How U.S. News Calculated the 2016 Best Colleges Rankings

Here's a breakdown of the key college data that go into the annual rankings.

The U.S. News Best Colleges rankings can help prospective students and their families compare institutions as they look for the right school.

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The host of intangibles that makes up the college experience can't be measured by a series of data points. But for families concerned with finding the best academic value for their money, the U.S. News Best Colleges rankings provide an excellent starting point for the search.

They allow you to compare at a glance the relative quality of institutions based on such widely accepted indicators of excellence as first-year student 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.

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 usnews.com with college visits, interviews and your own intuition, our rankings can be a powerful tool in your quest for the right college.

How the Methodology Works

The U.S. News ranking system rests on two pillars. The formula uses quantitative measures that education experts have proposed as reliable indicators of academic quality, and it's based on our researched view of what matters in education.

First, regionally accredited schools are categorized by their mission, which is derived from the breakdown of types of higher education institutions as refined by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2010. The Carnegie classification, which is used extensively by higher education researchers, has been the basis of the Best Colleges ranking category system since our first rankings were published in 1983.

The U.S. Department of Education and many higher education associations use the system to organize their data and to determine colleges' eligibility for grant money. In short, the Carnegie categories are the accepted standard in higher education. The category names we use are our own – National Universities, National Liberal Arts Colleges, Regional Universities and Regional Colleges – but their definitions rely on the Carnegie principles.

National Universities offer a full range of undergraduate majors, plus master's and doctoral programs, and emphasize faculty research. National Liberal Arts Colleges focus almost exclusively on undergraduate education. They award at least 50 percent of their degrees in the arts and sciences.

Regional Universities offer a broad scope of undergraduate degrees and some master's degree programs but few, if any, doctoral programs. Regional Colleges focus on undergraduate education but grant fewer than 50 percent of their degrees in liberal arts disciplines; this category also includes schools that have small bachelor's degree programs but primarily grant two-year associate degrees.

Regional Universities and Regional Colleges are further divided and ranked in four geographical groups: North, South, Midwest and West.

Once schools have been divided by category, we gather data from each college on up to 16 indicators of academic excellence. Each factor is assigned a weight that reflects our judgment about how much that measure matters. Finally, the colleges and universities in each category are ranked against their peers, based on their composite weighted score.

For more details on the variables used, see the "Ranking Model Indicators" section.

U.S. News made two small changes to how two ranking indicators were compiled for the 2016 edition of the Best Colleges rankings. This year, the academic peer scores are based on the two most recent sets of survey results, collected in spring 2014 and spring 2015. Using two years of data reduces year-to-year volatility in the results. For the high school counselor ratings, the three most recent years' results were averaged to compute the high school counselor score – an increase from the two years of results that were previously used.

The ranking indicators themselves and the ranking indicator weights used in the ranking methodology in the 2016 edition were unchanged compared with the 2015 edition.

Unranked Schools

Schools are unranked and listed separately by category if they have indicated that they don't use SAT or ACT scores in admissions decisions for first-time, first-year, degree-seeking applicants. Schools that have test-optional

admission policies for submitting ACT and SAT scores are included in the rankings because ACT and SAT scores are still used in the admissions process for the students who submit them.

In a few cases, schools are not ranked if too few respondents to the 2014 and 2015 peer assessment surveys gave them ratings.

Other reasons institutions are not ranked include: a total enrollment of fewer than 200 students; a large proportion of nontraditional students; and no first-year students – as is the situation at so-called upper-division schools.

As a result of these eligibility standards, many for-profit institutions have been grouped with the unranked schools, because their bachelor's degree candidates are largely nontraditional students in degree completion programs, for example, or they don't use SAT or ACT scores in admissions decisions.

In total, 130 colleges in the National Universities, National Liberal Arts Colleges, Regional Universities and Regional Colleges categories are listed as unranked.

We also did not rank 81 highly specialized schools in arts, business and engineering.

Data Sources

Most of the data come from the colleges. This year, 92.7 percent of the 1,376 ranked colleges and universities we surveyed returned their statistical information during our spring and summer 2015 data collection window.

