

# *Rankings EXPOSED*

10 shocking ways colleges game the rankings!  
Number 7 will blow your mind!



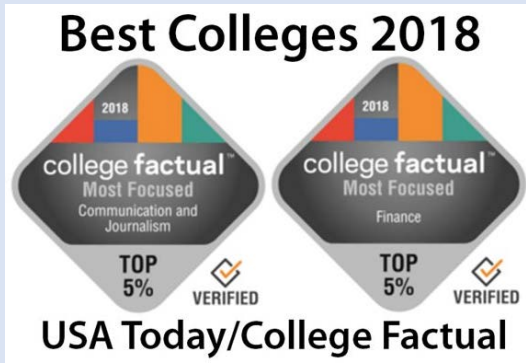
William Searle

Institutional Research & Planning

# Takeaways

- Ranking universities is difficult
- Some universities game the rankings
- IRP takes great care to report accurate information







# You won't believe how long rankings have been around



Where we get our best men : some statistics showing their nationalities, counties, towns, schools, universities, and other antecedents : 1837-1897  
By Alick Maclean

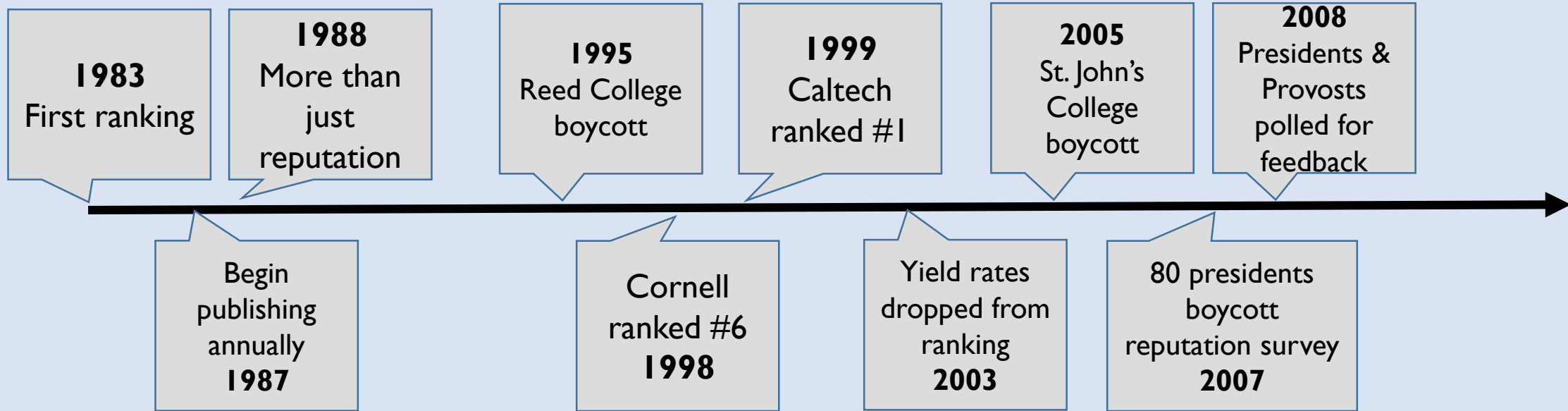
# Our Primary Focus Today



“U.S. News refines its methodology for one simple reason: to improve it.” *USNWR*

