

studentPOLL

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Rankings such as those in U.S. News and World Report and Money Magazine have little impact on college choice. They are used less frequently by students and have far less influence than most other sources of information and advice.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The rankings of colleges in *U.S. News and World Report*, *Money Magazine*, and other popular news-magazines are a source of vigorous and often acrimonious debate on America's campuses. The methodologies used to compile the rankings, suspicions that some institutions fictionalize the data they report, criticism of leadership when an institution's rankings slip or stack up unfavorably, disagreement about the impact of the rankings on student choice — these and many other factors fuel the ongoing controversy. The presumed influence of the rankings has even led institutions to formulate admissions and educational policy specifically to improve their ratings.

As we have observed private and public institutions around the nation trumpeting favorable rankings and lamenting rankings that they believe are unfair or unjustified, we've wondered... Is all the fuss justified? Do the rankings have so much influence over student application and selection decisions that they merit all the

anxiety and attention we give them?

Frankly, we had no idea. But we believed the questions had to be answered on the basis of reliable evidence. Thus, we decided to devote our first survey for *studentPOLL* to this issue.

The editors of *U.S. News and World Report* have often described the college rankings issue as "just another tool" in college choice and downplayed its influence. They're right, as the *studentPOLL* findings reported here conclusively document.

The implications for institutional behavior are clear. If you and your colleagues are committing much of your time, energy, and resources to efforts intended to exploit good rankings or minimize the damage from unfavorable ones, you should turn your attention to more productive pursuits. And put your latest issues of *U.S. News and World Report* and *Money Magazine* where they belong: on the shelf with *Barron's* and *Peterson's*, or maybe in the pile with the old *Sports Illustrated* college football predictions.

1. Among the students who utilized them, the value of the newsmagazine rankings in college choice is far lower than that of other major sources of information and advice.

ABOUT *student*POLL

*student*POLL is an authoritative national survey that measures the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of higher-ability, college-bound high school students and their parents. Available only by subscription, it is published quarterly by Art & Science Group, Inc., marketing consultants to higher education and the non-profit sector. The National Advisory Board suggests topics to be studied in *student*POLL and reviews survey instruments. Board members serve in a voluntary capacity as individuals, not as representatives of their institutions.

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SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The findings reported in this issue of *student*POLL are based on recent in-depth telephone interviews with a scientific national sample of 500 high school seniors who were about to enroll in four-year colleges in the fall of 1995. To qualify, respondents must have achieved a combined SAT score of 1,000 or higher (before recentering). The sample was drawn to represent five broad areas of intended college study: engineering, science, and computer science; social sciences; humanities and arts; business; and education and allied health professions. Other analytical variables taken into account in the study design and sample included geography, and family income. Questions about survey methods or findings, should be addressed to Art & Science Group, Inc., see page 8.

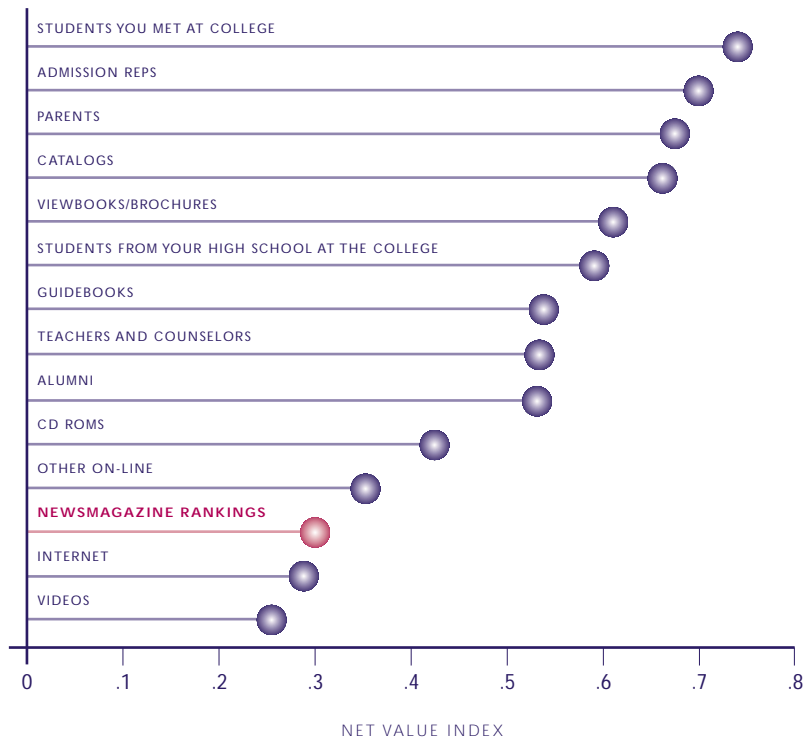
A reliable measure of the impact of the newsmagazine rankings on college choice is the value students assign to them in the admissions process. Here the rankings fare poorly, placing almost dead last in their value to users. We asked respondents to assign one of three levels of value to each of the information sources evaluated in the *student*POLL survey: extremely valuable, somewhat valuable, or not valuable at all. We then created a Net Value Index based on the following formula:

