

Great Speests: How Colleges Inflate Ratings

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counselor at the University of Chicago Laboratory High School, says some colleges are so obsessed with looking good that they employ tactics that hurt students. To appear more selective, she says, colleges solicit applications from students they don't really want, raising false hopes but pumping up the closely scrutinized ratio of rejections vs. acceptances. "They need more applications so they can turn down more people so they look better in the ratings," Mrs. Hogsan says.

Colleges are busily playing this numbers game at a time when admissions has become a buyer's market, with many schools fiercely scrambling for quality applicants. This school year, no fewer than 150 colleges made presentations at Mrs. Hogsan's school over a two-month application period. "We can't even accommodate them all any longer," she says. In this intense climate, college-admission directors who don't recruit the right mix of students often find themselves out of a job.

Money and U.S. News & World Report, though not the other guidebook publishers, use the data they receive to rank the schools with what appears to be methodical exactitude. College officials almost universally disdain these rankings, arguing that a college's quality can't be judged merely by statistics and opinion polls. But they dare not refuse to participate, knowing that the rankings can profoundly affect numbers of applications, the quality of students who apply and even alumni donations.

Applications jumped 7%, for instance, after U.S. News named Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pa., the No. 1 northern regional liberal-arts college last fall. When the magazine named Lyon College in Batesville, Ark., the No. 1 southern regional liberal-arts college, more highly qualified students applied, lifting the average SAT scores of applicants 73 points in a single year. When the same guidebook dropped Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., from its top 25 national liberal-arts colleges, the dozen disappointed alumni called the school demanding to know what was wrong.

Statistics Are Unaudited

When the most prestigious colleges trumpet their guidebook successes, when Massachusetts Institute of Technology summons reporters to a news conference on March 9, it is to announce a competitive breakthrough, not a scientific one: Two MIT graduate schools had placed first in a U.S. News survey. "We all live and die by those rankings," says Gordon Holland, president of Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pa.

Most of the statistics in magazines and guidebooks such as Barron's and Peterson's Four-Year Colleges are self-reported and unaudited. Each guide uses its own formula for evaluating colleges, including pollster-style surveys, but nearly all factor in the self-reported data heavily. As a result, says Roland King, director of public relations at the University of Maryland in College Park, "They're subject to cooking all the time."

To gauge the accuracy of colleges' reported numbers, this newspaper compared data colleges provide to the guides with similar statistical data for freshmen entering in the fall of 1993. But U.S. News lists the average score as 1095. Harvey Kesselman, the college's vice president for student services, acknowledges that Moody's number is correct and says he cannot explain the numbers given to U.S. News.

Rankings Are Affected
Editors at U.S. News, Money, Barron's and Peterson's say that though they try to fact check, they have never compared their own data with information reported to the debt-rating agencies; indeed, only U.S. News was aware that the agencies collected such information. U.S. News, whose college guide sells more copies than any other, says it hopes to compare the data bases in the future.

Pudging the guidebook numbers can have a direct positive effect on rankings. Edward Hershey, former director of communications at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, says Colby moved up significantly in U.S. News's fall 1992 rankings of national liberal-arts colleges through "numbers massage" and an inadvertent error.

In a letter last fall to the student newspaper at Cornell University, where he now works, Mr. Hershey recounted how officials at one college — which he now confirms was Colby — huddled at "a meeting that could only be described as a strategy session on how to cheat on the survey."

Though he won't detail the "num-

Acceptance Rates

College	Location	U.S. News	Moody's
Bard College	Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.	44%	62.6%
Carleton Res. University	Memphis, Tenn.	59	73.0
DePaul University	Chicago	74	82.4
Elizabeth City State University	Elizabeth City, N.C.	54	73.0
Georgetown Court College	Lakewood, N.J.	81	84.4
Head College	Frederick, Md.	81	84.6
Kent State University	Kent, Ohio	33	86.7
Nicholls State University	Thibodaux, La.	94	100.0
Waynesburg University	Middletown, Conn.	41	42.5

Note: Acceptance rate represents the percentage of applicants accepted for the fall 1993 freshman class. Some colleges attributed discrepancies to transcription or clerical errors; others said they could find no explanation.

Sources: U.S. News's America's Best Colleges 1995 College Guide and recent Moody's Investors Service Inc. credit reports.