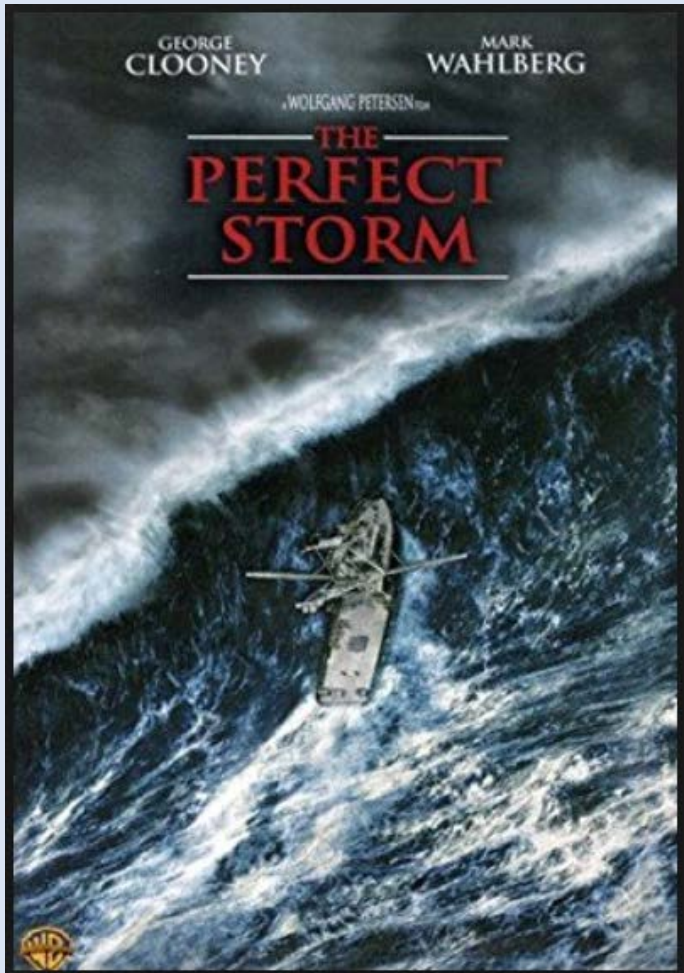


# The LAST timeline you'll ever need



“U.S. News refines its methodology for one simple reason: to improve it.” *USNWR*

# Why did US News rankings become popular?



- Struggling magazine
- College enrollment up 47% between 1970 and 1983
- Increasing importance of a college degree
- Mobile students



# Ranking Scandals Emerge

“Temple University on Monday announced that its business school had **submitted false data for years** for rankings purposes. The university said that it had asked Moshe Porat, dean of the business school, to resign...”

*Inside Higher Ed July 2018*

- Fudged GMAT and GPA information
- Underreported admission offers
- Reported average debt for all graduates, not just those who borrowed
- Counted “academic coaches” as faculty in student-faculty ratio

# What happened next will shock you

**Job duties** Temple has extensive external reporting activity, including accreditation bodies, rankings/guidebooks and reports for governmental agencies. These submissions require data and involve significant review and verification. The Assistant Director in collaboration with the Director for Data Analysis and Reporting will oversee Temple University's processes for completing, verifying and submitting surveys and other external reports.

**The Assistant Director will provide oversight within the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment for data collection, analysis and verification support for responses to external surveys and rankings for the university and will work with the schools and colleges to ensure data verification processes are being followed for school and program specific survey submissions.** Responsibilities include assist with codification of data definitions; analyze survey methodologies; identify sources of data; review internal data collection processes; audit responses to external surveys and rankings; monitor survey submission procedures; assist with maintenance of the master calendar of external surveys and rankings and archiving of survey submissions. The Assistant Director will determine the need for reports and processes to automate data collection and assist with process development. The Assistant Director will provide regular updates on rankings methodologies and outcomes for university leadership. In collaboration with external auditors, regularly review internal data control processes and provide training and support on internal procedures, policies and best practices. Performs other duties as assigned.

These colleges LIED to US News.  
Their punishment will leave you speechless.

### 8 More Colleges Submitted Incorrect Data for Rankings

*U.S. News* will consider them unranked for the rest of this rankings year, but that punishment will last only a few weeks.

Errors included graduation rates, spending per student, average faculty salaries and more.



# Why do colleges game the rankings?

- **Motivation:** Being aware of the performance measures and caring about the ranking.
- **Opportunity:** Having the ability to take action to influence the information used to calculate the ranking.
- **Measurement Error:** The measurement is an imperfect proxy for what we want to know.

# Motivation

“The Arizona Board of Regents approved a contract this year that will give Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State University, a **\$10,000 bonus** if the institution's U.S. News rank rises.”

