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# studentPOLL

## StudentPoll

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## Influence of the Rankings on College Choice

### Two-thirds of college-bound students report that the college rankings influenced their college application decisions

#### Publisher's Note

For the last several decades, there has been spirited and at times acrimonious debate about the influence of national college rankings on students' college application and enrollment decisions. For some time, these rankings sources, dominated by *US News & World Report*, have been the bête noire of many presidents, troubled by the very idea of rankings and the mockery they make of the complicated process of college choice. We have been among the strongest critics of rankings and the questionable metrics that drive them (rankings largely correlate with institutional wealth). And we've taken some comfort in previous *studentPOLL* studies that have demonstrated that the rankings may have had less impact on student choice than conventional wisdom suggested at the time.

No longer is this the case. The findings from our latest issue on the college rankings from an online survey conducted with 846 college-bound high school seniors revealed that a significant proportion of students today are paying attention to college rankings. Yet we would advise caution in reading too much into this finding. In sophisticated studies for a wide array of individual colleges and universities nationwide, we have found that the actual impact of the rankings varies widely. Other factors typically have greater influence on students' decisions where to apply and to enroll, at times much greater than the rankings.

By way of background, here's a quick history of *studentPOLL*'s studies on the influence of the national rankings on college choice. In 1995, when *studentPOLL* first published research on the influence of the rankings in college choice, the findings revealed that while a little more than half of the students interviewed used the rankings as they decided where to apply and enroll, the rankings had little impact on college choice compared to other sources of information and advice. In our second cycle of research conducted in 2002, *studentPOLL* found that for most prospective college students the rankings mattered little. Only one-fifth of these students reported having "read any articles or reports that ranked colleges" as they considered where to apply and enroll. A majority reported not looking at the rankings, and about a quarter couldn't remember (an indication that they didn't have much impact).

Our latest *studentPOLL* study conducted in November and December 2012 reveals that the college rankings are having an influence on many students' college decisions. Among the key findings of the study:

- Two-thirds of students surveyed indicated that they had taken college rankings into account in their college application decisions.
- Students with the highest SAT scores — 1300 and above — were more likely to have considered the rankings in their application decisions (85%) than students with SAT scores of less than 1300.
- *US News & World Report* is the predominant source of college rankings used by students to help make judgments about colleges.
- Nearly two-thirds of students surveyed "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that the rankings are "very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges."
- About two-thirds, respectively, **somewhat or strongly disagreed** that the rankings "don't matter" and that they "don't matter to me, but they matter to my parents."

Perhaps these findings should be expected. At the time I wrote this publisher's note, the *US News & World Report* rankings had just been released. In a quick Google search, countless search engine listings popped up with links to news articles from colleges or local media reporting a rise in a particular college's ranking or, in the case of others publicly backed in a corner, defending why an institution dropped several places in the standings.

Certainly all the media hype about the rankings, higher education's own pandering to them, and the intense competitive landscape of college admissions, have led students to place greater value on the rankings in their college decision making. Still, data from our own studies, as previously noted, suggest that the influence of the rankings on decisions where to apply and enroll varies widely depending on the institution, its markets, competitive landscape, and appeal. We often find that qualities related to a college or university's academic program, campus community, and other distinctions factor into students' college decisions more than its rankings do.

Indeed, students report not infrequently that substantive and atmospheric insights and information from the campus visit, interactions with parents, information on the web and in print materials, and more personal forms of contact with prospective students (including the counsel provided by admissions representatives and even high school guidance counselors) can have a greater influence than rankings. This can even be true of higher-ability and higher-income students who tend to pay the most attention to the rankings.

So despite the fact that college rankings appear to have grown in influence in students' college search, we would argue against spending too much institutional time, money, and energy on hand wringing over rank per se and on attempts to improve it. For most institutions, it would be far better to focus on planning strategy that strengthens an institution's competitive position on a substantive basis: differentiation based on educational approach, student experience, innovative teaching, and the like. In short, for most, trying to game the ranking numbers is a fool's errand.