$$\frac{\text{Proportion citing as extremely valuable} + \text{Proportion citing as somewhat valuable} / 2}{\text{Proportion citing as not at valuable at all}}$$

The indexed results are displayed in the accompanying table.

Only 21 percent of the respondents who had utilized the newsmagazine rankings rated them "extremely valuable." A near-equal proportion – 18 percent – rated them "not valuable at all." In contrast, 50 percent rated college catalogs as "extremely valuable," but only 3 percent "not valuable at all."

Value of information sources in college application and selection

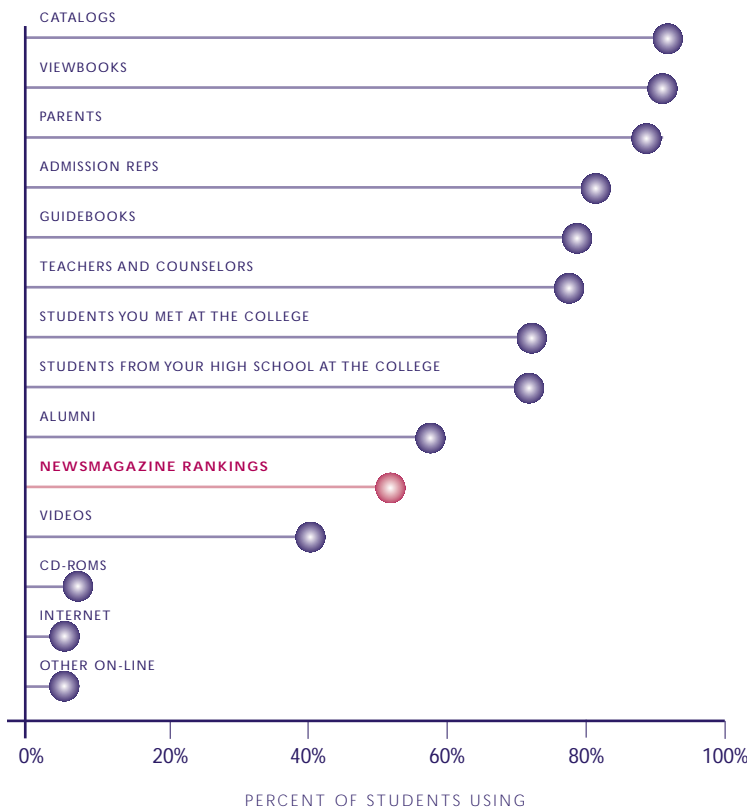


2. Students utilize news-magazine rankings of colleges and universities far less frequently than other major sources of information that influence college choice.

Another useful measure of the impact any source of information and advice has in the college selection process is the extent to which it is utilized by students as they make decisions about where to apply and ultimately matriculate.

By this measure the news-magazine ratings again fare relatively poorly. Slightly more than half (54 percent) of the students we surveyed told us they had referred to such rankings as they decided where to apply and enroll. While this number at first appears high, compared to most other information sources it is actually quite low. For example, over 80 percent of the students we interviewed has utilized guidebooks such as those published by The College Board and other independent sources. And over 90 percent said they utilized catalogs and viewbooks provided by the colleges they were considering. Discussions with parents and college representatives also figured much more prominently in the selection process than the magazine rankings. Only videos, CD-ROMs, and the Internet and other on-line communications were used less frequently, and all but videos are new communications technologies that are available only to a limited portion of the college-bound population (more about that topic in the next issue of *studentPOLL*).