Graduation Rates

College	Location	U.S. News	Moody's
Bowling Green State University	Bowling Green, Ohio	85%	54%
Camplott University	Bates Creek, N.C.	52	46
University of Cincinnati	Cincinnati	52	47
Coastal Carolina University	Myrtle Beach, S.C.	37	32
University of Hartford	West Hartford, Conn.	59	53
Indiana University	Bloomington, Ind.	66	62
Jackson State University	Jackson, Miss.	34	23
La Salle University	Philadelphia	76	68
Long Island University	Brooklyn, N.Y.	55	28
Louisiana Tech University	Ruston, La.	44	36
University of Md., Eastern Shore	Princess Anne, Md.	29	28
Marver University	Macon, Ga.	75	49
University of Miss.-Tate College	Mississippi	43	38
University of Missouri	Kansas City	43	38
Nagata University	Nagata, N.Y.	59	56
Nicholls State University	Thibodaux, La.	30	26
Norfolk State Univ. of Louisiana	Natchitoches, La.	27	29
Ohio University	Athens, Ohio	62	58
Providence College	Providence, R.I.	93	87
St. Francis College	Loretto, Pa.	62	57
University of San Diego	San Diego	64	59
San Jose State University	San Jose, Calif.	38	32
University of South Florida	Tampa, Fla.	46	40
Southern Illinois University	Carbondale, Ill.	43	37
Southern Utah University	Cedar City, Utah	45	27
Tennessee State University	Nashville, Tenn.	40	24
University of Toledo	Toledo, Ohio	46	39
Wagner College	Staten Island, N.Y.	67	43
Wake Forest University	Winston-Salem, N.C.	86	82

Note: Colleges gave a variety of reasons for discrepancies, including misinterpretation or misunderstanding of instructions; clerical or computer errors; and exclusion of part-time, transfer or second-degree students in one survey but not in the other.

Sources: U.S. News's America's Best Colleges 1995 College Guide and 1994 NCAA Division I Graduation Rates Report. Figures represent the average of combined freshmen and sophomores who graduated within six years. Graduation rates count for 15% of U.S. News's overall ratings.

SAT Scores

College	Location	Score
Boston University	Boston	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1150. Excluded the verbal, but not the math, scores of about 350 foreign students.
Florida Institute of Technology	Melbourne, Fla.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1065. The scores excluded foreign students.
Harvard University	Cambridge, Mass.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1400. Gave Moody's a middle range of scores with a midpoint of 1385.
Monmouthville College	Purchase, N.Y.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1068. The scores excluded economically disadvantaged students in a special state-sponsored program.
Marist College	Poughkeepsie, N.Y.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 985. The scores excluded about 25 students who are learning disabled, as well as international students.
Marshall University	Huntington, W. Va.	Told Barron's 47% of its students scored 21 or better on the American College Test (ACT). Told Peterson's 36% of its students scored 21 or better.
Monmouth University	W Long Branch, N.J.	Gave College Handbook a midpoint of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1115. Gave U.S. News a middle range of scores with a midpoint of 930, which the admission director says excluded 150 remedial students. Told Moody's the median score was 816.
New York University	New York	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1145. The scores excluded about 100 economically disadvantaged students in a special state-sponsored program.
Northeastern University	Boston	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 995. The scores excluded foreign and remedial students.
Richard Stockton College of N.J.	Pomona, N.J.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1095. Told S&P the average SAT score was 1041. Told Moody's the average SAT score was 991. An official says only the Moody's figures include freshmen.
Sarah Lawrence College	Bronxville, N.Y.	Gave U.S. News a middle range of SAT scores with a midpoint of 1215. Gave College Handbook a middle range of scores with a midpoint of 1145. Told Moody's the median score was 1150.

Note: Test scores are for fall 1993 freshman class. SAT scores represent combined verbal and math scores. SAT test-score ranges are for the middle 50% of students. Median is the middle score; Half are below, half are above. Average is the sum total of freshmen scores divided by the number of freshmen.

bers massage," Mr. Hershey says that in completing the U.S. News survey, he mistakenly reported that 80%, rather than 60%, of Colby's freshmen were in the top 10% of their high-school class. "It was pure innocence, I swear," he says. "Of course, the thing just rolled right on through." He says no one at U.S. News caught the error, even though the year before Colby had reported the figure as 54%.

When U.S. News's rankings came out in September 1992, Colby jumped to 15th place from 20th place. In his letter to the Cornell newspaper, Mr. Hershey wrote, "The downside was that we sent

the following year figuring out how to play with some other numbers to preserve our competitive advantage and forestall a subsequent plunge in the rankings that would have to be explained to concerned alumni."

Sally Baker, Colby's current director of communications, concedes that the school made an inadvertent error on applicants' class rank but denies that officials ever intentionally fudged any figures. "The data is real, and we are as honest as humans can be," she says.

Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tenn., is another school that benefited from giving U.S. News questionable data. The magazine's America's Best Colleges 1995 College Guide said that in the fall of 1993 the school accepted 59% of its freshman applicants, a figure that helped place the school in U.S. News's top tier of southern colleges and universities. But Moody's, in a credit report dated Jan. 3, 1995, said that in 1993 the school accepted 73% of its applicants.

Christian Brothers says the Moody's figure is accurate, and it can't explain the number in U.S. News. "We try to be honest," says Nick Scully, vice president for institutional advancement. "This doesn't look real honest and I don't know if it was on purpose or not."