Recent media attention given to institutions caught falsifying the data they reported to *US News & World Report* makes the point. The risks some will take in the hopes of maintaining and elevating

their standing further calls into question the reliability of the rankings themselves as well as the integrity of institutions that feel forced to go to any lengths to climb the rankings ladder.

 [signature]

**Richard A. Hesel**

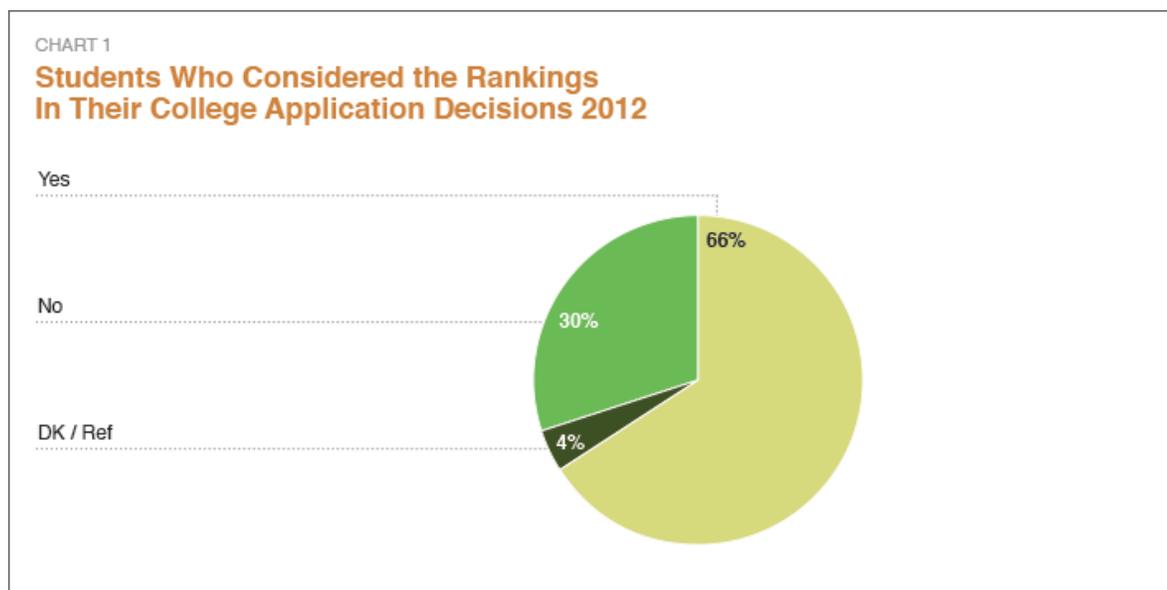
*Principal*

Art & Science Group, LLC

## Study Findings

### 1. National college rankings are influencing the college application decisions of many college-bound students.

In our most recent study, conducted online with high school seniors in November and December of 2012, we asked these college-bound students whether they had taken into account the various rankings of the schools in their application decisions. A majority (66%) indicated that they had considered different rankings in their college application decisions and the proportion might have been greater had we also included those who took the rankings into consideration in either or both their application and enrollment decisions. (Since the study was fielded in November and December 2012, we could not ask students how the rankings influenced their enrollment decision.)



A subgroup finding of interest:

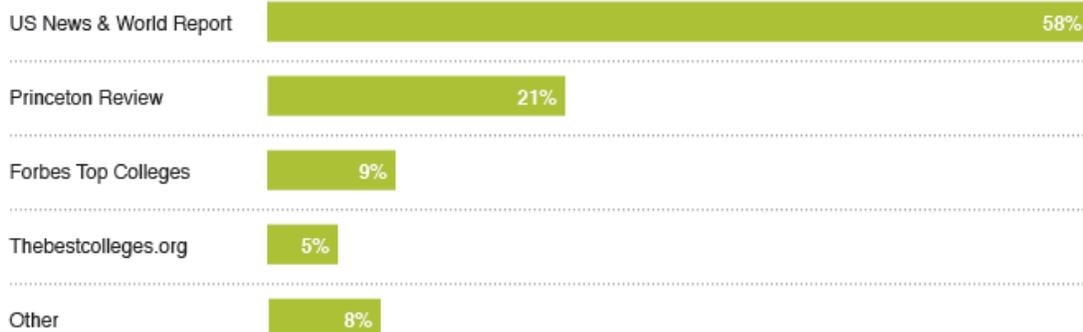
- Students with the highest SAT scores (1300 or higher) were more likely to have considered the rankings in their college application decisions than students with mid-range SAT scores (1100 to 1290) and those with the lowest SAT scores (1090 or lower), (85%, 62%, and 58% respectively).