A ranked college is defined as those colleges in the National Universities, National Liberal Arts Colleges, Regional Universities and Regional Colleges categories that are numerically ranked or listed as Rank Not Published.

In total, U.S. News has collected data on nearly 1,800 colleges. While all the data appear on usnews.com, only 1,376 schools are included in the rankings described in this methodology and given an actual numerical rank or Rank Not Published designation.

We obtained missing data from a number of sources, including the National Collegiate Athletic Association (graduation rates), the Council for Aid to Education (alumni giving rates) and the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (information on financial resources, faculty, SAT and ACT admissions test scores, acceptance rates and graduation and retention rates).

Estimates, which are not displayed by U.S. News, may be used in the ranking calculation when schools fail to report particular data points that are not available from other sources. Missing data are reported as N/A in the ranking tables on usnews.com.

For colleges that were eligible to be ranked but refused to fill out the U.S. News statistical survey in the spring and summer of 2015, we have made extensive use of the statistical data those institutions were required to report to the National Center for Education Statistics, including such factors as SAT and ACT scores, acceptance rates, number of faculty, student-faculty ratios and graduation and retention rates. These schools are footnoted as nonresponders.

Ranking Model Indicators

The indicators we use to capture academic quality fall into a number of categories: assessment by administrators at peer institutions, retention of students, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving, graduation rate performance and, for National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges only, high school counselor ratings of colleges.

The indicators include input measures that reflect a school's student body, its faculty and its financial resources, along with outcome measures that signal how well the institution does its job of educating students.

The measures, their weights in the ranking formula and an explanation of each follow.

Undergraduate academic reputation (22.5 percent): The U.S. News ranking formula gives significant weight to the opinions of those in a position to judge a school's undergraduate academic excellence. The academic peer assessment survey allows top academics – presidents, provosts and deans of admissions – to account for intangibles at peer institutions, such as faculty dedication to teaching.

To get another set of important opinions on National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges, we also surveyed 2,200 counselors at public high schools, each of which was a gold, silver or bronze medal winner in a recent edition of the U.S. News Best High Schools rankings, as well as 400 college counselors at the largest independent schools. The counselors represent nearly every state and the District of Columbia.

Each academic and counselor surveyed was asked to rate schools' academic programs on a scale from 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). Those who didn't know enough about a school to evaluate it fairly were asked to mark "don't know."

The score used in the rankings is the average score of those who rated the school on the 5-point scale; "don't knows" are not counted as part of the average. In order to reduce the impact of strategic voting by respondents, we eliminated the two highest and two lowest scores each school received before calculating the average score.

The academic peer assessment score in this year's rankings is based on the results from surveys in spring 2014 and spring 2015. Previously, only the most recent year's results were used.

Both the Regional Universities and Regional Colleges rankings rely on one assessment score, by the academic peer group, for this measure in the rankings formula. In the case of National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges, the academic peer assessment accounts for 15 percentage points of the weighting in the ranking methodology, and 7.5 percentage points go to the high school counselors' ratings.

The results from the three most recent years of counselor surveys, from spring 2013, spring 2014 and spring 2015, were averaged to compute the high school counselor reputation score. This was done to increase the number of ratings each college received from the high school counselors and to reduce the year-to-year volatility in the average counselor score.

Ipsos Public Affairs collected the data in spring 2015. Of the 4,530 academics who were sent questionnaires, 40 percent responded. This response rate is down very slightly from the 42 percent response rate to the surveys conducted in spring 2014 and spring 2013. The counselors' one-year response rate was 7 percent for the spring 2015 surveys.

Retention (22.5 percent): The higher the proportion of first-year students who return to campus for sophomore year and eventually graduate, the better a school is apt to be at offering the classes and services that students need to succeed.

This measure has two components: six-year graduation rate (80 percent of the retention score) and first-year retention rate (20 percent). The graduation rate indicates the average proportion of a graduating class earning a degree in six years or less; we consider first-year student classes that started from fall 2005 through fall 2008. First-year retention indicates the average proportion of first-year students who entered the school in the fall of 2010 through the fall of 2013 and returned the following fall.

