How U.S. News Calculated the 2021 Best Colleges Rankings

Here is a breakdown of the key data that goes into the annual rankings.

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How the College Rankings Were Calculated

The U.S. News Best Colleges rankings can help prospective students and their families compare institutions as they look for the best fit.

DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY is tough. But the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges rankings, now in their 36th year, can help. Our latest edition assesses 1,452 U.S. bachelor's degree-granting institutions on 17 measures of academic quality. The comparisons are useful for crafting a shortlist of institutions to examine more closely and may also highlight new options.

To further explore the rankings and data, U.S. News' college profile pages benchmark each school's relative performance across different ranking indicators and include many of the latest statistics used in the calculations – such as the student-faculty ratio and the average federal loan debt of graduates. We also list information schools reported directly to U.S. News on their application requirements, tuition and financial aid policies, student body demographics, and campus life. The college's individual profile pages have post-graduate earning data by undergraduate focus and user ratings and reviews submitted by alumni.

In conjunction with the rankings and school profiles, the usnews.com search filter allows users to explore what schools have certain characteristics. The My Fit College Search, a premium-level search accessible only to Compass subscribers, goes further by building customized rankings on personalized factors.

A new feature this year for those with free U.S. News accounts is access to our College Admissions Calculator. Among other things, this tool enables users to see how their high school GPA, SAT and ACT scores stack up against other individuals who were reportedly accepted, waitlisted and rejected at different schools.

Taken together, the rankings, directory and search tools – combined with interviews, virtual tours, college visits and your own intuition – can be a powerful resource in your quest for the best fit college.

How the Rankings Methodology Works

Although the methodology is the product of years of research, we continuously refine our approach based on user feedback, discussions with schools and higher education experts, literature reviews, trends in our own data, availability of new data, and engaging with deans and institutional researchers at higher education conferences. Our detailed methodology is transparent in part for use by schools and academics, but mostly because we believe prospective students will find our rankings more useful if they know what the rankings measure.

Only thoroughly vetted academic data from our surveys and reliable third-party sources are used to calculate each ranking factor. This means for better or for worse, we do not factor nonacademic elements like social life and athletics; we do not conduct unscientific straw polls for use in our computations; and schools' ranks are not manipulated to coddle business relationships.

The data used in these rankings pertain to fall 2019 and earlier. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic could not impact the data schools submitted to U.S. News. Nonetheless, to account for the huge disruption to higher education, we re-introduced test-blind schools in the rankings and placed reduced emphasis in the rankings on admissions data and alumni giving data, described below.

We group schools into 10 ranking categories based on their academic missions. Within each category, the sum of weighted, normalized values across 17 indicators of academic quality determine each school's overall score and, by extension, its overall rank.

For display purposes, we transformed overall scores so the top performer scores 100 on a zero-to-100 scale. In effect, a school's overall score reflects its distance from the top-performing school in its ranking. Among schools placing outside the top 75% of their rankings, U.S. News made an editorial decision to only display their rankings' bottom quartile ranges.

Grouping Ranked Colleges

To make valid comparisons, we group schools by academic mission into 10 distinct rankings.

- National Universities offer a full range of undergraduate majors, plus master's and doctoral programs, and emphasize faculty research or award professional practice doctorates.
- National Liberal Arts Colleges focus almost exclusively on undergraduate education and award at least 50% of their degrees in the arts and sciences.
- Regional Universities offer a broad scope of undergraduate degrees and some master's degree programs but few, if any, doctoral programs. We ranked them in four geographical groups: North, South, Midwest and West.
- Regional Colleges focus on undergraduate education but grant fewer than 50% of their degrees in liberal arts disciplines. They sometimes predominantly award two-year

associate degrees. We ranked them in four geographical groups: North, South, Midwest and West.

To place each school in its ranking, U.S. News strictly mapped its categories to The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education's Basic Classification system – using its 2018 update for the second consecutive year. The U.S. Department of Education and many higher education associations use the Carnegie system to organize and label their data, among other uses. In short, the Carnegie categories are the accepted standard in U.S. higher education. That is why U.S. News has been using them since the first Best Colleges rankings was published in 1983.

