

# Pulling Rank

## A Plan to Help Students with College Choice in an Age of Rankings

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“If I do not get into a top-ranked college, I’ll have to go to a public university. I’ll be stupid.”

—A student complaining to her guidance counselor.

“He indicated that he has filled out the U.S. News survey in the past, but now felt rather ashamed of doing that and wasn’t intending to do it in the future.”

—Account of college president’s epiphany after realizing the magazine’s survey accounts for 25 percent of a college’s score.

“So, you are only a fourteen.”

—A disappointed mother conflating her son’s value with the top *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of college his counselor predicts will admit him.

“We are all lying in order to improve our rank.”

—Admissions dean of highly ranked college.

It doesn’t take keen auditory skill or impressive educational pedigree to hear the frustration, twisted cynicism and outrage being generated by the *U.S. News and World Report*-fueled transformation of college admissions. The voices of discontent resound loudly in a growing national chorus, indicting both the rankings industry and the academy for their collusion in commercializing how students select and are selected by colleges. Stoked by the attendant rise of billion-dollar industries peddling test preparation, enrollment management, independent college counseling and the rankings themselves, the marketplace of college admissions has emerged and gained influence beyond its educational jurisdiction. Everyone, even the profiteers, knows there is something wrong. The good news is educators are gathering in the wings, rehearsing cooperation, feeling the courage of their stated convictions and preparing to reclaim the stage with a demonstration of the character of the academy.

Criticisms about college rankings have only grown over the years. Among the charges:

- Rankings imply a degree of precision and authority that is not supported by educational data.
- They distort the way education is perceived and pursued among K-12 educators, families, schools, colleges and trustees.
- They do not measure what matters in education: learning.
- The numbers on which they’re based are often

inaccurate. There is no enforced system of accountability in the information colleges report. Some colleges have omitted SAT scores of development cases, legacies and athletes and counted partial applications as applications to inflate their scores.

- They have contributed to an unhealthy environment of distrust, desire and deceit, fueled a destructive level of competition to be selective and to be selected, and fostered behavior (including resource allocation) that is compromising educational purposes and integrity.

In the face of such criticism, scant evidence has been offered that rankings have improved decision-making by students or by colleges, or contributed to education. In fact, abundant evidence is to the contrary. Multiple studies document that what we’ve gained are: more applications than ever before, because rankings reward colleges for selectivity—receiving and rejecting large numbers of applications; more dropouts, because students are often lured to colleges with misinformation and front-loaded financial aid packages; more stratification, more anxiety and frustration; more money being transferred from serving the most needy to luring the most desirable students; more treating students like customers and education like a product; and finally, more high performance but less engaged learning, because standardized test scores help determine rank, and rank is a proxy for student success. Perhaps most troubling, many trustees of colleges seem to be particularly impressed by rankings. College presidents report that trustees are unreasonably guided by the rankings as measures of institutional quality. Some even establish improving college rank as a presidential responsibility.

The ranksters’ success in selling the public a scorecard for judging institutions has been seen as a market response to education’s failure to fulfill its own responsibility. But what is to explain the academy’s

willingness to cooperate by “ranksteering,” driving so recklessly under the rankings’ influence?

Too often, a college’s stance on the rankings is determined by where it stands in the rankings. Still, some college leaders are responding to the rankings with befuddlement, discomfort and, increasingly, with action. *U.S. News* is feeling the heat of a growing movement to shake loose the influence of the rankings.

The Education Conservancy is helping shape this movement by describing the growing hunger for integrity in admissions among families, students and schools and by facilitating appropriate responses by those uniquely equipped to do so: colleges.

Our research reveals a deep level of cynicism among high school students about the admissions practices that are seen to serve institutional rank-mongering rather than the interests of students and education. These practices include encouraging everyone to apply, overemphasizing the SAT, overselling a college as being good for everyone and distributing free online applications that are partially filled in. We have engaged groups of parents, deans, presidents and trustees by asking questions about the relationship between admissions activities and educational values. While all recognize there is tremendous public pressure to go to the “one right college” and the “one right college” is the one that is the most highly ranked, all admit that their own personal experiences tell them that what is most important in education and in life is the attitude and skills a student brings to the learning experience; what you do in college matters much more than where you go to college. We have organized a boycott against *U.S. News* rankings in an effort to find a more meaningful alternative.

More than 100 professionals representing a range of positions and institutions joined us at Yale University in September 2007 for a meeting, titled “Beyond Ranking: Responding to the Call for Useful Information.” There, we discussed the prospect of developing a robust web-based system of information and guidance to better help students and families with college selection—an interactive educational tool that would draw upon current efforts to develop templates of information. With initial support from some of the colleges represented at the Yale meeting, the Education Conservancy is moving forward to solicit additional funding and plans to build a prototype of this system within a year.

Our campaign is gaining momentum. We are certain that the commercialization of college admissions fueled by the rankings has weighted “college choice” with too much gravity for both students and for the colleges themselves. Such delusion may be part of the historical ebb and flow between educational values and workplace forces, but the educational tide is on its way back in. As we work with educators (especially college admissions officials) to develop a better way for students and families to consider their college choices, we will follow a few principles:

- The *market* has a place in college admissions, but it must be kept in its place. Many questions help us

calibrate this relationship: To what extent can market mechanisms determine the values of liberal education? Should we treat students as customers; is the student always right? How far can we go in serving the bottom line before the institution we are serving loses its soul?

- We can all ask educationally based questions to guide admissions practices and help the admissions profession push back against the industries that would compromise education in order to win the rankings game.

- Colleges have more to gain by cooperating according to their common public interest than they do by competing according to differences that are overstated by purveyors of rankings. Various groups of colleges have successfully united to say no to the rankings, limit or eliminate standardized testing and articulate the value of common characteristics, such as liberal arts education, professional programs, size, etc. We have a classic prisoner’s dilemma—cooperation will be essential if we are to make progress.

- Colleges can do a better job acting like educational institutions by continuously trying to assess and improve the amount of learning that takes place. Yet the SAT scores and institutional selectivity and reputation emphasized by college rankings tell us nothing about the amount of learning that goes on at a given campus. Instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the College Learning Assessment do a much better job by describing college activities and achievements associated with learning.

- Colleges can use the admissions arena to demonstrate educational integrity and to yield real institutional benefits. All admissions activities should be reviewed for their educational merit and evaluated against the mission and values of the college. Admissions representatives should be rewarded based on how well they educate, not how much they sell. By closing their wide-mouthed-funnel approach to always luring more (more prospects, more inquiries, more candidates), colleges can focus on identifying institutional values and strengths, developing resonant messages and practicing admissions as education. Their pitch should be, “This is what we have and why you may be interested” as opposed to “What do you want, we have it.” Education matters, not sales.

- We would be wise to heed Einstein’s comment, “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” We must not become so obsessed with measurables that we lose sight of the essentials characteristics of “studenthood”—curiosity, imagination, confidence, risk-taking, passion, sense of discovery, tolerance for ambiguity.

Education is the crucible of hope. But the rankings have infused a cynical spin on education. How can we expect our students to be full of hope if our admission practices are not?

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