



The Equity Rankings:

An Alternative Assessment of U.S. Higher Education

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HACK THE GATES
RADICALLY REIMAGINE ADMISSIONS



Rethink the rankings. Trash the rankings. Abolish the rankings. At a gathering of college admissions professionals from across the nation in Fall 2019, one sentiment was loud and clear: college rankings systems have got to go. Is there a more just and equitable alternative?

INTRODUCTION

#HackTheGates is seeking to radically re-imagine college admissions, and that may very well necessitate radically re-imagining college rankings, one of the primary forces driving college admissions behaviors. Since 1983 when U.S. News & World Report (USNWR) first produced their list, college rankings have changed higher education, and not necessarily for the better. Designed as a tool to help students and families make decisions about college, they have instead prompted and pressured institutions to allocate resources to maximize prestige. They set college admissions offices on a hunt for students who are guaranteed glow-ups.^{1,2} They fill university presidents' pockets for rankings-worthy performances.³ They lead colleges to raise prices and change institutional spending behaviors, not always benefitting students.^{4,5} And it is all rational given the payout: Applications to a college substantially increase when it makes it into the top tier of colleges,⁶ and that front-page spot is especially worth it—College #51 receives far fewer applications than College #50.⁷

¹ Ehrenberg, R. G. (2005). Method or madness? Inside the U.S. News & World Report College Rankings. *Journal of College Admission*, 189, 29-35.

² Han, C., Jaquette, O., & Salazar, K. (2019). Recruiting the out-of-state university: Off-campus recruiting by public research universities.

³ Yeung, R., Gigliotti, P., & Nguyen-Hoang, P. (2019). The impact of US News college rankings on the compensation of college and university presidents. *Research in Higher Education*, 60(1), 1-17.

⁴ Kim, J. (2018). The functions and dysfunctions of college rankings: An analysis of institutional expenditure. *Research in Higher Education*, 59(1), 54-87.

⁵ McClure, K. R., & Titus, M. A. (2018). Spending up the ranks? The relationship between striving for prestige and administrative expenditures at US public research universities. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 89(6), 961-987.

⁶ Bowman, N. A., & Bastedo, M. N. (2009). Getting on the front page: Organizational reputation, status signals, and the impact of US News and World Report on student decisions. *Research in Higher Education*, 50(5), 415-436.

⁷ Meyer, A. G., Hanson, A. R., & Hickman, D. C. (2017). Perceptions of institutional quality: Evidence of limited attention to higher education rankings. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 142, 241-258.





Even those outside of higher education are seduced by college rankings. We all know in our collective psyche which names are at the top, and for the most part we have come to believe they deserve to be there. And so, the students and families keep coming. Before the COVID pandemic, those with resources would spend thousands of dollars to improve their SAT and ACT scores in test-prep programs, pad their resumés, and do whatever they believe necessary to get noticed. Do we even need to mention #AuntBeckyGate?

Although the rankings make us believe that the institutions at the top of the USNWR are better, it turns out that higher rankings do not necessarily equate to higher quality. Studies that have linked college rankings to surveys of student engagement have found little evidence that rankings are indicators of “good practices” in education.^{8,9} For example, ranking scores are negatively correlated with student experiences of cooperative learning and student-faculty interaction. Reputation ratings, which USNWR asks presidents, provosts, and deans of admissions to complete, are not actually predictive of quality of teaching and learning, experiences with diversity, or the quality of faculty and interactions.¹⁰ In fact, these peer assessments appear to be more influenced by prior published rankings and perceived quality rather than actual institutional performance.^{11,12} What then do these rankings represent?

What rankings systems really do well is measure¹³ and maintain¹⁴ systematic advantage and inequalities. Rankings can actually be predicted from faculty

⁸ Kim, J., & Shim, W. J. (2019). What do rankings measure? The US News Rankings and student experience at Liberal Arts Colleges. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(3), 933-964.

⁹ Pike, G. R. (2004). Measuring quality: A comparison of US News rankings and NSSE benchmarks. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 193-208.

¹⁰ Kim, J., & Shim, W. J. (2019). What do rankings measure? The US News Rankings and student experience at Liberal Arts Colleges. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(3), 933-964.

¹¹ Bastedo, M. N., & Bowman, N. A. (2010). US News & World Report college rankings: Modeling institutional effects on organizational reputation. *American Journal of Education*, 116(2), 163-183.

