

College-Bound Students Use a Wide Variety of College Rankings Sources

Key Findings

1. The majority of students are looking at rankings when making college application decisions, but there is no consensus on a preferred rankings source
2. Students are talking about college rankings
3. Students think rankings are useful for anticipating outcomes and differentiating college attributes
4. Motivations for using rankings are different depending on student quality, but there are no significant differences in the use of rankings by income level or first-generation status

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U.S. News & World Report began its college rankings list in the 1980s; we have been studying rankings' influence on students' application and enrollment decisions since *studentPOLL*'s origin in 1995. This longitudinal perspective enables us to provide insights on the full significance of our present study's findings, which suggest some shifts in the role and influence of college rankings. Mindful of the changes in the uses of the internet and social media that have occurred since we first explored the use of rankings over 20 years ago, we suspect the increased use and volume of rankings is a result of the shift to digital communications and the ease of content "shareability," through social media channels.

The most notable change is an increase in ranking publications used, which prevent *U.S. News & World Report* from dominating as the most-used ranking source. Students are now acquiring information from a wide variety of publishers, all providing slightly different approaches and scores. In addition, the results from this current study show that first-generation college students are using rankings as frequently as their peers who are not first-generation college students – a major shift from past research.

In recent months, college rankings have occupied a large share of the media space, including an explosion of news in September when many rankings go "live." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s article ["What Rankings Have Wrought,"](#) effectively highlights the back-and-forth support and controversy around college rankings in recent years. We must also point out that our culture, with a boost from the media, now ranks nearly everything – hospitals, physicians, restaurants and even driving schools. These have some influence

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on behaviors regarding nearly all choices we make. Colleges now are among the long list of places, people, thoughts, trends and more that we, as a society, have categorized and quantified.

And so, institutions are left with the predicament of how to deal with college rankings, which many students use but may be far less influential on students' application and enrollment decisions than other factors such as perceptions of academic quality and experiential or international learning opportunities. We may question the accuracy, fairness or value of the rankings but we should also reflect on the extent to which higher education institutions may have exacerbated this predicament by touting college rankings prominently in marketing and admission materials, often giving them more attention than the distinctive qualities of the institution that make greater differences. One thing is certain: rankings will not disappear. The critical issue every institution will continue to face is how to employ rankings in a way that does not over-emphasize them at the expense of the distinctive student experience that the institution offers.

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1. The majority of students are looking at college rankings, but there is no consensus on a preferred rankings source

Findings

- 72% of traditional college-bound students report that they consider rankings when considering where to apply to college.
- Most commonly, students used *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings (35%), *Forbes Top Colleges* (27%), *Princeton Review* (27%), and *Niche* (formerly *College Prowler*) *Best Colleges* (21%).
- 25% of students reported using only one or two college ranking sources.

Commentary

College rankings are considered by a strong majority of college-bound students, with almost three-quarters of students indicating they consider college rankings during their application decisions. However, the landscape of sources from which students find college rankings is changing. In this study, we found that students are using a wide variety of sources, such as *U.S. News & World Report*, *Forbes Top Colleges*, *The Princeton Review* and more. This is a notable shift, considering our past *student*POLL research on rankings ([2013](#), [2002](#) and [1995](#)) has suggested *U.S. News & World Report* was the primary source for rankings.

