They should listen and learn from current undergraduates, for their experiences are good guides to what life will be like. It's important to check out not just the curriculum, but also the extra-curriculum and the campus climate. Students should trust a combination of their heads and their hearts in determining how and how well they will engage at a college or university. In fact, there is lots of evidence that campus visits are the most important determinant of student choices.

A campus visit should be supplemented, of course, by as much information as possible about teaching and learning on a campus. Now there is another means to help students and parents make informed decisions: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Each year NSSE collects information directly from undergraduates at hundreds of campuses, based on research about how and under what circumstances students learn. Prospective students can check to see whether a college in which they are interested participates in NSSE. If so, they may be able to obtain valuable insights about the extent to which students find the academic work challenging, the degree to which they are active learners, the extent of student-faculty interactions, the richness of the out-of-class experiences, the overall campus environment, the exposure to diverse cultural experiences, and the scope of technology uses. NSSE provides a Pocket Guide on what questions students should be asking, drawn from the questions asked on the Survey. Research has shown that the questions NSSE uses give us a good picture of how much students are really learning. That's something that rankings such as those of *U.S. News & World Report* can't tell. (For more information on NSSE and its Pocket Guide, see [http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/pocket\\_guide\\_intro.htm](http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/html/pocket_guide_intro.htm))

Fortunately, many campuses would be a right fit for any particular student, so there should be many institutions from which to choose. The quality of campus resources and of incoming students—factors that dominate most rankings—are some of what should be considered. But no one would choose a hospital based on the health of patients coming into the hospital, and no one should choose a college based primarily on the grades and test scores of incoming students. Since learning is the primary goal of going to college, students should determine what environment will best support them in becoming successful learners, and which institutions will meet their needs and interests. Making the effort and taking the time to investigate an institution fully before choosing where to apply is a short-term investment that will bring dividends for life.

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