Frequency of use of information sources



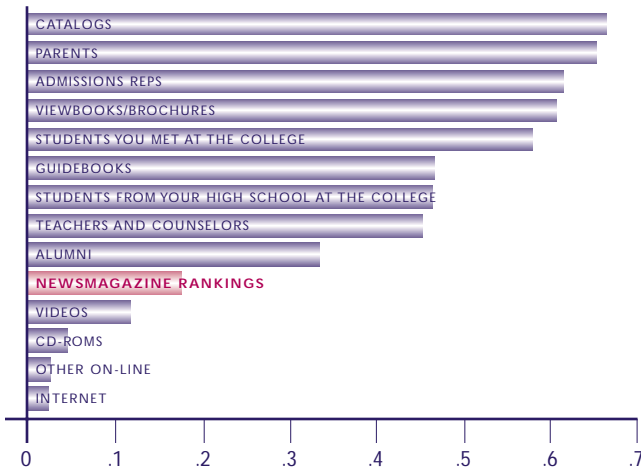
A D V I S O R Y

THINK TWICE ABOUT TOUTING YOUR
U.S. NEWS AND MONEY MAGAZINE RANKINGS.

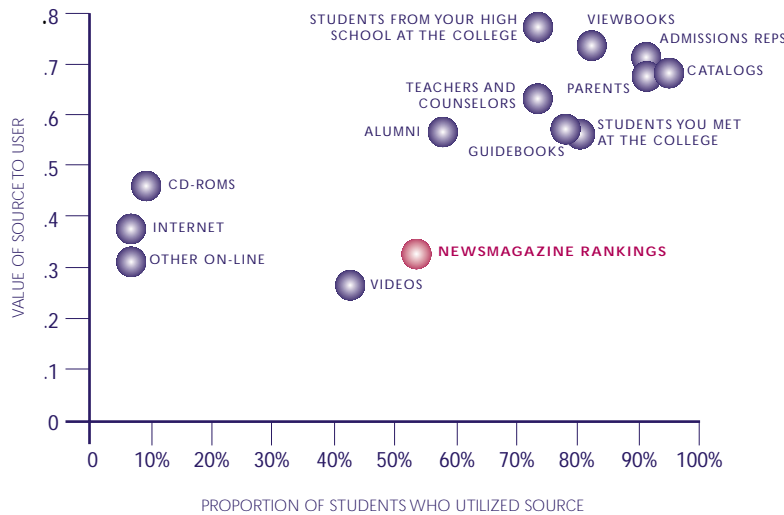
Do not make them a central message of your recruitment communications. Instead of reprints and mailings, invest your institution's resources in enhancing communications and contacts that have more impact and are more cost-effective.

3. The overall impact of newsmagazine rankings on college choice is among the lowest of all major sources of information and advice.

Impact of information sources on student decisions about where to apply and enroll



Value and frequency of use of various information sources in college choice



Combining the measurements of frequency of use with the rating of value to users enables us to measure the overall impact or “market power” of each major source of information. The formula we used to calculate the impact rating is as follows:

$$(\text{Frequency of use}) \times (\text{Net Value Index})$$

For example, guidebooks are used by 81 percent of the respondents and have a Net Value Index of .58 among users, resulting in an impact rating of .47. When we rank each source of information and advice using this formula, the newsmagazine rankings fall near the bottom again, higher only than videos, CD-ROMs, and on-line communications. As already noted, since the latter are relatively new and untested communications vehicles, we would expect their rankings to be relatively low until they mature to the point that they gain more widespread use. The newsmagazines’ low impact cannot be explained on this basis.

Another way to visualize the overall impact of various communications is to plot them on a two-dimensional grid, with the x axis representing frequency of use and the y axis the value to users, as plotted on the graph at left.

Communications positioned in the upper right quadrant of the graph are those with the greatest market impact. As the plot demonstrates, relative to most other forms of information and advice, the newsmagazine rankings have only a minor effect.

A D V I S O R Y

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO ALTER YOUR INSTITUTION’S POLICIES TO IMPROVE ITS STANDING IN THE NEWSMAGAZINE RANKINGS.

Make these decisions on educational, financial, and other more important grounds. Don’t compromise institutional or professional integrity for the sake of the rankings.