Sources of information on college rankings

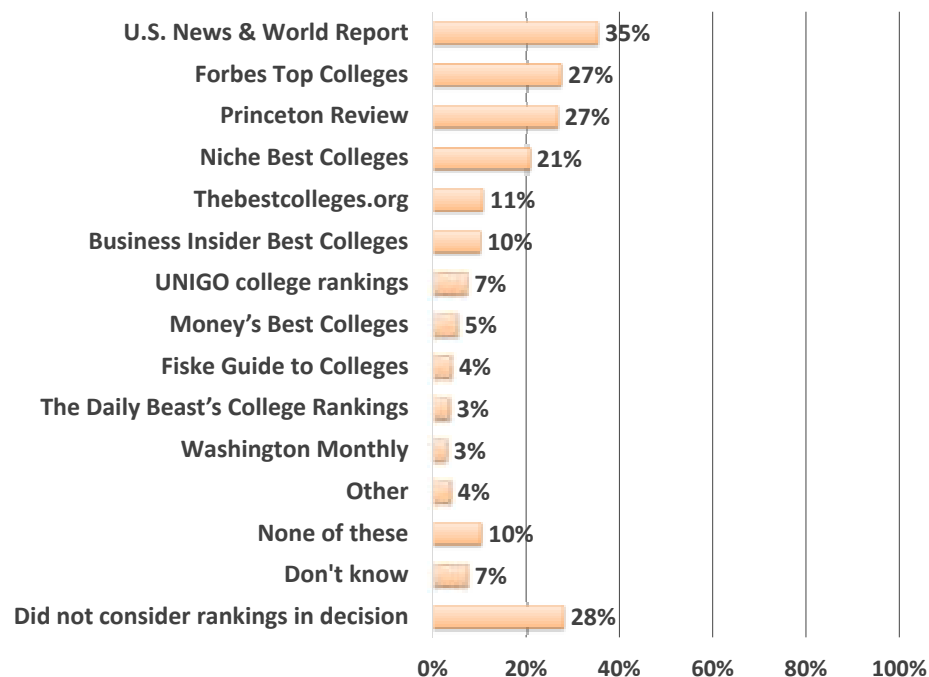


Chart 1

2. Students are talking about college rankings

Findings

- Seven-in-ten students have discussed college rankings with someone they know.
 - › More than half of students have discussed rankings with their parents or other family members.
 - › Half of students have discussed rankings with their friends.
 - › Three-in-ten have discussed rankings with their high school guidance counselor or high school teachers.
- Higher scorers are more likely than lower scorers to discuss rankings with their family and friends.

Commentary

Students are discussing rankings with a broad range of people in their lives, but they are most likely to partake in such conversations with family members and close friends.

Types of people with whom students are discussing college rankings

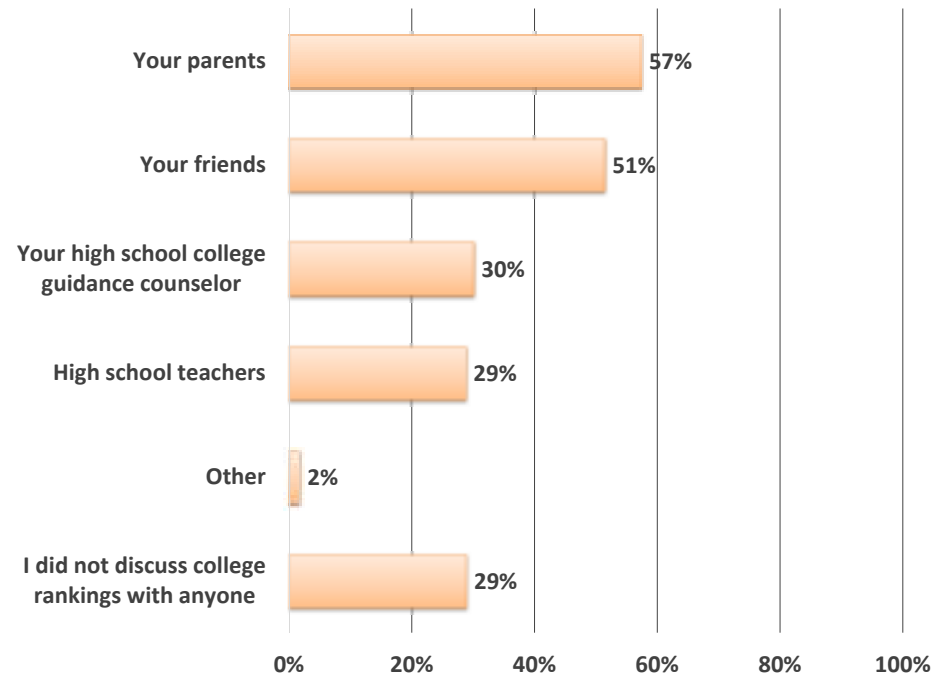


Chart 2

3. Students think rankings are useful for anticipating outcomes and differentiating college attributes

Findings

- About three-quarters of students agreed that college rankings are important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges.
- About three-quarters of students also agreed that graduates of higher-ranked colleges find good jobs more easily.

Commentary

Not only are students reading college rankings when thinking about where to apply, they are also using college rankings to differentiate important factors among colleges. Although these are one of many elements influencing students' application decisions, Art & Science Group's work with individual clients suggests rankings play a bigger role in application decisions than in the final enrollment decisions.

