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Why College Report Cards Are Flawed on College Value

Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance (HESIG)

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By Darryl Greer and Mico Lucide

Nationally, there has been a recent explosion in the number of college report cards, rating and ranking initiatives.¹ Examples include those supported by the White House, student activists, for-profit companies, non-profit foundations, college associations, and even social media enterprises such as *LinkedIn*. Values driving these grading/rating schemes have a mix of commercial and public accountability objectives. But one factor connects their purposes: an overriding concern about what drives college cost (expenses) and the price students pay. This principal concern diminishes rather than adds to their usefulness for many students and families, especially first-generation, poor and underserved populations.

Our research indicates that more than price concerns, citizens link college value with availability of practical experiences (such as internships) tied to academic studies; better advising about academic choices and careers; and easier credit transfer to reduce time to degree completion; leading to the most important outcome of college—an increased prospect for a good job and a better life.

The Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance Project (HESIG) of the Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University (N.J.) qualitatively reviewed 10 college rating websites, following a 2014 New Jersey poll on college value (summaries of websites' content, how to use them, and survey results are available at www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig). These report cards should be judged not only regarding the validity, reliability and utility of the data provided, but also on principles guiding their development in the first instance. We suggest an approach based on college value and outcomes expectations that might work better in providing information to advance college opportunity, affordability and success.

Flawed Assumptions on Need, Audience, Comparability and Outcomes

¹ Michael W. Klein. "What Counts: The Policy and Politics of the Proposed College Rating System in the United States;" Higher Education Forum; Volume 12, March 2015, Hiroshima University.

Report card providers explicitly state or imply that there is too little information and a lack of transparency about college cost and price. They assume that more comparative cost information will lead to more enlightened consumer choices, better decisions on where to attend college, and about how much to pay, leading to better outcomes and less personal debt. But as a recent Brookings study regarding transparency in calculating college costs points out, while cost calculators are “well intended, they have had limited success and may even make matters worse.”²

Some providers start with an implicit, simplistic “return on investment” framework that does not take into account college as a mixed public and private good that provides long-term benefits over a lifetime. The problem with a consumer-driven, market-model approach is that there is already so much information available about choosing a college, that more, sometimes questionable, information may confuse some college-bound individuals, especially poor and first-generation college students. While “self-service” market-models excel at providing users with the freedom to find and exchange information, they are insufficient in providing equitable access to other resources needed to exploit successfully a marketplace crowded with often questionable or useless comparative information about thousands of colleges.

Some of these websites, such as *the Center for Affordability and Productivity*, seem to be self-serving in justifying their purposes, and aimed at a relatively higher income, sophisticated college-bound audience who may be more likely to have family college experience, and who might be better prepared to benefit from the information, to gain admission to selective colleges. It is highly unlikely that much of the data provided on many sites are useful to underrepresented populations without intensive face-to-face counseling, and without more information about how to choose and succeed in college beyond the issue of paying for it. Scant research exists indicating that these report cards serve well these students and families. Furthermore, many of the sites, such as *Noodle*, seem to be simply churning available data,

² Philip B. Levine. “Transparency in College Costs.” Economic Studies Working Paper; Brookings Institute, November 2014.

reproducing in a different format readily available information from colleges or other sources on matters such as cost, net price, student financial aid and debt.

Much worse, in some cases, developers such as *Unigo* create new highly subjective data from unconventional sources on these matters, without being explicit about methodology. Some of the ranking information is so incomplete or arcane (such as a “fast and flirtatious” college rating category), that the purpose of the exercise becomes murky, except perhaps for its lightheartedness, or commercial benefit to its developer. *LinkedIn*, which proposes to link college choice to prospective employers and earnings, is another example of a commercial operation clearly providing a “brand” product for its customers. Also, somewhat suspect, some commercial sites require the user to sign in, or to provide additional personal information, without being clear about how it may be used by the site or by others.