¹² Jones, W. A. (2013). Prestige among Black colleges: Examining the predictors of HBCU peer academic reputation. *Journal of African American Studies*, 17(2), 129-141.

¹³ Volkwein, J. F., & Sweitzer, K. V. (2006). Institutional prestige and reputation among research universities and liberal arts colleges. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2), 129-148.

¹⁴ Martin, J. P. (2015). Moving up in the US News and World Report rankings. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 47(2), 52-61.





salaries and student profiles.¹⁵ Seven of the top ten institutions in the 2020 USNWR Best Colleges rankings are also ranked in the top ten for largest endowments.¹⁶ And the cycle continues—having been given a top ranking, colleges can grow their endowments more, attract the highest-achieving students (as measured by test scores) who are generally also from wealthier families¹⁷, and secure the “top” faculty. They work hard to increase and maintain this advantage, making decisions and engaging in activities that preserve their status based on a specious evaluation and ranking system. It is no surprise there is relatively little movement in the rankings year to year—the top-ranked institutions have a 99% chance of staying in the top nine over time.¹⁸

What is perhaps most unsettling is how much attention we pay to the top 10, 50, and 100 colleges, and how much effort institutions place into making and staying in the top tier. The top 10 institutions enroll less than 100,000 of the roughly 16 million undergraduate students in U.S. higher education.¹⁹ The next 40 or 90 don’t increase the share that much more. The metrics that give these colleges their standing—endowments, faculty resources, student selectivity, and alumni giving—disadvantage from the start regional comprehensive colleges and universities, minority serving institutions, and two-year institutions, who serve the lion’s share of the nation’s college students.²⁰

¹⁵ Volkwein, J. F., & Sweitzer, K. V. (2006). Institutional prestige and reputation among research universities and liberal arts colleges. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2), 129-148.

¹⁶ <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/10-universities-with-the-biggest-endowments>

¹⁷ Meredith, M. (2004). Why do universities compete in the ratings game? An empirical analysis of the effects of the US News and World Report college rankings. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(5), 443-461.

¹⁸ Grewal, R., Dearden, J. A., & Llilien, G. L. (2008). The university rankings game: Modeling the competition among universities for ranking. *The American Statistician*, 62(3), 232-237.

¹⁹ Author’s calculations based on <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities> [73,513]; [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp#:~:text=\(Last%20Updated%3A%20May%202020\),increase%20to%2017.0%20million%20students](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp#:~:text=(Last%20Updated%3A%20May%202020),increase%20to%2017.0%20million%20students).

²⁰ Richards, D. A., Awokoya, J. T., Bridges, B. K., & Clark, C. (2018). One Size Does Not Fit All: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on College Rankings. *The Review of Higher Education*, 42(1), 269-312.





TOWARDS AN EQUITY-ORIENTED RANKING

If rankings can so powerfully and effectively get higher education institutions to change their behavior, then why not use “the master’s tools” towards more equitable and just ends?²¹ Could a college ranking instead be used to advance the causes of equity and social justice, and orient colleges towards the democratic ideals of the university?

“Reframing excellence” can be done by adapting and adopting criteria that are in alignment with the public mission of higher education – higher education for social opportunity and democratic equality.²² And the time is now! With tremendous shifts in higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic – institutions moving to remote instruction and changing their core programming, juggernauts like the University of California system and Caltech dropping SAT/ACT requirements, and higher education all around facing uncertainty of epic proportions – there is no real reason to return to “normalcy.” This is a moment to re-envision a college rankings system that is oriented towards the higher education we want to see.

The following outlines possibilities for an alternative to college rankings, one that is focused less on prestige maximization and more on equity maximization. The idea is simple: College rankings do what they are designed to do. A ranking based on prestige will lead institutions to chase prestige. A ranking based on equitable outcomes may lead institutions to change course and instead pursue democratic and social justice ideals.

I focus on racial equity in particular. Despite growing numbers of racially minoritized students enrolling and completing college, gaps persist and

²¹ Audre Lorde wrote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” While this could suggest that developing an alternative ranking to the dominant rankings is a fallacy, one interpretation is that these types of tools can be reclaimed and use for social justice ends. See: Cokley, K., & Awad, G. H. (2013). In defense of quantitative methods: Using the “master’s tools” to promote social justice. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, 5(2), 26-41.

