



# OBICOACH TIP SHEET

## How to Use Those College Rankings

*The second Monday in September. A new college tradition. The day US News & World Report College Rankings come out. These rankings aren't the only rankings, but they're the original and best known. Eager high school students & parents, anxious college administrators, and countless curious others click the link to the Rankings as soon as they see it. And a new year of stress and arguments begin...*

But – what do the Rankings (from all of the various sources) really mean? How are they determined? Is one better than the others? Who thinks they're great, who thinks they're useless? **Most importantly – if you're a high school student or parent in or starting the process of researching colleges, how should you use them?**

Welcome to a much-debated topic. We at ObiCoach wanted to share one set of thoughts for you to consider. Here are some important points for you:

- The evidence shows that you will do best in college if you attend the best college for you – a great fit for your personality/interests/needs – not one labeled “the best college”
- Studies have demonstrated that high school students of similar capabilities perform similarly in their careers regardless of which colleges they attended
- Each of the various source's college rankings use different criteria in their calculations
- If you just look at numerical rankings without understanding each methodology, the rankings likely WON'T help you find the colleges where you will thrive the best; so click each ranking's link to its process/methodology
- Some data is self-reported by colleges, and colleges measure some of that data differently
- Several rankings give considerable weight to college presidents'/administrators' subjective opinions of all of the other colleges. Wait a minute – what? An extremely busy administrator at one college has the data, knowledge, and time to accurately rate 10s or 100s of other colleges? They are likely each wonderful and intelligent people, but...
- For data that is the result of surveys of students (or administrators): Human nature makes people more likely to participate in a survey if they have something good to say, and more likely to say good things if they participate, so – how might the results be biased? And – what percentage participated? How many didn't because they didn't want to spend time saying negative things or were afraid of retribution? Also – how was the poll conducted? Do they have any measures to ensure student opinions come from actual students? Yes, colleges do work to manipulate the polls.
- Each college is likely strong in some fields and not in others – what are you likely to study and participate in?
- The various rankings certainly contain useful aligned data that can help inform your search for colleges; they can be valuable if you use them the right way
- \*\*\*Your first step is to determine what factors are important to you in a college. Naturally, we at [ObiCoach](#) can help...
- The day you start college you will forget those college rankings ever existed and assuming you've chosen a school which is a good fit for you, you will likely have an **incredible** experience.

We listed just 5 of the many college rankings at the end of this piece<sup>1</sup>. Why do schools show up in different spots in each one? Here are two examples (2017-8 rankings):

Georgia Institute of Technology was ranked:	34 in US News	38 in Niche	88 in Forbes
Tulane University was ranked:	40 in US News	70 in Niche	109 in Forbes

Read to know what criteria was used by each ranking. Understand which criteria is objective and which is subjective. And compare that to your criteria of what matters to you.

Let's also look at some examples of the things measured and how they might be confusing.

- 1) Average salary. School1 has average \$70k salary vs School2 with \$80k.
  - a. Consider - School1 might have average salary of \$90k for Electrical Engineering grads, and \$50k for Biology grads. School2 might have \$82k for EE grads and \$78k for Biology grads. Which school looks better now if you are considering EE? Which if you are considering biology?
  - b. Also – how does that salary vary at each school if you: go to grad school; go into public service; work for the government; go to work for a biotech company?
- 2) Graduation rate. School A might have a 6-year graduation rate (*wait – 6-year? what about 4-year? cost implications? financial aid implications? make sure you look and understand*) of 68% while School B might be 54%. But this may be deceiving.
  - a. Consider - School A might have a more limited admissions policy only accepting top-ranked students from a smaller set of high schools, while School B might admit a broader spectrum of students and give more opportunities, and therefore a larger portion may not complete school. How do students like you fare? This can be hard to figure out. Learn what's behind the data.
  - b. IMPORTANT but maybe not included: % graduating in 4 years vs 6 years (or 2 years vs 3 years at a 2-year school); related - amount of debt when graduating; % continuing after freshman year (shows successful admittance policies, and support for students); availability of classes in YOUR major/classes and therefore likelihood of graduating on schedule.

Want some interesting and/or entertaining articles on the topic of college rankings? There are plenty – here's a sampling:

[NPR Ed Rates the Rankings](#)

[Rankings are terrible for students. Why don't colleges stop them?](#)

[Stop Looking at Rankings. Use Academe's Own Measures Instead.](#)

[Making Money Shouldn't Be the Purpose of a College Education](#)

[Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League](#)

In summary – how should you approach these college rankings?

- First, begin working to figure out what things matter to you in a school. Your college will be the place where you study . . . and also where you spend much of your free time, meet many new people, have new experiences, develop your adult self, and probably be on your own for the first time.
- Do your college research. Know that rankings can be one helpful factor in creating your college list, if they support your other research. Explore online, attend info sessions, go to college fairs. Visit schools you are considering if you can and speak with current students and professors. Separately, especially if you can't visit, speak with recent graduates who may live in your area. Or contact current students and recent graduates via friends or Facebook or LinkedIn.
- Make sure you understand each set of college rankings, and what is behind them.

Of course, some of the ranking results are just good fluff. Have fun with them. Best looking students, best food, best library, best location, prettiest campus, best parties. All VERY subjective of course. Will you still think the campus is beautiful when frigid or covered by 2 feet of snow (we're talking about the campuses not the people) 😊.

To conclude, here is one of our absolutely favorite articles on the general topic of “the best colleges” –

["How to Survive the College Admissions Madness".](#)

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<sup>1</sup>Random set of 5 of the rankings for comparison, certainly no rating/endorsement from us –

- [US News & World Report](#)
- [Niche.com](#)
- [Collegescorecard.ed.gov](#)
- [Princeton Review](#)
- [Forbes](#)

And just for the heck of it: [A Different Kind of College Ranking](#)