Another flaw in some rating/ranking systems is that they attempt to provide college value and outcome comparisons within a national context. On close examination, there appears to be limited need for complex national rankings of colleges, given that most students attend college locally and regionally, and within fewer than 200 miles from home. In other words, most students attend a local public two-year or four-year college, within state or regional boundaries. Some states, such as New Jersey, require by law—beyond federal standards—that colleges and universities regularly publish much of the data found on rating websites. These required institutional “consumer information” sites providing basic accountability information may prove more useful and reliable to many students and families. College Reality Check and Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) are among sites which include tools such as College Navigator, Portraits and Net-Cost Calculator that stand out for their utility.

Choices about where to attend college evolve from life circumstances beyond cost, including age, employment, family status, experience and personal aspirations. HESIG survey research in New Jersey indicates that the top three factors affecting college choice are location, program availability and cost, in that order. Accordingly, complex national comparative schemes to measure college cost and affordability seem to be unnecessary. In practice, few students need to be able to compare the cost of a public college in California, to that of a two-year college in New Jersey, and a private college in Ohio. Even when some

websites, such as *College Measures*, attempt to make such comparisons available, they do so incompletely; not providing the user with enough capability to navigate the website easily to compare information across colleges, or states.

Finally, although some rating sites try, few do a very good job getting at what students and families need to know beyond net cost: the expected value of a particular college experience. Again, HESIG survey research suggests that college value, measured by outcomes, trumps cost and price for those attending. For example, in New Jersey, even though about one-half of citizens surveyed see college as unaffordable, 90 percent of college graduates view the value of the degree earned as worth the cost. What students and families want to know is not simply what a college costs, but more importantly, its value in terms of expected outcomes. HESIG surveys indicate that top outcome measures of college value include gaining specific demonstrable academic and workplace skills and abilities (such as writing and problem solving), and preparation for jobs and careers that lead to a more prosperous life.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

These generalizations cannot be applied equally to each report card website that HESIG reviewed. Certainly, many provide useful information and will continue to improve, and new developers will enter the field, given the importance of college access and affordability. HESIG's analysis suggests that it is time to shift some of the focus from the affordability/debt challenge to shed light on the more elusive matter of college value, a proposition that brings together the economic reality of paying for college with important matters of quality and outcomes from the experience. Some of these value measures might include:³

- Programmatic quality, assessed by student, faculty and administrative performance tied to specific academic competencies, workplace skills and practical experiences, measured at the college level, and compared to regional peers;

³ Another example of such “value measures” beyond price is offered by Tim Harmon and Anna Cielinski. “Transparency and Accountability: Implementing Postsecondary Rating System That Empowers Students While Avoiding Unintended Consequences.” Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, November 2014.

- Measures of demonstrated abilities of college graduates on essential learning outcomes, especially regarding writing, speaking and problem solving, as reported by colleges and employers;
- Where college graduates are working after one, three and five years, and the relationship between job, career choices and academic studies;
- Number of graduates engaged in community and public service, and enrolling in post-graduate/professional studies after one, three and five years;
- Number of internships offered by academic field, and number of students participating;
- Extensiveness and intensity of academic advising and career counseling for new and transfer students, based on college surveys;
- Total degree credits earned, compared to those required for graduation, and how long it takes to earn a degree; and
- Credit awarded for prior learning as a percentage of total credits earned required for graduation.

College in America is highly valued. Citizens are willing to pay for what they value, but they expect colleges to be accountable about access, affordability, completion and outcomes. Placing more emphasis on the college value proposition as we tackle the big questions—who goes to college, how we pay for it, and the expected outcomes that benefit the individual and society—seems to be the right step in helping students choose and succeed in college.

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Mico Lucide provided research assistance to HESIG, and will earn a Stockton University B.A. in Political Science in 2015.

About

Higher Education and Strategic Information Governance (HESIG)

HESIG serves as an agent for constructive higher education policy change, by recommending strategic policy action aligned with a public agenda to serve the public good. Guiding principles include: enhancing college access, affordability, completion, productivity, accountability, and building partnerships to achieve these ends.