Students' perceptions on using college rankings

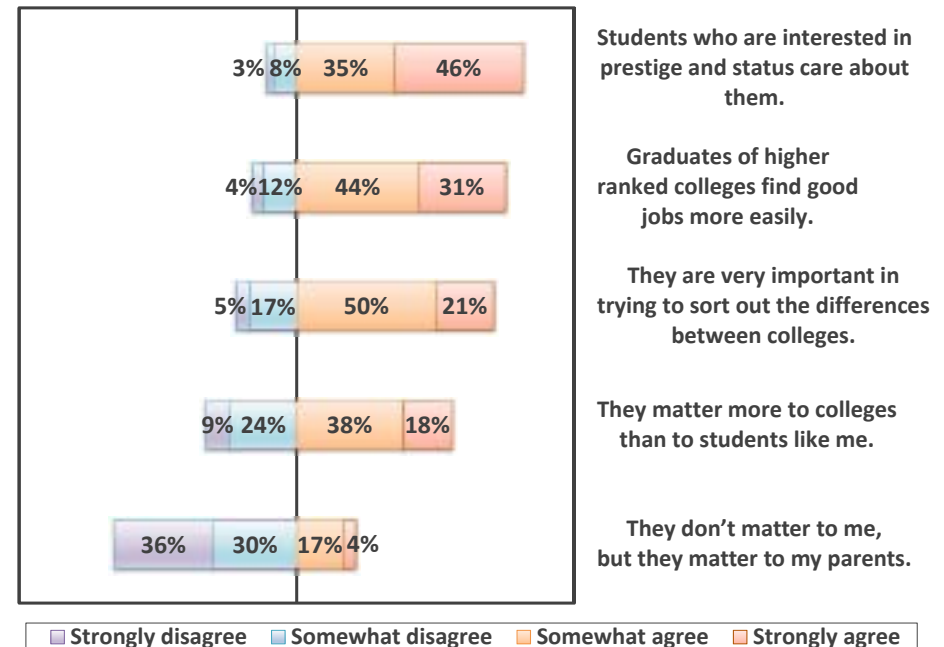


Chart 3

4. Motivations for using rankings are different depending on student quality, but there are no significant differences in the use of rankings by income level or first-generation status.

Findings

- Students who have higher ACT scores are more likely to consider rankings and use more rankings sources than students with lower and middle ACT scores.
- Students with a realistic first-choice school ranked in the Top 50 of *U.S. News National Universities* rankings, which correlates strongly with high ACT scorers, are more likely to use rankings than those with a first-choice school that is a lower-ranked National University or a Regional University/College.
- Higher- and middle-income students and those who are not first-generation status use a larger variety of rankings sources than other subgroups, but there are no differences in terms of their propensity to consider rankings in general.
- Along with higher ACT scores, students interested in STEM majors, private institutions, doctoral/research institutions and those who have a better understanding of the liberal arts* are more likely to be considering rankings in their decisions to apply to colleges.
- Lower ACT scorers are more likely to agree that rankings are very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges.
- The ability to identify specific ranking sources correlates with ACT score: Two-thirds of lower scorers could not identify a specific ranking (even though around 60% said they considered

rankings) as opposed to less than half of middle scorers and one-third of higher scorers.

- First-generation students reported using fewer rankings, but there are no differences in the types of sources they considered, when compared to students that are not first-generation status.

Commentary

These findings suggest that students are interacting with college rankings as a justification for their application choices rather than a driver of those choices. While the majority of all ACT testers use college rankings, higher scorers are more likely than lower scorers to use rankings. Furthermore, although two-thirds of lower ACT scorers cannot identify a specific rankings source, lower scorers are still more likely to think rankings are very important in sorting out the differences between colleges than compared to their higher-scoring peers. All students, regardless of first-generation status or ACT score, pulled from the same collection of rankings sources, as listed in finding 1, suggesting no particular rankings source dominates the rankings market.

Chart 4: Students' perceptions on using college rankings, by ACT score

Conclusion

These data strongly suggest that students are incorporating college rankings into their college application decisions; yet we suspect that the influence of rankings is more prevalent during the early stages of the application process, as students sort through and narrow their application choices. As noted earlier, these data and our own experience suggest that the rankings serve largely as a justification and talking point for the application choices students make but not a driver of those choices. We suspect the element of “prestige” associated with college rankings is more important to high-achieving students because they have more school choices available to them. That being said, it is likely that rankings are not driving the actual college enrollment decisions, but instead are influencing students’ perceptions of prestige for the schools they are considering.