*The Chronicle of Higher Education 2007*

“The University of Missouri at Kansas City gave the Princeton Review false information designed to inflate the rankings of its business school, which was **under pressure from its major donor to keep the ratings up**, according to an outside audit released Friday.”

*Inside Higher Ed 2015*

# Motivation

Being ranked in the top 25 of US News was associated with **6-10% increase in applications.**

*American Educational Research Association, 2014*



#139063589

# Opportunity

- Misreporting
- Change Practices
- Interpretation

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2018: Best Colleges - Main Survey <https://dataportal.usnews.com/survey/index.php/printsurvey/view/survey...>

PRINT SURVEY

## 2018: Best Colleges - Main Survey

### Introduction

#### BEST COLLEGES

Data Collection

U.S. News has begun collecting data for the 2019 edition of Best Colleges. The U.S. News surveys ask about many aspects of your institution that are important to potential college applicants across the country, other educational intuitions, and the public at large.

**Survey Deadline:** May 10th, 2018

There are 3 steps in the U.S. News data collection process:

**Step 1: Data** - Fill in as much of the survey as possible.

**Step 2: Assessment** - After filling in your data, navigate to the 'Main Survey Assessment' section. The assessment runs a comparison between your current data and the data submitted last year. The assessment will identify potential errors between the two years of data. For more information please go to the main assessment section.

**Step 3: Verification** - After reviewing the assessment and fixing any remaining errors, navigate to the section titled 'Verification'. This is where the survey submission takes place. Please take some time to review your survey data one last time. When you are ready, please select the check box, fill out the identification information and hit the red 'Submit Survey' button.

#### Important Icons

- \* The red asterisk located next to a few question numbers indicated that the question is mandatory. If the question is not answered you will be unable to submit the survey. All assessment flags are mandatory and must be addressed.
- ✘ The red x indicates that you have not filled out the question correctly. There will be a line of text that accompanies the icon letting you know what the exact problem is. Once the issue is corrected, the x will disappear. All failed validations must be fixed before the survey can be submitted.
- 🛡️ The gold shield indicates that the question has been used in past U.S. News Best Colleges rankings calculations or is under consideration for future use.
- 💡 The question mark indicates a tip on how to answer that particular question.
- ☑️ The checkbox indicates the assessment section of the survey.
- ⬆️ The upward arrow indicates the verification section of the survey. This is where the submission button is located.