William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and is also the home of the Stockton Polling Institute. The Center is named for William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton University. The Hughes Center blog can be found at blogs.stockton.edu/policyhues.

Center for College Affordability and Productivity

Web Address:

www.centerforcollegeaffordability.org

Audience:

Higher Education Policy Advocates, Policy Makers

Sponsorship:

Lumina Foundation for Education – Forbes

Purpose:

The Center for College Affordability and Productivity (CCAP), a nonprofit organization, states that it is dedicated to researching the rising cost, as well as productivity in higher education. CCAP seeks to facilitate a broader dialogue with the public on the issues and problems facing the institutions of higher education, policy makers, and the higher education community.

Information provided includes student financial aid policy, rising costs of college, causes of higher education inefficiencies, productivity of staff and faculty members, for-profit higher education, and accreditation.

It is led by a director and a team of fellows and associates.

Display and Content:

The website's display is somewhat generic. The data are compiled in simple tables, easily understood, but not especially appealing visually.

The website lists its ranking methodology as follows: 27.5% student satisfaction, established from evaluations by RateMyProfessor.com freshman-to-sophomore retention rates, and comparison of predicted retention to actual retention rates; 30% post-graduate success, established from salary of alumni from Payscale.com, and the American Leaders List; 17.5% student debt, which is established from average federal student debt, predicted vs. actual average student debt, and default rates; 17.5% four-year graduation rates, established from actual rates, and actual rates vs. predicted rates; and 7.5% academic success, explained by students winning nationally competitive awards, and alumni receiving doctorates.

The website creates a rating for institutions based on percentage distributions above. The rating is not substantively detailed. While the site provides a detailed methodology and final aggregate rating based on each considered factor, it does not explain what each institution scored under each factor.

Sources:

Bureau of Labor Statistics – CollegeGrad.com – Digest of Education Statistics – FastWeb – National Center for Education Statistics – National Post-secondary Student Aid Study – Post-Secondary Education – The Project on Student Debt – United States Census Bureau – Rhodes Scholarship – British Marshall Scholarship data – Gates Cambridge Scholarship data – Harry S. Truman Scholarship data – Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship data – National Science Foundation Fellowships data – Fulbright U.S. Student Program data – USA Today All-Academic First and Second Teams data

Update Frequency:

The website's blog is updated roughly 2 – 3 times per week. The website's copyright is for 2014.

College Measures

Web Address:

www.collegemeasures.org

Audience:

Prospective Students

Sponsorship:

Optimty Advisors – American Institutes for Research (AIR) – Lumina Foundation

Purpose:

The website states: “College Measures is a partnership between the American Institutes for Research and Optimty Advisors, focused on using data to drive improvement in higher education outcomes in the United States.” The providers state that they are deeply concerned about improving American higher education, and believe that important underlying data is underexposed and underutilized by students, parents, policymakers, and even by institutions themselves.

Display and Content:

From the main page, the user is presented with three options: two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and economic success of graduates. The two-year and four-year websites are very similar; however, the economic success of graduates is connected to a program supported by the Lumina Foundation called the Economic Success Metrics (ESM) program. This program is currently limited to six states which participate in its program. The website is relatively easy to navigate.

The ESM program has released several reports to provide insight into the economic outcomes of different states’ higher education systems for individuals. Each state has a report of its own, which provides more information such as earnings by type of degree, by major, and location of employment (i.e., in-state or out-of-state).

A scorecard judges the state’s higher education performance by four major factors: completion and progression; efficiency; productivity; and gainful employment. Each of these is further detailed. Under completion and progression, the site lists graduation rate and first-year retention. Under efficiency, cost per student (FTE) is provided. Under productivity, cost per degree and cost of attrition are provided. Under gainful employment, student loan default rate and ratio of student loan payments to earnings for recent graduates are provided.

