



**National Association for  
College Admission Counseling**  
*Guiding the way to higher education*

May 2011

## **A View of the *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings of Undergraduate Institutions from the College Admission Counseling Perspective**

Survey report from the National Association for College Admission  
Counseling *Ad Hoc* Committee on *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings



### **NACAC Ad Hoc Committee on *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) convened a group of members to form an *Ad Hoc* Committee on *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings. The Committee was convened to conduct discussions with *U.S. News* staff for the purpose of offering an organizational conduit through which to exchange ideas, convey concerns, and respond to questions about each organization's respective constituency.

To help inform the *Ad Hoc* Committee, NACAC conducted a survey of association members in May 2010 to gauge attitudes of college admission counseling professionals toward the *U.S. News & World Report* undergraduate rankings publication. Major findings from the survey research include:

***A majority of college admission counseling professionals hold negative opinions of the U.S. News & World Report undergraduate rankings.*** On a scale of 1 (strenuously object to rankings) to 100 (strongly support the rankings), high school counselors rated the *U.S. News* rankings a twenty nine and college admission officers rated the rankings a thirty nine. A majority of respondents believe that the rankings have increased in prominence over the past five years.

***Public schools and institutions tended to view the rankings slightly more favorably than private schools and institutions.*** In many cases, public high school counselors were more charitable toward the rankings than private school counselors. In a few cases, public college admission officers were more charitable toward the rankings than private college admission officers.

***College admission counseling professionals believe the title "America's Best Colleges" (or "Best Colleges" as of August 2010) is not an accurate representation of the information in the publication.*** Only 2.9 percent of respondents believe that "America's Best Colleges" accurately represents the information contained in the rankings publication. Many respondents posed the question, "Best for whom?" to emphasize the lack of objective measures of the fit between student and college. A large majority of respondents believe that the rankings offer misleading conclusions about institutional quality.

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***College admission counseling professionals find useful resources in the publications aside from the rankings.***

Articles on preparing for and narrowing the college search, as well as articles about paying for college, are well-received by respondents. Rankings of colleges are perceived as the least helpful feature in the publication.

***Colleges use rankings to market themselves.*** A majority of colleges that are ranked in the *U.S. News* publication promote their ranking as part of their marketing strategy.

***College admission officers believe rankings encourage counter-productive behavior among colleges, though they are less likely to believe that such behavior takes place on their campus.***

More than 90 percent of colleges believe the rankings put pressure on institutions to invest in strategies to maintain their rankings, though only 46 percent believe that their institution makes programmatic changes because of their rankings.

***College admission counseling professionals find the rankings methodology problematic.***

A majority of respondents believe that several core elements of the *U.S. News* rankings methodology are either "poor" or "not at all" predictors of college quality, including the peer assessments, student selectivity, and alumni giving. A majority of respondents also believe that graduation/retention rates, faculty resources, financial resources, and graduation rate performance are "fair" or "good" indicators of college quality.

### Next Steps

The *Ad Hoc* Committee will propose recommendations for action to the NACAC Board of Directors and issue a final report, based on these survey results, the committee's continued discussions, and the committee's recommendations at the NACAC National Conference in September 2011.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) convened a group of members to form an *Ad Hoc* Committee on *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings. The Committee was convened to conduct discussions with *U.S. News* staff for the purpose of offering an organizational conduit through which to exchange ideas, convey concerns, and respond to questions about each organization's respective constituency.

To help inform the *Ad Hoc* Committee, NACAC conducted a survey of association members in May 2010 to gauge attitudes of college admission counseling professionals toward the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings publication, "America's Best Colleges." This report on the survey findings will be followed by a series of conversations with college admission counseling professionals via NACAC's member communication channels and at Affiliate conferences in Spring 2011. The Committee anticipates issuing a final report, to include further research and recommendations to the association, at the [NACAC National Conference](#) in Fall 2011.

For purposes of this report, the term "Committee" refers only to the NACAC members who serve on the *Ad Hoc* Committee. Representatives of *U.S. News & World Report* meet with the *Ad Hoc* Committee to ensure an open dialogue with the association, but their views are not represented in this report. For the official public summaries of meetings between both NACAC and *U.S. News & World Report* representatives, visit the [Ad Hoc Committee's Web page](#).

The first section of this report examines general NACAC member attitudes toward the "America's Best Colleges" ranking publication. Those who are familiar with the college admission counseling profession will not be surprised that NACAC members expressed a significant degree of skepticism and dislike of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. However, the Committee believes it is important—for practitioners, students and families—to carefully examine member attitudes toward the rankings if we are to make responsible recommendations about the role and influence of rankings in college admission.



Despite holding strong negative attitudes toward the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, as revealed by the first section, the majority of NACAC members still use the rankings in their admission and advising work.

The second section examines how NACAC members use the "America's Best Colleges"<sup>1</sup> ranking publication. Despite holding strong negative attitudes toward the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, as revealed by the first section, the majority of NACAC members still use the rankings in their admission and advising work. It is therefore vital to consider the influence of rankings on the college search process.

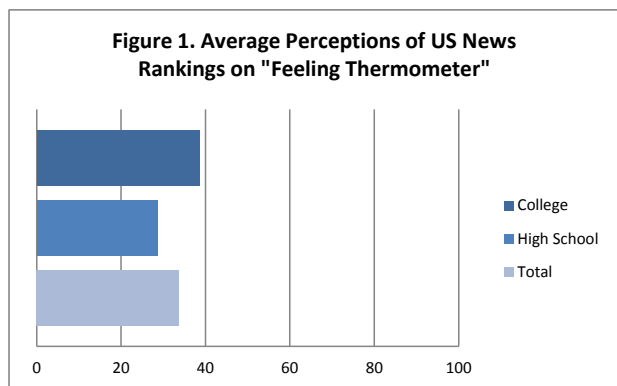
The third section examines how NACAC members feel about specific elements and features of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings publication. Members hold particularly negative opinions of the peer assessment, student selectivity and alumni giving elements of the rankings methodology and believe the annual rankings of colleges to be the least helpful feature in the publication. In responding to the survey, some members proposed a variety of changes that could be made to improve the rankings and related materials, while others stood entirely opposed to the practice of ranking colleges and universities.

<sup>1</sup> Now called "Best Colleges" as of August 17, 2010.

## SECTION ONE

### Confirming What We Know: College Admission Counseling Professionals Hold Generally Negative Assessments of the Rankings

NACAC members were asked to indicate, on a scale from one to 100, their general attitude toward the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. A score of one represents a strenuous objection to U.S. News rankings, while 50 represents a completely neutral attitude and 100 indicates strong support. The mean scores, which are presented in Figure 1, reveal generally negative opinions of the rankings among respondents.

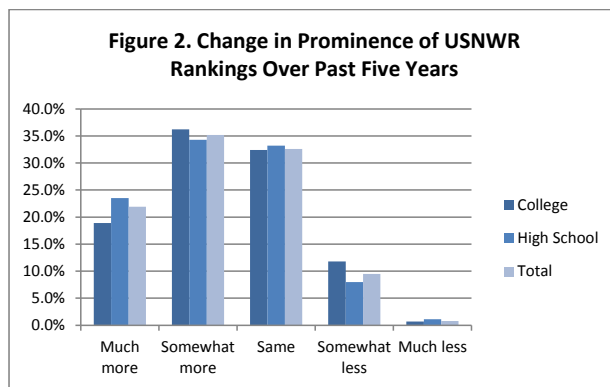


High school counselors (mean score of 28.67) expressed lower regard for the rankings than college admissions officers (mean score of 38.54), but both groups held negative views (under fifty) toward the rankings.<sup>2</sup> Public high school counselors viewed the rankings slightly more charitably (mean score of 35.11) than private high school counselors (mean score of 23.92).

