

Ethics and Leadership

Rank My College? How?

**By
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Well, the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of America's colleges and universities came out in early September. There was a little less fanfare this time. Academics have always considered the *U.S. News* rankings problematic -- even presidents of the most prestigious schools have lacked enthusiasm for them. But the market is what the market is, and the rankings quickly became essential not only to high school students' college search, but to the work of enrollment management executives everywhere.

Until recently. Concerned about *U.S. News*' methodology, a number of prestigious liberal arts colleges announced last year that they no longer intended to participate. The rankings' emphasis on admissions selectivity (number of students denied), size of endowment, and other criteria failed to capture what many schools considered distinctive about the education they offered. And it was no secret that *U.S. News* had hit upon a brilliant marketing idea designed to spike the circulation of a fading conservative newsweekly. Others had noticed as well. In 2005, the *Washington Monthly* issued its first set of rankings. The magazine created a new set of criteria based on its understanding of the purpose of American higher education. How many graduates go into some sort of career that benefits American society, whether social service or military?

How many graduates go on to pursue graduate work? What about access for those of lesser means?

The *Monthly's* report turned the *U.S. News* rankings upside-down. Few of *U.S. News's* top ten were in the *Monthly's* top ten. More surprising was the terrific jump in the standings some schools made with this new way of measuring. Unsurprising to many was the presence of religiously affiliated colleges in the *Monthly's* rankings. South Carolina's Presbyterian College, 106 in *U.S. News*, holds first place in the *Monthly's* 2007 rankings. Wheaton College, evangelist Billy Graham's alma mater, is third. Seton Hill, that small Catholic school on the other side of the state, is 17, just above Benedictine St John's of Minnesota and immediately below Franciscan Siena.

Does it matter? I think so. There is no substitute for academic excellence in higher education. A college's primary purposes, however, are to provide society graduates with the skills needed for the country to thrive *and* to develop young adults who become responsible citizens. The "name" colleges will tell you that they do that, and they do. But including such data in the calculus of college rankings makes a statement about a *philosophy* of education unlike any other. I like it here at Alvernia. I like it because we do the kinds of things they do at Presby or Wheaton or Siena. There are many ways to look at a college education. We do best when we look at the whole person.

Yo! (That's Philly talk.) Some of y'all are wondering where I'm hanging out these days. Francis Hall 307. It's my house, but you're welcome anytime.

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