Clicking either on two-year or four-year college tools brings the user to four options on performance, measured by AIR and Matrix Knowledge (now, part of Optimty Advisors). The options are listed by college, by state, by rank, and the United States’ national average performance. Viewing colleges by name gives the user a search box where the name of a college can be entered. The user can also sort that by state, in case there is more than one institution with similar names. Searching performance by state brings up a map; clicking any given state will take the user to a page with three tabs: scorecard, compare against other states, and compare the state’s public colleges.

Comparing states brings the user to a list of all states, including territories, ranked by a rating on each of the above factors. The user is able to organize a search by any of these factors.

Comparing a state’s public colleges provides a list of each state’s public institutions of higher education, compared on each of the above mentioned factors, and allows the user to get more specific information for each using tabs at the top of the page. Unlike comparing states against one another, the user is unable to compare institutions against one another on this page.

Sources:

The website lists no specific sources, but states:

“Hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent creating data warehouses that contain the information needed to assess the performance of our higher education system. These warehouses exist at the school, state and national levels, and hold a powerful amount of information that needs to be presented in ways that are compelling to users. Our goal is to move the information out of these data warehouses and into "data storefronts" in which performance

metrics will be placed into the public square, allowing students, their families, and policy makers to get much better measures of the rate of return on their investment in higher education programs and institutions.”

Update Frequency:

The website has a copyright of 2014. The most recent article posted is from 2014.

Chronicle of Higher Ed.: College Reality Check

Web Address:

www.collegerealitycheck.com

Audience:

Students, Parents, Counselors

Sponsorship:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – Inceptia – The Chronicle of Higher Education

Purpose:

College Reality Check is produced by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The goal of the website is to share data that students, parents, and counselors might consider in making decisions about college. These factors include colleges' graduation rates, net-price, monthly cost of student loans, and potential earnings of graduates.

As part of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the website is led by members of its staff.

Display and Content:

The website is easy to use. The information provided is targeted very specifically to students, parents, and counselors; and is easily accessible from the homepage.

From the homepage, the user is asked whether they are a student, parent, or counselor, or none of those options. From there, the user can see five main options on the homepage: “how much will I actually pay for my degree;” “will I graduate on time;” “will I make enough to repay my debt;” “find colleges;” and “compare colleges.” The first three buttons all go to a different section on the same page with a summary about the selected topic and a “learn more” button, which leads to a page of detailed information.

Clicking “learn more” under “how much will I actually pay for my degree,” takes the user to a page that boldly displays the average net-price of a two-year associate degree and a four-year bachelor degree. It then goes on to explain the difference between what colleges advertise and what students actually pay—i.e., the net-price. There are related articles listed next to this description, with additional resources at the bottom of the page, each of which has a short summary.

Clicking “learn more” under “will I graduate on time,” takes the user to a page that discusses graduation rates. It explains the importance of graduation rates, the history of requiring colleges to divulge that information, and explains how transfer students are not counted in these numbers. Again, this page has related articles and additional resources.

Clicking “learn more” under “will I make enough to repay my debt,” takes the user to a page that discusses average repayment rates compared with average earnings. The page explains the severity of college debt and the importance of data available to parents and students needed to calculate cost of debt and estimated earnings after graduation. It refers users to another website, Project on Student Debt, to search details regarding average earnings by discipline. Again, this page has related articles and additional resources with descriptions of the resources.

Clicking “find colleges” takes the user to a form to fill out information such as college size, location, cost, and graduation rate, and allows the user to include an estimated family income range. College listings are very easy to read and understand. The listings include information on the college location, size, private or public, type of degree, selectivity, graduation rate by four and six years, average net-price, estimated debt, and the institution's student default rates. On this page the user can “add to compare” colleges. The website lists up to five slots to compare colleges.

Clicking “compare colleges” from the homepage takes the user to a section of the website that gives a detailed data comparison for each of the selected colleges. There is an option to print these comparisons, or to download these as an excel sheet.

