

Don't be so quick to join the refusenik ranks

By COLIN S. DIVER

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More than 10 years have passed since Reed College first refused to cooperate with the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of American colleges and universities, and despite dire warnings about being punished in the marketplace, the college has thrived. In just the past five years, the number of applicants has doubled, the admit rate has been cut in half, the proportion of students of color has doubled, and the academic qualifications of entering students have risen steadily.

As Reed's president, I am often asked whether other institutions should follow suit. Given Reed's history of refusal, one would expect me to answer "By all means!" But it turns out that my answer is much less emphatic or clear-cut. Like the answer to most interesting questions, "It depends."

There are, of course, many generic reasons to dislike the *U.S. News* rankings.

1. One size cannot possibly fit all. Higher education is the most complex "product" that most people will ever purchase in their lifetimes. It is a package of

services extending over a multiyear period, typically consisting of instruction, social interaction, entertainment, recreation, physical and mental health care, housing, and nutrition. The instructional component alone embraces a great diversity of subject matter, pedagogies, intellectual and cognitive activities, and methods of evaluation. Even within the liberal arts college sector, there is tremendous variation—in curricular requirements, departmental structure, dominant pedagogy, percent of students housed on campus, support for athletics, religious affiliation, emphasis on community service, career or vocational orientation, and so on. The notion that a product this complex could be ranked ordinally on a single scale is simply ludicrous. Yet that is precisely what the *U.S. News* rankings purport to do.

2. The rankings are arbitrary. *U.S. News* produces its rankings by feeding raw data into a formula that assigns weights to a selection of variables. Both the weights and the variables are arbitrary. The magazine has never attempted to justify in rigorous, social-scientific terms either its selection of variables or its assignment of relative weights to those variables. It has never demonstrated that the variables are truly independent of each other. To the contrary, academic studies have repeatedly shown that most of the variables correlate highly with each other and with the single dimension of institutional wealth.

3. The underlying data are unreliable. Much of the data on which *U.S. News* bases its rankings are self-reported but not independently audited or verified. Institutions have incentives not only to misreport and misrepresent data, but also to distort their behavior simply to increase their scores on relevant measures. Numerous published reports have documented the too-clever-by-half ways in which institutions seek to manipulate the *U.S. News* formulas.

Despite these well-known objections to the *U.S. News* rankings, I do not counsel my colleagues to withdraw cooperation without considering several important factors. In other words, **don't boycott *U.S. News* unless ...**

... you are prepared to see your ranking drop. *U.S. News* will rank your institution whether you cooperate or not. Refusing to fill out the reputation survey will have no effect on your peer ranking—other, perhaps, than to deny you the satisfaction of ranking your own institution in the top quintile. Refusing to fill out the statistical questionnaire will simply delegate to the number-crunchers at *U.S. News* the task of finding, estimating, or simply making up missing variables.

When Reed first declined to fill out the questionnaire in 1995, *U.S. News* arbitrarily assigned low values to the missing variables, with the result that Reed's ranking plummeted to the bottom quintile. In subsequent years, *U.S. News* made a more responsible attempt

to estimate variables for Reed, using published data. But for any variables not readily available to the magazine staff, you remain at the mercy of their assumptions. When the president of Sarah Lawrence College (which does not collect SAT scores from applicants) failed to report an average SAT score, *U.S. News* made up a number, a full standard deviation below the SAT scores of comparable schools.

... you have the self-discipline to avoid talking about your institution's *U.S. News* ranking. Nothing undercuts the credibility of a rankings-refusenik quite so effectively as boasting about an improvement in the very ranking that you are boycotting. In addition, you must be thoughtful about whether to cooperate with, or appear to endorse, the many other college guides and rankings published each year. Our practice at Reed is to supply data to any college guide that offers consumers descriptive information, even if comparative, so long as it does not claim to provide a single ranking of overall quality comparable to the *U.S. News* rankings.

... you are doing it for the right reasons. Don't boycott *U.S. News* simply as a way of making a philosophical or moral statement or of seeking favorable publicity for your institution. In order to be convincing and authentic, a decision not to cooperate with the rankings must resonate deeply with the mission and educational philosophy of your institution.



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Reed College's decision to withdraw had this character. At Reed, we advocate an approach to knowledge that eschews shortcuts and arbitrary simplifications of the sort exemplified by the rankings. We emphasize the careful gathering of evidence, application of multiple analytical frameworks, consideration of competing arguments, and repeated testing of conclusions. For this reason, faculty members return

student-written work with lengthy evaluative comments, but no letter grades. (They assign grades at the end of the course, but students must make a deliberate effort to learn their grades and their GPAs. A majority of students choose not to do so.) Likewise, we relish and celebrate our distinctiveness, as exemplified by such features as our conference-

based pedagogy, a strong honor principle, a required yearlong interdisciplinary humanities course, junior qualifying examinations in a student's field of major study, and required senior thesis. We know that Reed is not for everyone, indeed that it will appeal only to a minority of intellectually ambitious and independent-minded students. It would be incompatible with this posture to join willingly in a ranking exercise that implies, by its one-size-fits-all formula, that all liberal arts colleges are essentially fungible.

... you are willing to go it alone. An institution willing to withdraw from the *U.S. News* rankocracy must be willing to make that decision on its own, regardless of what any other institution is doing. Don't wait to see what your competitors do. Don't join a group boycott just to show solidarity. If it's the right thing to do, just do it. ■

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