### How Influential Are the Rankings?

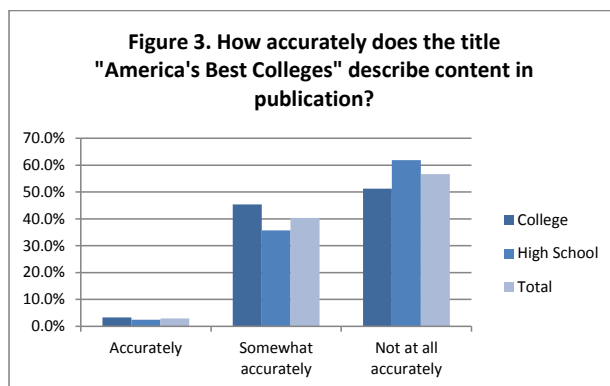
If college admission counseling professionals are, on the whole, negatively inclined toward them, is the influence of rankings such that we should be more concerned, or less concerned, about their effects on college admission and counseling? NACAC members were asked about their opinions on the change in prominence of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings over the last five years. As Figure 2 suggests, a majority of NACAC members believe that the prominence of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings has increased over the past five years.

Only 2.9 percent of all respondents believed that the title of the publication accurately represents the content delivered by the publication.



### "Best for Whom?"

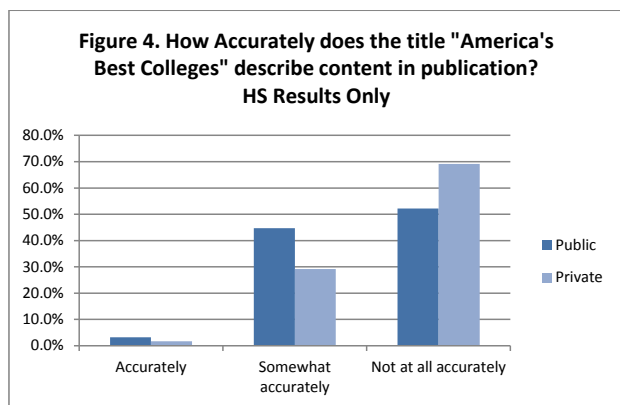
NACAC members expressed something approaching a consensus on the question of whether the title of *U.S. News & World Report's* annual publication, "America's Best Colleges," accurately represents the information presented therein.



Only 2.9 percent of all respondents (2.4 percent of high school counselors and 3.3 percent of college admission professionals) believed that the title of the publication accurately represents the content delivered by the publication. The majority of college admission officers (51.3 percent) and high school counselors (61.9 percent) reported that the title is not at all accurate (Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> To ensure that the mean was not masking highly polarized opinions, we examined the median scores as well. High school counselors' median feeling thermometer score was twenty five, while college admission officers' median score was thirty five.

As Figure 4 indicates, public high school counselors were slightly more likely to believe that the title at least “somewhat accurately” describes the content in the publication.



More than 600 NACAC members offered comments on this question in addition to their multiple choice responses. The most common themes in the open ended responses add substance to the general notion that the title of “America’s Best Colleges” does not accurately convey the information contained in the publication to consumers.

Common themes included:

- **“The Best for Whom?”**—Many members stated that the best college for an individual student will be determined by the goodness of fit between institution and student.
- **“What’s in a Rank?”**—Members argued that the difference in numeric rank between colleges is at least somewhat arbitrary by virtue of the weighting system used in the methodology, that making subsequent rank order distinctions between colleges does not prove that one college is “better” than another, and that the weights of the factors, when changed, have produced and will produce different rankings.
- **Inputs vs. Outputs**—Members find it difficult to explain what the term “best” describes—many believe that the rankings’ use of “input” variables (including selectivity and test scores) and other variables not related to directly measurable outputs (such as the peer assessments) lead consumers to make decisions based on information unrelated to the quality of education provided at the institutions

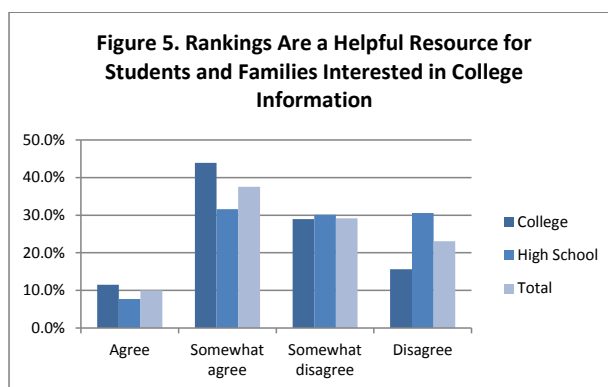
Americans love rankings—of all things—and unfortunately higher education, whether we like it or not, is part of the rankings system. We need to help families understand that small differences are meaningless and to also understand why the items that are ranked actually matter.

### Beyond the Title—Member Attitudes About the Utility of the Rankings Publication

When asked about the utility of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings publication, NACAC members felt that the publication itself contained potentially helpful resources and focused their concern on the rank ordering of colleges.

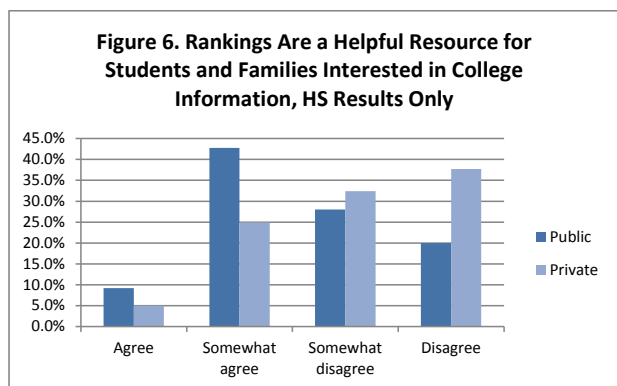
#### Helpful Resource for Students and Families?

Overall, NACAC members differed as to whether the rankings are a helpful resource for students and families interested in college information.



College respondents were more likely than high school respondents to at least “somewhat agree” (55.4 percent vs. 39.3 percent) that the rankings are a helpful resource (Figure 5). The split between college and high school opinions on this question reveals a potentially important and well-known difference between the two professional segments. Namely, colleges may be more inclined to view the rankings as containing information that is useful to students and families, though potentially flawed in presentation and interpretation. Conversely, high school counselors appear more apt to view the rankings as doing more harm than good on balance.

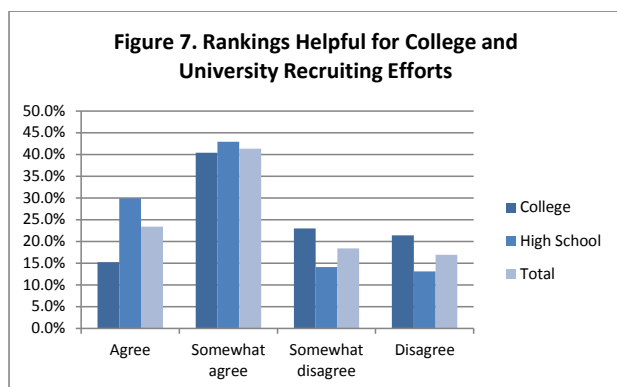
As Figure 6 suggests, public high school counselors were more likely to view the rankings as a helpful resource than private high school counselors.