Sources:

Project on Student Debt – The Chronicle of Higher Education – National Center for Education Statistics – National Student Loan Data System – Department of Education – White House College Scorecard – PayScale – Office of Student Financial Assistance Programs

Update Frequency:

There is no information regarding how frequently the website is updated.

College Scorecard

Web Address:

www.collegecost.ed.gov/scorecard

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents, Counselors

Sponsorship:

College Affordability and Transparency Center/United States Department of Education (DoE)

Purpose:

College Scorecard in the U.S. Department of Education's College Affordability and Transparency Center purports to make it easier for college-bound students to search for a college that is a good fit. The College Scorecard provides information about a college's affordability and value to assist in making informed decisions about which college to attend.

The College Scorecard is a product of the DoE's College Affordability and Transparency Center, and is operated thereunder. It is also promoted by the White House.

Display and Content:

Compared to other sites, the scorecard is not the easiest to use; however the information provided is substantial, the layout is understandable; and the specifications of search options are clear. There's no way to compare institutions side-by-side, but the manner in which one selects preferences provides reasonable comparability.

From the main page, the user has two options: looking up a specific college, or looking up various colleges with a wide selection of specifications. One can search by: degree and major, occupation, awards offered, zip code, state, region, size, campus setting, and distance education.

When viewing an institution, the total cost is displayed, together with the average percentage price increase from 2008 – 2010; the graduation rate, listed as a percentage on a scale from low to high; the student loan default rate, compared to the national default rate; the median borrowing rate; shown as both whole number and average monthly payment over a 10-year period; and employment data, which DoE is still working on gathering.

Sources:

Department of Education – National Center for Education Statistics – National Student Loan Data System – The Office of Federal Student Aid – Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System – College Affordability and Transparency Center

Update Frequency:

There is no explicit information on the website regarding update frequency.

LinkedIn University Rankings

Web Address:

www.linkedin.com/edu/rankings

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents, Returning Adult Learners

Sponsorship:

LinkedIn

Purpose:

LinkedIn provides a university ranking system (US, UK and Canada) based on projected earnings among its relatively limited membership database. By identifying “desirable” companies and “relevant” college graduates, LinkedIn compiles information on graduates’ institutions to identify which institutions lead to jobs in specific fields. LinkedIn currently has eight careers that it identifies in its rankings: accounting professionals; designers; finance professionals; investment bankers; marketers; media professionals; software developers; and software developers at startup companies. For each of these careers, it ranks the top 25 institutions nationally, which excel at helping a student get a job in that field.

In order to identify desirable companies, LinkedIn utilizes its membership data. Members who work in those specified fields are first identified. Then, reviewing the work history of its members, LinkedIn recognizes patterns of migration and retention at companies. Companies which are better at attracting and retaining employees are deemed desirable.

Display and Content:

The display is simple and elegant, but limited in terms of information available. The rankings page for LinkedIn displays the eight careers mentioned, and the top three institutions for each career field. Clicking on any one of the careers allows the user to see a ranking of 25 institutions as best for that career.

Clicking on the institution displays information from the institution’s LinkedIn page, such as number of students and alumni on LinkedIn, location, and how the user is connected to the institution through friends on LinkedIn. It also shows a listing of desirable companies at which graduates work, which are related to the field in question.

Sources:

LinkedIn

Update Frequency:

Because this ranking system is new as of 2014, information is not available regarding update frequency.

Noodle

Web Address:

www.noodle.com

Audience:

Prospective Students, Parents, Current Students

Sponsorship:

Noodle is founded as the flagship company of The Noodle Companies, which is independently founded by members of the Princeton Review.

Purpose:

The website states that “Noodle is an alternative to ‘pointless’ rankings, and to [leading] sites that simply drive students to the highest bidder. By holding the content to the highest standards, Noodle strives to bring the user the personalized, authentic, and honest information.” The intent of Noodle is to assist prospective students in finding the right institution for them.