Harvard's 'Mystery' Listing

Acceptance rates at Bard College, a highly regarded liberal-arts school, don't square, either. Moody's says the college, in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., accepted 62.6% of its freshman applicants for fall 1993. U.S. News reports the figure at 44%. Both figures are wrong, says Mary

Inga Backlund, Bard's director of admission. She says the figures given to Moody's were provided by the college's business office and excluded downward applicants excused from paying a \$40 application fee, but included transfer students who should have been excluded. "This is a conflict that we have regularly with the business office," Mr. Backlund says. The U.S. News figure, she adds, "was a transcription error on my part." Bard's actual acceptance rate: 47%, she says.

Even Harvard University, often the top-ranked school in the nation, shows up with slightly conflicting SAT data. Harvard gave U.S. News a range of SAT scores for fall 1993 freshmen, and the magazine placed the midpoint at 1400 — a benchmark score that's a well-established mark of excellence. But Harvard's midpoint in Moody's reports was 1385, derived from a lower range that Harvard provided Moody's.

Martin McGrath Lewis, director of admission for Harvard and Radcliffe College, describes the Moody's numbers as a "mystery" and says the U.S. News figures were accurate. "I don't think this is significant," she says. A Moody's spokeswoman says the score it published was exactly what Harvard told it.

The NCAA Comparison

Graduation rates are also subject to sleight of hand. The National Collegiate Athletic Association requires its members to disclose graduation rates for the student body as a whole and for student-athletes. As a comparison of the numbers reported by 300 colleges to the NCAA and to U.S. News found discrepancies in more than 50 instances; in nearly every case, the overall graduation rates reported to the NCAA were lower. Schools may have an incentive to show the school appeared to be more of the NCAA so that their student-athletes' rates look better in comparison, college officials say.

Acceptance rates provide further opportunities for manipulation. Conrad Sharlow, who was dean of admission at Rochester Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., from 1965 to 1993, says about 20% of the school's applicants were rejected by the specific program for which they applied but were accepted into another undergraduate program at RPI. All these students were counted as rejects in the school's reported admission figures. That way the school appeared to be more selective overall than it actually was.

He says he also used waiting lists to enhance the numbers. "Suppose you had 5,000 applications and suppose in the first round you accepted 2,500 of those. Then you had a waiting list," he explains. "So when the question comes up, how many did you accept, you say about 20% of the school's acceptance rate, a figure that he believes doesn't connote quality. He says if college guides "abuse" such numbers "then what you've got to do as an admissions person is to juggle them in such a way so the abuse is minimized."

Rensselaer's new dean of admissions, Teresa C. Duffy, says she stopped such practices last year. Mel Eflin, special-projects editor at U.S. News, defends the magazine's college guide despite some school's efforts to deceive readers. Roughly 90% of the information in U.S. News's guide is accurate, he estimates, adding: "Our job now is not to throw our hands up in the air and say it doesn't work but to continue to beef up our defensive line."

But colleges are so accustomed to cheating by now, contends college consultant Marlene Nemko, that it may be impossible to put out a reliable guidebook. Mr. Nemko, of Oakland, Calif., says he was slated to write a guide for Little, Brown & Co., a unit of Time Warner Inc., that would have required schools to distribute questionnaires to random groups of students.

But in January, he wrote to colleges saying he had been forced to scrap the project after receiving "sufficient" evidence that more than a few institutions will be taking extraordinary measures to guarantee that their student questionnaires paint an inordinately flattering picture.

One example was Texas A&M University, which told him it planned to distribute the surveys mostly to honor students, Mr. Nemko says. Admission Director Gary Engleau now says he hadn't finally decided on a distribution list but notes that honor students are generally more likely to fill in surveys. He adds: "If you ask me to do something, as much as I can within the rules, I'll try to do it so that it makes me look good."

Ingersoll-Rand Co.

Clark Equipment Businesses Likely to Be Kept in Merger

Ingersoll-Rand Co. indicated it would like to keep the businesses operated by Clark Equipment Co. if it succeeds in its fight to acquire Clark.

"They're all good businesses, except VME," Ingersoll Chairman James Perrella said at an industrial manufacturing conference in New York.

VME Group NV is the construction-equipment business that Clark sold to Volvo AB of Sweden. Thomas McBride, Ingersoll's chief financial officer, said Ingersoll had no intention of VME's competing in Europe with Caterpillar Inc., the heavy construction equipment leader.

Ingersoll has said it wants to acquire a company that is a leader in its markets. The executives said the \$77-a-share, or \$1.34 billion, offer for Clark fits that criteria. They said Clark has both good earnings and cash flow and strong management of its units, which include Melroe, the maker of Bobcat skid-steer loaders; Club Car golf carts; Blaw-Knox construction equipment; and Clark-Hirth axles. Ingersoll said one of the biggest areas of savings from a combination of the firms would be eliminating Clark's headquarters operation in South Bend, Ind.