Endnotes

* Students’ understanding of the liberal arts was calculated from parallel *studentPOLL* research that will be released in the next *studentPOLL* issue.

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The findings in this issue of studentPOLL were based on a fielding that took place in January 2016. The sample includes high school senior ACT test-takers, who tested on the September 2015 or October 2015 national test dates. Respondents were each recruited from a random sample of 40,000, plus an over-sample of 2,500 African-Americans. Including the oversample, 42,500 emails were sent inviting participants to the online survey during the fielding period.

Responses were collected from Jan. 4, 2016, to Jan. 31, 2016. A total of 2,654 people responded to the survey invitation and 1,199 qualified and completed the survey. Responses are weighted by race, region and gender so that respondents resembled the full population from which they were recruited. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 2.8 percent and is higher among subgroups.

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About *student*POLL

A collaboration between ACT and Art & Science Group, LLC, *student*POLL presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of college-bound high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *student*POLL seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, a leading national source of market intelligence for higher education, *student*POLL has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. ACT and Art & Science Group have now joined forces to expand the depth and range of the issues that will be explored in *student*POLL. *Student*POLL findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

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About ACT

ACT is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Headquartered in Iowa City, Iowa, ACT is trusted as the nation's leader in college and career readiness, providing high-quality achievement assessments grounded in more than 50 years of research and experience. ACT's uniquely integrated set of solutions provide insights that empower individuals to succeed from elementary school through career. To learn more about ACT, go to www.act.org.

About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group, LLC is one of the nation's most influential consulting firms specializing in market-related issues facing higher education and the nonprofit sector. The firm's work synthesizes imagination and empirical rigor — art and science. Its research is considered the most rigorous and innovative in higher education today. The firm assists clients in every major arena of marketing and communications: market-informed strategic planning; enrollment management and student recruitment; development and alumni relations; and tuition pricing and financial aid. The firm has extensive experience working with a large variety of public and private institutions of higher learning, ranging from comprehensive private and public research universities to small liberal arts colleges.

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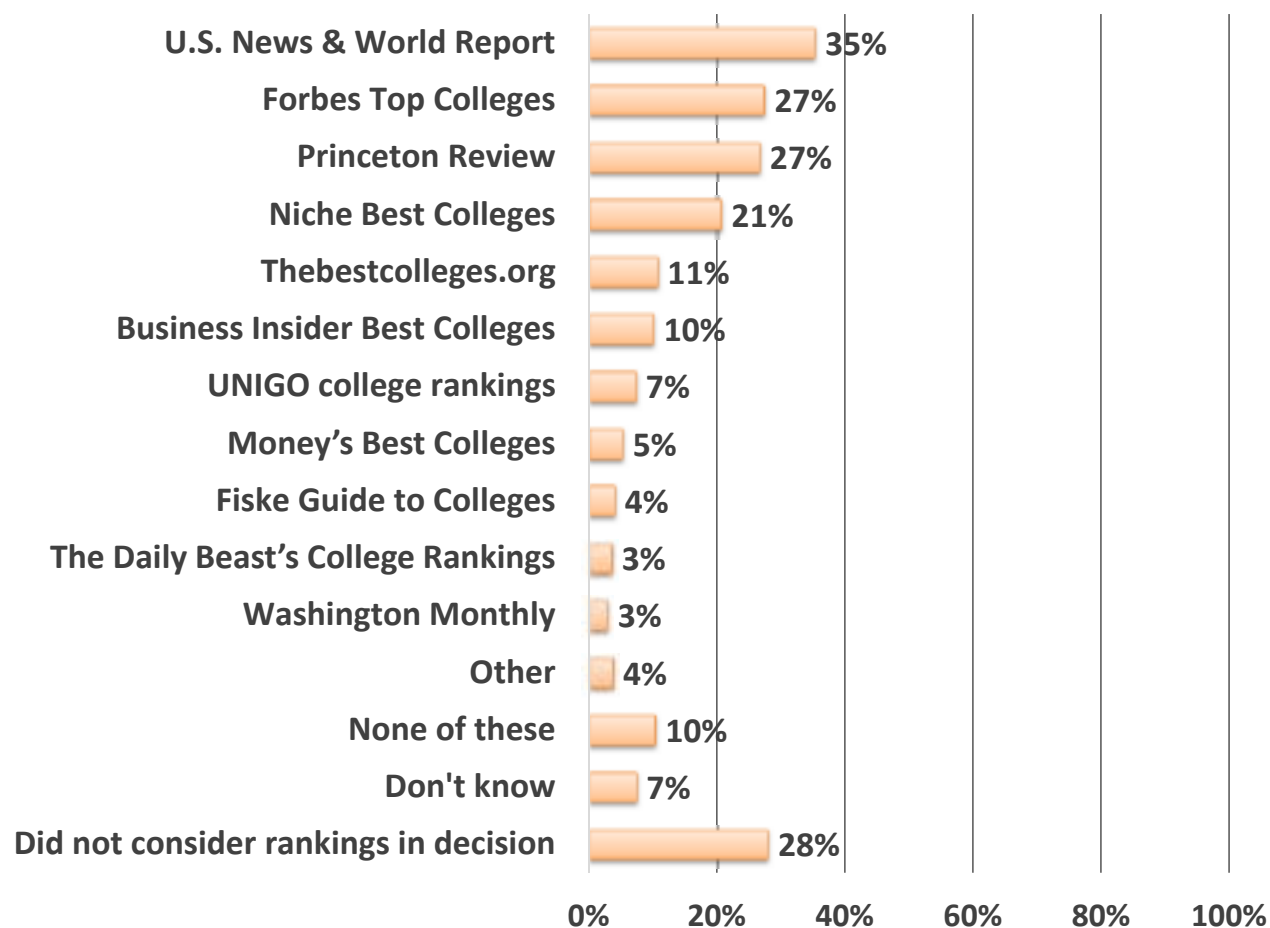
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Chart 1: Sources of information on college rankings