### 2. Among all national college rankings, *US News & World Report* remains the predominant source read/used by students to make judgments about colleges and the rankings source that most influenced their college application decisions.

In this study, *studentPOLL* provided students a list of common rankings sources and asked them which ones they used to make judgments about where they would apply to college. For those students who mentioned more than one rankings source (about half of the 590 students who reported using the rankings), *studentPOLL* then asked them to specify the source that had the greatest influence on their college application decisions. When these two responses were combined to determine the single rankings source that had the greatest influence on students' application decisions, *studentPOLL* found that 58 percent cited *US News & World Report*, 21 percent *Princeton Review*, 9 percent *Forbes Top Colleges*, and 5 percent *Thebestcolleges.org*.

CHART 2

### Most Influential Ranking Source Students Used To Make Judgments about Where to Apply to College



Note: Bars may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Statistically significant subgroup findings include:

- Students with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above) and those with mid-range SAT scores (1100 and above) were more likely to say they used the *US News* college rankings to make judgments about where to apply than students with the lowest SAT scores (1090 or lower), (66%, 60%, and 48% respectively).
- Asian students (75%) were more likely to report *US News & World Report* as the rankings source of greatest value to them in their application decisions than Caucasian (53%), African American (54%), and Hispanic students (45%).
- Students with the lowest SAT scores (1090 or lower) were more likely to say they used *Thebestcolleges.org* to make judgments about where they would apply to college than students with mid-range SAT scores (1100 to 1290) and those with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above), (9%, 1%, and 2% respectively).

### **3. Students' agreement or disagreement with statements about college rankings reflects the growing importance the rankings have in their college decision-making. But other findings appear to suggest resignation or cynicism on the part of students that the rankings matter more to prestige-conscious students and colleges than to students like them.**

To further explore students' perceptions about the rankings and the extent to which they matter or don't matter to them in their college deliberations, *studentPOLL* gave students a series of randomized statements about the rankings and asked them to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the different statements.

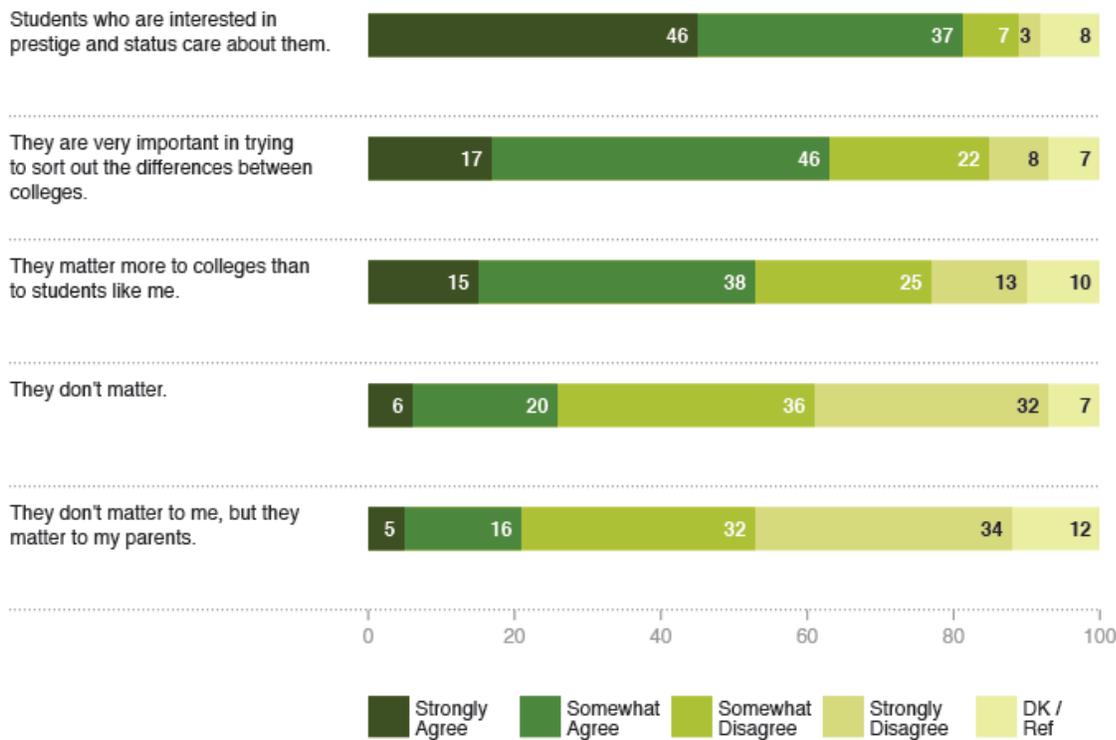
Eighty-three percent of students surveyed "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that "students who are interested in prestige and status care about them." By comparison, in our 2002 study, 49 percent strongly or somewhat agreed with that same statement.