It is nearly impossible to classify a college as the "Best." The best for whom? The best at what majors or programs? Even if *U.S. News & World Report* used criteria that were more honestly effective at measuring outcomes it could not predict what is best for individuals."

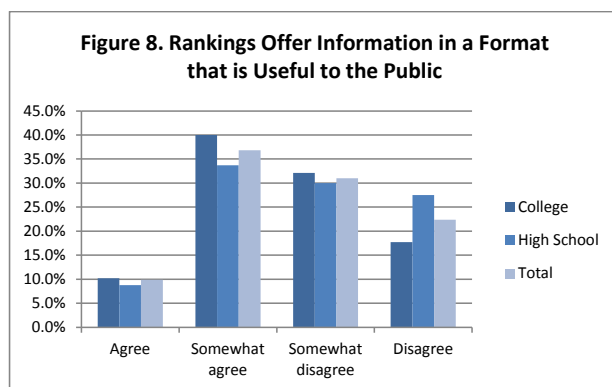
*Useful to College and University Recruiting Efforts?*

The majority of NACAC members agreed with the statement, "U.S. News rankings are useful to college and university recruiting efforts." Colleges were relatively evenly divided on this question, as 55.6 percent either somewhat agreed or agreed and 44.4 percent either somewhat disagreed or disagreed. Nearly 73 percent of high school counselors, on the other hand, either somewhat agreed or agreed that the rankings are useful to college and university recruiting efforts (Figure 7).



*Information Presented in a Useful Format?*

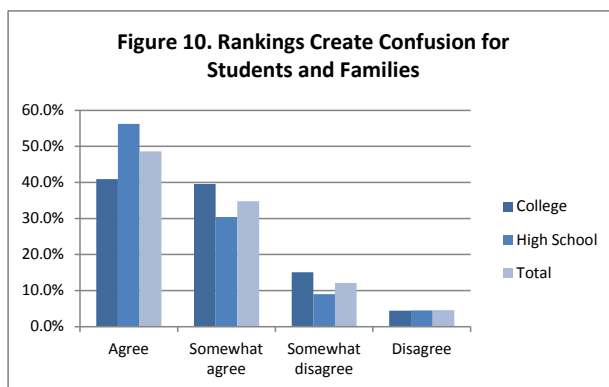
Members were somewhat evenly divided on whether the U.S. News rankings offer information in a format that is useful to the public. Though few respondents agreed entirely, 46.7 percent either agreed or somewhat agreed that the format was useful, compared to 53.4 who expressed some level of disagreement (Figure 8).



As Figure 9 shows, public high school counselors find the publication's format more useful than private high school counselors.

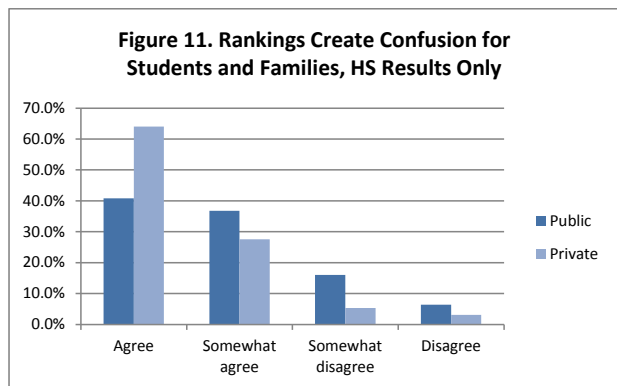
*Rankings Create Confusion for Students and Families?*

A large majority of respondents from all groups agreed that the U.S. News rankings create great confusion for students and families interested in college information. Overall, 83.4 percent of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed, versus only 16.7 percent of respondent who expressed some level of disagreement. High school counselors (86.6 percent) were most likely to suggest that the rankings create confusion for students and families (Figure 10).





Private high school counselors were slightly more likely to believe that the rankings create confusion for students and families (Figure 11).



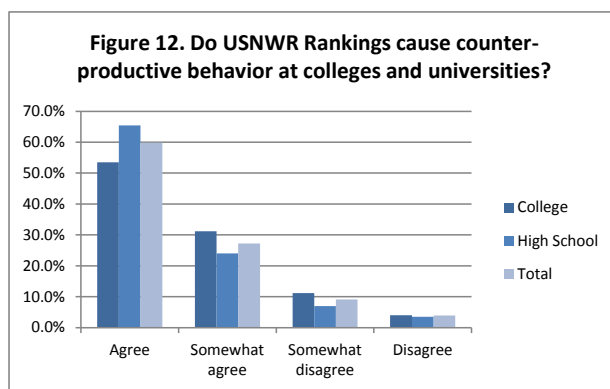
It is important to note that these data describe NACAC member attitudes and experiences toward the rankings, and do not reflect direct survey research on students and families. As a result, it is probably more accurate to state that NACAC members perceive that students and families are at times confused by the rankings in some fashion. As such, the Committee intends to explore this idea further, and seek ways in which college admission counseling professionals can assist in alleviating confusion over the role and meaning of rankings in college admission.

The behavior of colleges at the apparent whim of their boards to increase their ranking for *U.S. News* creates unfriendly behaviors towards students. Education is an important national and global mission. To have the students dehumanized by policies designed simply to increase the arbitrary rankings that *U.S. News* has promoted, and continues to promote undermines the mission of educating our youth.”

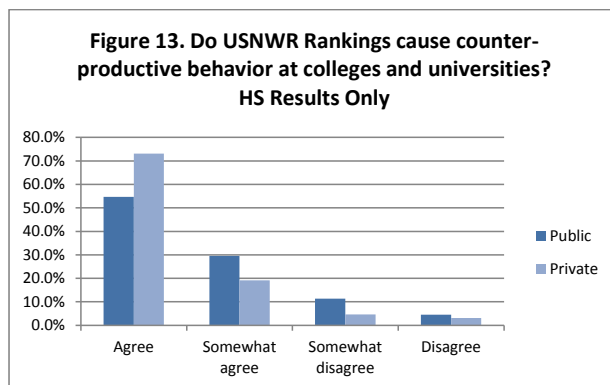
*Do Rankings Encourage Counter-Productive Behavior Within Colleges and Universities?*

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (87 percent) either “somewhat agree” or “agree” that the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings encourage counter-productive behavior within colleges and universities.

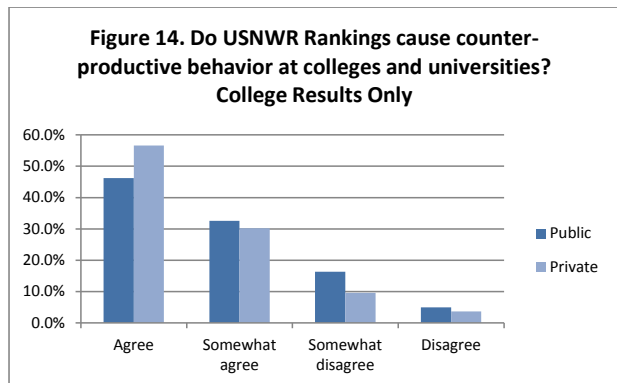
High school respondents were most likely to either “agree” or “somewhat agree” (89.4 percent) that rankings cause counterproductive behavior at colleges and universities, though college respondents were similarly inclined (84.7 percent either agreed or somewhat agreed) (Figure 12).



Disaggregated results show differences based on control (public/private) at both the high school and college levels, although overall attitudes are generally aligned. In the case of high schools, public high school counselors were slightly less likely than private school counselors to believe that the rankings cause counter-productive behavior at colleges and universities (Figure 13).