#### Entering Data

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# Measurement Error

Construct



What  
matters

Proxy



What is  
measured



Where things  
go wrong



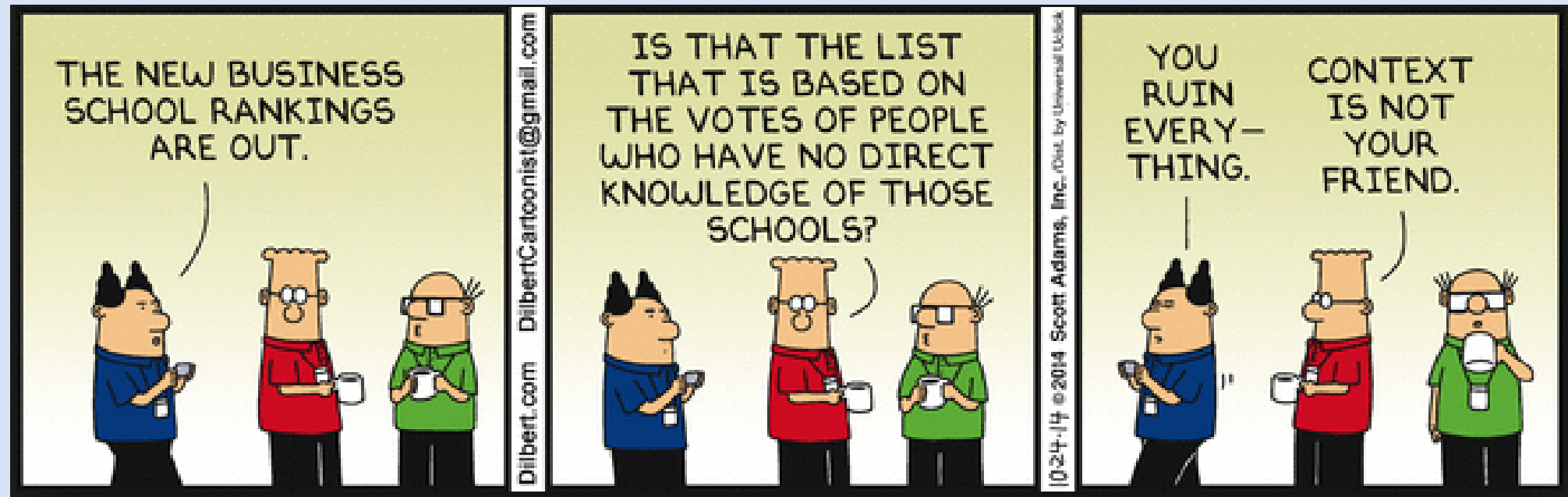
# U.S. News Ranking Methodology

- Expert Opinion (20%)
- Outcomes (35%)
- Alumni Giving (5%)
- Financial Resources (10%)
- Faculty Resources (20%)
- Student Excellence (10%)

- What counts
- How is it counted
- How to game the measurements

# Expert Opinion (20%)

- Peer Assessment (15%)
- High School Counselor Rating (5%)



# Expert Opinion (20%)

“The U.S. News ranking formula gives weight to the opinions of those in a position to judge a school's undergraduate academic excellence.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Academic  
Excellence

What is measured



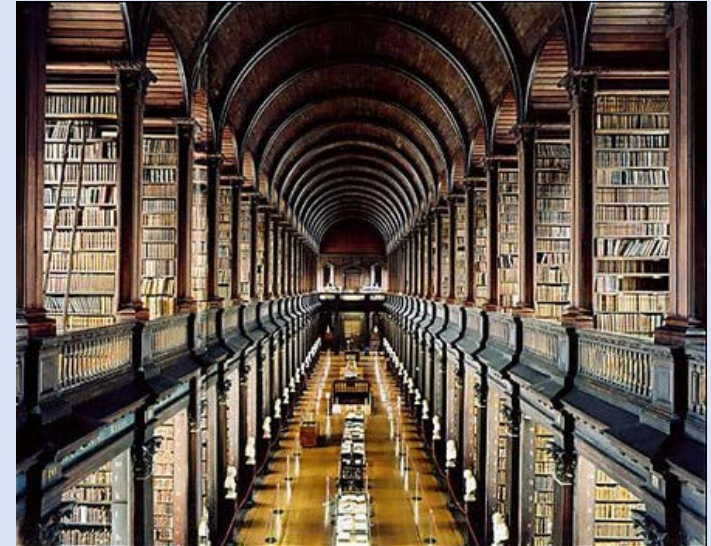
Survey  
Ratings



# Gaming Expert Opinion (20%)

“Trinity College Dublin sent letters seeking favorable reviews.”

- *Inside Higher Ed*, 2016



“In the magazine's academic-reputation surveys, Ms. Watt said, administrators rated all institutions other than Clemson as below average.”

- *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2009

# Graduation and Retention Rates (22%)

- Six-year graduation rate (17.6%)
- First-year retention rate (4.4%)



# Graduation and Retention Rates (22%)

“The higher the proportion of first-year students who return to campus for sophomore year and eventually graduate, the better a school is apt to be at offering the classes and services that students need to succeed.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Availability of  
Classes & Services

What is measured



Graduation &  
Retention Rates



# Graduation Rate Performance (8%)

“This indicator of added value shows the effect of the college's programs and policies on the graduation rate after controlling for spending and student characteristics, such as standardized test scores, high school class standing and the proportion receiving Pell Grants.” *USNWR*