The Ranking Factors

Changes to the rankings methodology this year include the introduction of two outcome measures pertaining to graduate indebtedness, for a total of 17 factors. To make room, we gave less weight in the rankings to SAT/ACT scores, high school class standing and alumni giving rates. Below are the factors and weights used in the Best Colleges rankings. For more granular descriptions, see Ranking Criteria and Weights and Morse Code: Inside the College Rankings.

RANKING FACTOR	NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND NATIONAL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES INDICATOR WEIGHT	REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND REGIONAL COLLEGES INDICATOR WEIGHT
GRADUATION AND RETENTION RATES	**22%**	**22%**
AVERAGE SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATE	17.6%	17.6%
AVERAGE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT RETENTION RATE	4.4%	4.4%
SOCIAL MOBILITY	**5%**	**5%**
PELL GRANT GRADUATION RATES	2.5%	2.5%
PELL GRANT GRADUATION RATE PERFORMANCE	2.5%	2.5%
GRADUATION RATE PERFORMANCE	**8%**	**8%**
UNDERGRADUATE ACADEMIC REPUTATION	**20%**	**20%**
PEER ASSESSMENT SURVEY	20%	20%

RANKING FACTOR	NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND NATIONAL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES INDICATOR WEIGHT	REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND REGIONAL COLLEGES INDICATOR WEIGHT
FACULTY RESOURCES FOR 2019-2020 ACADEMIC YEAR	**20%**	**20%**
CLASS SIZE INDEX	8%	8%
FACULTY COMPENSATION	7%	7%
PERCENT FACULTY WITH TERMINAL DEGREE IN THEIR FIELD	3%	3%
PERCENT FACULTY THAT IS FULL TIME	1%	1%
STUDENT-FACULTY RATIO	1%	1%
STUDENT SELECTIVITY FOR THE FALL 2019 ENTERING CLASS	**7%**	**7%**
MATH AND EVIDENCE-BASED READING AND WRITING PORTIONS OF THE SAT AND THE COMPOSITE ACT SCORES	5%	5%
HIGH SCHOOL CLASS STANDING IN TOP 10%	2%	0%
HIGH SCHOOL CLASS STANDING IN TOP 25%	0%	2%
ACCEPTANCE RATE	0%	0%
FINANCIAL RESOURCES PER STUDENT	**10%**	**10%**
AVERAGE ALUMNI GIVING RATE	**3%**	**3%**
GRADUATE INDEBTEDNESS	**5%**	**5%**
GRADUATE INDEBTEDNESS TOTAL	3%	3%
GRADUATE INDEBTEDNESS PROPORTION WITH DEBT	2%	2%
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**

Outcomes (40%, previously 35%)

Forty percent of a school's rank comes from its success at retaining and graduating students within 150% of normal time (six years), graduate indebtedness, and social mobility factors. Graduation rates themselves have the highest weight in outcomes and in our rankings because degree completion is necessary to receive the full benefits of undergraduate study from employers and graduate schools. We approach outcomes from angles of graduation and retention (22%), graduation rate performance (8%), social mobility (5%) and, new this year, graduate indebtedness (5%).

Graduation and retention rates:

This has two components.

- A four-year rolling average of the proportion of each entering class (fall 2010-2013) earning a degree in six years or less (17.6%)
- A four-year rolling average of the proportion of first-year entering students (fall 2015-fall 2018) who returned the following fall (4.4%)

Graduation rate performance: We compared each college's actual six-year graduation rate with what we predicted for its fall 2013 entering class. For the first time this year, we averaged two years of graduate rate performance data for the graduation rate performance calculations to reduce the volatility of this indicator. So this indicator contains data from the fall 2012 and fall 2013 entering classes. The predicted rates were modeled from admissions data, the proportion of undergraduates awarded Pell Grants, school financial resources, the proportion of federal financial aid recipients who are first-generation college students, and National Universities' math and science orientations.