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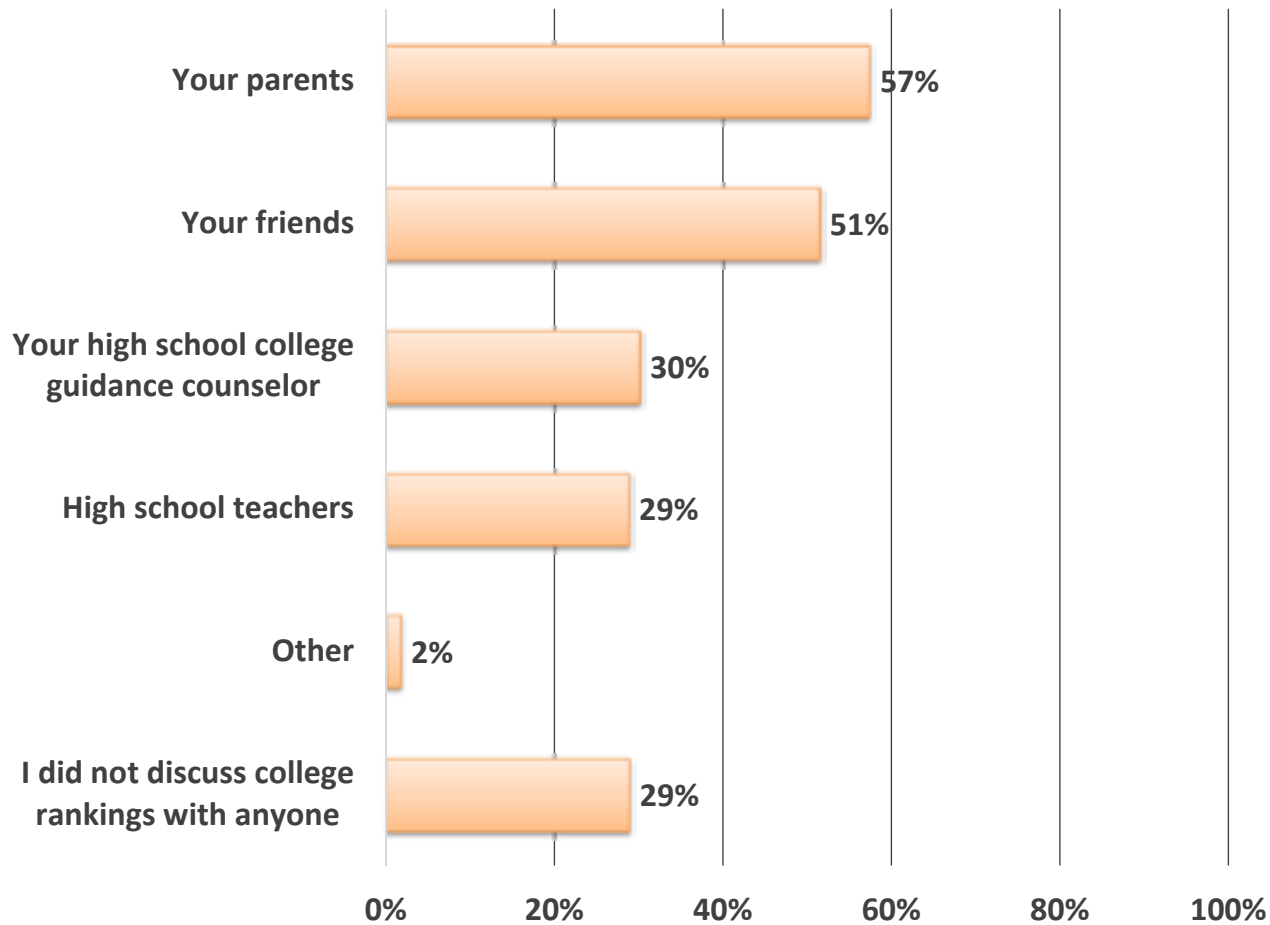
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Chart 2: Types of people with whom students are discussing college rankings