Display and Content:

The display of information is clear and understandable. From the main page, the user immediately knows where to go. However, after clicking on “find colleges,” the next page is less simple to navigate. On the side, it offers many options to narrow down college selections, such as size, cost, location, workload, diversity, and activities. One can also input SAT/ACT scores and amount of credit courses taken in high school to narrow down the options to ones by which the user would have a likelihood of being accepted.

The website is free to use, but some searches, such as saving a list of institutions to view later, require signing up for the website.

The website is comprehensive and relatively rich in content. Information is aggregated from several sources and displayed. The user can search for any level of education from pre-school to graduate programs and law schools. It contains specific sections for online courses, study abroad schools, and internships. From the main page, clicking “find colleges” takes the user to a list of the Noodle’s highest-ranked institutions based on selectivity, influence, education quality, environment, and outcomes. Clicking on an institution will give the user information from the institution itself, from Noodle, and from college reviewers. There is also contact information, and a descriptor regarding type of institution (e.g. “heavy undergraduate arts and sciences focus, research university”).

The institution’s profile gives significant information regarding admissions practices, SAT/ACT scores of recent incoming classes, acceptance rate, faculty statistics, administration information, majors offered, graduation rates, student life, student statistics, housing options, activities, services, finances and rankings from other ranking sites.

Sources:

Sources for the information are different for each institutional profile. One can check sources at the bottom of each institutional profile. Notable sources include US News & World report, The Princeton Review, Payscale, and the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Update Frequency:

The website is updated multiple times per month with news stories and articles from Noodle’s staff.

Student Impact Project

Web Address:

www.studentimpactproject.org

Audience:

Students, Graduates, Higher Education Policy Advocates

Sponsorship:

Atlantic Philanthropies – California HealthCare Foundation – Kauffman Foundation – Lumina Foundation – The Annie E. Casey Foundation – The Arthur M. Blank Foundation – The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – The Boston Foundation – The California Community Foundation – The California Endowment – The Joyce Foundation – The Kresge Foundation – The Nathan Cummings Foundation – The David and Lucile Packard Foundation – The Rappaport Family Foundation – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – The San Francisco Foundation – The Seattle Foundation – Women’s Foundation for California – Center for Community Change.

Purpose:

The website states: “The Student Impact Project, an initiative of Young Invincibles, aims to equip students with tools and resources to organize and advocate for state policies that support college access, affordability, and success.”

The Young Invincibles is led by a board of directors, including an executive director and higher education campaign director. The Young Invincibles has six offices throughout the United States.

Display and Content:

Display of information at first glance may not appear to be straightforward or initially easy to navigate, without a link to report cards, or an easily navigable sidebar menu. However, it is not difficult for the user to find information through a few extra clicks. After getting to the Student Impact Project website, there are three drop menus with reasonably easily understood titles to help the user find what they are seeking.

The Student Impact Project is under the umbrella of “The YI Network,” which is the parent organization of four independent projects. Healthy Young America, Student Impact Project, Jobs Tour, and Your Debt in Perspective are each independent operations of The YI Network.

Student Impact Project Report Card: Offers the user a user-friendly report card system for states’ higher education rating. The report card grades states, rather than institutions, and is based on five factors: tuition cost, spending per student, burden on families, state aid to students, and education as a state priority. Ultimately, the report provides one final grade after averaging the five factors. Each grade has a short sentence or two of explanation for the reason behind the grade. There is a section for additional comments, and the average student debt in each state. On the main page for report cards, the website displays a chart of every state’s grade. The site provides a methodology for the report card analysis, using nationally recognized data sources.

Student Impact Project Maps: Interactive maps are available with information that is more detailed than the report cards. These offer information by each state, color-coded to indicate the state’s higher education condition. Additionally, a report shows a state-rank, a total percentage score rating, five-year increase in tuition, five-year spending change per student, and amount of grant funds per full-time equivalent students.

Other Resources: The website allows users to register to vote, to share policy ideas through a student forum, and it allows visitors to connect with an organization called U/FUSED, United for Undergraduate Socio-Economic Diversity. The website also provides a report on racial inequality in college and employment.