Social mobility: This indicator measures how well schools graduated students who received federal Pell Grants. Students receiving these grants typically come from households whose family incomes are less than $50,000 annually, though most Pell Grant money goes to students with a total family income below $20,000. For the second consecutive year, U.S. News published a distinct social mobility ranking for all ranked schools. The social mobility ranking was computed by aggregating the two ranking factors assessing graduation rates of Pell-awarded students.

- **Pell Grant graduation rates** incorporate six-year graduation rates of Pell Grant students, adjusted to give much more credit to schools with larger Pell student proportions. This is computed as a two-year rolling average.
- **Pell Grant graduation rate performance** compares each school's six-year graduation rate among Pell recipients with its six-year graduation rate among non-Pell recipients by dividing the former into the latter, then adjusting to give much more credit to schools with larger Pell student proportions. The higher a school's Pell graduation rate relative to its non-Pell graduation rate up to the rates being equal, the better it scores. This, too, is computed as a two-year rolling average.

The two graduate indebtedness figures added to the rankings this year were collected by U.S. News during the spring and summer 2020 on our financial aid survey. Federal loans made to students who borrowed while enrolled at the institutions and co-signed loans make up these figures. They exclude students who transferred in, money borrowed at other institutions, parent loans and students who did not graduate with a bachelor's degree. The two new indicators are:

Graduate indebtedness total: Average amount of accumulated federal loan debt among the 2019 bachelor's degree graduating class that took out federal loans (weighted 3%). For nonresponders to U.S. News' financial aid survey, the College Scorecard's most recent cohort of institutional median graduate indebtedness was adjusted and used in its place.

Graduate indebtedness proportion: Percentage of graduates from the 2019 bachelor's degree graduating class who borrowed federal loans (2%). For nonresponders to U.S. News' financial aid survey, the College Scorecard's most recent institutional cohort of the proportion of undergraduates borrowing was adjusted and used in its place.

New this year, U.S. News calculated a **graduate indebtedness rank**, which is the combination of the two indebtedness indicators for ranked schools. They indicate how schools compare in terms of total graduate indebtedness among those with debt and the proportion of graduates with debt. Schools that ranked the highest had the lowest average amount of debt accrued by their the most recent graduates and a relatively small proportion of students graduating with debt compared with other schools in their U.S. News ranking category. This graduate indebtedness rank is available on each school's Ranking Factor section on usnews.com.

These two indicators were introduced because it has been estimated that U.S. college debt stands at $1.6 trillion of outstanding federal and private student debt, which is held by 45 million student loan borrowers. Affordability of college and the value of that degree after graduation, in terms of being able to earn enough money to be able to make the loan payments, are prime concerns of prospective students and their families. Those vital issues are accounted for in graduate indebtedness. Student debt can have a long-lasting impact. Incorporating this outcome measure into the rankings is a step to holding institutions accountable for the cost of college and the sources of funding available from that school to help students pay for their education.

Faculty Resources (20%)

Research shows the greater access students have to quality instructors, the more engaged they will be in class and the more they will learn and likely graduate. U.S. News uses five factors from the 2019-2020 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction: class size (8%), faculty salary (7%), faculty with the highest degree in their fields (3%), student-faculty ratio (1%) and proportion of faculty who are full time (1%).

- At 8%, class size is the most highly weighted faculty resource measure. Schools score better the greater their proportions of smaller classes for fall 2019.
- Faculty salary is weighted at 7% and is the average full-time faculty salaries for assistant, associate and full professors for 2019-2020, based on definitions from the American Association of University Professors. This is a change from previous rankings, which used a two-year average of both salaries and nonsalary compensation, i.e., benefits in the calculations. The salary data was once again adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living using the Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities indexes, published in May 2020.

