

How Students and Families Use Rankings for College Selection

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Introduction

The field of college admissions has undergone tremendous change in the past few decades and newsmagazine rankings of colleges and universities are one part of that change. Rankings have proliferated and have received much public attention, but are also controversial, and have been criticized by academicians and university administrators. Institutional rankings have particularly affected university admissions offices; admissions directors closely watch the rankings. Yet, how, and the extent to which students utilize rankings in their admissions decisions has been less clear. In the first part of this paper, I situate the growth of rankings within broader changes in the field of college admissions by providing an overview of the changes in college admissions in recent decades, and the ways in which rankings have been part of that change. I then discuss students' use of rankings in their decisions, utilizing data from a research project in which I was involved. Finally, I provide some closing thoughts about the use of rankings and equity concerns within the college admissions arena.

The changing field of college admissions

National rankings of academic institutions began in 1910, but were little known outside of academic circles (Stuart, 1995; Webster, 1985). That changed, however, in 1983, when US News and World Report published its first reputational ranking of U.S. colleges. Although rankings of all types have flourished, US News and World Report's annual rankings, known as the "swimsuit issue" (Machung, 1995), have dominated the newsmagazine rankings and fundamentally changed the way college and universities behave.

The US News and World Report (USNWR) rankings affect the number of applications colleges and universities receive (Fombrun, 1996; Webster, 1992b; Wright, 1990) and shape admissions policies (Art and Science Group, 1995; Hunter, 1995; Art and Sciences Group, 1995). The effect on admissions, according to researchers, is one reason that colleges and universities manipulate the reported data to improve their rankings (Hunter, 1995; Stecklow, 1995; Wright, 1990). Adding volatility to the responses from constituencies, the ranking methodologies change with each iteration (Webster, 1992b; Machung, 1995). For all these reasons, the rankings have provoked wide spread criticism, particularly from universities.

Although the rankings have changed admissions, other concurrent changes are also shaping college admissions. One change has been the divestment of college admissions counseling by both high school counselors and college admissions counselors (Fitzsimmons, 1991; McDonough & Robertson, 1995). This divestment has been one factor in the privatization and commodification of information about and assistance with college admissions. The reasons for this divestment are complex. High school counselors have other, sometimes more immediate, counseling concerns including drug and alcohol issues, students' personal issues and more complex class scheduling (Fitzsimmons, 1991). Additionally, the ratio of counselors to students is too high. According to one source, the recommended counselor to student ratio is 250:1, while the national average is 490:1 (Villalpando and Solarzano, 2003). College admissions counselors, on the other hand, are under pressure to fill classes and to market their college or university to particular demographics, and are less able to focus on helping students find a college that is a good fit (McDonough & Robertson, 1995). This

divestment is undoubtedly unintentional, but as a result of it students and parents need new sources of information (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, Perez, 1998).

Students and parents also need new information because of a third change occurring with the rise of rankings and the divestment of the counseling function, which is the increasing competitiveness of college admissions, particularly at highly selective institutions (McDonough, 1994). The numbers of young people are growing and a higher proportion of these young people are attending college. Some college and universities have not increased the size of their student bodies, and others are not doing so quickly enough. In this competitive environment, students need new information on alternative institutions.

The new information sources, necessitated by the divestment of the counseling function and the competitive admissions environment, include a wide array of products such as CD's, guidebooks, test preparation guides and courses, private college counseling, and magazines which rank colleges and guide students with their college choices. Although some of these products are expensive, many are widely available and affordable to individual people and families, illustrating the ease with which college knowledge has been packaged and sold (McDonough, et al., 1998). In fact, according to one estimate, college bound students and their parents spend an average of \$250 per student on college prep products (McDonough, et al., 1998). Newsmagazine rankings and magazine college guides are widely available and relatively inexpensive sources of information for students and parents, with most retailing under \$10. The wide availability and relatively modest cost of rankings and guides could mean that information about college is accessible and useful to most students.

Sales estimates of these items would support this proposition. McDonough et al. (1998) estimated that newsmagazine rankings issues and stand alone guides from four publishers (US News and World Report, Money, Newsweek/Kaplan, and Time/Princeton Review) generated \$15 million per year in sales revenue. Advertising could account for significant additional revenue. Furthermore, these researchers estimated that US News and World Report sold 2.3 million copies of its regular rankings issue annually, which is indicative of its widespread popularity.

