



College Rankings & College Choice

How important are college rankings in students' college choice process?

This research brief examines the importance of college rankings in informing the college choice process for entering college freshman at four-year institutions. Using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey over the last twelve years, we examine the changing influence of college rankings in students' choice process over the last decade, closely exploring how this influence can vary for students based on demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional characteristics.

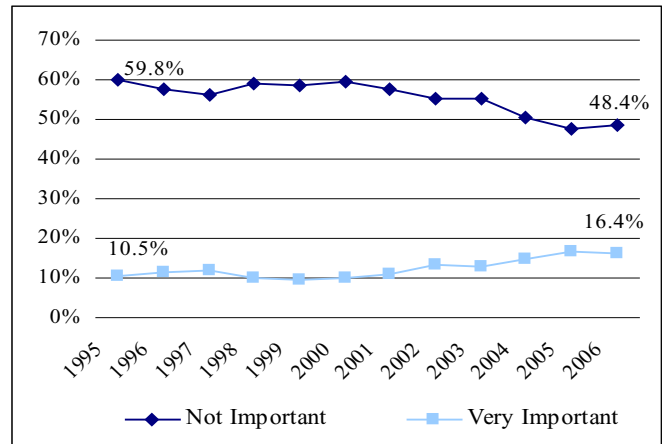
The advent of annually published college rankings (e.g., *U.S. News & World Report*; *Money Magazine*, etc.) has served to reinforce a competitive dynamic within the higher education marketplace. A continual jostling for the best students, the most renowned faculty, and top-notch campus facilities is emblematic of the redefined cultural norms of the college choice process in the four-year sector. Institutions have had to become smarter about their packaging and marketing, and students and families in turn have become savvier about “shopping” for the best educational value when making their final college choice.

In some ways, the increasing popularity and use of rankings that purport to categorize the “best colleges” (e.g., *U.S. News & World Report*), the “best college buys” (e.g., *Money Magazine*) or the “best sports schools” (e.g., *Sports Illustrated*) has given more advantage than ever before to affluent students and families in the college decision process. McDonough et al. (1998) noted that while others have characterized college rankings as a democratization of college knowledge for the benefit of all, their findings suggested quite the contrary. They found that more affluent families were much more likely to value college rankings and use them in informing their college choice. The patterns of use of college rankings point to the reinforcement of advantages that more affluent students already possess with respect to the college choice process, which leads us to question the true utility of rankings given other recent criticisms and growing resistance from college leaders (see for example, McDonough et. al., 1998; Meredith, 2004; The Education Conservancy, 2004; Webster, 2001).

More Students are Citing Rankings as “Very Important” in Recent Years, but Numbers Still Low

In 1995, when a question about the importance of national magazine rankings in student college choice was first asked on the CIRP Freshman Survey, approximately 10.5 percent of incoming college students reported that such rankings were “very important” in their college decision (see Figure 1)¹ while almost 60 percent reported it was not important at all. From 2002 to 2006 however, the proportion of students reporting rankings as “very important” has steadily increased, peaking at over sixteen percent in 2005 and 2006.

Figure 1. Importance of College Rankings in National Magazines as Reported by Entering Students at Four-Year Institutions



How Important are College Rankings, Really?

Although there has been an increasing proportion of students who cite college rankings as a “very important” factor for choosing their college, this factor has not been among the most important reasons in the choice process. Rather, students have

¹ All figures and tables in this brief utilize national trends data from the CIRP Freshman Survey, administered annually by over six hundred American higher education institutions.



consistently reported a school's "good academic reputation" as the top reason for choosing their college, along with whether graduates of their college get good jobs, the size of the campus, the financial assistance they were offered, the school's reputation for social activities, and whether the graduates of that school gain admission to top graduate or professional programs.

When placed in the appropriate context, college rankings are much lower in relative importance for students in making their college choice. Thus, it appears that rankings serve as a sort of confirmation of perceived academic reputation or educational excellence, perhaps reinforcing a student's ultimate college choice rather than guiding it in any meaningful way.

Table 1: How important was each of the following reasons in your decision to come to this particular college? (Percent Marking "Very Important")

Item	1995 %	2006 %	Percentage Change 95-06
Very good academic reputation	57.2	57.4	0.3
Graduates get good jobs	48.6	49.3	1.4
Size of college	37.8	38.9	2.9
Offered financial assistance	33.5	34.3	2.4
Good reputation for social activities	26.0	32.2	23.8
Grads get into top graduate/professional programs	29.7	30.2	1.7
Wanted to live near home	16.7	18.3	9.6
Rankings in national magazines	10.5	16.4	56.2
Relatives wanted me to come here	8.1	11.6	43.2
High school guidance counselor advice	6.4	8.6	34.4
Religious affiliation/orientation of the college	6.2	7.3	17.7

Nonetheless, the influence of rankings in the college decision process has been increasing in the last decade. Over the twelve years that we have asked this question of students (1995 to 2006), there has been a 56.2 percent increase in the proportion of students who report rankings are "very important" when deciding where to go to college. By contrast, the four reasons that the largest proportion of students consistently rated "very important" showed only very small relative increases. While it is apparent that rankings are not the most important issue that students take under consideration when selecting their college, they are nonetheless becoming increasingly more important to students nationally.