What we want to know →

Student Success  
Over/Under  
Performance

What is measured →

Graduation Rate  
Over/Under  
Performance



# Social Mobility (5%)

- Absolute Pell Grant graduation rate (2.5%)
- Relative Pell Grant graduation rate (2.5%)





# Social Mobility (5%)

“New this year, we factored a school's success at promoting social mobility by graduating students who received federal Pell Grants.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Success at  
Promoting Social  
Mobility

What is measured



Pell Grant  
Graduation Rates



# Gaming Outcomes (35%)

$$\text{Rate of Persistence} = \frac{\text{\# of students persisting}}{\text{\# of students starting}}$$

Two ways to make a fraction larger:

- Increase the numerator
- Decrease the denominator



# Alumni Giving Rate (5%)

“This reflects the average percentage of living alumni with bachelor's degrees who gave to their school during 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. Giving measures student satisfaction and postgraduate engagement.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Student  
Satisfaction/ Postgrad  
engagement

What is measured



Percent of Alumni who  
Donate



# Gaming Alumni Giving Rate

Albion College spread out donations from graduating seniors over five years.

*Wall Street Journal, 2007*

“Anderson’s report found that for NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision teams...winning football games increases alumni athletic donations...” *Inside Higher Ed, 2012*



# Financial Resources (10%)

“U.S. News measures financial resources by using the average spending per student on instruction, research, student services and related educational expenditures in the 2016 and 2017 fiscal years. Spending on sports, dorms and hospitals does not count.” *USNWR*



# Financial Resources (10%)

“Generous per-student spending indicates that a college can offer a wide variety of programs and services.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Variety of Programs  
and Services

What is measured



Educational  
Expenditures per  
Student



# Gaming Financial Resources



$$\text{Financial Resources} = \frac{\text{Educational Expenditures}}{\# \text{ of students}}$$

# Faculty Resources (20%)

- Class size (8%)
- Average faculty compensation (7%)
- Percent of faculty with terminal degrees (3%)
- Student/faculty ratio (1%)
- Percent of full-time faculty (1%)



# Faculty Resources (20%)

“U.S. News uses five factors from the 2017-2018 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction.” *USNWR*

What we want to know



Commitment to  
Instruction

What is measured



Class Size, Faculty  
Information



# Gaming Faculty Resources

“You get credit for the number of classes you have under 20 [students], so we lowered our caps on a lot of our classes to 19 just to make sure.” – Richard Freeland, former president of Northeastern University

Careful counting of faculty, and balancing tradeoffs.