Scholars investigating the popularity of these rankings cite the competitive admissions environment, a lack of alternative cross-institutional information, the unique ambiguity associated with determining the quality of a university, and America's obsession with rankings of all kinds as reasons for rankings' popularity (Fombrun, 1996; Hossler and Foley, 1995; Hunter, 1995; McDonough et. al., 1998; Webster, 1992a&b; Wright, 1990). In a competitive admissions environment, other options are needed because students are less likely to gain admission to the school of their choice, particularly at highly selective colleges. As a result, students and parents must seek new choices that offer the quality they desire. However, there is not a single, neutral, unified source of such information, such as a consumer report for colleges and universities. Therefore, scholars believe that parents and students utilize rankings as they seek cross-institutional data (Hossler and Foley, 1995; McGuire, 1995; Webster, 1992a).

Furthermore, the products of a college or university are ambiguous and difficult for consumers to evaluate (Fombrun, 1996; Litten 1986). Reputation sets consumers' expectations, which in the case of universities includes parents' and students' expectations (Fombrun, 1996). Moreover, reputation is critical to marketing the products of

knowledge-based sectors such as universities (Fombrun, 1996). Since rankings are one indication of that reputation, they can assist consumers in evaluating an ambiguous product (Litten, 1986). In fact, rankings may be important for providing emotional satisfaction with an important, but uncertain, decision about college (McDonough, et al., 1998).

Thus, there are multiple reasons why parents and students may utilize newsmagazine rankings such as USNWR in their decisionmaking. Moreover, the rankings and the magazine guides that accompany them are widely available and relatively inexpensive. It is possible, then, that these magazines are used by most students. In fact, these rankings and magazine guides may be a particularly useful tool for students who have the least amount of information -- that is, first generation, low-income students. However, given the competitive admissions environment, particularly for highly selective colleges and universities, it is possible that students whose sights are set on these types of institutions would be more likely to utilize rankings to find alternatives and compare institutions. Since these students tend to be from high-income families, it is possible that rankings usage patterns may be tied to family income.

A study of rankings usage

A study conducted by a team of researchers I was part of investigated these very issues. Our research questions investigated the profile of students who found newsmagazine college rankings very important; whether nontraditional, low-income, first-generation college, and commuting students utilized newsmagazine college rankings; whether newsmagazine rankings usage rose with family income; and whether students attending highly selective colleges used newsmagazine college rankings.

We utilized data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) 1995 Freshman Survey, a national survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA¹ and the American Council on Education. The sample consisted of 221,897 first-time, full-time freshmen from 432 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. One question on the survey asked students about the extent to which several items influenced their college choice. "Rankings in national magazines" was one item to which students responded. So, the results of our study strictly addressed magazines that contain college and university rankings. The possible responses to the question included: "Not important," "Somewhat important," or "Very important."

Two stages of analysis were conducted. In the first stage, we categorized freshmen according to whether they indicated rankings in national magazines were "not important," "somewhat important, or "very important," in their decision to choose their college, and then analyzed these three groups with respect to demographics, academics, high school behaviors, self-concept, college choice preferences and behaviors, and the types of institutions they attended. Crosstabulations were also examined to investigate whether nontraditional, first-generation, low and high income, and commuting students utilized rankings and also to investigate whether rankings usage differed by institutional selectivity.

The second stage of the analysis focused on multivariate analysis of national rankings usage in college choice. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted among Freshman Survey items measuring the importance of reasons cited in students' decisions to go to college and reasons they chose their specific institution. The second step of this

¹ Additional information and detail about the study methodology can be found in the original article. McDonough, P.M., Antonio, A.L., Walpole, MB., and Perez, L. (1998). College Rankings: Democratized College Knowledge for Whom?. Research in Higher Education, October 1998, Vol. 39, No. 5, 513-537.

stage was a regression of the national rankings usage variable on a set of individual and institutional characteristics. Two logistic regression models were run to understand first how student characteristics were associated with rankings usage and secondly to incorporate measures of institutional characteristics.

We found that overall, 60% of students indicated that rankings were not at all important, 30% cited rankings as somewhat important, and 11% rated them as very important in their college choices. The finding was similar to what The Art and Science Group found in a 2002 poll (Thomson, 2003). First, in terms of race and ethnicity, Asian Americans were more likely to indicate that rankings were very important. Students from college-educated families and high income (>\$75K) families found the rankings more useful than first-generation students. Students who found newsmagazine rankings to be very important were also more likely to ask their high school teachers for advice, receive A grades in high school, and have intentions of getting doctoral, medical or law degrees. At higher rates than other students, students who utilized rankings planned to live away from home during college, expected to be satisfied with college, and had more favorable assessments of their academic ability and motivation. Finally, students who placed high importance on a college's national rankings were more likely to file higher numbers of applications and attend private universities.

In choosing their colleges, students placing high importance on rankings tended to desire to go to college in order to gain a general education, learn more things that interested them, become more cultured, and to improve their study skills. These students were also more likely to choose their freshman college based on school reputation (strong academics, social environment, and success of alumni), the appeal of special programs,

the advice of high school and private counselors, and being recruited by a college representative than were their peers who did not use rankings.