Expert Opinion (20%)

Academic reputation matters because it factors things that cannot easily be captured elsewhere. For example, an institution known for having innovative approaches to teaching may perform especially well on this indicator, whereas a school struggling to keep its accreditation will likely perform poorly.

Each year, top academics – presidents, provosts and deans of admissions – rate the academic quality of peer institutions with which they are familiar on a scale of 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). We take a two-year weighted average of the ratings. The 2021 Best Colleges ranking factors in scores from both 2020 and 2019.

U.S. News collected the most recent data by administering peer assessment surveys in spring and summer 2020 directly to schools. Of the 4,816 academics who were sent questionnaires in 2020, 36.4% responded – a decrease from the 43% response rate in 2019.

Schools interested in a breakdown of their peer assessment ratings by respondent type can access this information along with 29 million other data points with a subscription to U.S. News' Academic Insights. Its web-based platform facilitates a deep dive for studying and benchmarking the rankings and is designed for colleges and universities only.

Financial Resources (10%)

Generous per-student spending indicates a college can offer a wide variety of programs and services. U.S. News measures financial resources by using the average spending per student on instruction, research, student services and related educational expenditures in the 2018 and 2019 fiscal years.

Student Excellence (7%, previously 10%)

A school's academic atmosphere is influenced by the selectivity of its admissions. Simply put, students who achieved strong grades and test scores during high school have the highest probability of succeeding at challenging college-level coursework, enabling instructors to design classes that have great rigor.

Standardized tests: U.S. News factors average test scores for all enrollees who took the mathematics and evidence-based reading and writing portions of the SAT and the composite ACT in fall 2019. Both SATs and ACTs were converted to their 0-100 test taker percentile distributions and weighted based on the proportions of new entrants submitting each exam.

We weighted standardized tests at 5% (7.75% previously) in the overall rankings.

Schools sometimes fail to report SAT and ACT scores for students in these categories: athletes, international students, minority students, legacies, those admitted by special arrangement and those who started in the summer term. For any school that did not report all scores or that declined to say whether all scores were reported, U.S. News reduced its combined SAT/ACT percentile distribution value used in the ranking model by 15%. If the combined percentage of the fall 2019 entering class submitting test scores was less than 75% of all new entrants, its combined SAT/ACT percentile distribution value used in the rankings was discounted by 15%.

U.S. News now ranks schools that report they don't use the SAT or ACT at all in admissions decisions. Previously, beginning with the 2008 edition of Best Colleges, these test-blind schools had been automatically excluded from the overall rankings and categorized as unranked. (These are different than schools that have test-optional or text-flexible admissions policies that have always been ranked and will continue to be ranked.) As a result of this change, more than 60 schools will be added to the overall rankings. The test-blind schools without SAT/ACT scores for fall 2019 were assigned values for ranking calculation purposes only equal to the lowest test score by a ranked school in their category; their test scores are published as N/A on usnews.com.

High school class standing: U.S. News incorporates the proportion of enrolled first-year students at National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges who graduated in the top 10% of their high school classes, and for Regional Universities and Regional Colleges, the proportion who graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes. It contributes 2% (2.25% previously) toward schools' overall scores.

Alumni Giving (3%, previously 5%)

This is the average percentage of living alumni with bachelor's degrees who gave to their school during 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. Giving measures student satisfaction and post-graduate engagement.

Data Sources

Most colleges report the data directly to U.S. News. This year, 85% of ranked institutions returned their statistical information during the spring and summer 2020 data collection window.

We use the most current information available for the rankings. Because we conduct our own data collection, much of what was analyzed and published is a year ahead of other sources. This also means much of our information on schools is not available anywhere else or, at least, would require navigating through variegated school websites.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic means some of the information about "current" policies and procedures collected in spring 2020 has probably changed more often than in a typical year. In the summer of 2020, many institutions announced (temporary or indefinite) changes to their standardized test requirements for admissions and made adjustments to student expenses, as examples. But all data used for the rankings pertain to fall 2019 and earlier.