²² Pusser, B., & Marginson, S. (2013). University rankings in critical perspective. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 84(4), 544-568.





are even growing in some concerning ways. For example, Black and Latinx students are less likely to attend selective colleges than white students, even when they have similar test scores.²³ Racially minoritized students are more likely to report feelings of exclusion and hostility on campus, and campus racial climate has implications for persistence and completion.²⁴ And a college degree does not confer the same benefits across the board – the college earnings premium is substantially larger for white students.²⁵ Working towards racial equity in higher education means addressing disparities in these educational outcomes and confronting the policies and practices that create and perpetuate those inequities. Drawing on ideas from higher education researchers and the availability of new sources of data, I propose metrics that can augment or replace existing rankings criteria and lead us towards more equitable outcomes in higher education access, experiences, and outcomes.

EQUITY AT THE POINT OF ACCESS

The USNWR rankings factor in “student excellence” (10%) based on admissions tests scores and high school class standing. This of course directs colleges towards recruiting students with high test scores and marks, which are correlated with race and socioeconomic status, and serve as narrow metrics of academic talent.²⁶ Here are four metrics that could increase equity at the point of college access:

1. Class and Race. An equity-oriented metric would reward institutions that try harder to recruit low-income and racially minoritized students. There has been

²³ Posselt, J. R., Jaquette, O., Bielby, R., & Bastedo, M. N. (2012). Access without equity: Longitudinal analyses of institutional stratification by race and ethnicity, 1972–2004. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1074-1111.

²⁴ Museus, S. D., Nichols, A. H., & Lambert, A. D. (2008). Racial differences in the effects of campus racial climate on degree completion: A structural equation model. *The Review of Higher Education*, 32(1), 107-134.

²⁵ Carnevale, A., Schmidt, P., & Strohl, J. (2020). *The merit myth: How our colleges favor the rich and divide America*. The New Press.

²⁶ Han, C., Jaquette, O., & Salazar, K. (2019). Recruiting the out-of-state university: Off-campus recruiting by public research universities.





significant attention to low-income students (Pell grant recipients). Measures like the share of Pell Grant students recruited and enrolled²⁷ and college endowment per Pell recipient²⁸ could easily be included in college rankings. Could we more directly consider how hard colleges are working to attract and enroll (and later serve) racially minoritized students? College rankings could easily incorporate measures of enrollment rates by race, relative to their local community, city, state, or the U.S. overall, using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data housed at the U.S. Department of Education. With respect to recruiting practices, a more equitable approach would be to consider whether institutions actively recruit from local low-income and majority-minority high schools, and the yield from these places.²⁹

2. Community College Transfers. Black, Latinx, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander students are more likely to enroll in community colleges than four-year colleges.³⁰ About 80 percent of community college students seek to earn a bachelor's degree, but just 13 percent do so, oftentimes due to the difficulty of the transfer process, credit loss, and lack of support.³¹ This breach is unacceptable, and four-year colleges should be rewarded if they actively recruit and provide a viable and efficient pathway for students in two-year colleges seeking to transfer. For example, estimates suggest transfer students lose an average of 43 percent of their credits.³² An equity-oriented metric could acknowledge and reward those institutions that increase enrollment (and completion) of community college transfers. These data are available in IPEDS. The National Student Clearinghouse gathers data on the percentage of transfer credits accepted, and these could be used as an indicator of transfer efficiency.

²⁷ https://americantalentinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ATI-Impact-Report_Feb-2020_Expanding-Opportunity-for-Lower-Income-Students.pdf

²⁸ <https://robertkelchen.com/2017/02/16/examining-college-endowments-per-pell-recipient/>

²⁹ Some recruitment data can be found at <https://emrresearch.org/>

³⁰ The Campaign for College Opportunity. (2015). *The state of higher education in California for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders*. Retrieved from <http://collegecampaign.org/>

³¹ Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Huie, F., Wakhungu, P. K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Hwang, Y. (2017). *Tracking transfer: Measures of effectiveness in helping community college students to complete bachelor's degrees* (Signature Report 13). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

³² U.S. GAO [Government Accountability Office]. (2017). *Students need more information to help reduce challenges transferring credits* (GAO-17-574). Washington, DC: Author.





3. College in Prison and Prison-to-College. Data from the Prison Education Project indicate there are at least 289 U.S. colleges and universities providing in-prison higher education.³³ Although the majority are two-year institutions, 39 institutions provide baccalaureate programs, together offering courses in at least 360 penal facilities. An equity-oriented metric would acknowledge the work of these institutions, along with those that are proactively enrolling and supporting formerly-incarcerated individuals.

