

A Few Thoughts From Jeffrey Brenzel, Dean of Admissions, Yale University, 2005-2013

Every year, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Money*, and a few other national magazines publish college rankings. And every year, Yale is at or near the top of the lists. I am writing to say that there are many excellent reasons to apply to Yale, but Yale's position in the rankings is not one of them.

Make no mistake: the publication of college rankings is a business enterprise that capitalizes on anxiety about college admissions. Ranking lists do not provide much useful information for making decisions about where you should apply. Their main flaw is obvious but worth stating: the more or less arbitrary factors that go into the ranking calculations often have little to do with what will be important to your educational experience.

I do not mean to vilify the magazines that create such lists. They merely respond to consumer demand. Rather, I would like to illustrate the hazards of relying on the rankings and to make a case for a more personal and holistic approach to deciding on your list of colleges.

To better understand the phenomenon of the rankings, it is important to look at three things: why they are so popular, what is wrong with them, and why they have a bad influence on college decision-making.

What Drives Public Interest in Rankings?

The college search process can be a formidable task of sifting through enormous amounts of information, and the stakes are high. Ranking systems have an immediate and obvious appeal: they seem to simplify making sense of complicated and confusing information.

We have also become accustomed to relying on rating systems as consumers. When buying a vacuum cleaner or a television set, we can turn to *Consumer Reports*, which employs testing labs, engineers, surveys, and independent experts. By these means, they are able to condense and filter a great deal of information. We've learned from experience that there are good reasons to trust their advice, and the college ranking lists depend on people making the assumption that they are providing a similarly useful service.

What's Wrong with College Rankings?

A college, however, is not a vacuum cleaner. Choosing a school is a far more personal, subjective, and ultimately expensive decision. Yet despite the greater importance and complexity of selecting a college, college rankings systems all take a far *less* thorough and scientific approach than *Consumer Reports* does when testing vacuum cleaners.

Another problem with rankings is that they allow the dominant player – *U.S. News and World Report*, a magazine that has actually gone defunct and exists now only as a purveyor of rankings -- to exert undue influence. A former Yale admissions officer, now working in college counseling at a high school, shared this story with me. Each year, she helps students who have just completed their junior year create a list of colleges that are a good fit with their interests, personalities, and achievements.

Each summer, the students visit those schools with their families to get a first-hand look. When they return to high school in the fall, despite what they have seen on their visits and what they know about their prospects, many of the students have created new lists of their college preferences. These new lists always seem to correlate with the rankings in *U.S. News*. Students tend to discard excellent and appropriate colleges ranked lower in *U.S. News* and to add “stretch” schools that are unlikely to offer them admission. She tells me she had this experience with “truly depressing regularity.”

Why is That Bad?

Rankings promote the notion that the college you attend signals something about your place in the world. The signal translates as something like this: “People will think better of me if I attend a more highly-ranked school.” Rankings encourage students (and parents) to internalize the myth that where you go to college defines your value and determines your future success in life.

What is the reality? This country happens to have hundreds of outstanding undergraduate programs, each offering more opportunities than any student could possibly pursue over four years. It will be up to the student to make something out of those opportunities, and it will not be the school that makes something out of the student.

Meanwhile, the formulas used to rank schools are based on factors that in themselves are often irrelevant to individual students. Their composite scores reflect alumni giving rates, student-to-teacher ratios, median SAT scores, persistence to graduation, admissions selectivity and other data that provide little information about specific program strengths, honors programs or the general way in which the school lifts and supports student aspirations. The simplicity and clarity that ranking systems seem to offer are not only misleading, but can also be harmful. Rankings tend to ignore the very criteria that may be most important to an applicant, such as specific academic offerings, intellectual and social climate, ease of access to faculty, international opportunities and placement rates for careers or for graduate and professional school.

Rankings have also turned out to be bad for colleges. They encourage schools to expend resources on things that move their ranking positions rather than things that serve their students. They diminish the appeal of colleges that serve many students extremely well but do not fit the performance parameters that the rankings measure. At one lower-ranked college, for example, students without strong prior academic records may tend to make tremendous gains, while at a higher-ranked school, even better-prepared students may tend to underperform their potential. The ranking systems provide no way to find out which is which.

A Better Approach

Your high school academic record, teacher recommendations, extracurricular activities, test scores, and personal objectives will determine the range of colleges where you stand a good chance of admission. If your school has a good counseling office, you should certainly work with your college counselor to develop a reasonable sense of the different kinds of schools that lie within that range.

Then simply keep in mind that the “ranking” differences among the schools within that group are likely to matter far less to your college experience than how you yourself decide to explore and engage the opportunities available at those schools. Look at different types of schools. Big schools and small schools. Schools focused on liberal arts and schools focused on technical programs. Schools known best for high academic standards and schools known best for their entrepreneurial spirit, outstanding extracurricular activities or social life. Schools with strong programs in your area of interest. Schools with interesting international opportunities. Decide which of these things is most important to you.

As you examine different types of institutions, your own feelings and thoughts are likely to change. Before zeroing in too quickly on what you think you want, give yourself time to absorb the ways in which colleges differ. Give yourself time to change your mind as you look at very different *kinds* of schools.

Perhaps you feel absolutely certain of the kind of school you want to attend, and you have a list of such places where you have a reasonable chance of admission. Even so, I urge you to apply to a couple of schools that do not fit the profile, but that you find interesting for one reason or another. Why? I have often seen students respond to a college very differently once they have been admitted in the spring than they did when visiting the prior summer. Students change in some important ways during their senior year in high school as they look outward to the rest of their lives, and they learn a great deal about colleges along the way. Give yourself the option in the spring of heading in a direction you did not anticipate in the fall.

Finally, once you have finished your applications, relax. You will very probably gain admission to some of your chosen colleges. You will probably have a few campuses to revisit as you make your final selection. You will also be prepared to attend college with the understanding that its rank does not correlate with what you are going to do there and how fulfilling the experience will be. What you accomplish in college – and in the years after – will instead be a function of how well you engage the incredible variety of opportunities and challenges that college presents.