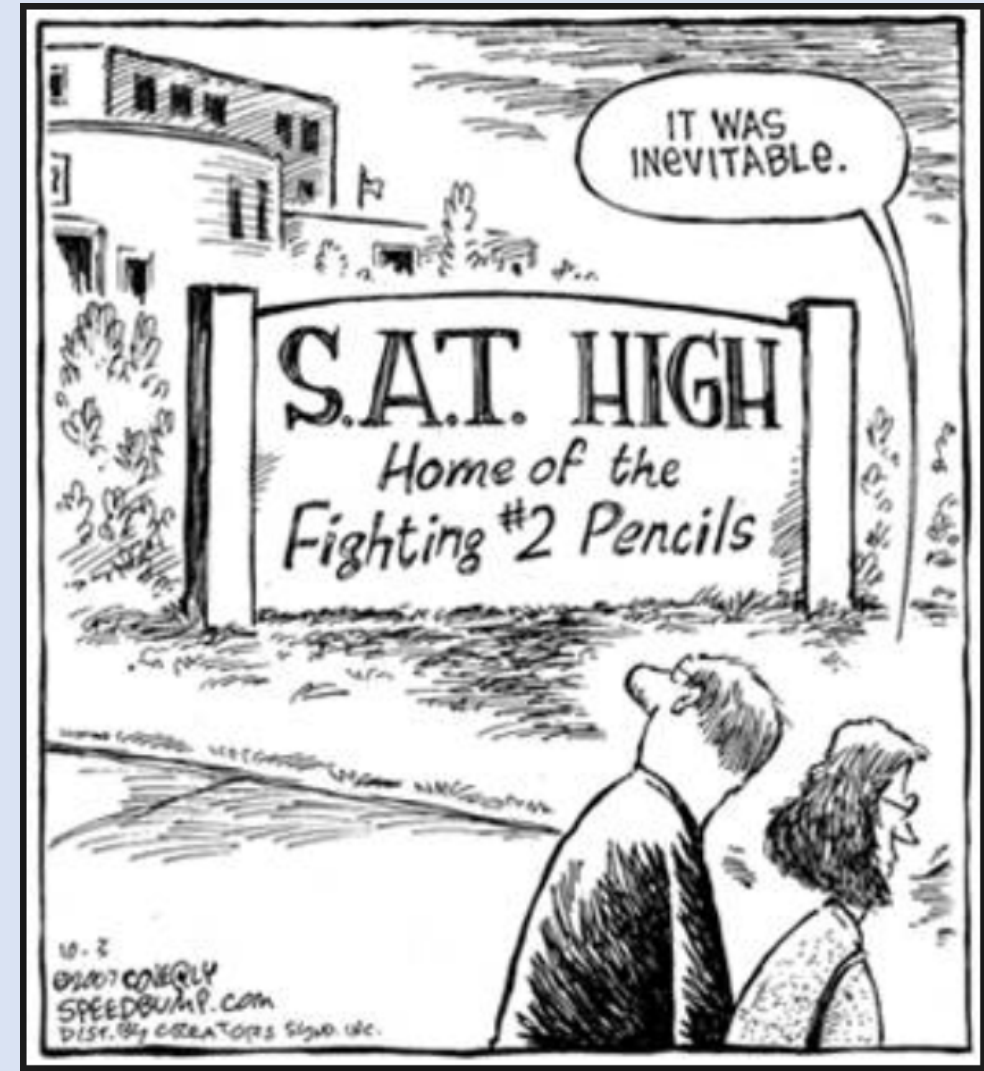


# Gaming Faculty Resources

	Format	Number of sections	Total enrollment	Mean section size	US News group	Percent of courses offered <20	Percent of enrollment in <20 course
Current Scenario	Lecture	2	839	420	50+	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
	Lab	3	213	71	50+		
	Lab	5	626	125	50+		
<b>Scenario A:</b> adding one lecture and one lab with <20 students each	Lecture	2	820	410	50+	<b>17%</b>	<b>2%</b>
	Lecture	1	19	19	<20		
	Lab	8	820	100	50+		
	Lab	1	19	19	<20		
<b>Scenario B:</b> adding 2 lectures and 8 labs with <20 students each	Lecture	2	801	400	50+	<b>50%</b>	<b>12%</b>
	Lecture	2	38	19	<20		
	Lab	8	683	85	50+		
	Lab	8	156	19	<20		
<b>Scenario C:</b> all sections are <20	Lecture	44	839	19	<20	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
	Lab	44	839	19	<20		
<b>Scenario D:</b> one lecture and all labs are <20	Lecture	1	839	839	50+	<b>98%</b>	<b>50%</b>
	Lab	44	839	19	<20		
<b>Scenario E:</b> lectures are 50 each and labs are <20	Lecture	17	839	50	50+	<b>72%</b>	<b>50%</b>
	Lab	44	839	19	<20		

# Student Excellence (10%)

- SAT/ACT scores (7.75%)
- Students graduating in top 10% of their high school class (2.25%)



# Student Excellence (10%)

“Simply put, students who achieved strong grades and test scores during high school have the highest probability of succeeding at challenging college-level coursework; enabling instructors to design classes that have great rigor.”

