

Things to Toss: College Rankings

By Jenna Johnson

If college rankings are to be believed, Warren Wilson College in North Carolina has the most liberal students, the College of Wooster in Ohio has the smartest professors, and Rice University has the happiest undergrads. And the very best college in the country is Princeton. Or Harvard and Princeton in a tie.

It doesn't take a bachelor's degree to figure out that most college rankings are at best highly flawed and at worst completely bogus. Rankings formally started back in the early 1980s, when U.S. News & World Report came up with measurements to judge the nation's top universities so consumers could vet a school before enrolling. The list weighs many factors, including academic reputation, retention and graduation rates, faculty pay and credentials, incoming student test scores and alumni donations.

Over the years, this methodology has become complicated and controversial – and sometimes the results are inaccurate. In the past year, U.S. News publicly shamed a number of schools for fudging their numbers or outright cheating. George Washington University lost its No. 51 ranking after school officials disclosed that they had accidentally miscalculated the academic credentials of incoming freshmen.

U.S. News likes to describe its rankings as a public service to consumers – but sales of magazines, books and Web advertising driven by clicks have been highly profitable for the company. And that success and exposure prompted others to get into the game. Even the Obama administration recently unveiled a college scorecard Web site. It has data on nearly every college in the country and focuses on

graduation rates and affordability, which some have criticized as an overly simple way to compare schools.

The worst rankings are those that attempt to evaluate such things as party scenes, dorm food and even professors' looks – based on online surveys, questionable statistics and unfair stereotypes. There is no way such lists help students properly pick a college.

While rankings are often the starting place for many college searches, most families tend to make their final decisions based on information provided directly by the school. Other factors, such as cost, distance from home and a campus' atmosphere during a whirlwind tour – and, frankly, gut instinct – can be far more influential than rankings. While a sliver of the population enrolls at the nation's most selective, top-ranked colleges and universities, many more attend institutions you've probably never heard of, schools that are not always forthcoming about their abysmal graduation rates, sky-high student debt loads, teetering accreditation and serious financial problems.

How about we stop obsessing about rankings and start caring about that?

Jenna Johnson reports on higher education for The Washington Post.

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