4. Legacy Admissions. Colleges could be required to report the share of incoming students who gained admissions via legacy channels, as they are in California.^{34,35} There should be a rankings penalty for those institutions that engage heavily in legacy-based admissions practices.

EQUITY IN COLLEGE EXPERIENCES

Despite rankings being designed to inform students and their families of college quality, the most prominent rankings systems do not factor in student experiences very much. The USNWR asks for “expert opinion” from leaders at peer institutions (20%), but it has dropped the high school counselor assessment. Rankings systems could ask for a corresponding student assessment, somewhat like The Princeton Review does, to affirm that student experiences on campus matter. A survey of “student opinion” could illuminate the following areas:

1. Student Experiences & Learning. The primary way USNWR captures metrics of student experience and learning is by proxy through the categories

³³ Castro, E. L., Padilla, E. A., & Royer, C. E. (2019, Nov.). *The landscape of postsecondary education in U.S. Prisons*, 2019. Research Brief. Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison, University of Utah.

³⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/least-difficult-reform-college-admissions/605689/>

³⁵ https://insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/07/06/california-law-sheds-light-how-private-colleges-handle-applications?utm_content=buffer5e3f8&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=IHEbuffer&fbclid=IwAR1kd4_rA_BpKBI-wvSoWBZj2IhaWADaeqE5PohWAK4NrG7a0kkIO_c5xNg





“faculty resources” (20%), wherein the quality and productivity of faculty and class sizes are a stand-in for educational experiences, and financial resources (10%), which calculates average spending per student on instruction, research, student services and related educational expenditures. These may reflect an institution’s systemic advantages more than it does quality education. An improvement over this would be to conduct surveys of students in every institution and incorporate measures of student experience and learning into the rankings system. Students should be asked about their academic experiences, the quality of teaching and learning, and their sense of belonging on campus. Incorporating measures of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, campus racial climate, and student engagement would also orient colleges towards equitable college experiences. The National Survey of Student Engagement and Higher Education Research Institute collect these types of data and could be a model, though not all institutions currently participate.

2. Cross-Racial and Cross-Class Interactions. These experiences have implications for fostering a more inclusive and democratic society.^{36,37} Rankings could include measures of campus diversity, such as the likelihood that two randomly drawn students from a campus are of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.³⁸ Or better yet, the above survey could ask students directly about the quantity and quality of their cross-racial and cross-class interactions. The racial diversity of faculty and staff and interactions with faculty and staff should also be considered. These data points would lend insight into how hard colleges are working to create and support spaces and opportunities for students to interact across difference.

³⁶ Denson, N., Bowman, N. A., & Park, J. J. (2017). Preparing Students for a Diverse, Deliberative Democracy: College Diversity Experiences and Informed Citizenship after College. *Teachers College Record*, 119(8), n8.

³⁷ Park, J., Bowman, N., Denson, N., & Eagan, K. (2019). Race and class beyond enrollment: The link between socioeconomic diversity and cross-racial interaction. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 90(5), 665-689.

³⁸ The method for doing so is described here: Allen, D., & Wolniak, G. C. (2019). Exploring the effects of tuition increases on racial/ethnic diversity at public colleges and universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 60(1), 18-43.





3. Serving Today's College Students. If colleges are supposed to be the pathway to upward mobility, then colleges that are serving these more vulnerable and marginalized groups in society should be acknowledged for doing so. Colleges could be more systematically recognized for enrolling and serving today's college students – racially minoritized students, students over the age of 25, student-parents, and students who have aged out of the foster care system, among others.

“Serving-ness” is one way of thinking about this. Challenging what is meant by “Serving” in the terminology “Minority Serving Institution” and “Hispanic Serving Institution,” scholars have advocated for higher education institutions to move beyond merely enrolling racially/ethnically diverse students to actually serving them. Colleges could be evaluated on the extent to which they adequately support these students. One framework (focusing specifically on HSIs)³⁹ directs us to consider organizational structures (e.g., diversity plans, programs and services), student experiences (e.g., of validation, of racism), and both academic and nonacademic outcomes. Results from the Student Opinion survey could be used to develop indices of servingness.