Sixty-three percent also "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" that the rankings are "very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges." This finding is similar to the 2002 study in which 67 percent of respondents indicated that they strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement.

CHART 3

### Extent to Which Students Agree or Disagree With Different Statements about College Rankings

Percentage



Note: Bars may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Among interesting subgroup findings:

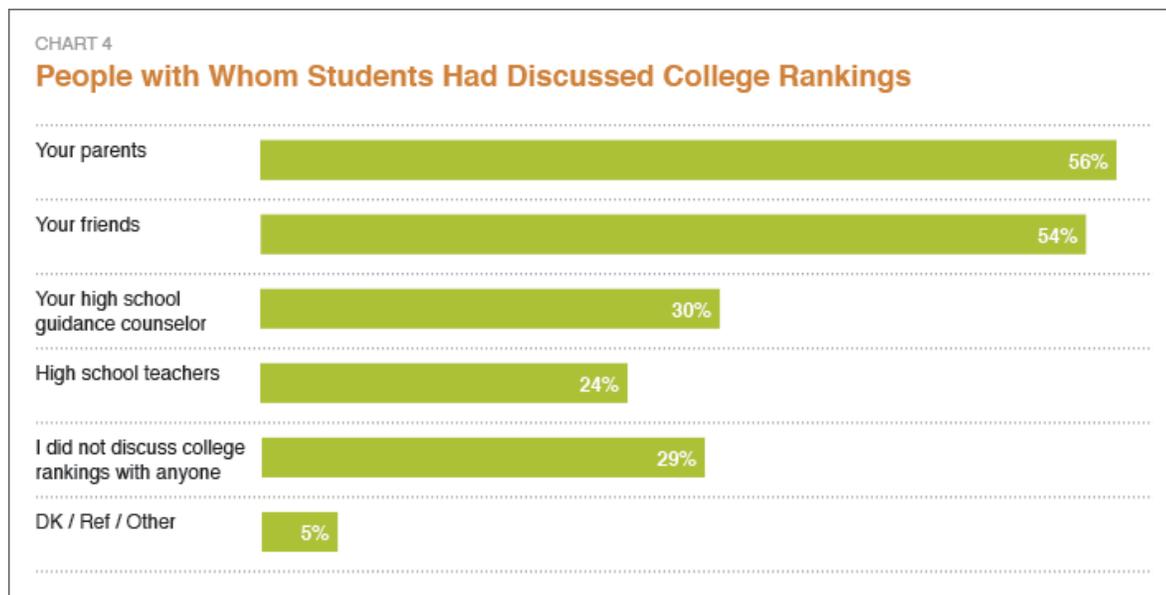
- Caucasian (36%), African American (41%), and Asian students (51%) are more likely to express some level of disagreement with the statement “[rankings] matter more to colleges than to students like me” than Hispanic students (23%).
- Students with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above) and those with mid-range SAT scores (1100 to 1290) are more likely to disagree that the rankings are “very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges” than students with the lowest SAT scores (1090 or lower), (34%, 35% and 24% respectively).
- Students with high SAT scores are more likely to disagree that the rankings “don’t matter” than students with the lowest SAT scores (75% and 64% respectively).

