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## The College Rankings Racket

By JOE NOCERA

The U.S. News & World Report's [annual college rankings](#) came out earlier this month and — knock me over with a feather! — Harvard and Princeton were tied for first.

Followed by Yale.

Followed by Columbia.

It's not that these aren't great universities. But c'mon. Can you really say with any precision that Princeton is "better" than Columbia? That the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (No. 6) is better than the California Institute of Technology (No. 10)? That Tufts (No. 28) is better than Brandeis (No. 33)?

Of course not. U.S. News likes to claim that it uses [rigorous methodology](#), but, honestly, it's just a list put together by magazine editors. The whole exercise is a little silly. Or rather, it would be if it weren't so pernicious.

Magazines compile lists because people like to read them. With U.S. News having folded its print edition two years ago, its rankings — not just of colleges, but law schools, graduate schools and even high schools — are probably what keep the enterprise alive. People care enough about its rankings [to pay \\$34.95](#) to seek out the details on the U.S. News Web site.

And they imbue these rankings with an authority that is largely unjustified. Universities that want [to game the rankings](#) can easily do so. U.S. News cares a lot about how much money a school raises and how much it spends: on faculty; on small classes; on facilities; and so on. It cares about how selective the admissions process is.

So universities that once served populations that were different from the Harvard or Yale student body now go after the same elite high school students with the highest SAT scores. And schools know that, if they want to get a better ranking, they need to spend money like mad — even though they will have to increase tuition that is already backbreaking. "If you figure out how to do the same service for less money, your U.S. News ranking will go down," says Kevin Carey, the director of education policy at the New America Foundation, a nonpartisan research group. The rankings encourage trends that ill-serve the country.

There is something else, too. The rankings exacerbate the status anxiety that afflicts so many high school students. The single-minded goal of too many high school students — pushed by

parents, guidance counselors and society itself — is to get into a “good” school. Those who don’t land a prestigious admission feel like failures. Those who do but lack the means often wind up taking on onerous debt — [a burden that can last a lifetime](#). And U.S. News has largely become the measure by which a good school is defined. “U.S. News didn’t invent the social dynamic,” says Carey. “What it did was very accurately empiricize them.”

As it happens, Carey has been working for a number of years with The Washington Monthly to compile [a different kind of college ranking](#). (I was an editor at The Monthly in the late 1970s.) Instead of trying to serve as a gauge of status, The Monthly’s rankings attempt to gauge more useful measures: social mobility, for instance, or “bang for the buck.” Its top-ranked national universities this year are the University of California-San Diego and Texas A&M. Neither is ranked in the top 30 by U.S. News. All they do is graduate a higher percentage of students than you would expect given their populations — at a reasonable price.

Yes, The Washington Monthly’s rankings are yet another list compiled by magazine editors, inevitably flawed. But the point the magazine is trying to make is that this is the model of higher education we should be encouraging. Can you really disagree? I have no doubt that you can obtain a very good education at Texas A&M. As you surely can at many other institutions that don’t crack the top of the U.S. News rankings.

Not long ago, I saw an article written by a recent graduate of Stuyvesant High. Stuyvesant, widely considered the most prestigious public high school in New York, [has just been through a cheating scandal](#) — one driven in no small part by the imperative of its students to get into a prestigious college.

The author, who was not part of the cheating scandal, had succeeded in getting into a “Desirable University,” as she put it, but her parents had been unable to afford the tuition. She wound up, deeply embittered, at a state school. Whenever people would bring up the subject of college, she wrote, she would “mutter something about not wanting to talk about it.” Although she claimed to have made her peace with her education, she ended her article by vowing to save enough so that her children wouldn’t have to suffer the same fate.

How sad. Maybe someday she’ll understand that where you go to college matters far less than what you put into college. Maybe someday the readers of the U.S. News rankings will understand that as well.