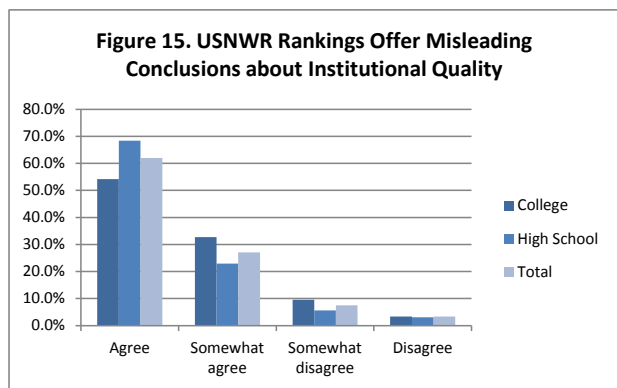
Among colleges, admission officers from public institutions were slightly less likely to believe that the rankings caused counter-productive behavior than admission officers at private institutions (Figure 14).



Committee discussions to this point have noted the widely-held perception that colleges are heavily incentivized to “game” the rankings by manipulating data they submit in any numbers of ways. As the Committee proceeds with its discussions of the survey results, it will seek feedback from members about ways in which the association might address the environment created by the rankings, the incentives the environment creates, and avenues for members to ensure the integrity of information conveyed to students and families.

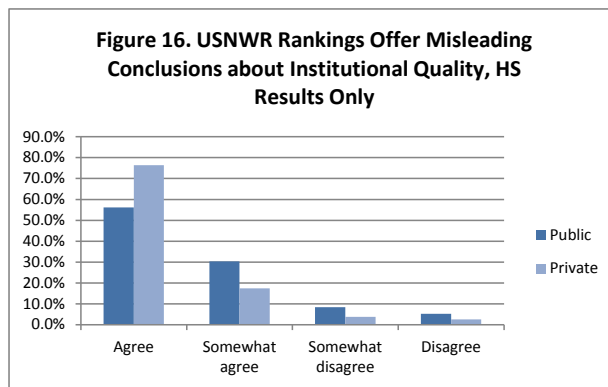
*Misleading Conclusions About Institutional Quality?*

An overwhelming 89.1 percent of all respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings offer misleading conclusions about institutional quality. As Figure 15 shows, opinions did not vary substantially between college and high school members.



Ever since they first arrived I've argued that this controversy really reflects higher education's inability to articulate and provide convincing evidence of its quality. It says VOLUMES about the state of assessment on our campuses. We should focus on that issue and less trying to get *U.S. News* to change something that's a big seller because of our own industry's inadequacies in providing better evidence!

Disaggregated results among high schools again reveal a slight difference between public and private high school opinions about the conclusions drawn by the rankings about institutional quality, though the differences in this case are slight (Figure 16).



These results, combined with the responses to the question about the accuracy of the title, “America’s Best Colleges,” offer the clearest indication of where NACAC member concerns are grounded.<sup>3</sup>

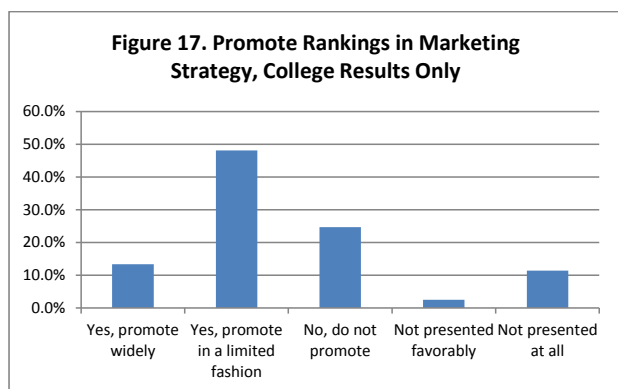
<sup>3</sup> There was a strong and statistically significant correlation (-.521, p<.01) between responses to the feeling thermometer question and the question about the accuracy of the title “America’s Best Colleges.”



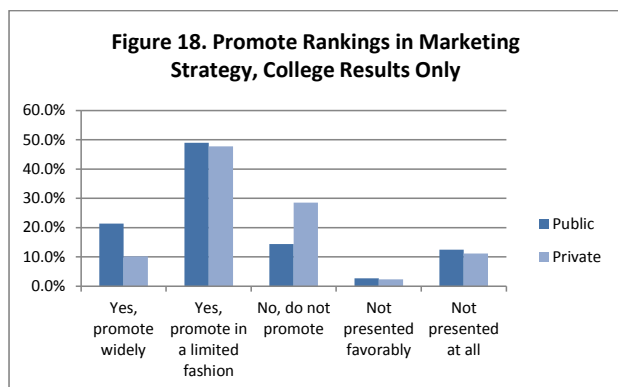
## SECTION TWO

### Rankings and Recruiting

Section One revealed that a majority of NACAC members believe the rankings are, generally speaking, useful to college and university recruiting efforts. A specific example of the rankings' utility for colleges—the promotion of an institution's rank in its marketing materials—is shown in Figure 17. Because a majority of NACAC members representing high schools are not presented at all in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, only responses from members representing colleges are discussed for this question.



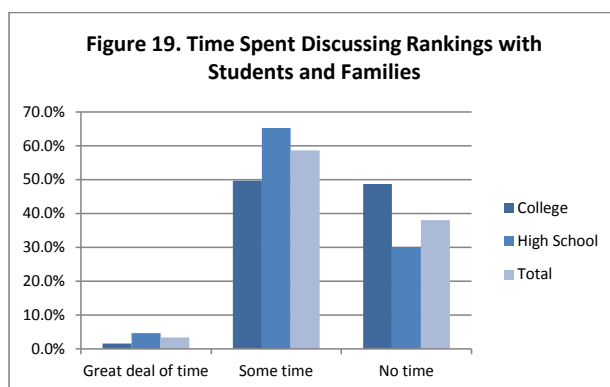
Of the 88.6 percent of college members who are included in the rankings, only 2.8 percent report being presented unfavorably. Among the remaining 79.8 percent of college members who are presented favorably in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, over two-thirds (71.3 percent) promote their rank, though most do so in a limited fashion. Among colleges, public institutions were slightly more likely to promote their ranking than private institutions (Figure 18).



Smart institutional leaders will find alignments between institutional mission/vision and advancement in rankings, if that is a priority. While rankings are often sighted, in general institutional leaders pick and choose the areas to address, and the idea that these drive institutional decisions is wildly over-stated.

### Rankings in Counseling and Admission Offices

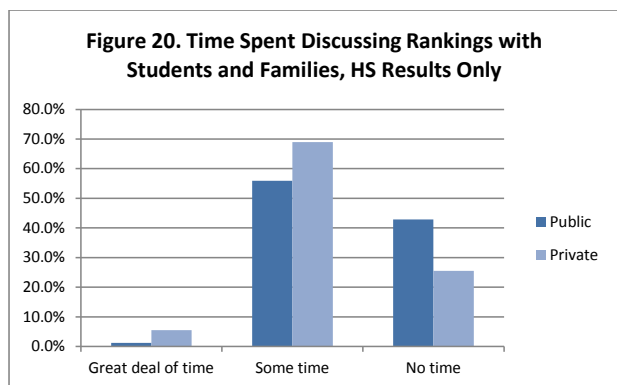
NACAC members were asked whether they spend “a great deal of time,” “some time,” or “no time” discussing or answering questions about the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. As Figure 19 shows, a majority of members spend at least some time discussing *U.S. News* rankings with students and families.



