

Rankings Matter Relatively Little in College Choice

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

While the near-obsessive attention given this time of year by the media, many college presidents, trustees, and other senior college officials to the *US News and World Report* college rankings might lead an uninformed observer to conclude that the *US News* sophist's scorecards of higher learning are the *sine qua non* of quality, amidst all the frenzy very few people have stopped to ask whether the rankings matter to the students filling college classrooms every fall. We did, and what we found stands in stark contrast to conventional assumptions about the rankings.

In fact, for most prospective students, the rankings matter little: A campus tour, the advice given by parents, the perceptions gleaned from alumni and current students, or even the information available in college viewbooks or on college web sites influence college choice far more than rankings.

So who is paying attention to the rankings? Our anecdotal evidence suggests that boards of trustees might be at the top of the list, and that many of their reactions to the rankings may be misguided. Since the *US News* rankings are largely a measure of institutional wealth, board members concerned about boosting their institution's place in the *US News* hierarchy might first reach deeper into their own pockets for a multimillion dollar gift.

While some recently published studies (Ehrenberg) indicate that the rankings have a modest influence on selectivity at elite private institutions, such studies raise a critical question that none answer: Compared to what? Our evidence suggests that college leaders would be much better off if they gave the time now devoted to hand-wringing over the rankings to more vigorous pursuit of academic innovation, careful consideration of how campus tours are handled, the content and quality of communications with parents, or determining with greater imagination and conviction the true distinctions of their institutions.

Richard A. Hesel
Publisher, StudentPoll
Principal, Art & Science Group, LLC

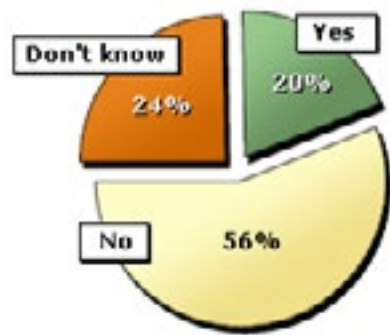
Q Are many students looking at college rankings as they consider where to apply or enroll?

A *StudentPoll* found that only a small segment of students look at the college rankings. Specifically, one-fifth of the 500 college-bound students we surveyed actually reported reading any articles or reports that ranked colleges as they considered where to apply and enroll.

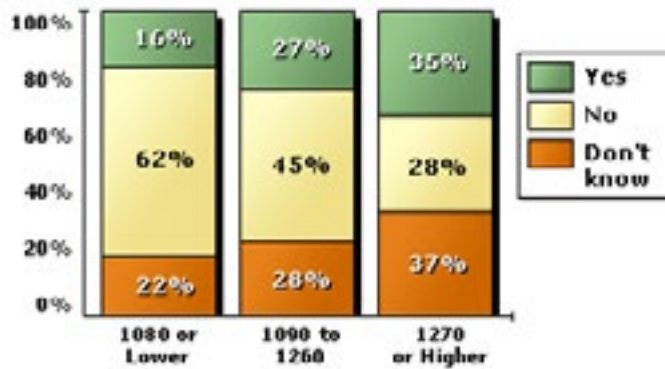
When we asked students whether they read articles or reports on rankings to make college application and enrollment decisions, 56 percent said they do not look at any rankings, 24 percent couldn't remember (an indication that they didn't make much of an impact) and only 20 percent acknowledged reading the rankings.

Among those who did rely on the rankings (only 100 out of the 500 students surveyed), notable subgroup differences include:

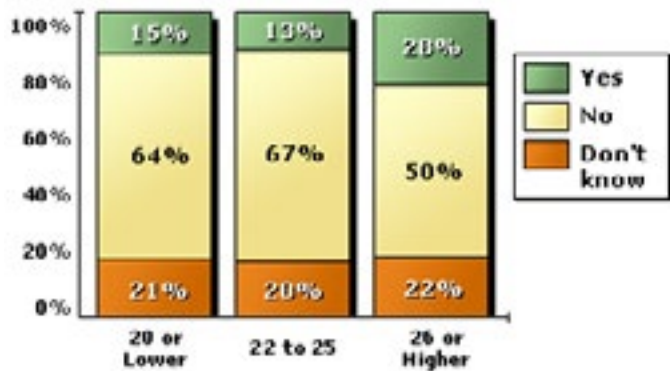
- A higher proportion of the most highly qualified students – those with SAT and ACT scores of 1270+ and 26+ respectively – were more likely to have read *US News* rankings than students with lower test scores.
- Students from families with higher incomes (\$75K above) also were more likely to have read *US News* rankings in college decisions and students with family incomes below \$75K.