In the crosstabulation results, nontraditional students (age 25 or older), overwhelmingly indicated the rankings were not important in deciding their freshman college, 65% of first-generation college students found newsmagazine rankings unimportant, and nearly three-quarters of commuter students did not find rankings to be important in choosing their college. The crosstabulations also showed that upper income (<\$75K) students had the highest rate of rankings usage, with nearly half of all upper income students acknowledging some role of newsmagazine rankings in their college choice decisions. Finally, it was clear that students choosing lower selectivity schools overwhelmingly found the rankings to be of no importance in their decisions, while over three-quarters of the students in the highest selectivity colleges cited rankings as somewhat or very important in their college choice decisions.

In the factor analysis the specific college choice preference, “Rankings in national magazines,” loaded with three other variables that were indicative of school reputation. Those three were a good academic reputation and the fact that graduates go to top graduate schools and get good jobs. Thus, the factor was clearly indicative of choosing a college based on academics and the quality of the reputation.

The regression results confirmed much in the descriptive analysis. Asian American students were much more likely to report rankings as important in their college choice decision, while Chicano/a students were significantly less likely to refer to national rankings for their choices. Middle and upper class students were more likely to use college rankings in choosing their college. Students with higher degree aspirations

were associated with placing importance on national rankings, and students who expected to be satisfied with college were also more likely to consult rankings. Students with greater concerns for paying for college were more likely to utilize rankings, as were students who submitted greater numbers of college applications. Students concerned with school reputations were significantly more likely (odds ratio=1.5) to use rankings in their process, as were students who received advice and information from teachers and family. Students attending universities and private schools, rather than public four-year colleges, were significantly more likely to have consulted national rankings and weighed them into their choice processes. Furthermore, students competing for admission to highly selective colleges and universities were also more likely to use college rankings. Students choosing to attend local institutions (within 10 miles) were less likely to use rankings.

Thus, from all the data it was clear that rankings were utilized by a minority of students, but those who did use them were students focused on the college's academic reputation; high achieving students; students who sought advice from their teachers, school, and private counselors; students attending universities; students motivated to choose their college because of a liberal education ideal; students attending more selective colleges and universities; and high-income students. The use of newsmagazine rankings were a phenomenon of high socioeconomic status (SES), high-achieving students who attended highly selective institutions and were focused on colleges with reputations for offering a good liberal education and for positioning students favorably for graduate school and professional opportunities. These were also the students for whom the admissions process was the most competitive. It was possible then, that these

students were seeking alternatives, checking reputations, and utilizing the rankings to assuage any discomfort regarding their choices (Fombrun, 1996; Litten, 1986; McDonough et al, 1998). These students who used the rankings, the high SES, high achieving students, were, however, a tiny proportion of the college going population, and were also the students who had access to college knowledge from multiple sources, including parents.

Conclusion

Clearly, the majority of students did not utilize newsmagazine rankings in their college decisions and those who did were the higher socioeconomic, high achieving students aiming to attend highly selective colleges. So despite the widespread availability and relatively low cost of these magazines, students who need information about college the most, low income and first generation college students, were not utilizing these publications for their information. The students who were using the rankings were the same students who have precise notions of what is important in choosing a college and who already know, and act on, perceptions of which institutions are "best." Newsmagazine rankings merely reinforced and legitimized students' status obsessions.

Newsmagazine rankings are part of a larger phenomenon of privatizing college advising. Given other, more demanding counseling missions and high counselor-to-student ratios, most American high schools have divested themselves of any real responsibility for college advising (Fitzsimmons, 1991). Given that colleges are understandably focused on enrolling enough freshmen to fill available seats, college admissions representatives are concerned more with selling their college to a prospective

student than to helping a student find the right college for them (McDonough & Robertson, 1995). Thus, we have the major educational institutions, high schools and colleges, effectively turning over responsibility for the college transition to the individuals who are making the transitions -- students and their families. Effectively, and without intention, secondary and postsecondary educational institutions have ceased attending to college access concerns by not assisting students make the transition to college. The profit-making sector has stepped into that vacuum and filled in the gap that it could, college knowledge. The result of this commodification of college knowledge is that the corporate sector provides what will sell to those who can afford to buy it. Because it is a for-profit sector, though, the information provided is not neutral. Moreover, given the \$15 million sales estimate (McDonough et al., 1998), these companies have a huge stake in providing information that sells, not necessarily the information many students need. Although the marketing of college knowledge is obviously underway, what is possible is to determine the information students most likely to not attend college need and the means for providing them with such information. This is a critical task for the students' futures and, indeed, for the future of higher education.

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