#### 4. A majority of students indicated that they discussed college rankings with their parents and friends. But nearly 30 percent did not discuss the rankings with anyone.

The last question in *studentPOLL*’s college rankings study asked the 820 students who completed this section of the survey to indicate whether they had discussed the college rankings with different people, randomizing the list of people included in the list and accepting multiple responses.

Fifty-six percent of respondents reported discussing the rankings with their parents and 54 percent with their friends. Thirty percent had discussed the rankings with their high school college guidance

counselor and 24 percent with their high school teachers. On the flip side, 29 percent reported not discussing the rankings with anyone.



Subgroup findings of statistical significance:

- Students from higher-income families (\$100K and above) were more likely to report they had discussed college rankings with their parents than students from lower-income families (less than \$60K).
- Asians (69%) were more likely to report that they discussed college rankings with their parents than Caucasians (54%), African Americans (53%), and Hispanics (49%).
- Students with the highest SAT scores (1300 and above) were more likely to say they discussed the rankings with their parents than those with mid-range SAT scores (1100 to 1290) and students with lower SAT scores (1090 or lower), (71%, 53%, and 48% respectively).

## Advisories

- Over the long run, time and money invested in improving an institution's standing in the rankings is likely to have little, if any effect on realizing critical institutional and enrollment goals. Rather, planning efforts focused on exploring and determining what strategic choices including curricular, student life, and pricing and financial aid initiatives have the greatest potential to encourage students to apply and enroll at your institution are far more likely to elevate your institution's appeal, competitive position, and stature.
- The static nature of the rankings suggests that climbing over the competition in the rankings ladder is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Much more important is strengthening your institution's competitive position by creating a parallel ladder that, in a sense, leapfrogs the rankings. This can only be achieved through long-term institutional positioning focused on creating, improving, and marketing the substantive elements of your institution's educational experience that differentiate it from competitors and positively affect the application and enrollment decisions of students you seek in greater numbers.

## Study Methodology

The findings of this issue of *studentPOLL* were based on a random national sample of SAT test takers. More than 39,000 students were sent an email inviting them to participate in the survey. Fielding of the survey took place from November 14 to December 10, 2012 with 1,237 respondents beginning the survey and 1,138 students meeting the requirements to participate in the survey. All respondents are four-year, college-bound students. Responses are weighted by gender, region, and race data provided by the College Board with the exception of responses from the Southwest which were weighted solely on region due to small numbers in the sample. The margin of sampling error for this population of students is plus or minus 2.79 percent. [Note: Due to some attrition while taking the online survey, 849 students actually began this section of the survey devoted to questions on the influence of the college rankings on their college decisions.]

Specific demographic information about these respondents is provided in the table below:

### Subgroup Splits

<b>SAT Score Distribution (Mean 1170)</b>	<b>Annual Family Income (Mean \$84,700)</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>
Low (< 1100): 46%	< \$60K: 47%	Caucasian: 42%
Mid (1110 - 1290): 30%	\$60K - \$100K: 25%	African American: 20%
High (1300+): 25%	> \$100K: 28%	Latino / Hispanic: 18%
		Asian: 20%
N=1136	N=653	N=1066

## About *studentPoll*

Art & Science Group, LLC, the publisher of *studentPOLL*, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior 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, *studentPOLL* 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, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely-cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. *studentPOLL* findings and analysis are provided free on Art & Science Group's web site (<http://www.artsci.com/>).

Special thanks goes to the College Board for its many contributions to *studentPOLL*.

## About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group (<http://www.artsci.com/>) is one of the nation's most influential consulting firms providing market-informed strategy to higher education, independent schools, 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. Art & Science works in every arena that depends on market data, analysis, and inventive ideas to guide and advance an institution's strategic investments and interests in these areas including market-informed: strategic planning; student recruitment and enrollment management; institutional branding; tuition pricing and financial aid; and development and alumni relations. 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 and specialty schools.

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