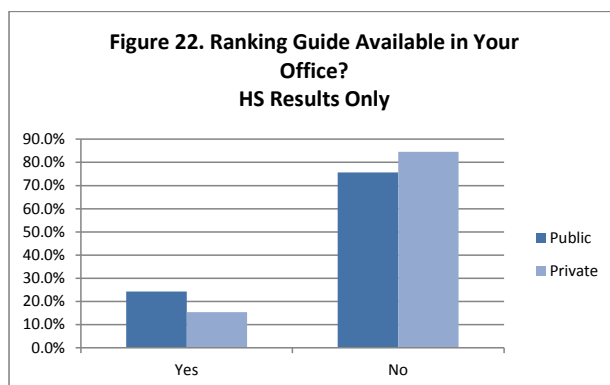
Members representing colleges and universities were split almost 50/50 between spending no time and some time on the rankings. NACAC high school members, however, were more likely to spend some time on the rankings (65.2 percent) than no time (30.1 percent). Due to the fact that high school respondents held more negative opinions about the rankings than college respondents (as seen in the first section), it is possible that this discrepancy is a result of a strong demand among families and students for ranking information in counseling offices, rather than a stronger desire or willingness to discuss the rankings among high school counselors.

They have created a frenzy of competition among campuses that has also added to the frenzy experienced by students who are trying to be competitive to be admitted. They have turned college presidents into CFOs and fundraisers. They have turned admissions efforts into high-level marketers, and forced colleges to manipulate admissions stats, waiting list lengths, and lead students on to get them to apply.”

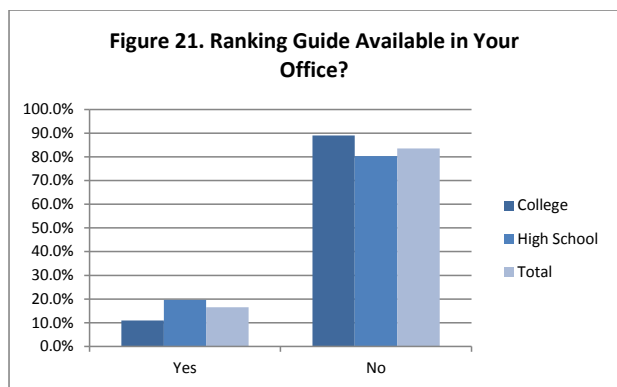
Private high school counselors were more likely to report spending at least “some time” discussing the rankings with students and families than high school counselors (Figure 20).



In keeping with the slight differences between public and private high schools, public high school counselors were slightly more likely than private school counselors to report making the rankings available in their offices (Figure 22).

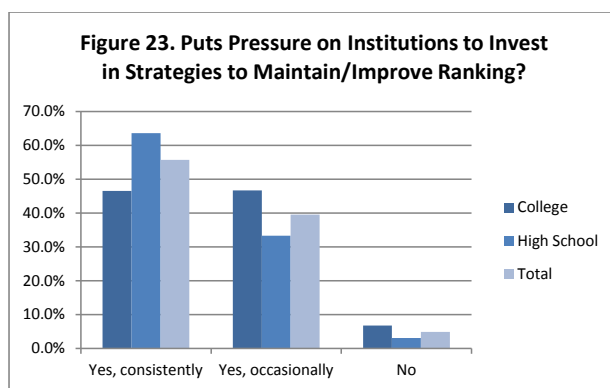


Though 62 percent of NACAC members discuss the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings with students and families to some extent, only 16.5 percent make a copy of the undergraduate ranking guide available for students to use in their offices, as shown in Figure 21.



### Institutional Responses to the Rankings

Figure 23 demonstrates that an overwhelming majority (95.1 percent) of NACAC members believe that the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings “put pressure on institutions to invest in strategies and practices primarily for the purpose of maintaining or strengthening position in the rankings,” either consistently or occasionally.



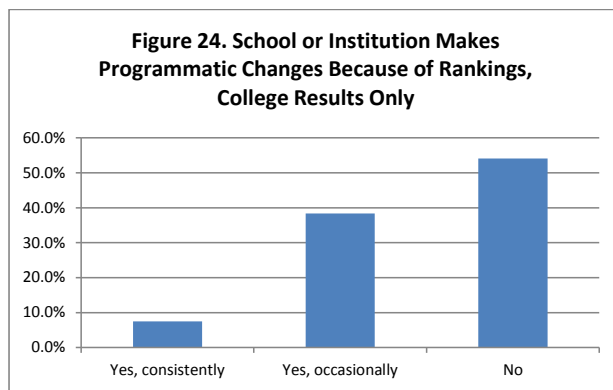
High school members are more suspicious of institutional responses to the rankings. Nearly two-thirds (63.6 percent) of high school respondents believe that the rankings “consistently” put pressure on institutions, compared to only 46.5 percent of college respondents.

More than 300 NACAC members offered comments on this question in addition to their multiple choice responses. The most common themes in the open ended responses add substance to the general belief institutions and schools are pressured to make programmatic changes in efforts to improve their rankings. Common themes included:

- **Manipulating numbers**—Many members believe that schools manipulate the data that is used to calculate the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, especially admit and yield<sup>4</sup> rates, with wait lists, fast-track applications, and early decision programs.
- **Outside pressure**—Members commonly reported being pressured by their institution’s presidents, trustees, and faculty to adopt strategies that would increase their rank.
- **Benefits**—Some members argued that the pressure to improve rankings can benefit schools, colleges, and students by encouraging policies that improve certain student-centered features, including retention rate and class size.

In contrast to the data shown in Figure 23, 54.1 percent of NACAC members representing colleges reported that their particular institutions do not make any programmatic changes

based on the rankings, as seen in Figure 24. Because the *U.S. News & World Report* high school rankings are less prominent and influential than the college rankings, only responses from NACAC members representing colleges are discussed for this question.<sup>5</sup>



Very few NACAC college members (7.6 percent) report that their institutions consistently “make programmatic changes at least in part because of their influence on the rankings.” Over one-third of college respondents (38.4 percent) report that their particular institutions do so occasionally. Comparing Figures 23 and 24 yields an interesting contrast. College respondents’ beliefs that institutions are “gaming” the rankings generally seems to apply to other colleges, whereas they are less likely to perceive their own institution as manipulating the process. The Committee will explore this finding further as they meet and share information with members over the coming months.

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**Any attempt—ANY—to distill the concept of academic quality down to a single metric is based solely in marketing and is antithetical to all best practices in conducting a proper college search. As has been said on this matter countless times, what is best for one student is not necessarily best for another, let alone best for all. The guiding principles for finding the right college for any student must be rooting in fit and match, and there is no ranking system that can accomplish this. This applies to *USNWR*, *Forbes*, *Newsweek*, and every single publication that tries to make the college search process easier for families by selling millions of issues of their publication.**

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<sup>4</sup> Yield rates are no longer used in the *U.S. News* rankings formula.

<sup>5</sup> The high school member responses for the question regarding the promotion of rankings were as follows: 6.7 percent consistently make changes based on the rankings, 20.4 percent occasionally make changes based on the rankings, and 72.9 percent do not make any changes based on the rankings.

