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# THE U.S. NEWS BEAUTY CONTEST

*U.S. News & World Report* has just come out with its annual ranking of colleges, which makes me think of Miss Teen South Carolina 2007. If you rely as I do on a GPS, you may even be one of those “U.S. Americans” who “don’t have maps.” The fact is that the *U.S. News* rankings are mostly a beauty contest—when what we really need is a map.

For *U.S. News*, the leading factor in ranking schools is “peer assessment.” Some 25 percent of each school’s ranking is based on . . . surveys emailed to administrators at other schools, inquiring about “intangibles such as faculty dedication to teaching.” So to determine how dedicated the teachers are at Princeton, they ask the provost of Harvard—and vice versa. No wonder some college administrators boycott the *U.S. News* surveys. This year, Princeton and Harvard staffers must be on exceptionally good terms: the schools tied for first in the rankings. This is the biggest and dumbest part of the ranking; call it the swimsuit competition.

The next category, accounting for 20 percent of each school’s score, is freshman retention and graduation rate. For *U.S. News*, “The higher the proportion of freshmen who return to campus the following year and eventually graduate, the better a school is apt to be at offering the classes and services students need to succeed.” Or it might mean that a school is unadventurous about the students it admits, and that easy grading makes it very hard to flunk out. As colleges play to win a place in *U.S. News*, they are less willing to take a chance on talented underachievers (with high SATs but low grades, for instance). Once they let someone in, the pressure to keep a high retention rate encourages schools to inflate students’ grades and move them down the assembly line. Grade inflation is considered a major problem by faculty both at Harvard (tied with Princeton for number one) and at Yale (number three)—while Princeton has made serious efforts to enforce more honest grading.

The next category is “faculty resources” (20 percent), which mashes up numbers like the percentages of large and tiny classes, faculty pay and qualifications, and the use of adjunct and part-time teachers. While average class size is critical, it puzzles me why faculty salaries are important but the ratio of class meetings taught by graduate students isn’t. (Most schools won’t cough up this last number; you actually have to call up faculty members and ask them.) Most of the leading National Universities in the *U.S. News* ranking rely heavily on graduate students to interact with students both in grading and discussion sections. Professors are mainly lecturers.

Next comes “student selectivity” (15 percent). Fair enough. If Princeton can cherry-pick students, its classroom discussions will probably be more enlightening than those at Podunk Tech. Of course, a high ranking from *U.S. News* leads thousands more students to apply to a given school, which affords its admission department the luxury of being . . . more selective. Kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy here.

Ten percent of each school’s ranking is simply bought and paid for—as colleges move up in the rankings through “generous per-student spending.” If you’re wondering why small schools, historically black schools, and religious schools rarely make the *U.S. News* ranking, and why the top schools this year (as every year) are mostly the richest colleges in America—this would be why. Of course, it’s at just such schools that faculty tenure and pay are based not on teaching quality (or even quantity), but on how many books or articles professors crank out—typically on obscure subjects unrelated to their teaching. The average such scholarly book in the humanities sells just 300 copies, which mostly sit unread in libraries.

The next category is kind of puzzling: “graduation rate performance” (5 percent). Basically it amounts to totaling up a bet. *U.S. News* looks at how well it thought, years back, a school was going to do on improving its graduation rate—then compares its prognostication to what actually happened. Schools that beat the point spread get a leg up. Call this category the talent competition—do the judges really care how well those girls can juggle?

Finally, *U.S. News* asks schools what percentage of alumni give money every year. Since it doesn’t ask “how much” but rather “how many,” this metric actually makes sense. Who better than those putting a school’s education to use to judge how much the school was worth to them? This category is very telling—which leaves me wondering why *U.S. News* weights it at only 5 percent.

Entirely absent from *U.S. News*’s evaluations are two questions that educators like me consider essential:

- *How solid is a school’s curriculum?* Must students take fundamental courses in U.S. history, Western Civilization, classical philosophy, and great works of literature? For instance, at Harvard, which recently overhauled its curricular requirements, students can easily graduate without having read Shakespeare or the Constitution. As one student complains, “The new General Education program requires no real exposure to a body of knowledge or intellectual skill. . . . This is by far the worst thing about Harvard.”
- *Does a college encourage intellectual diversity?* Are undergrads free to speak their minds on issues Americans differ about? Or do speech codes and punitive grading enforce a grim uniformity? Are

teachers fair and reasonably objective? At the University of Pennsylvania (tied for fourth this year), for example, one student complains of “professors who are ideologically driven. They care less about teaching history and more about teaching their political views.”

These subjects provoke controversy, which is why a nice, apolitical magazine like *U.S. News* prefers to evade them. But parents and students ignore them at their peril.

*John Zmirak is editor of Choosing the Right College 2010–2011: The Whole Truth about America’s Top Schools (ISI Books) and [www.collegeguide.org](http://www.collegeguide.org).*

If you would like to schedule an interview with Dr. Zmirak, please contact Carol Houseal, Director of Communications, at [media@isi.org](mailto:media@isi.org) or 302-524-6167.

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