How U.S. News Calculates the College Rankings

A number of schools switch ranking categories this year, and for-profits are ranked.

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Terrie Lin reads in the library at New York University.

Certainly, the host of intangibles that make up the college experience can't simply be measured by a series of data points. But for families concerned with finding the best academic value for their money, the 2012 edition of U.S. News Best Colleges rankings provides an excellent starting point for the college search. The rankings allow you to compare at a glance the relative quality of institutions based on such widely accepted indicators of excellence as freshman retention and graduation rates and the strength of the faculty. And as you check out the data for colleges already on your short list, you may discover unfamiliar schools with similar metrics, and thus broaden your options.

Yes, many factors other than those spotlighted here will figure in your decision, including location and the feel of campus life; the range of academic offerings, activities, and sports; and cost and the availability of financial aid. But if you combine the information on this site with college visits, interviews, and your own intuition, our rankings can be a powerful tool in your quest for the right college.

U.S. News has made some significant changes this year to the Best Colleges presentation and ranking methodology:

1. Rankings categories have been updated: To sort colleges and universities into their appropriate ranking categories, we used the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education 2010 revisions to its highly respected Basic Classification. The Basic Classification is the traditional framework that Carnegie has used to classify colleges. The 2010 update was the first major category revision by Carnegie since 2006; that update was reflected in the 2008 Best Colleges rankings.

As a result of this latest revision, many colleges have switched ranking categories (from National Liberal Arts to Regional Colleges, from Regional Colleges to National Liberal Arts, from
Regional Universities to National Universities, or from National Universities to Regional Universities, for example) and some schools have been added to the rankings for the first time. In most cases, these category changes were the main explanation for the biggest movements in this year's Best Colleges rankings.

The Carnegie classification has been the basis of the Best Colleges sorting system since our first ranking was published in 1983, given that it is used extensively as the basis for classifying schools by higher education researchers. For example, the U.S. Department of Education and many higher education associations use the system to organize their data and as the basis for research studies. In addition, in some cases, Carnegie Categories are used to determine colleges' eligibility for grant money.

In short, the Carnegie categories are the accepted standard in higher education. The ranking category names U.S. News uses are our own—National Universities, National Liberal Arts Colleges, Regional Universities, and Regional Colleges. Which U.S. News ranking category a school appears in is based solely on its Carnegie Basic classification category.

2. All regionally accredited for-profit institutions that grant bachelor's degrees are included in the U.S. News data collection: For the first time, U.S. News has included in the rankings all for-profit colleges and universities that grant bachelor's degrees and are regionally accredited and that were eligible to be ranked based on whether they met the specific U.S. News criteria to be included in the rankings. The for-profits include many schools that have large online bachelor's degree programs.

3. Non-responders are handled differently: In the case of colleges that have refused to fill out the U.S. News statistical survey for at least two years, and for schools new to the rankings that did not respond to our statistical survey, we have made extensive use of the statistical data those institutions were required to report to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on such factors as SAT and ACT scores, acceptance rates, and faculty and retention rates.

It is well known that schools inflate their data. US News should go directly to the source, ETS (SAT) to verify the data.

Also, in your faculty analysis you don't include research productivity or research investment. It is well known that faculty who is involved in knowledge discovery are more effective and relevant teachers.

I was also surprised to see that diversity is not included in your rankings. I see a lot of "very white" schools that are ranked very high, and that unfortunately will not prepare students for the real world.
My advice to US News: 1) Do not trust the numbers that schools give you, go directly to the source of the data; 2) Good faculty makes a good school, so do a better job looking at this (Gonzaga's Faculty is mediocre, so I can't understand why it ranks in the 2nd position); 3) Visit the school and assess what it is told to you. Do an audit!; 4) Look at diversity.

Chris of MA, the SAT scores are of the enrolled class. If you look at them, you'll see the University of Chicago has higher scores than Stanford. So do several of the ivies, including Harvard, Columbia, Yale, and Princeton. The student bodies are quite comparable and this ranking provides the back up data to support it.

I think the actual rankings aren't all that helpful, but looking at the individual data points can help prospective students make more informed decisions and dispel certain myths (like the U of C student body can't be compared to Stanford's student body).