## SECTION THREE

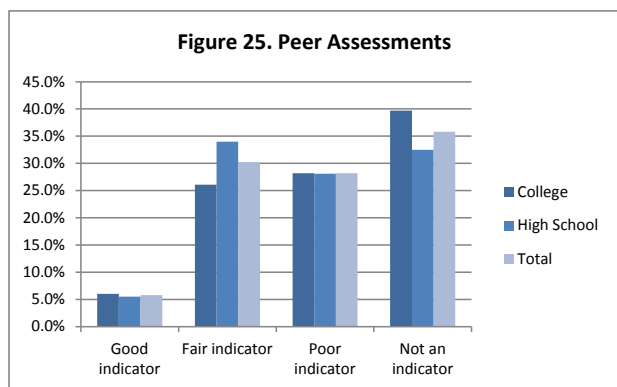
### Elements of the Rankings Methodology

NACAC members were asked to classify seven elements of the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings methodology as either good indicators of college quality, fair though imperfect indicators of college quality, poor indicators of college quality that provide useful information, or not at all indicators of college quality. Members are more critical of the peer assessment, student selectivity and alumni giving elements of the methodology and more positive regarding the measures of financial resources, faculty resources, graduation rate performance and graduation and retention rate.



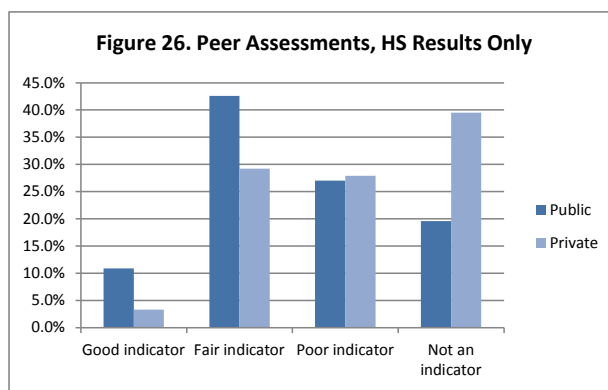
### Peer Assessments

A very small portion of NACAC members (5.8 percent) think that the peer assessments issued by *U.S. News & World Report* are good indicators of college quality. The remaining 94.2 percent of respondents are split nearly evenly between the remaining categories, with college admission officers more likely to report that the assessments do not provide any indication of quality (39.7 percent) than high school counselors (32.5 percent) (Figure 25).

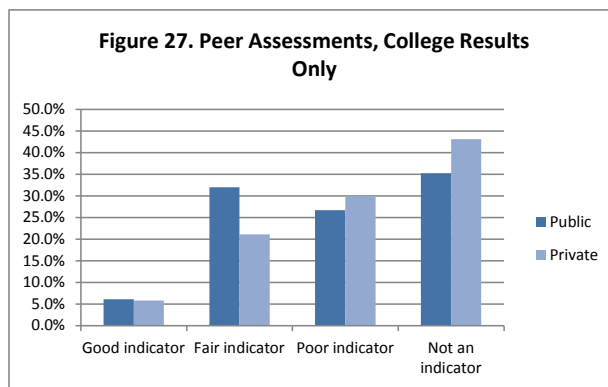


A very small portion of NACAC members think that the peer assessments issued by *U.S. News & World Report* are good indicators of college quality.

Disaggregated results by control (public/private) reveal differences as to respondents' viewpoints about the peer assessment portion of the rankings methodology. Among high schools, a majority (54 percent) of public school counselors believe that the peer assessments are at least a "fair" indicator of institutional quality. Meanwhile, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of private high school counselors believe that the peer assessments were either "poor" or "not at all" indicators of institutional quality (Figure 26).

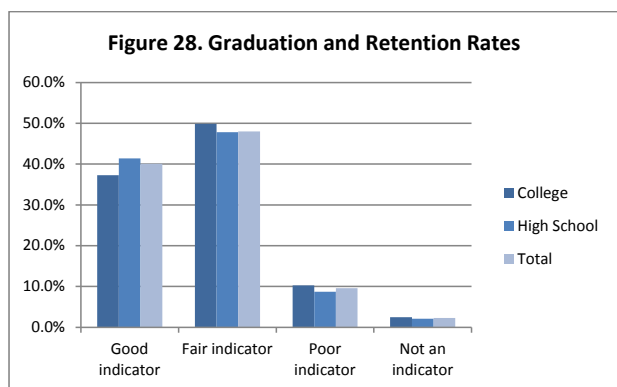


Among colleges, admission officers from public institutions were slightly more likely (38 percent) to believe that the peer assessments were at least a "fair" indicator of institutional quality than admission officers from private institutions (27 percent) (Figure 27).



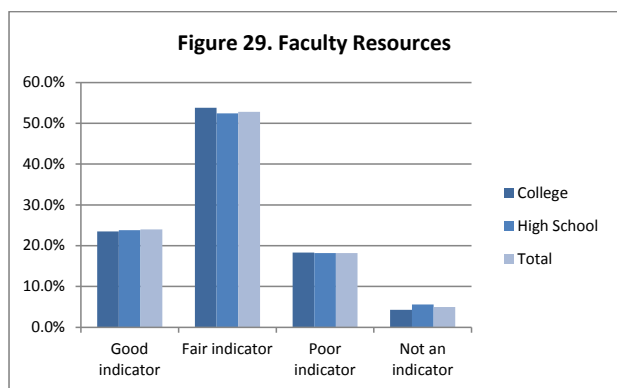
### Graduation and Retention Rates

An overwhelming majority of respondents (88.1 percent) view graduation and retention rates as either “good” or “fair” indicators of college quality, though, of those, more would describe them as fair and imperfect (forty eight percent) than good (40.1 percent) (Figure 28). Only 2.3 percent believe that the rates are not indicators of college quality and do not provide any useful information. Among all of the elements of the *U.S. News & World Report* methodology, graduation and retention rates are viewed most favorably.



### Faculty Resources

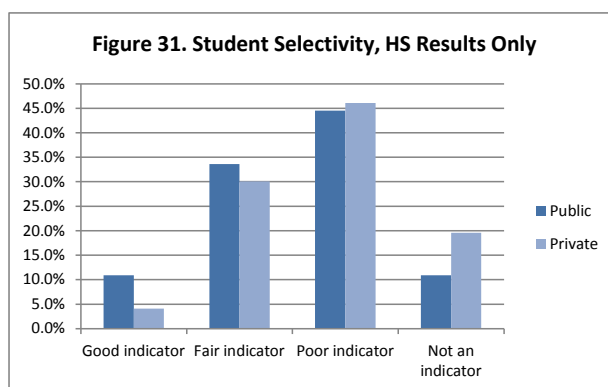
Survey respondents are also positive about the measures of faculty resources used in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings methodology. A majority of NACAC members (52.8 percent) think that faculty resources provide a fair but imperfect measure of college quality, while only five percent say that they provide no indication of quality. College and high school respondents expressed very similar views in response to this question (Figure 29).



### Student Selectivity

Forty percent of NACAC members, including 44.2 percent of high school respondents and 35.9 percent of college respondents, think that student selectivity measures provide a “poor” indication of college quality but offer useful information for students and families (Figure 30). Responses to subsequent open ended questions reveal that some members find the measures of selectivity useful for anticipating a student’s chance of acceptance.

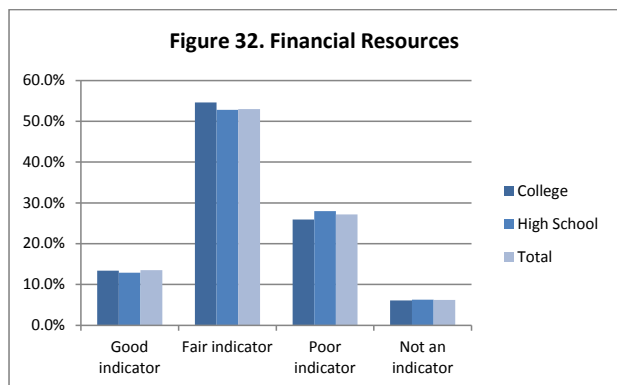
Public school counselors (forty five percent) were slightly more likely to believe that student selectivity was a “fair” or “good” indicator of institutional quality than private school counselors (thirty four percent) (Figure 31).