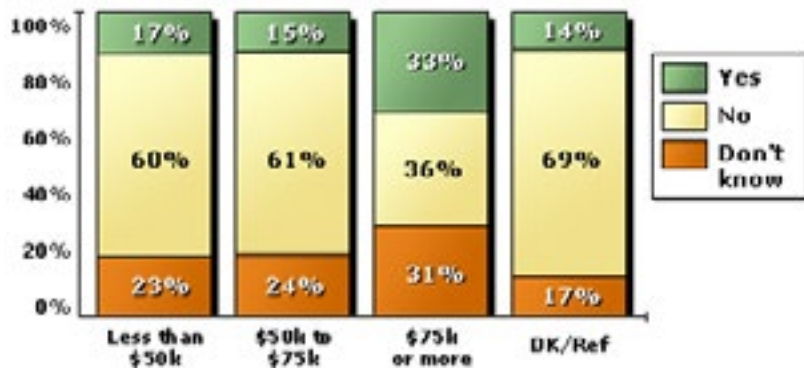
Graph 1: Students Who Read Articles or Reports on College Rankings
Total Respondents: 500



Graph 2: Students Who Read Articles or Reports on College Rankings (By SAT test scores)
Total Respondents: 500



Graph 3: Students Who Read Articles or Reports on College Rankings (By ACT test scores)
Total Respondents: 500



Graph 4: Students Who Read Articles or Reports on College Rankings (By Household Income)
Total Respondents: 500

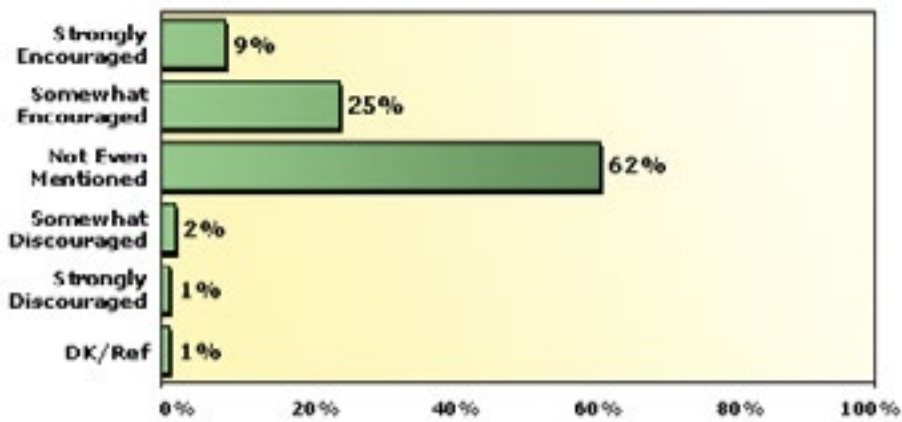
Q OK, not many students look at the rankings, but what about their parents?

A Far from encouraging their children to look at the rankings, 62 percent of parents did not even mention college rankings to their sons and daughters. In fact, only 9 percent of all respondents surveyed indicated that their parents had strongly encouraged them to look at the rankings.

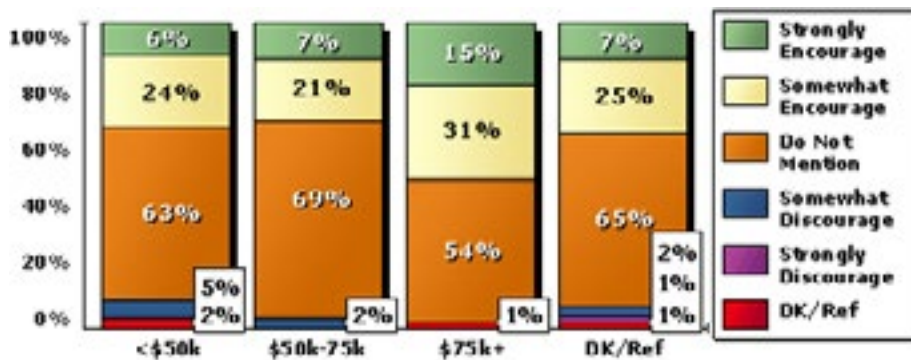
When we asked students if their parents had strongly encouraged, somewhat encouraged, somewhat discouraged, strongly discouraged or not even mentioned the rankings to them, only a third indicated that their parents had mentioned rankings at all. Nine percent and 25 percent, respectively, said their parents had strongly encouraged or somewhat encouraged them to look at rankings.

