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Low Ranking May Not Tell Whole Story

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U. S. News & World Report released its latest college rankings Thursday, and cheers were heard in Cambridge, Mass., and Princeton, N.J., as Harvard and Princeton shared the No. 1 spot for the second year in a row.

The reaction was much more muted in Tampa, home to the University of South Florida, which U.S. News relegated to the third of four tiers of schools - those ranked 130 through 181 out of 248 universities.

Although universities covet a high ranking, or make excuses for a low one, those in the know about U.S. higher education say the U.S. News & World Report list, and rankings from competitors such as The Princeton Review and Newsweek, don't carry much influence when it comes to how students go about selecting a college.

"The reason schools get so bent out of shape about it has much more to do with alumni, and the grief they get when their rankings slip," said Rick Hesel, a partner in the Art & Science Group, a Baltimore-based consultant to colleges and universities across the country.

A low ranking "wounds the self-image of a school," said Hesel, and some go to great lengths to improve their standing by courting the presidents and provosts of other universities whose opinions are factored into the ratings.

Not A Big Factor

Instead of sending out glossy magazines touting their accomplishments, schools "should spend a lot less time worrying about the rankings and more time on the things they can control," Hesel said.

An Art & Science Group poll backs up what Hesel is talking about.

Of 500 college-bound students surveyed in 2002, campus visits (cited by 65 percent of students as a factor they considered) were the No. 1 influence on student enrollment decisions, followed by parents or other family members (39 percent) and current students or graduates (33 percent).

College rankings was the 11th most important factor, at 12 percent, and only 20 percent of the students surveyed said they had read them.

Despite that, "Colleges care a lot about the ratings, and in a sense play to them," said Toby Waldorf, a Los Angeles-based college admissions consultant.

The ratings are a good starting point for a discussion about which school might be right for a student, but they don't give students a clue about a school's personality, the most important ingredient in campus happiness, Waldorf said.

Making A Choice

Waldorf relates a story about a student who came to her, whose interests included assembling model cars.

After talking with the student and his parents, Waldorf suggested they look at Western Washington University, a college far off U.S. News & World Report's radar screen, but one with a strong program in automotive design.

“If they only looked at the rankings, this school wouldn't even register,” Waldorf said.

USF is an example of what little effect the U.S. News rankings have.

Despite the school's mediocre ranking by the magazine, more than 41,000 students attended USF last year, making it the third- largest public university in Florida. This year, it attracted nearly 17,000 applications, an 11 percent increase from last year. The school had to place 800 students on a waiting list.

There are some crowns that universities just refuse to wear.

When The Princeton Review last week anointed The University at Albany (N.Y.) the nation's top party school, university officials protested in a letter to The Chronicle of Higher Education. And in a letter posted on the university's Web site, Albany's interim president blasted the rankings as unscientific and an inaccurate picture of the school.

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