*USNWR* is not going away. I think it's important as an organization to keep discussions in the public eye, as it brings awareness to families to "look beyond the rankings" The guide does contain a lot of good information about schools that can be used for comparing—graduation rates, costs, student demographics—I use it as a resource a lot for those purposes.

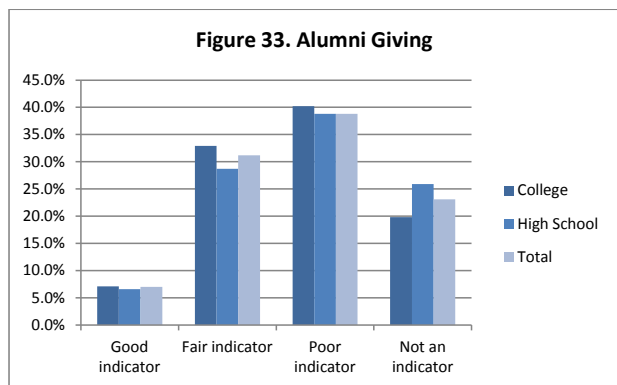
### Financial Resources

A majority of survey respondents (fifty three percent) believe that the measures of financial resources used by the “America’s Best Colleges” publication provide a fair but imperfect measure of quality. High school and college members once again provided very similar responses (Figure 32).



### Alumni Giving

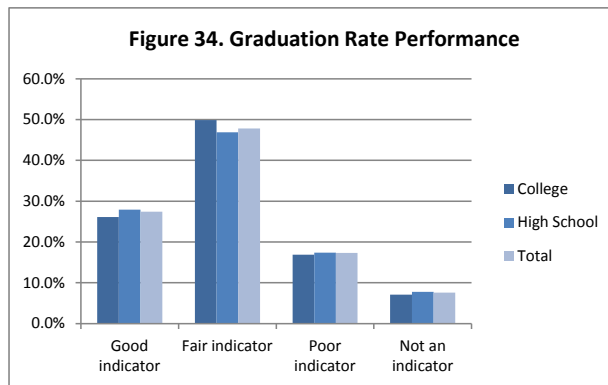
Nearly two-thirds (61.9 percent) of respondents believe that the measures of alumni giving provide either a poor indication of quality (38.8 percent) or no indication of quality (23.1 percent) (Figure 33). Only seven percent of NACAC members endorse the measure as a good indication of quality. College respondents are slightly more likely than high school respondents to describe alumni giving measures as fair (32.9 and 28.7 percent, respectively) while high school counselors believe that they provided no indication of quality at a higher rate than college admission officers (25.9 and 19.8 percent, respectively).



Imagine this: the rankings world has been turned on its head, and *U.S. News* is ranking America's Best High School Seniors, and this is how colleges select applicants for admission. Now imagine that if a major component of that ranking was based on your child's peers' assessment of him or her. Would that be a fair process?"

### Graduation Rate Performance

Compared to most other elements of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings methodology, graduation rate performance is viewed favorably by NACAC members. Just over seventy five percent of respondents would describe the measure as either a “good” (27.4 percent) or “fair” (47.8 percent) measure of college quality and only 7.6 percent believe that it provided neither an indication of quality nor any useful information (Figure 34). Responses from both college and high school members were similar to those of the total respondent pool.





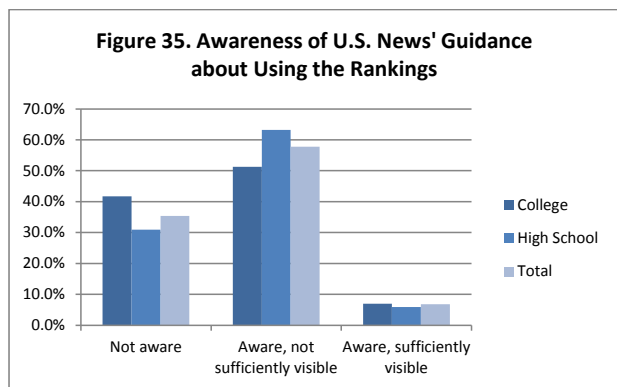
## Other Concepts or Data Points for Quality Assessments

In an open ended response question, members were asked what other concepts or data points they believe would be important for inclusion in any attempt to assess the quality of postsecondary institutions. Nine hundred members offered suggestions that may have implications for future efforts to improve the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings methodology. Common themes that emerged included:

- **Student experience**—Many NACAC members support the inclusion of a measure of students' experiences while in college using surveys of student satisfaction and/or engagement (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement), surveys of alumni and/or parent satisfaction, and measures of the amount and type of student work (for example, the percentage of freshmen required to write papers of a certain length or whether or not students are required to write a senior thesis).
- **Student services**—Members also suggest looking into what support, advising, and career services are available to students, as well as measuring the availability and placement rate of students in internships, work study positions and study abroad programs. Some respondents also emphasize the importance of considering freshman orientation programs, transition programs, and retention programs when measuring institutional quality.
- **Student outcomes**—Many members emphasize the importance of including outcome measures as opposed to or in addition to measures that seek to quantify the quality of institutions' incoming freshman classes. Proposed measures for alumni outcomes include: average student debt and income, possibly combined with the cost of tuition in order to form a measure of return-on-investment; employment rates; acceptance rates into graduate and professional schools; Ph.D. completion rates; GRE, MCAT, LSAT and other standardized test and placement exam scores; the percentage of alumni receiving academic fellowships and honors such as Fulbright, Watson and Rhodes scholarships; the rate of acceptance into Phi Beta Kappa; and rates of enrollment in competitive community service programs such as Teach for America and the Peace Corps.
- **Faculty quality**—Some respondents suggest using different measures to calculate the faculty resources element of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings methodology. These measures include the percentage of faculty with terminal degrees teaching in the classroom; the percentage of freshmen classes taught by professors; the ratio of professors to adjunct professors, teaching assistants, and graduate assistants; the percentage of courses taught by tenure or tenure-track faculty; the number of faculty with distinguished honors, including Nobel prizes, Pulitzer prizes, Fulbright scholarships, national awards for teaching excellence, and university awards for teaching excellence; and the number of hours that professors are available to students.
- **Other factors**—Other elements of institutional quality supported by members include the extent to which students are involved in the community; post-graduation academic assessments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment; the diversity of the student body; the percentage of Pell Grant recipients; the percentage of first generation students; the graduation and retention rates for underrepresented minorities; the amount of financial aid distributed; the safety of the campus and/or the crime rate; the variety of programs or number of majors offered; and the fulfillment of the institutional mission statement
- **Not applicable**—Some members suggest that colleges and universities shouldn't be ranked at all and that quality assessments should be based on non-quantifiable measures gleaned from personal research and campus visits. One member wrote, "Someone once compared US News to ranking every sports team in the country against one another. Can one compare a volleyball team to a basketball team? Rankings don't work." Others believe that only academic programs, and not whole institutions, should be ranked, or that institutions should be placed into groups, rather than ordinal order. Some members also believe that the rankings are irrelevant as long as questions remain about the accuracy of reported data.