Sources:

Congressional Budget Office -- Congressional Research Service -- US Census Bureau -- Center on Budget and Public Policy -- State Higher Education Executive Officers' Association -- Bureau of Labor Statistics -- Center for American Progress -- Oxford University Press -- National Bureau of Economic Research -- The Brookings Institute -- Industrial and Labor Relations Review -- Journal of Business and Economic Statistics -- The New York Times -- The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center -- Project on Student Debt -- Corporation for National & Community Service -- Department of Education -- American Enterprise Institute -- The Hamilton project -- US News and World Report -- National Center for Education Statistics -- National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators -- College Board -- American Federation of Teachers -- Center for Law and Social Policy -- SCOTUSblog -- The Century Foundation -- American Journal of Political Science -- State Legislative Websites -- National Association of State Budget Officers -- National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs.

Update Frequency:

The Young Invincibles website updates its news information roughly once or twice per week. Typically, it publishes a press release roughly once every other week. There is no specific notation on the website regarding how often the website itself is updated—that is, unlike most sites, it does not have a year stamp at the bottom of the page marking its copyright.

The Student Impact Project updates its news at least once a week, except during summer months. It updates its blog frequently—multiple times a week—but not during the summer months.

Unigo

Web Address:

www.unigo.com

Audience:

Prospective Students, Current Students, Parents

Sponsorship:

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – Facebook – College Summit – King Center Charter School

Purpose:

The website states: “Powered by a network of the nation’s top college counselors and a vibrant community of enrolled college students, Unigo is the Web’s largest resource of information to find, get in, and pay for college. Unigo offers the ability for prospective students to have live one-on-one sessions with college counselors and current college students from around the country. With more than 15,000 college students and counselors available for sessions, prospective students can browse and search based on the type of desired session, areas of interest, region and much more. The counselors and college students available for live sessions have all been personally vetted by the Unigo team to ensure a valuable and informative experience. Prospective students also use Unigo for admissions advice and access to more than 200,000 multimedia reviews by students on 6,500 campuses across the country, for free. The reviews on Unigo are included in US News & World Report’s college directory and rankings. Founded in 2008, Unigo is based in New York and funded by McGraw Hill and angel investors.”

Unigo.com is a wholly owned subsidiary of the for-profit Unigo Group. Unigo.com is led by a professional staff.

Display and Content:

This website is not well displayed. It is difficult to navigate, uses unconventional ratings, and does not provide substantial comparative information. The only way to compare colleges is by location, size of student body, and tuition cost.

From the main page, one can search a specific college to see reviews and ratings, which appear to be done completely by students. The website does offer real-time admissions advice from a team of college admissions officials. It also offers limited information on scholarships – which requires users to sign up for the website to obtain. In fact, reviewing more than just a few rankings will prompt the site to ask you to register.

The Ranking system used by this site exists in two distinct forms: 1) Ratings of individual colleges based on student reviews; and 2) Unconventional rankings, such as “famous faculty,” “politicians and pundits,” “fast and flirtatious,” “best bang for your buck,” and “no last Call.” These second rankings were compiled after 30,000 students voted to decide which colleges had the best “atmospheres.” While this may be a novel idea for prospective students, it does not necessarily help them to find an institution that is academically appropriate.

Sources:

Student College Reviews – College Counselors – National Center for Education Statistics – The Common Data Set Initiative

Update Frequency:

The website’s copyright is 2014. No other information can be found on the site regarding update frequency.

U.S. News & World Report

Web Address:

www.usnews.com/rankings

Audience:

Prospective Students, Parents, Higher Education Officials, Current Students

Sponsorship:

U.S. News & World Report

Purpose:

U.S. News & World Report is one of the better-known national college ranking systems. Since 1983 it has compiled and released rankings of “America’s Best Colleges,” expanding ranking content over time. In 2010, it moved to online-only format for its rankings. Its purpose is to provide college-bound students and families with comprehensive information about choosing a college, and comparing colleges to one another cost and quality, and ranking colleges nationally and regionally by type. Annually in the fall, just as the school year starts, U.S. News & World Report updates its rankings.