To Whom are Rankings Important?

CIRP Freshman Survey data for the last 12 years point to a rise in importance for college rankings among entering college students. However, rankings seem to have much more of an influence for some groups of students than for others.

Institution Type

The proportion of students who reported that rankings were "very important" to them varied drastically by the type of institution that students decided to attend. In general, the more selective the institution, the higher the percentage of students who reported rankings were an important reason for attending that institution.² In both 1995 and 2006, approximately eleven percent or fewer of the students at low selectivity institutions reported that rankings were "very important" to them, compared to approximately twenty percent or more of students at high selectivity institutions. Further, in general, fewer students at public institutions and more students at private and non-sectarian institutions reported that rankings were a "very important" factor in their choice.

Table 2: Percent citing rankings as "very important", by type of institution they are attending

Type of Institution	Selectivity	1995 %	2006 %
Public Universities	Low	6.8	10.9
	Medium	9.2	23.6
	High	21.4	24.4
Private Universities	Low	10.7	21.8
	Medium	19.1	28.3
	High	32.0	42.6
Public 4-year colleges	Low	3.3	5.4
	Medium	8.4	7.2
	High	21.4	16.9
Non-sectarian 4-year colleges	Low	7.4	8.8
	Medium	14.6	12.9
	High	16.2	17.7
	Very high	20.8	30.5
Catholic 4-year colleges	Low	5.0	9.2
	Medium	9.6	11.2
	High	13.4	19.2
Other religious 4-year colleges	Very low	2.1	5.3
	Low	8.0	8.6
	Medium	12.6	10.4
	High	13.9	20.6
Predominantly Black	Public	4.6	12.5
	Nonsectarian	20.4	32.5

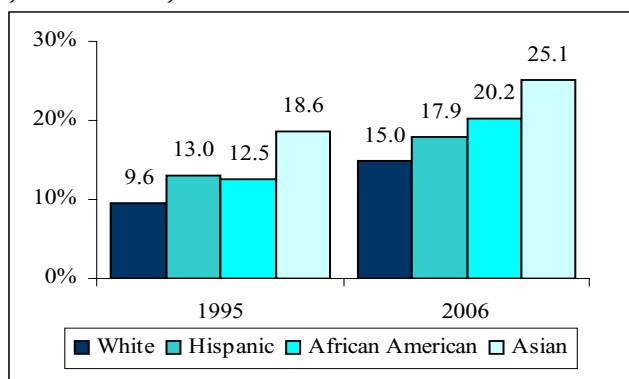
Students at private, highly selective universities were by far the most likely to report that rankings were "very important" to them (in 1995 32.0% and in 2006 42.6% did so), although students at highly selective *public* universities were also very likely to report that rankings were "very important" in their selection (21.4% of students in 1995 and 24.4% in 2006 did so). Students at low selectivity 4-year non-Catholic religious colleges and students at public 4-year colleges were the least likely to report that rankings were "very important" in their selection choice in both 1995 and 2006. In addition, students at non-sectarian 4-year colleges were particularly likely to report that rankings were "very important" when they were at high- or very high-selectivity institutions.

² The selectivity of a school is based on the mean score of entering freshmen on the Verbal plus Mathematical portions of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (or the converted SAT Math and Verbal equivalents from the American College Test composite).

Race/Ethnicity

In both 1995 and 2006, students who identified themselves as White/Caucasian were the least likely to indicate that rankings were “very important” in their college choice. Asian or Asian American students were most likely to report rankings as a “very important” factor in choosing their college. Hispanic and African American students rated rankings similarly in 1995, but by 2006 African American students were second behind Asian students in citing rankings as “very important.” In sum, all student groups demonstrated a consistent increase in reporting that rankings were a “very important” factor in the college choice process.

Figure 2. Percent citing rankings as “very important,” by Race/Ethnicity



Major

Students who intended to major in technical or profession-oriented fields were the most likely to report that rankings were a “very important” influence in their college selection process, and students who intended to major in the social sciences or arts/humanities were the least likely to report that rankings were a “very important” reason in choosing their college. Specifically, in both 1995 and 2006, students who reported they planned to major in such fields as engineering/technical, business, or the natural sciences were far more likely to cite rankings as “very important” compared to their peers intending to major in the social sciences or arts/humanities. Students who were undecided about a major were the least likely to report that rankings were “very important” in their college selection, although in 2006, almost the same proportion of undecided students cited rankings as “very important” as did those who intended to major in arts/humanities.