For quality assurance, rankings data that schools reported to U.S. News were algorithmically compared with previous years' submissions to flag large change statistical outliers. Respondents were required to review, possibly revise and verify any flagged data to submit their surveys. For the second year in a row, they were also instructed to have a top academic official sign off on the accuracy of the data. Schools that declined to do this step could still be ranked but display a footnote on their U.S. News profile on usnews.com.

After submitting, U.S. News assessed the veracity of data submitted on a factor-by-factor level and contacted select schools to confirm or revise data. Schools that did not respond or were unable to confirm their data's accuracy may have had the data in question unpublished and unused in the calculations.

We obtained missing data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (finances, faculty counts, student-teacher ratios, faculty salaries, SAT and ACT scores, Pell and non-Pell graduation rates, and overall graduation and first-year retention rates) and its College Scorecard (graduate indebtedness). In total, ranking indicators that constitute approximately 85% of each schools' overall score may use third-party data when survey data was not supplied.

U.S. News uses assigned values, which are not displayed, in the ranking calculation when schools fail to report on a ranking indicator and data is not available from these sources.

Missing data is reported as "N/A" on usnews.com, which means that specific data points (often the most recent cohort data that U.S. News could only obtain directly from schools) were missing. This does not indicate whether the school received an assigned value or was scored on historical data either submitted in a previous data collection cycle or obtained using a third-party source. Schools that refused to fill out the U.S. News survey altogether display a footnote on their profiles as nonresponders but incur no direct penalty in the ranking calculations.

In total, U.S. News has collected data on more than 1,800 institutions. While data for all schools appears on usnews.com, 1,452 schools were ranked.

Unranked Schools

In total, 377 colleges are listed as unranked, much fewer than 542 colleges in the 2020 edition. The reason for the decrease is because in previous editions dating back to 2008, schools that did not make use of ACT/SAT in admissions were unranked, but going forward, U.S. News has dropped this approach. (Note that test-optional schools were always ranked.)

The unranked designation now owes to one of the following reasons, in descending order of frequency:

- They are in a Carnegie Classification that U.S. News has not included in its ranking categories. These include 257 highly specialized schools in arts, business, engineering, health, medicine and technology.
- They received too few cumulative ratings in the 2019 and 2020 peer assessment survey to be scored on the indicator.
- The institution's total undergraduate and graduate enrollment is fewer than 200 students.
- A six-year graduation rate could not be found; this was most common with new and recently merged institutions.

Unlike schools that are on usnews.com as unranked, some U.S. schools that award bachelor's degrees are excluded from Best Colleges pages altogether. These include U.S. institutions that lack regional accreditation, that only award bachelor's degrees as degree completion programs or that only offer 100% distance education undergraduate degree programs, according to 2019 data from the federal government.

New Rankings and Indicators

Undergraduate rankings in computer science: U.S. News published undergraduate computer science program rankings for the first time. They were produced using data from a specialized computer science peer assessment survey administered in spring and summer 2020.

The overall computer science rankings were calculated solely from ratings of program quality on a 1-5 scale. Institutions most frequently nominated for having strength in any of nine computer science specialties could also be ranked in those specialties in descending order of ratings received.

For more details and a list of specialties, see the undergraduate computer science methodology.

Undergraduate business specialty: Business analytics is a new specialty in the undergraduate business rankings. All schools that were nominated by seven or more schools for having strength in business analytics were ranked in descending order of ratings received. For more details, see the undergraduate business methodology.

Best Value Schools Methodology: By design, the Best Value Schools rankings place significant emphasis on affordability for students who may be eligible for need-based aid. The 2021 edition introduced a new ranking indicator, contributing 20% toward a college or university's Best Value Schools rank, which incorporates the proportion of need-based aid in the form of grants and scholarships.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities rankings: For the 2021 edition of the HBCU ranking U.S. News added the two graduate indebtedness indicators. As a result, more weight was given to outcomes measures (40%, previously 30%) and slightly less to peer assessment, SAT/ACT scores, high school class standing and alumni giving.

More to Come ...