President’s Letters on College Rankings

A. Highly selective liberal arts colleges:

On September 7, 2007, Carleton's President, Robert Oden, and presidents of eighteen other highly selective liberal arts colleges issued a joint "Statement on College Rankings" stating, "We commit not to mention U.S. News or similar rankings in any of our new publications, since such lists mislead the public into thinking that the complexities of American higher education can be reduced to one number." In addition, information shared with college guides will also be made available on institutional Web sites rather than be distributed exclusively to a single entity.

Presidents' Statement on College Rankings (September 7, 2007)

I, and the other undersigned presidents, agree that prospective students benefit from having as complete information as possible in making their college choices.

At the same time, we are concerned about the inevitable biases in any single ranking formula, about the admissions frenzy, and the way in which rankings can contribute to that frenzy and to a false sense that educational success or fit can be ranked in a single numerical list.

Since college and ranking agencies should maintain a degree of distance to ensure objectivity, from now on data we make available to college guides will be made public via our Web sites rather than be distributed exclusively to a single entity. Doing so is true to our educational mission and will allow interested parties to use this information for their own benefit. If, for example, class size is their focus, they will have that information. If it is the graduation rate, that will be easy to find. We welcome suggestions for other information we might also provide publicly.

We commit not to mention U.S. News or similar rankings in any of our new publications, since such lists mislead the public into thinking that the complexities of American higher education can be reduced to one number.

Finally, we encourage all colleges and universities to participate in an effort to determine how information about our schools might be improved. As for rankings, we recognize that no degree of protest may make them soon disappear, and hope, therefore, that further discussion will help shape them in ways that will press us to move in ever more socially and educationally useful directions.

Robert Oden, Carleton College

Also:

Anthony Marx, Amherst College
Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Bates College
Barry Mills, Bowdoin College
Nancy Vickers, Bryn Mawr College
B. The Education Conservancy

May 10, 2007

Dear Colleague:

We are writing to seek your commitment (and the commitment of your institution) to a new approach to rankings of colleges and universities compiled by U.S. News and World Report.

We believe these rankings are misleading and do not serve well the interests of prospective students in finding a college or university that is well suited to their education beyond high school. Among other reasons, we believe this because such rankings

- imply a false precision and authority that is not warranted by the data they use;
- obscure important differences in educational mission in aligning institutions on a single scale;
- say nothing or very little about whether students are actually learning at particular colleges or universities;
- encourage wasteful spending and gamesmanship in institutions' pursuing improved rankings;
- overlook the importance of a student in making education happen and overweight the importance of a university's prestige in that process; and
- degrade for students the educational value of the college search process.

While we believe colleges and universities may want to cooperate in providing data to publications for the purposes of rankings, we believe such data provision should be limited to data which is collected in accord with clear, shared professional standards (not the idiosyncratic standards of any single publication), and to data which is required to be reported to state or federal officials or which the institution believes (in accord with good accountability) should routinely be made available to any
member of the public who seeks it.

We ask you to make the following two commitments:

1. Refuse to fill out the *U.S. News and World Report* reputational survey.

2. Refuse to use the rankings in any promotional efforts on behalf of your college or university, and more generally, refuse to refer to the rankings as an indication of the quality of your college or university.

Each of us has already made these commitments. We ask you to do the same.

In accord with these commitments, you may want to provide a link on your website to information about how you are ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*, but to do this in a way that simply provides information, not in a way that suggests you value the specific ranking or support the ranking project. Similarly, in answering questions from students, parents, reporters, alumni, or prospective students and parents, these commitments would lead you to answer such questions factually, but not in a way that suggests you value how you are ranked or that suggests support for the ranking project.

Other publications also provide rankings of colleges and universities, and the commitments stated here may also guide you in deciding whether or how to respond to requests from or inquiries about these other rankings.

As we go forward, we will also be working with the Education Conservancy and with other groups to develop clear explanations of what rankings of colleges and universities do and do not mean, and to develop better approaches (including ones that assess student learning) to helping prospective students find and evaluate colleges and universities that will serve well their education beyond high school.

Will you join us in these endeavors?

Sincerely yours,

Douglas C. Bennett, Earlham College
William G. Durden, Dickinson College
Jackie Jenkins-Scott, Wheelock College
Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, Marlboro College
Patricia McGuire, Trinity (D.C.) University
Christopher Nelson, St. John's College (Annapolis)
Michael Peters, St. John's College (Santa Fe)
Kathleen Ross, Heritage University
Jake Schrum, Southwestern University
G. T. "Buck" Smith, Bethany College
Robert Weisbuch, Drew University
Daniel H. Weiss, Lafayette College
Additional Signatories:

William Bloodworth, Augusta State University
Walter M. Bortz III, Hampden-Sydney College
R. Judson Carlberg, Gordon College
F. Javier Cevallos, Kutztown University
Thomas V. Chema, Hiram College
J. Timothy Cloyd, Hendrix College
Joan Develin Coley, McDaniel College
Thomas B. Coburn, Naropa University
Robert A. Corrigan, San Francisco State University
Alan S. Cureton, Northwestern College (MN)
Gary Dill, College of the Southwest
Donald R. Eastman III, Eckerd College
Mark Erickson, Wittenberg University
Julius E. Erlenbach, University of Wisconsin-Superior
Brother Ronald Gallagher, Saint Mary's College of California
Philip A. Glotzbach, Skidmore College
John V. Griffith, Presbyterian College
George J. Hagerty, Franklin Pierce College
Tori Haring-Smith, Washington and Jefferson College
Peyton R. Helm, Muhlenberg College
Ralph Hexter, Hampshire College
Dean Hubbard, Northwest Missouri State University
Mark W. Huddleston, University of New Hampshire
James F. Jones, Trinity College (CT)
David C. Joyce, Ripon College
Walter Kimbrough, Philander Smith College
Stuart Kirk, College of Santa Fe
Dale Thomas Knobel, Denison University
Ruth A. Knox, Wesleyan College
Alton Lacey, Missouri Baptist University
Sylvia Manning, University of Illinois at Chicago
Michael McFarland, College of the Holy Cross
Lex O. McMillan III, Albright College
Carolyn W. Meyers, Norfolk State University
John W. Mills, Paul Smiths College
Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, Sweet Briar College
S. Georgia Nugent, Kenyon College
Oscar C. Page, Austin College
James Phifer, Coe College
G. David Pollick, Birmingham-Southern College
William Craig Rice, Shimer College, Chicago
Stephen D. Schutt, Lake Forest College
Rebecca Sherrick, Aurora University
David Shi, Furman University
Larry Shinn, Berea College
John Strassburger, Ursinus College
Tim Summerlin, Schreiner University
Christopher M. Thomforde, Moravian College
Baird Tipson, Washington College
Richard L. Torgerson, Luther College
Mitchell Thomashow, Unity College (ME)
Saundra Tracy, Alma College
W. Craig Turner, Hardin-Simmons University
Sanford Ungar, Goucher College

http://www.educationconservancy.org/presidents_letter.html