Faculty resources (20 percent): Research shows that the more satisfied students are about their contact with professors, the more they will learn and the more likely they are to graduate. We use six factors from the 2014-2015 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction.

Class size has two components: the proportion of classes with fewer than 20 students (30 percent of the faculty resources score) and the proportion with 50 or more students (10 percent of the score).

Faculty salary (35 percent) is the average faculty pay, plus benefits, during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic years, adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living using indexes from the consulting firm Runzheimer International. We also weigh the proportion of professors with the highest degree in their fields (15 percent), the student-faculty ratio (5 percent) and the proportion of faculty who are full time (5 percent).

Student selectivity (12.5 percent): A school's academic atmosphere is determined in part by the abilities and ambitions of the students.

This measure has three components. We factor in the admissions test scores for all enrollees who took the critical reading and math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT score (65 percent of the selectivity score). We also consider the proportion of enrolled first-year students at National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school classes or the proportion of enrolled first-year students at Regional Universities and Regional Colleges who graduated in the top quarter of their classes (25 percent). The third component is the acceptance rate, or the ratio of students admitted to applicants (10 percent).

The data are all for the fall 2014 entering class. While the ranking calculation takes account of both the SAT and ACT scores of all entering students, the ranking tables on usnews.com display the score range for whichever test was taken by most students.

We use footnotes on usnews.com to indicate schools that did not report to U.S. News the fall 2014 SAT and ACT scores for all first-time, first-year, degree-seeking students for whom the schools had data. Schools sometimes fail to report SAT and ACT scores for students in these specific categories: athletes, international students, minority students, legacies, those admitted by special arrangement and those who started in the summer of 2014. We also use footnotes to indicate schools that declined to tell U.S. News whether all students with SAT and ACT test scores were represented.

For schools that did not report all scores or that declined to say whether all scores were reported, we reduced the value of their SAT and ACT scores in the Best Colleges ranking model. This practice is not new; since the 1997 rankings, we have discounted the value of such schools' reported scores in the ranking model, because the effect of leaving students out could be that lower scores are omitted. If a school told U.S. News that it included all students with scores in its reported SAT and ACT scores, then those scores were counted fully in the rankings and were not footnoted.

If less than 75 percent of the fall 2014 entering class submitted SAT and ACT scores, their test scores were discounted in the ranking calculations. This policy was also used in the 2015 edition of the rankings.

Financial resources (10 percent): Generous per-student spending indicates that a college can offer a wide variety of programs and services. U.S. News measures financial resources by using the average spending per student on instruction, research, student services and related educational expenditures in the 2013 and 2014 fiscal years. Spending on sports, dorms and hospitals doesn't count.

Graduation rate performance (7.5 percent): This indicator of added value shows the effect of the college's programs and policies on the graduation rate of students after controlling for spending and student characteristics, such as test scores and the proportion receiving Pell Grants. We measure the difference between a school's six-year graduation rate for the class that entered in 2008 and the rate we predicted for the class.

If the school's actual graduation rate for the 2008 entering class is higher than the rate U.S. News predicted for that same class, then the college is enhancing achievement, or overperforming. If a school's actual graduation rate is lower than the U.S. News prediction, then it is underperforming.

Alumni giving rate (5 percent): This reflects the average percentage of living alumni with bachelor's degrees who gave to their school during 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, which is an indirect measure of student satisfaction.

To arrive at a school's rank, we first calculated the weighted sum of its standardized scores. The final scores were rescaled so that the top school in each category received a value of 100, and the other schools' weighted scores were calculated as a proportion of that top score. Final scores were rounded to the nearest whole number and ranked in descending order. Schools that are tied appear in alphabetical order and are marked as tied on all ranking tables.

Check out usnews.com over the coming year, since we may add content to the Best Colleges pages as we obtain additional information. And as you mine these tables for insights – where your SAT or ACT scores might win you some merit aid, for example, or where you will be apt to get the most attention from professors – keep in mind that they provide a launching pad, not an easy answer.

Searching for a college? Get our [complete rankings](#) of Best Colleges.