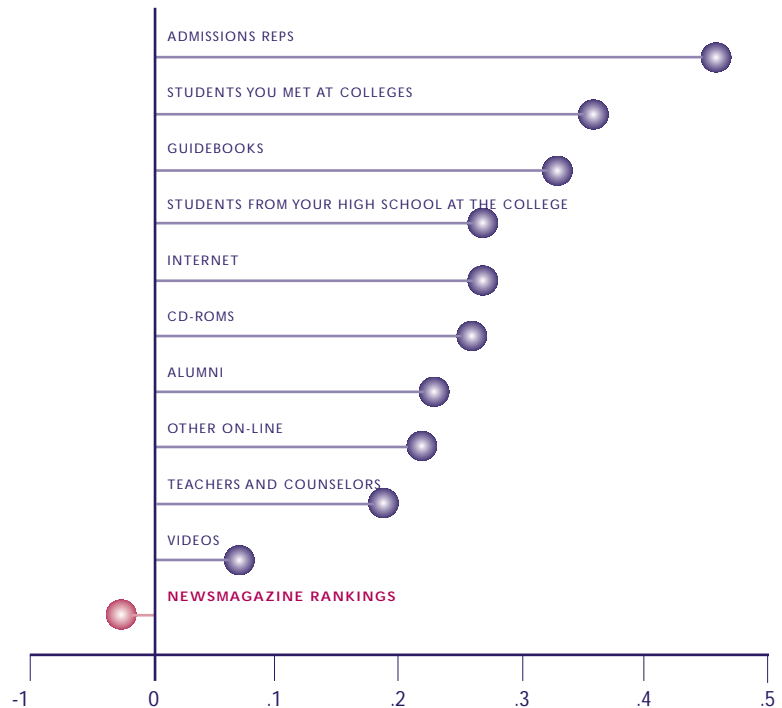
Nearly half of the students we interviewed said they had not read any of the newsmagazine ranking issues. We thought it would be worthwhile to explore how much value these non-readers thought the rankings might have. Because non-users of any source of information or advice are often biased against these sources, we made the measurement comparative, that is, we asked all non-users of each source to rate its value. Because some sources (such as viewbooks and catalogs) had only a small number of non-users, to eliminate sampling distortions we excluded these from the analysis. As the accompanying graph clearly illustrates, the newsmagazine rankings have a negative net value* for non-users. In sum, they are perceived to be almost totally worthless by non-readers.

The findings here are especially instructive, not only because they confirm the perceived low value of the newsmagazine rankings, but also because they suggest that colleges could benefit substantially by increasing the frequency of use of the communications tools that have high perceived value among non-users. For example, respondents who did not talk to students at the colleges they were considering thought this source of information would be especially valuable. This finding suggests that institutions that do not now provide opportunities for prospective students to meet and talk with current undergraduates could benefit considerably by doing so. A much more thorough examination of how institutions can gain marketing advantages by changing or refocusing their student recruitment communications mix will be the topic of an upcoming issue of *studentPOLL*.

* Using the same index formula described above.

4. *Students who have not read the newsmagazine rankings consider them essentially worthless – of lower value than any other major communications tool.*

Index of value to non-users of various sources of information and advice about colleges



