**[A Guide to Understanding College Rankings](http://www.theadmissiongame.com/blog/archives/264)**

It’s that time of the year to play the college rankings sweepstakes. The Princeton Review’s annual review of 373 “best colleges” hit the newsstands earlier this month. *U.S News & World Report* has since released its “America’s Best Colleges” edition and the parade of ranking guides goes on as editors ply the “science” of their surveys on an audience of consumers eager for a scorecard that quantifies the mythical pecking order of colleges.

Before you get out your credit card or rush to printout a list of the “best” colleges, take a moment to ask yourself three questions:

1. ***Who is defining the “best” and what does this definition mean to me?*** References to the “best” in any context are heavily value-laden and offered from the perspective of the person making the statement. Be discriminating. Know that the definitions of “best” that are thrown around to sell magazines may not—and, in fact, should not—be the beginning point for your own definition.
2. ***What do the editors of ranking guides know about me/my student?*** Where, for example, do they talk about the colleges that are best for the bright but timid student who wants to study classical archaeology or the student who learns best through engagement in the classroom or the young person whose sense of self and direction is still emerging? What tangible takeaways do college rankings offer that apply to your situation?
3. ***Where is the evidence that rankings will make a difference in our college planning outcomes?*** More specifically, ask yourself, “What’s in it for me?” Unlike the purchase process with regard to other commodities (cars, appliances, etc.), the ultimate choice of a college is the product of a *mutual* selection process. Rankings don’t get kids into college nor do they point you in the direction that is best *for you*.

Over the last 25 years, the college-going process has been turned upside down by ranking guides. Whereas the focus should be on the kids—and what is best for them—college ranking guides put the focus on destinations that are presumed to be most desirable. In reality, they are artificial metrics for quality in education that detract from sensible, student-centered decision-making.

Herein lies the disconnect. If ranking guides are truly useful to consumers, why do so many students apply to schools where the chances of gaining admission are less than one out of four? And where is the usefulness of college ranking guides when barely half of the students entering college this fall will graduate from any college in 4-5 years?

Frankly, the rankings phenomenon is growing wearisome. The notion that all of America’s best colleges can be rank ordered in any context (“party schools,” academic reputation,” etc.)—that the mythical pecking order can actually be quantified—is foolhardy. It makes too many wandering assumptions about people and places, cultures and values, quality and—believe it or not—fit.

Among other things, rankings promote a destination orientation and an obsessive approach to getting into highly ranked colleges. *Where* the student might be headed becomes more important than what is to be accomplished or *why* that goal might be important or *how* the institution might best serve the student. When distracted by the blinding power and prestige that rankings bestow upon a few institutions, it is easy to lose sight of one’s values and priorities as well as the full range of opportunities that exist.

Keep rankings in perspective as you proceed with college planning. Resist the temptation to obsess on a set of numbers. Instead, focus on developing a list of colleges based *who* you are, *why* you want to go to college and what you want to accomplish during your undergraduate years. And don’t lose sight of how you like to learn. Stay student-centered and you will discover the colleges that are best for you.

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