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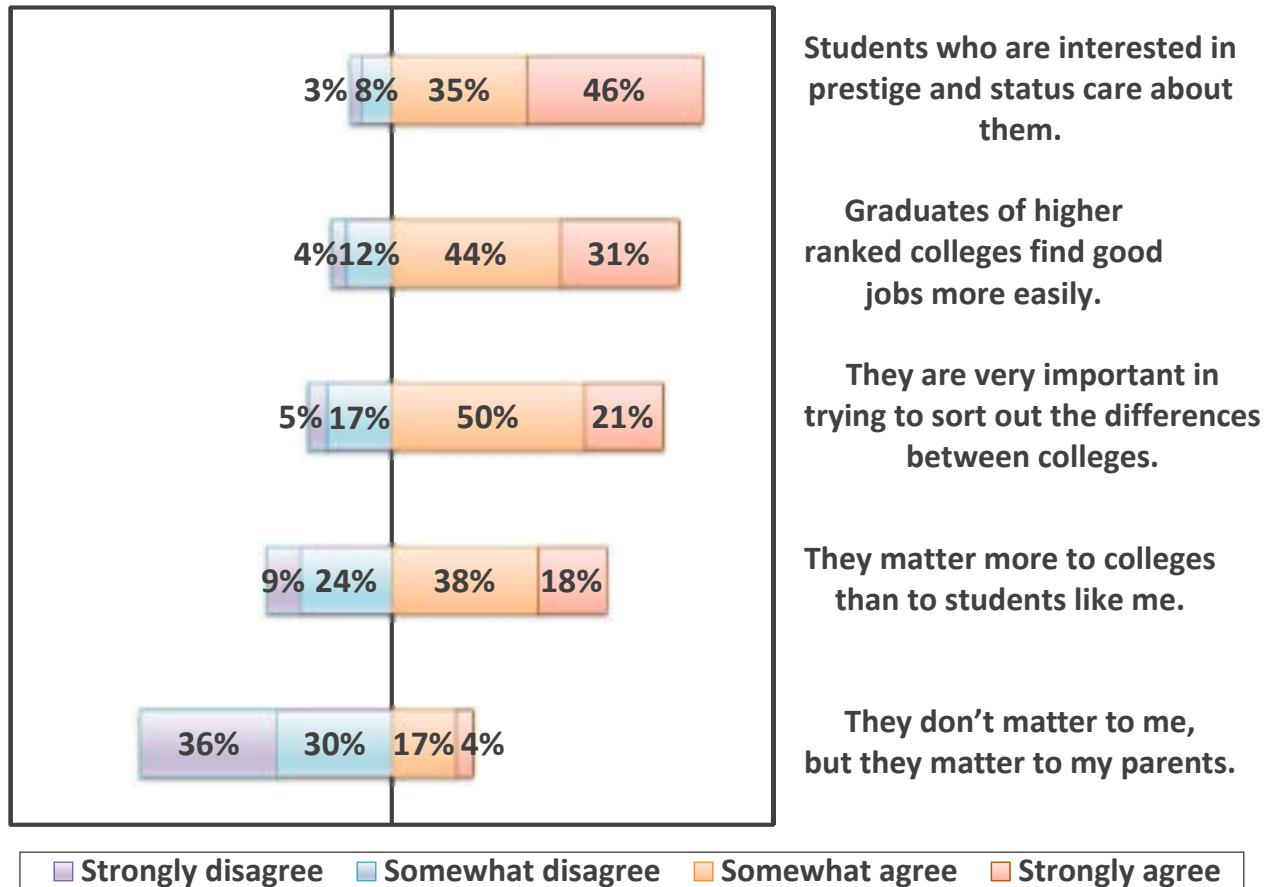
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Chart 3: Students' perceptions on using college rankings