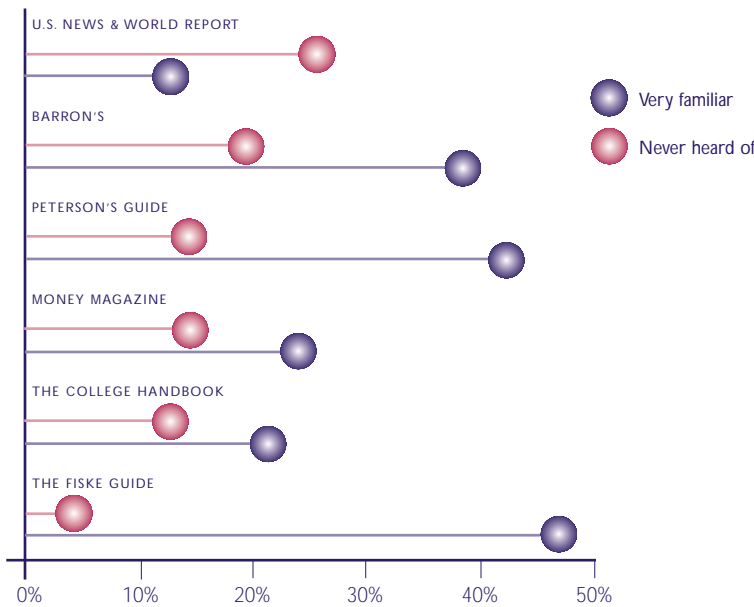
A D V I S O R Y

DON'T DISSIPATE YOUR TIME AND ENERGY DEBATING THE U.S. NEWS OR MONEY MAGAZINE EDITORS ABOUT THE RANKING METHODOLOGIES OR WHY YOUR INSTITUTION DESERVES A HIGHER RATING.

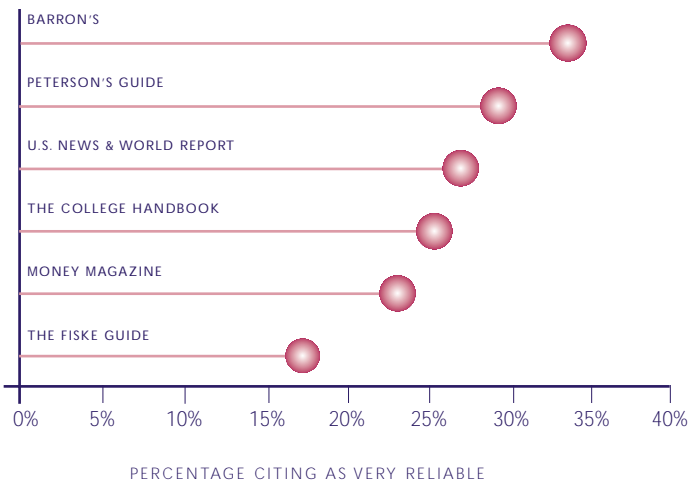
Don't waste your colleagues' time and energy this way either. You all have many more important things to do.

5. While overall awareness of the *U.S. News* rankings is higher than that of *Barron's* and *Peterson's*, the perceived reliability of the information in *U.S. News* is rated lower.

Familiarity with newsmagazine rankings and major guides



Reliability of key college guide/rating sources

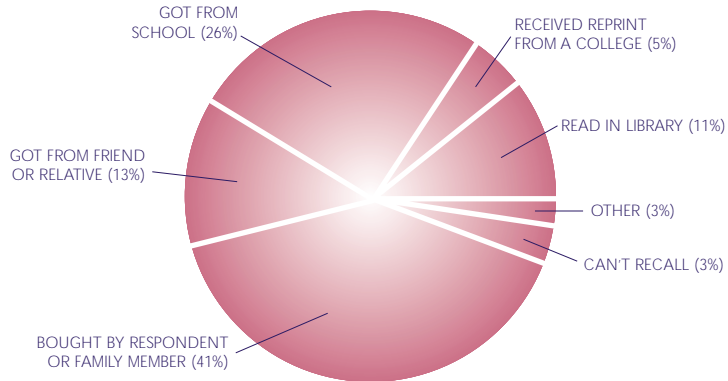


While the *U.S. News* rankings appear to have relatively little effect on college choice, it's not because students are unaware of their existence. In fact, when we asked students whether they were familiar with the rankings, a number of the major college guidebooks, and the *Money Magazine Best Buys* rankings, over a quarter of our respondents said they were very familiar with *U.S. News*, the highest for the group. *Barron's* finished second with 20 percent. About 16 percent of the respondents said they were very familiar with the *Money Magazine* rankings. On the flip side, only 14 percent said they had never heard of the *U.S. News* rankings, again the most favorable rating for the group evaluated. In fact, *U.S. News* was the only publication among the group tested with a higher percentage of respondents who were very familiar with it than who had never heard of it. Fully a quarter of the students said they had never heard of the *Money Magazine* rankings and nearly half had never heard of the *Fiske Guide*.

In a test of perceived reliability among the students who were aware of these publications, *U.S. News* fared less well. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents who were aware of it said the information in *U.S. News* was very reliable, placing it third behind *Barron's* (34 percent) and *Peterson's Guide* (30 percent).

6. The majority of students who have seen or read the U.S. News and World Report rankings buy the magazine themselves, obtain it from a member of their immediate family, or get a copy in school.