### Guidance on the Use of the Rankings

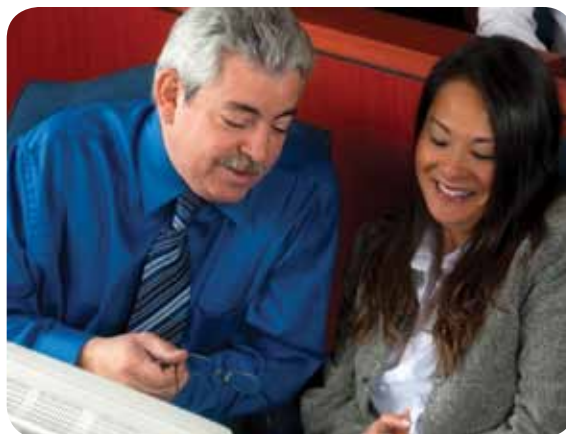
When members were asked, “Which statement best describes your awareness of *U.S. News*’ guidance to students and families about how to use the rankings as a tool in the college search process,” 57.8 percent said that they are aware of the guidance but believe it is not sufficiently visible and clear to communicate with students and families effectively. College members are more likely (47.1 percent) to be unaware of the guidance than high school members (30.9 percent) (Figure 35).



### Important Considerations for Students and Families Using the Rankings

In another open ended response question, members were asked to describe the information that they believe is important for students and families to consider when using the *U.S. News* rankings. More than 950 members volunteered their expertise in response to the question. Common themes that emerged included:

- **Focus on fit**—Many respondents emphasize that college choice should ultimately be about personal fit and that college rankings, regardless of their methodology, can’t tell student anything about how well they will fit at an institution. One member wrote, “Our students are not all the same, and so they shouldn’t be using rankings as if the same criteria ought to apply to each student’s college search process.”
- **Buyer beware**—Some NACAC members are entirely opposed to the use of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and urge students and families to avoid them altogether. Other members believe “America’s Best Colleges” is only one of many resources that



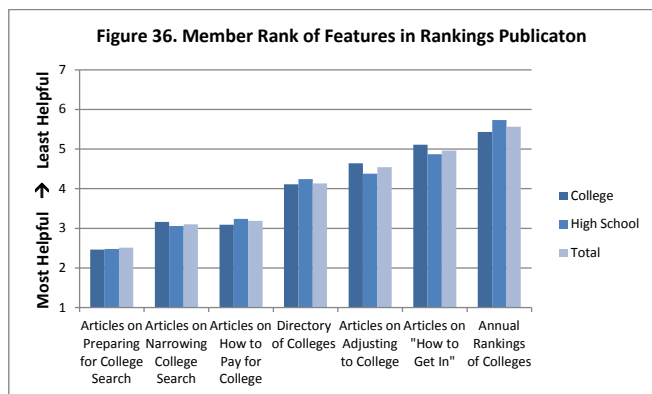
can be used in a college search and urge families to keep the rankings in perspective by supplementing them with college visits and other research.

- **Useful, but not because of the rankings**—Some members think that students and families can use the rankings to find schools that they otherwise wouldn’t have considered, while others find certain data collected by *U.S. News & World Report* to be useful when considered individually and without regard to the rankings. Members identified the following figures as helpful: retention and graduation rate, selectivity, institution size, class size, student-to-teacher ratio, and cost.
- **Methodology issues**—Many members are concerned with students’ and families’ knowledge of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings methodology. They recommend finding out what factors are (and are not) taken into account and deciding as a family what factors are relevant in measuring quality. Some members said that, because the methodology is different each year, the rankings are unstable and cannot be compared over time. They also said that the rankings are based on the incoming class as opposed to students’ experiences while at college, that some colleges, particularly prestigious private colleges, are unfairly favored by the formula, and that the rankings are based too heavily on measures of alumni giving and peer assessments, which are subjective and biased. Some respondents further emphasize that there is little statistical difference between schools and that, by placing colleges in ordinal rank, *U.S. News* creates the illusion of differences where there are none.

- **Data collection issues**—Some respondents want students and families to know that the rankings can be gamed, that there are issues with accurate data collection, and that the rankings can encourage bad behavior. More specifically, a few members believe that by the time the rankings are published the data are outdated, that selectivity measures are easily skewed, and that the listed average class sizes can take non-teaching faculty into account.
- **Other issues**—Some members ask families and students to keep in mind that there are good colleges in the lower tiers and that good colleges are sometimes not included in the rankings at all, often by choice. Others ask students to remember that the rankings are used to sell magazines and as a marketing tool for a magazine. One member deemphasized the importance of the rankings, saying, “I have come to a realization that success is much more dependent on what they [students], themselves, do and take advantage of at a university than the university’s ranking.”

### Features of the Rankings Publication

NACAC members were asked to rank the features of the “America’s Best College” publication from one to seven, one being the most helpful and seven being the least helpful. Perhaps reflecting their disapproval of the process of placing things in ordinal rank, about a third of members rated, rather than ranked, the features (i.e. used the same number for two or more features). For the purposes of this report, their responses were excluded (Figure 36).

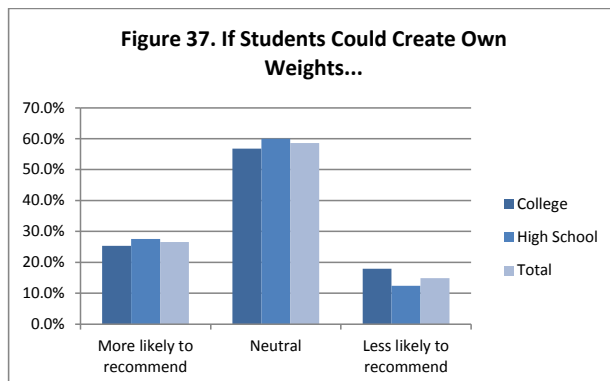


That the information in *U.S. News* is only one of many sources of important information and that the information does not by itself measure institutional quality. Students and families should be encouraged to do their own investigation by visiting campuses, speaking with current students, speaking with faculty and alumni, etc.”

Articles on preparing for and narrowing the college search, as well as those on how to pay for college, received the highest mean scores, with average mean scores of 2.51, 3.1, and 3.19, respectively. Unsurprisingly, the annual rankings of colleges are believed to be the least helpful feature of the publication with an overall mean score of 5.56.

### Creating Individual Weights

If given the option to select individual weights for various elements of the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, most members (58.6 percent) would be neither more or less inclined to recommend the rankings to their students. Over a quarter (26.6 percent) of members would be more likely to recommend the rankings, given the option to choose their own weights (Figure 37).



## METHODOLOGY

NACAC sent the *U.S. News & World Report* Rankings Survey to 9,660 of its 10,915 members electronically in May 2010. NACAC received 2,649 responses for a response rate of 27.4 percent. The table below provides a comparison of the percentage of survey respondents and NACAC members belonging to five different groups. College/university members were slightly under-represented among survey respondents (44.4 percent vs. 49.8 percent), while high

school members were slightly over-represented (43.7 percent vs. 38.8 percent). Together, these two groups accounted over eighty eight percent of the total respondents. For purposes of clarity in this report, only college and high school respondents are presented separately from the total. Organizational members, independent counselors/ educational consultants, and “other” members are included in the “total” figures throughout the report.

Type	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents	Percent of NACAC Membership
College	1176	44.4	49.8
High School	1157	43.7	38.8
Organization	84	3.2	4
Independent Counselor	135	5.1	3.8
Other	97	3.7	3.5

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### Research Topics

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### Standardized Testing in Admission

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