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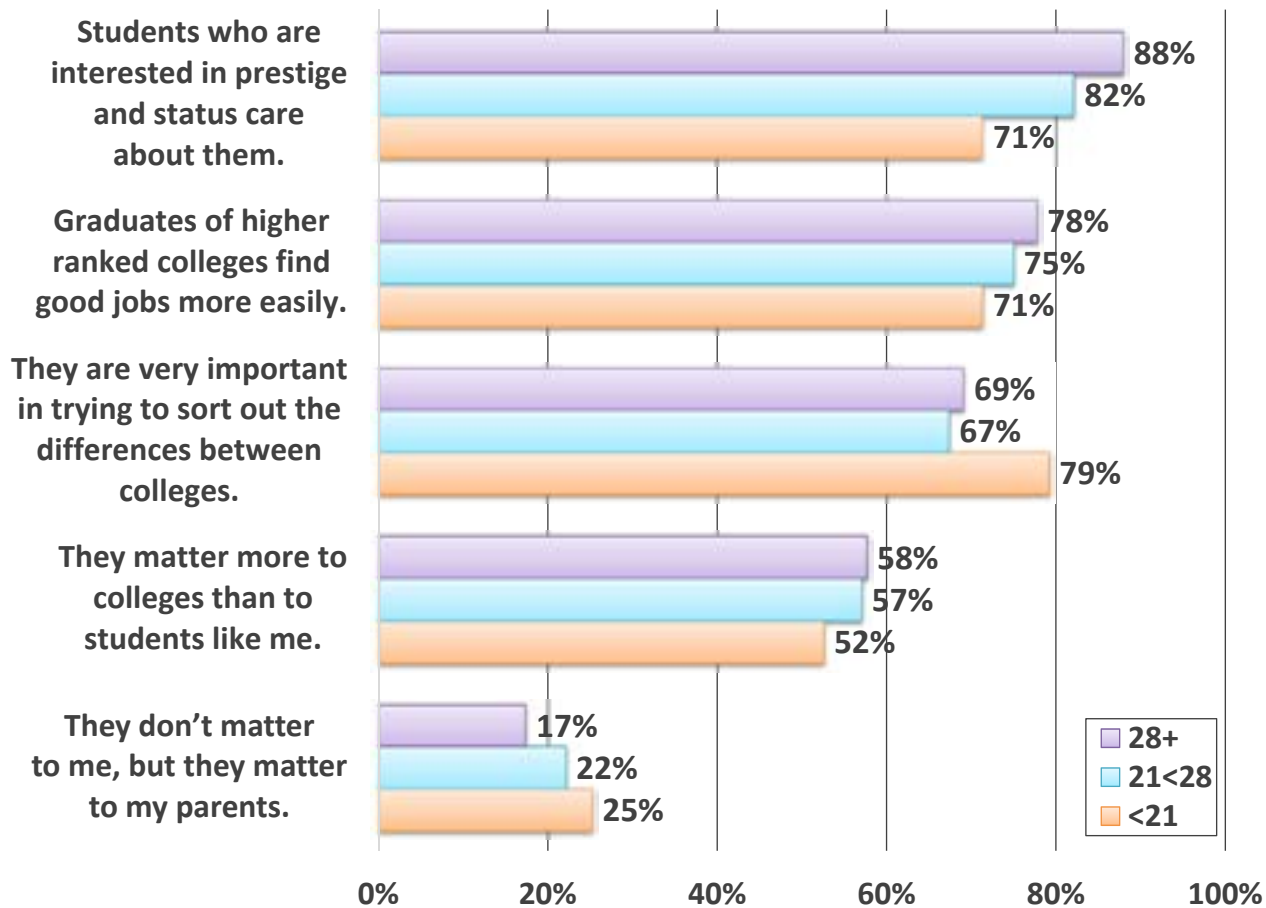
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Chart 4: Students' perceptions on using college rankings, by ACT score



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