Table 3: Percent citing rankings as “very important”, by intended major field

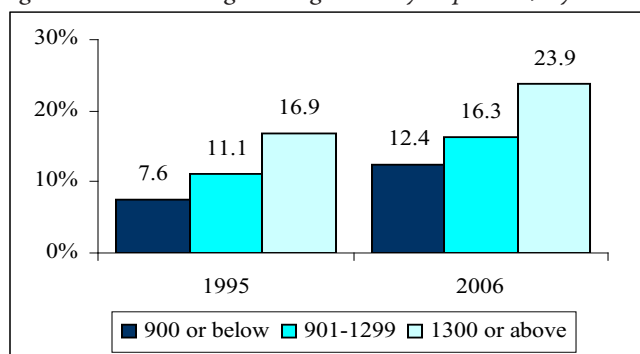
Major Field	1995 %	2006 %
Engineering/Technical	12.3	20.2
Business	12.3	18.3
Natural Science	11.4	18.1
Social Science	9.4	14.9
Arts & Humanities	9.6	13.5
Undecided	8.3	13.3

Although there has been an increasing proportion of students who cite college rankings as a “very important” factor for choosing their college, this factor has not been among the most important reasons in the choice process.

SAT Score³

The higher a student’s SAT score, the more likely he or she reported that rankings were an important factor in their college choice. In both 1995 and 2006, students whose SAT scores were above 1300 were by far the most likely to report that rankings were “very important”—these students were about twice as likely to cite rankings as “very important” than students whose SAT scores were 900 or lower. Students whose SAT scores fell between 901 and 1299 were about as likely as the overall average to report that rankings were “very important.”

Figure 3. Percent citing rankings as “very important,” by SAT score

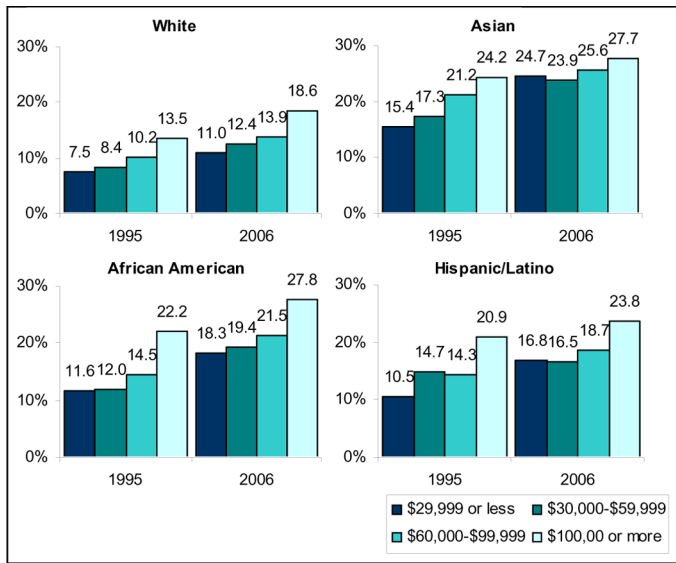


Race/Ethnicity by Parental Income Level

Almost without exception, across all income groups, White/Caucasian students were the least likely to report that rankings were “very important” and Asian American students were the most likely. African American and Hispanic students in the highest income bracket were also very likely to report that rankings were a “very important” influence for them. Interestingly, for all racial/ethnic groups in 1995, there was a trend of more students reporting rankings were “very important” as their household income increased, and in 2006 this was also the case for White/Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic/Latino students. However, for Asian-American students in 2006, the trend across income groups was virtually flat—the percent of Asian-American students who reported rankings were “very important” was between 24 and 28 percent, regardless of income.

³ SAT scores in this report represent the Verbal plus Mathematical portions of the Scholastic Aptitude test, or the converted SAT Math and Verbal equivalents from the American College Test composite.

Figure 4: Percent citing rankings as “very important,” by race/ethnicity and income



Summary

From 1995 to 2006, CIRP Freshman Survey trends data demonstrated a steady increase in the proportion of freshmen at four-year institutions who reported that rankings were “very important” in affecting their college decision. Situated within the broader context of other influences guiding college choice, college rankings appear to be growing in importance as a resource for some students. This is especially true for students from more affluent backgrounds, for those majoring in technical or business fields, for those with higher SAT scores, or those enrolled at selective institutions across different sectors. In spite of these important contextual differences across different student groups, college rankings continue to “rank” relatively low compared to other factors guiding a student’s college choice.

Our exploratory analysis has yielded a more nuanced portrait of the importance of rankings relative to other influences, revealing, perhaps, that rankings serve as more of an additional confirmation of an institution’s academic reputation, social and academic offerings, and educational value rather than guiding students’ college choice in any meaningful way. Admissions officers and administrators should understand that rankings are only one of many tools that today’s college students will utilize in guiding their college choice.

In spite of the growing opposition and criticisms over their inherent value, the use of college rankings as an information resource for students and their families appears to be a permanent fixture in the college choice process.

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The Cooperative Institutional Research Program

CIRP is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is now the nation’s largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions and over 12 million college students. The Higher Education Research Institute has administered the CIRP since 1973. The CIRP longitudinal program consists of the Freshman Survey, Your First College Year Survey, the College Senior Survey, and the triennial Faculty Survey.

Information on the CIRP Freshman Survey, research and publications based on these data, and other research projects conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute can be found on the HERI website at: www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri.

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