

# College Rankings and the Admission Decision

by [Marty O'Connell](#), *Colleges That Change Lives*

**The hotly debated "college rankings" you've seen (or will likely see, if you haven't already) aren't the end-all, be-all arbiters of college success. One passionate higher education professional explores the reasons why.**

We exist in a name-brand obsessed culture, which creates stress-inducing media headlines every year when high school seniors are winnowing their prospective colleges list. Articles and blogs tend to highlight only the attention-grabbing results of a very narrow band of highly selective college admission decisions, which are then translated by most students into "I'll never get in anywhere!"

If you had to choose a spouse or partner for life, would you like to use a publication ranking them by income, IQ scores, and reputation as reported by others who have never met the person? As a culture, we love consulting consumer guidebooks and lists for a shortcut method to choosing electronics and cars; the college search requires a more thoughtful, personal, and time-consuming approach. It can't be reduced to rankings with numerical values when it requires starting with the individual students and why they are going to college, their needs and desires, their learning styles and interests. This self inventory is the start of finding colleges that "fit" the individual, instead of starting with the assumption that only the "Top 20" on college-ranking lists have any value. These ranking guides sell big, but their value, or lack thereof, in the college search process can certainly be diminished if students, parents, and counselors go after fit, rather than name recognition.

One of the biggest flaws in starting the college search process by using ranking lists is that they tout the entering class statistics, rather than focusing on what happens during the four years those students are enrolled. The late author Loren Pope, of *Looking Beyond the Ivy League* and *Colleges That Change Lives*, often known as the "Ralph Nader" of college admission, said that choosing colleges based on the entering statistics of the freshman class is like choosing a hospital based on the health of those in the ER—it's the treatment that really matters, and when it comes to colleges, that's what happens between the first year and graduation. Researching colleges based on student outcomes highlights many colleges that outperform the Ivies and other assorted "name brands" but don't have the benefit

of name recognition. [NSSE, The National Survey of Student Engagement](#), is a wonderful resource for gathering information about college outcomes and provides a list of the right questions to ask during the college search.

To counteract the notion that “a college can't be any good if I've never heard of it”—another familiar student opinion—I challenge students to think about the people in their lives who are happy and successful and find out where, or if, they went to college. Doing this same exercise using “famous” people, they discover that most often the *choice* of college has less to do with success in life than does the experience and the opportunities students take advantage of during their college years, coupled with personal qualities and traits. Employers and graduate schools are looking for outstanding skills and experience, not college pedigree. On the flip side of the process I pose this question to students: “Would you want college admission deans to ignore your application and the chance to learn all about your background and talents, only because they have not heard of your high school?” This question usually helps students to see that in looking beyond name recognition when searching for colleges, they will leave themselves open to more possibilities for colleges that will be a great fit for them.

The simple truth is that the majority of the colleges and universities in this country admit more students than they deny. The college search process should be an enjoyable and memorable experience, not an exercise to be dreaded! This is not a trophy hunt, with a “winner takes all” philosophy. Students who are worried about their chances for college admission and are willing to investigate beyond the very narrow band of highly visible colleges will find many options that will lead to both a great fit—and a lifelong passion for learning.