Display and Content:

As one would expect, the website is displayed in a news format. This makes it relatively difficult to navigate for the purpose of rankings. It has a lot of tools, but the layout of the information makes it somewhat confusing. This website requires users to sign in or create an account to view certain information.

From the main page of U.S. News, one must click on education, then “best colleges” to reach the college rankings page. The rankings are separated into different categories. The various lists are as follows: national university rankings, liberal arts college rankings, regional colleges, regional universities, best value schools, A+ schools for B students, up-and-coming schools, best undergraduate business programs, top public schools, most international students, and unranked.

Upon clicking any of the rankings, the user is taken to a list of colleges, ordered from highest ranked to lowest ranked. The user can also select a tab above the list to view the rankings in table mode, which has more data. Whereas the list view has a short paragraph on each institution, along with tuition, enrollment, and the institution’s setting/location, the table view lists all of this information along with acceptance rates, retention rates, six-year graduation rates. If the user creates an account they can also see the percentage of classes with 20 or fewer students, and the SAT/ACT percentiles.

Clicking on an individual institution brings the user to a campus profile. Each campus overview profile has a description summary, contact information, tuition, enrolled students, the gender breakdown of students, and the admissions deadline with the percentage of students accepted. Further down the page, the user can see information on the application process, selectivity of the institution, statistics about academic and student life (such as Greek life and athlete information), services offered to students, and grant and scholarship information.

For the profiles, there are two sets of tabs, one set at the top and one to the left. The top set offers information on the institution, its rank, information on Facebook Friends who are connected with the institution (if the user connects their Facebook profile to U.S. News), graduate school information (if applicable), online programs (if applicable), and information for jobs and internships for students and grads near the institution. The set of tabs on the left brings the user to any of the categories mentioned above in the overview profile.

Sources:

Carnegie Foundation – Colleges and Universities – United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics – American Association of University Professors – National Collegiate Athletics Association – Council for Aid to Education

Update Frequency:

The website's copyright is 2014. The rankings update annually in the fall.

Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)

Web Address:

www.voluntarysystem.org

Audience:

Higher Education Officials, Prospective Students, Current Students

Sponsorship:

Lumina Foundation – Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) – American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) – Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) – American College Testing Service (ACT) – Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) – Council for Aid to Education (CASE) – ETS – Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) – National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment – National Student Clearinghouse – National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Purpose:

The VSA is a voluntary initiative developed by the higher education community to meet the following objectives: demonstrate accountability and stewardship to public; support institutions in the measurement of educational outcomes, and facilitate the identification and implementation of effective practices as part of institutional improvement efforts; assemble and disseminate information that is transparent, comparable, and understandable; and provide a useful tool for students during the college search process.

The VSA is directed by an oversight board, made of individuals from different institutions of higher education, such as presidents, chancellors, and provosts. It also has three ex-officio members, the VSA Executive Director, the APLU Senior Advisor, and the Associate Vice President of Academic Leadership and Change (part of AASCU).

Display and Content:

It is reasonably easy to use once one gets to the College Profile, but navigating is not very convenient. Users can compare colleges easily, but one can compare only two at a time, which makes comparing multiple colleges difficult. The site is not one of the more appealing ones, aesthetically.

The website seems to focus on higher education officials more than on students. Its rating system is called the College Portrait. The comparison tool allows users compare two schools by viewing data about cost, including fees, financial aid, student success and retention, demographics, student residency, faculty ratio, minimal faculty demographics, and a breakdown comparison of those who applied, compared to those who were admitted, and compared to those who were enrolled.

Sources:

The website does not list data sources, but instead states “the majority of the data elements selected are from currently available data sources with established definitions and reporting conventions.”

Update Frequency:

The website’s most recent News article is from 2013. The copyright for the website is 2011.