*USNWR*

What we want to know



Rigor of classes

What is measured



SAT/ACT, HS Rank



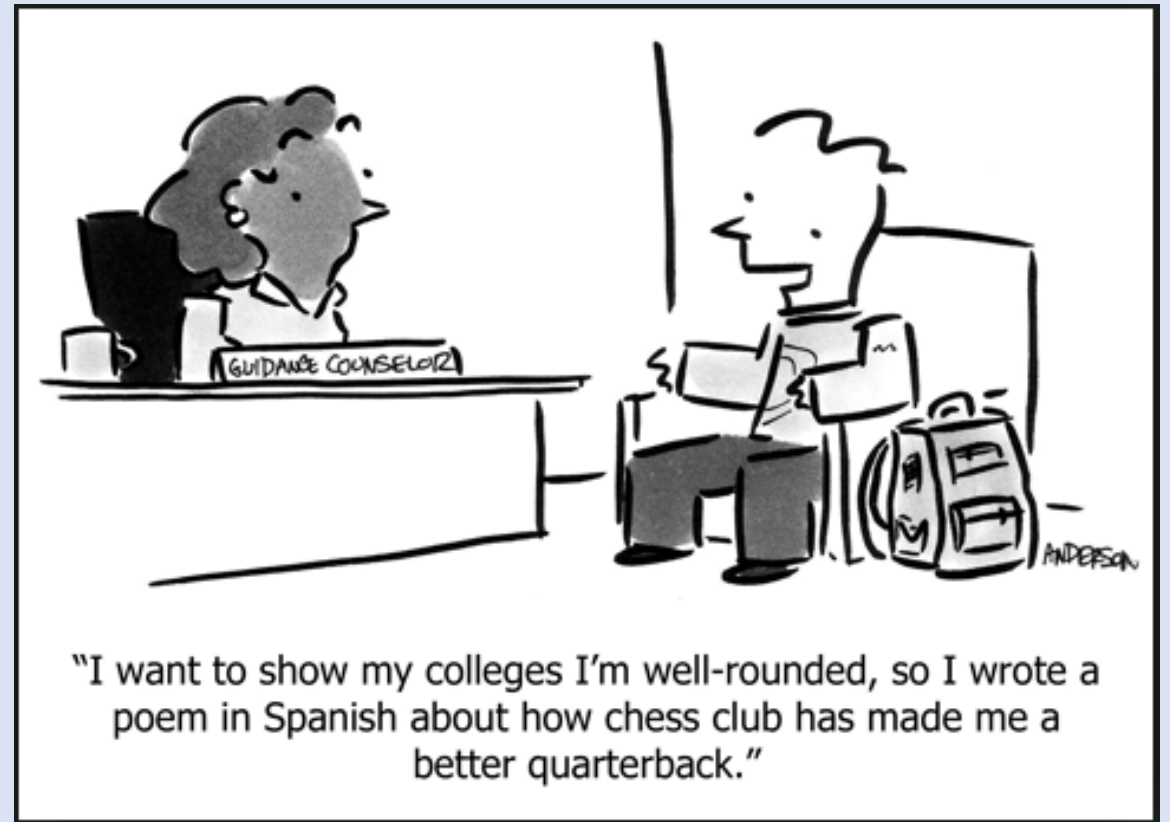
# Gaming Student Excellence

“Emory University officials announced Friday that administrators had knowingly misreported information about the SAT and ACT scores, class rank, and grade point averages of incoming students since at least 2000.” *Inside Higher Ed, 2012*

“In 2008, Baylor University told newly admitted students that they’d receive a \$300 campus-bookstore credit if they retook their SATs, and \$1,000 a year in student aid if the scores improved by more than 50 points.” *Boston Magazine, 2014*

# Gaming Student Excellence continued

- Test optional
- Early Decision
- Merit Aid
- Spring admission



# *REVEALED!* Formula for the Best College (according to US News)



Classes & Services, Social Mobility

Academic Excellence

Commitment to Instruction

Rigor of classes

Variety of Programs & Services

Student Over/Under Performance

Student Satisfaction, Engagement

Graduation & Retention Rates

Survey Ratings

Faculty info, class size

SAT scores, HS Rank

Educational Expenditures per Student

Grad. Rate Over/Under Performance

% of Alumni Donating



# Takeaways



- Ranking universities is difficult
- Some universities game the rankings
- IRP takes great care to report accurate information