However, the findings show some important subgroup differences:

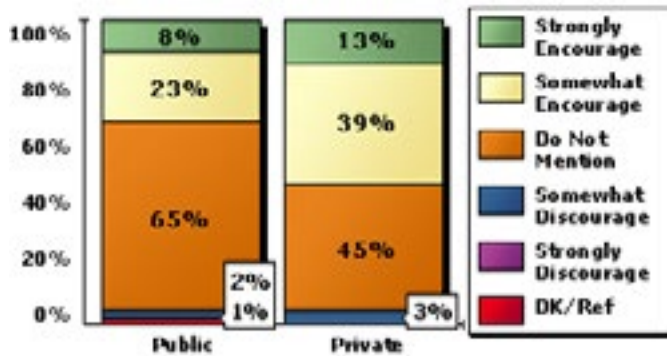
- Parents of students with household incomes of \$75K and above were more likely to strongly encourage their children to consider the rankings (15 percent) compared to those from lower income families (7 percent of parents in the \$50K-\$75K income range and 6 percent with incomes of \$50K or lower).
- Students attending private schools were more likely to report that their parents encouraged them to look at the rankings (52 percent) compared to those attending public high school (31 percent).



Graph 5: Parental Influence in Encouraging Students to Look at College Rankings
Total Respondents: 500



Graph 6: Parental Influence in Encouraging Students to Look at College Rankings (by Household Income)
Total Respondents: 500

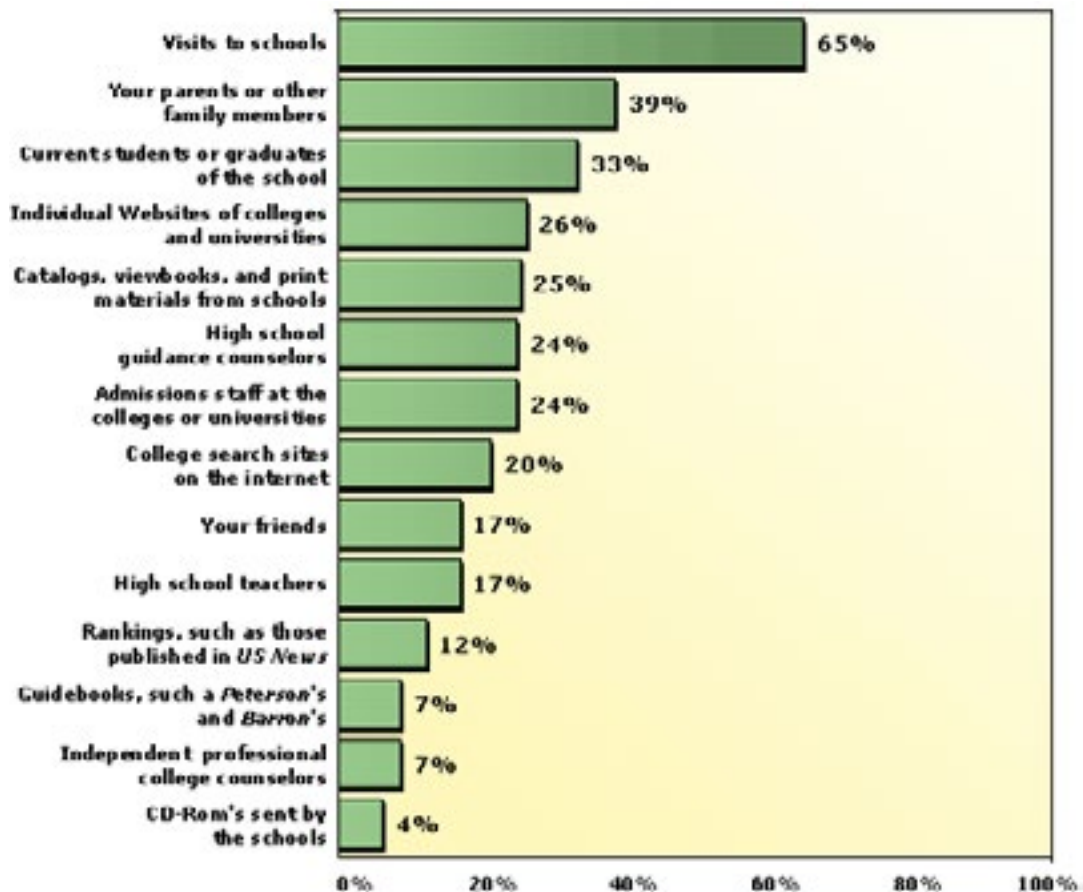


Graph 7: Parental Influence in Encouraging Students to Look at High School Rankings (By Type of High School)
Total Respondents: 500

Q How much influence do rankings have in comparison to other sources of information and advice, such as college web sites or the campus visit?

A In two words, very little. Other factors such as the campus visit figure more prominently in students' enrollment decisions.

When we asked students which sources of information and advice were most influential in their decisions about where to apply, only 12 percent named rankings. Conversely, 65 percent said campus visits were very influential. Other very influential sources cited included parents (39 percent), current students or alumni of a college (33 percent), individual college web sites (26 percent), and print materials from colleges (25 percent). In fact, the rankings were only slightly more influential than guidebooks such as *Peterson's* and *Barron's*, which ranked near the bottom of influential sources of information.