Of the 500 students we interviewed, slightly less than half, 243, said they had seen or read the college rankings issues of *U.S. News*. Fully 40 percent buy the issue themselves or obtain it from a family member. Another 26 percent get copies in school. Only 5 percent receive a copy from a college.



ABOUT ART & SCIENCE GROUP

*student*POLL is published by Art & Science Group, Inc., a national leader in marketing and communications consulting to higher education and the non-profit sector. The firm provides consulting services in the following areas:

- ▶ Student recruitment marketing and enrollment management
- ▶ Planning and communications for capital campaigns, other large fundraising efforts, and alumni relations programs
- ▶ Financial aid and net tuition revenue management
- ▶ Overall institutional advancement and marketing

Within these broad areas, the firm provides a number of supporting services

- ▶ Strategic marketing and communications planning
- ▶ Quantitative and qualitative market research
- ▶ Econometric analysis of financial and awards

- ▶ Predictive mathematical modeling of student and prospect behavior
- ▶ Operations assessment and re-engineering
- ▶ Creation of print and electronic communications tools

Current and recent clients range from Bucknell University to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, from Rutgers University to Florida State University, and from Duke University to Columbia University Law School.

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A D V I S O R Y

REMIND ALUMNI, PARENTS, FACULTY, AND OTHERS WHO CRITICIZE YOUR INSTITUTION FOR POOR OR SLIPPING RATINGS THAT THE RANKINGS HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON COLLEGE CHOICE.

Cite the findings reported in this issue of *student*POLL as evidence. And focus their interest and energies on improving the communications that truly do advance the interests of your institution.

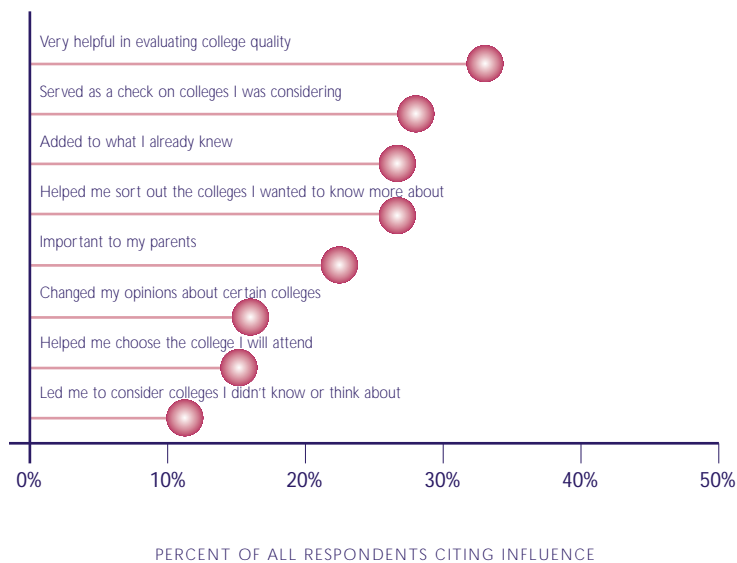
7. For students who utilize the U.S. News ratings, the rankings serve largely to validate and inform pre-existing college interests and evaluations.

How do the *U.S. News* rankings and related information affect the behavior and decisions of students? The accompanying graph illustrates the overall influence of the rankings for the entire respondent group, as measured by a variety of ways in which the college selection process might be affected.

Our conclusion is that *U.S. News* functions much like a guidebook for the students who read it, confirming what they already know, providing additional information and insights, and suggesting where further inquiries might be made. In some cases, students told us the *U.S. News* rankings did have an effect on their application and matriculation decisions. Far more frequently, however, its role was an informational one.

In sum, the *U.S. News*, *Money*, and similar rankings can best be classified

Influences of U.S. News rankings on various aspects of college selection



as guidance and informational tools with about the same impact on the college selection process as *Barron's*,

Peterson's Guide, *The College Handbook* and other major guidebooks.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The winter issue of *studentPOLL* will focus on the use of computer and communications technology in student recruitment and admissions communications. The survey will explore such questions as student computer ownership; hardware and software capabilities; and interest in and use of CD-ROMs, the Internet, World Wide Web, other on-line services, and electronic applications. Advisories will focus on appropriate strategies and investments to take advantage of these budding technologies. This issue will be available only to subscribers.

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