

How Students and Families Use Rankings for College Selection

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WISCAPE Forum
November 20, 2003

Changes in college admissions

- Rankings growth and proliferation
- Divestment of college counseling function
- Competitive admissions environment
- Commodification of college knowledge

College and University Rankings

- Began almost a century ago, but were little known
- US News World Report's rankings, first published in 1983, currently dominate rankings
- Annual rankings issue, known as their swimsuit issue, sells 2.3 million copies
- Rankings and guides from 4 publishers generate \$15 million/yr in sales revenue

College and University Rankings

- Affect the number of applications received
- Shape admissions policies
- Universities may manipulate reported data
- Methodology changes annually
- Rankings provoke widespread criticism

Divestment of college counseling

- High school counselor ratios are high
 - Recommendation 250:1; National Average 490:1
- High school counselors are overwhelmed
 - Scheduling is more complex
 - Drug/alcohol counseling
 - Students' personal/emotional needs

Divestment of college counseling

- Admissions officers less focused on helping student find right "fit"
- More concerned with marketing college/university to particular demographics
- Need to fill a class

Competitive Admissions Environment

- Mass access to higher education
- Demographic shifts- more young people
- Higher proportion attending college
- Colleges are not growing or are not growing quickly enough to accommodate students
- Particularly competitive at highly-selectives

Students and parents need:

- Information about college
- Alternative colleges and universities
- Look to private sector information sources

Commodification of college knowledge

- CD's
- Books
- Guides
- Rankings
- Test preparation
- Private counseling
- College knowledge is packaged and sold

Why use rankings?

- Widely available and inexpensive information
- Determining university quality is difficult; reputation is key
- Need cross-institutional data on alternatives
- Seeking comfort with important, but uncertain decision
- American obsession with rankings

Who uses rankings?

- May be widely utilized because they are inexpensive
- Low income, first generation who need information
- Students seeking highly-selective who need alternatives in a competitive environment - usually high income

Research questions

- What is the profile of students who do and do not use rankings?
- Do non traditional, low income, first generation, commuter students use rankings?
- Does usage rise with family income?
- Do students attending highly selectives use rankings?

Data Source

- CIRP 1995 Freshman survey
- 221,897 first-time, full-time freshman
- 432 four-year institutions
- One survey question asked students about the importance of several factors on college choice; rankings was one factor
- Not important, somewhat important, very important

First stage of analysis

- Grouped freshman by response - NI, SI, VI
- Investigated demographics, high school behaviors, self-concepts, college choice behaviors, and institution type for each group
- Crosstabulations to see if nontraditional, first generation, income groups, and commuters used rankings

Second stage of analysis

- Multivariate analysis of rankings usage
- Factor analysis
- Two logistic regression models
 - Association of student characteristics with rankings use
 - Incorporate institutional measures

What we found

- 60% did not use rankings at all
- 30% said they were somewhat important
- 11% responded that rankings were very important in college choice

Rankings were very important

- Asian-Americans
- College educated families
- High income families (>75K)
- Sought PhD, MD, JD degrees

Rankings were very important

- Asked teachers for advice
- Received A grades in high school
- Rated their academic ability and motivation highly

Rankings were very important

- Planned to live away from home in college
- Expected to be satisfied with college
- Filed high numbers of applications
- Attended private universities and highly selective institutions

Rankings were very important

- Attended college to:
 - Gain a general education
 - Learn more things
 - Become more cultured
 - Improve study skills

Rankings were very important

- Chose college based on:
 - Strong academic reputation
 - Special programs
 - Advice of high school/ private counselors
 - Recruited

Rankings were not important

- Nontraditional
- First generation
- Commuters
- Attended lower selectivity schools

Factor analysis in college choice

- Rankings
- Good academic reputation
- Graduates go to top graduate schools
- Graduates get good jobs

More likely to use rankings

- Asian Americans
- Middle and upper class
- Higher degree aspirations
- Apply to many colleges
- Receive advice from teachers and families

More likely to use rankings

- Expect to be satisfied with college
- Concern with paying for college
- Concern with school reputation
- Attend universities/private institutions
- Apply to highly selective colleges

Less likely to use rankings

- Mexican-American
- Attend public four year colleges
- Attend a college within 10 miles of home

Overall - Who uses rankings?

- High SES
- High achieving
- Attend highly selective institutions
- Focus on good academic education
- Focus on good graduate schools
- Focus on professional opportunities

Overall - Who uses rankings?

- Tiny proportion of students
- Students for whom process is most competitive
- Have access to multiple information sources
- Have the most material resources to buy college knowledge

Why use rankings?

- Checking reputations?
- Seeking alternatives?
- Increasing comfort with choices?

Overall - Who is not using rankings?

- Most students
- Low SES students
- Least selective/least competitive
- Fewest information sources
- Least material resources
- Students who need the most information

Access and Equity Concerns

- Divestment of counseling function leaves students without needed information
- Privatized information fills the gap-marketing college knowledge
- Privatized sources are not available to all
- Privatized sources provide information that sells, not information many students need

Closing thoughts

- Rankings feed students' status obsessions
- Rankings are part of larger privatization of college counseling
- Many students need to know what college is and why it is important to attend
- Colleges need to reach out to the students who need basic information