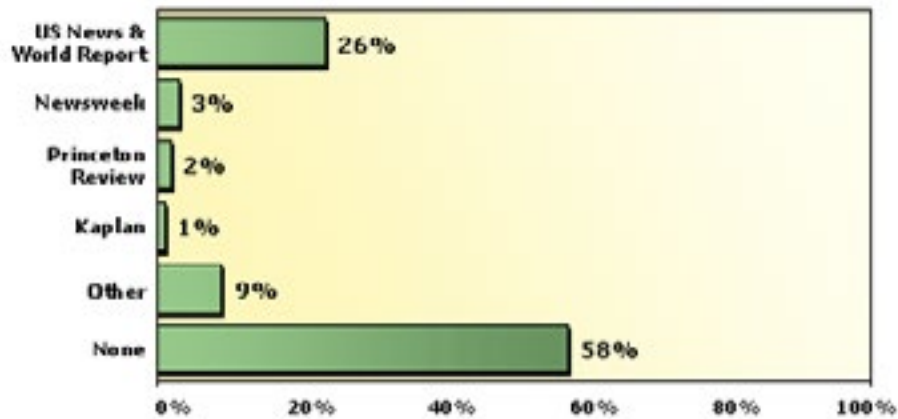
Graph 8: Most Influential Sources of Information in Student's Enrollment Decisions
Total Respondents: 500

Q Which of the various ranking sources are read most by students?

A While the rankings are read by only a small segment of the college-bound populations we surveyed, those who do read are far more likely to read the *US News* rankings than any other.

Twenty-six percent of the 100 students who said they read the rankings in college decision-making, indicated that *US News* was the single most important source of information.

To put things in perspective about the overall impact of rankings, out of the 500 students surveyed, only 26 students cited *US News* as the single most important source of rankings they read to make judgments about where they should enroll.



Graph 9: Single Most Important Source of College Rankings
Total Respondents: 100

Q When do college rankings have the greatest influence on college consideration and choice?

A A majority of students who said that they relied on a source of rankings in deciding where to enroll, reported that this information made them more interested in a college or university or more comfortable with decisions they had already made.

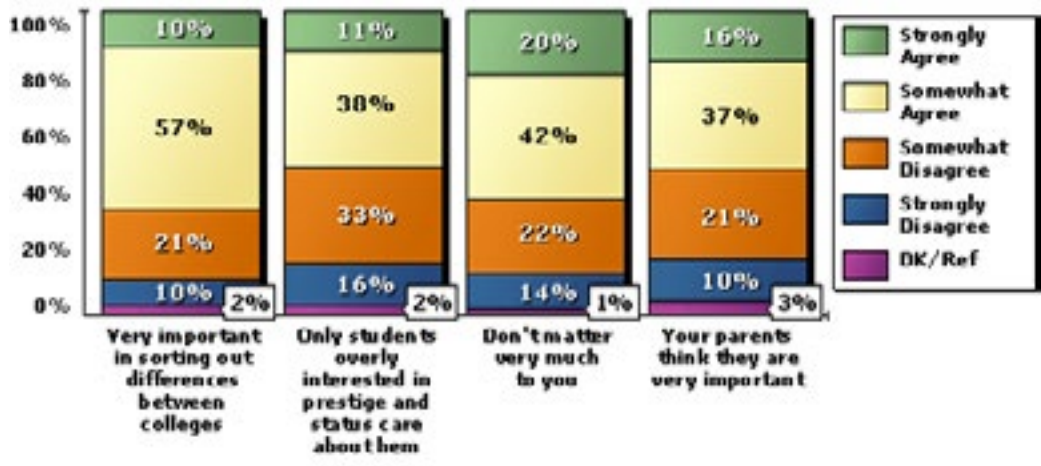
In our study, we asked students if their interest in a school had changed based on the rankings. In particular, we wanted to know if the rankings used by students had made them more or less interested in certain colleges, encouraged them to consider schools for the first time, or actually made them rule out certain college or universities. Again, it is important to note that we only posed this question to those students who indicated that they relied most on *US News* or another source of rankings to make critical decisions about where to attend college.

Q On a more personal level, what do students really think about the rankings?

A The majority of students agreed that rankings don't matter all that much to them.

To gauge their personal attitudes about the rankings, we read respondents a series of statements, including the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the rankings mattered a great deal to them, that rankings were only of interest to students overly concerned about prestige and status, among others.

Only 10 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that rankings are very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges. Sixteen percent strongly agreed and ten percent strongly disagreed that rankings were very important to their parents. Likewise, respondents were equally divided as to whether the rankings only matter to students interested in prestige and status.



Graph 10: Agreement by Students with Statements about College Rankings
 Total Respondents: 500