4. Just Employment Practices. College rankings singularly focus on students, faculty, and alumni, neglecting higher education institutions as large employers. Yet one of the most egregious injustices in higher education today is the exploitation of labor, including non-tenure track faculty and contingent labor, in what some have called “The Gig Academy.”⁴⁰ An equity lens would implore us to consider how colleges treat their lowest-paid workers, and a ranking could be constructed based on lowest hourly wage, number and percentage of staff under the living wage. This ranking could also assess commitment to workers' rights.⁴¹

³⁹ Garcia, G. A., Núñez, A. M., & Sansone, V. A. (2019). Toward a multidimensional conceptual framework for understanding “servingness” in Hispanic-Serving Institutions: A synthesis of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(5), 745-784.

⁴⁰ Kezar, A., DePaola, T., & Scott, D. T. (2019). *The gig academy: Mapping labor in the neoliberal university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴¹ <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/17005>; <https://universitybusiness.com/new-ub-survey-reveals-movement-on-minimum-wage-on-college-campuses/>





EQUITY IN COLLEGE OUTCOMES

Student outcomes contribute to 35% of a school's ranking in the USNWR methodology. These metrics award graduation and retention rates, graduation rate performance (predicted vs. actual), and social mobility. Importantly, the ranking now gives schools more credit for graduating first-generation students and Pell Grant recipients. These are more progressive than prior years' rankings, but more intention can direct institutions towards more equitable outcomes.

1. Intersections with Race. Although a focus on the graduation rates of students receiving Pell grants⁴² is illuminating, policies and practices that address class-based inequities do not fully address race-based inequities. To close racial equity gaps, it is imperative to weigh graduation rate performance and social mobility more heavily, and also to examine differences by race. The rankings should reward colleges that are closing the racial equity gap in degree attainment. These data are already available in IPEDS.

2. Earnings. While USNWR includes a social mobility ranking with respect to graduation, data from the College Scorecard makes it possible to examine earnings by college and major.⁴³ Data from Opportunity Insights can expand the social mobility metric to consider intergenerational mobility, for example, the extent to which colleges move students from the bottom 20 percent of household income to the top 20 percent. Importantly, these data should also be disaggregated by race for each college.

3. "More than papelitos."⁴⁴ One problem with rankings based on alumni salaries is the underlying assumption that all students of all backgrounds have salary and prestige maximization as a goal. A more equitable ranking

⁴² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/25/sunday-review/opinion-pell-table.html>

⁴³ Mabel, Z., Libassi, C. J., & Hurwitz, M. (2020). The value of using early-career earnings data in the College Scorecard to guide college choices. *Economics of Education Review*, 75, 101958.

⁴⁴ Pérez Huber, L., Velez, V. N., & Solorzano, D. (2018). More than 'papelitos': A QuantCrit counterstory to critique Latina/o degree value and occupational prestige. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 21(2), 208-230.





would challenge conceptions of occupational prestige. For instance, it has been documented that some students are more likely to enter into the helping professions and pursue community activism and community development work, which pay less.⁴⁵ These choices should reflect well on colleges and not hurt them in a rankings scheme. An equity-oriented ranking would award those institutions whose graduates are pursuing these public interest careers. This could also extend to community engagement (e.g., service learning, community programs) and community reputation.⁴⁶

4. Student Debt. We ought to also acknowledge those colleges that provide ample financial aid and help students graduate debt free or with minimal debt. The College Scorecard data include student debt averages by program, but do not disaggregate by race. It would be important to assess colleges on average debt for students, and to pay attention to racial disparities in debt burden.⁴⁷

A DIFFERENT FUTURE

College rankings have steered U.S. higher education away from its public mission. We can reorient higher education towards a more equitable and just future with a rankings system that prioritizes equitable access, experiences, and outcomes, largely using data that already exist. Other social justice aims beyond this list could also be achieved, such as divestment from the fossil fuel and prison industries and a police-free campus, if we truly wanted our colleges and universities to achieve them. An alternative ranking centering these equity goals would not just change college admissions, but the premise and promise of higher education altogether.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Pérez Huber, L., Velez, V. N., & Solorzano, D. (2018).

⁴⁶ Since 2005, *Washington Monthly* has “ranked colleges based on what they do for our country.” The ranking is based on social mobility, research, and service. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/september-october-2019/a-note-on-methodology-4-year-colleges-and-universities-10/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/black-white-disparity-in-student-loan-debt-more-than-triples-after-graduation/>

⁴⁸ The author wishes to thank Dr. Cheryl Ching and Dr. Jeongeun Kim for their valuable feedback on this research brief.





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