

An Investigation of the Facts Behind Columbia's U.S. News Ranking Executive Summary

Note: Please refer to the main article for definitions of terms used here.

OVERVIEW

- The U.S. News ranking is a long-standing and highly visible ranking of American universities.
- Columbia's ranking has steadily risen from 18th place in 1988 to 2nd place in 2022.
- Much of the data supporting Columbia's high ranking, however, proves to be inaccurate, dubious, or highly misleading.
- There is a pattern of discrepancies, in Columbia's favor, between data reported to U.S. News and data available elsewhere.
- Almost all elite universities release detailed statistical information to the public in the form of a Common Data Set. Yet unlike every other Ivy League school, Columbia does not issue a Common Data Set.

CLASS SIZE

- Having many small classes and few large classes leads to a higher score in the U.S. News ranking.
- Columbia claims to U.S. News that 82.5% of undergraduate classes enroll fewer than 20 students — a higher percentage than any other school in the top 100 — yet an analysis of data from Columbia's Directory of Classes indicates that the correct figure is likely between 62.7% and 66.9%.
- Columbia also claims to U.S. News that 8.9% of undergraduate classes enroll 50 students or more, yet a similar analysis indicates that the correct figure is likely between 10.6% and 12.4%.

FACULTY WITH TERMINAL DEGREES

- Columbia claims to U.S. News that 100% of its full-time faculty hold a terminal degree (PhD, MFA, MBA, etc.), yet the Columbia College Bulletin lists dozens of full-time faculty with only bachelor's or master's degrees. The correct percentage is therefore at most 96%, probably lower.

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PERCENTAGE OF FACULTY WHO ARE FULL-TIME

- Columbia claims to U.S. News that 96.5% of its non-medical faculty are full-time, yet data reported to the U.S. Department of Education indicate that the correct percentage is more like 74.1%.

STUDENT-FACULTY RATIO

- Columbia claims to U.S. News that its student-faculty ratio is 6/1, yet if the methodology prescribed by U.S. News is followed, a much higher ratio must be correct, somewhere between 8/1 and 11/1.

SPENDING ON INSTRUCTION

- The larger the amount that a university claims to spend on instruction, the more it benefits in the U.S. News ranking.
- U.S. News does not disclose these amounts, but in its reporting to the U.S. Department of Education, Columbia claimed to spend \$3.1 billion on instruction in 2019-20. This is a colossal sum: by far the largest such figure reported to the government by more than 6,000 institutions of higher learning, and more than the corresponding figures for Harvard, Yale, and Princeton put together.
- A comparison of Columbia's government reporting with its financial statements shows that much of this \$3.1 billion figure represents expenditures on patient care made by Columbia's medical center. The claim that it represents instructional expenses appears strained at best.

GRADUATION RATES

- The graduation rates reported by Columbia to U.S. News are extremely high and play a key role in sustaining its lofty position in the ranking.
- These figures, however, do not include transfer students, who comprise about 30% of Columbia's incoming undergraduates.
- While there is no evidence of inaccuracy in these figures, analysis of government reporting shows that they would be considerably lower if transfer students were included.
- In this case, Columbia would fall precipitously in this component of the ranking.
- There is reason to believe that transfer students at Columbia tend to come from less privileged backgrounds than other undergraduates, and that financial hardship may contribute to their lower graduation rates.
- Nevertheless, they receive less generous financial aid packages than other undergraduates, because they mostly enroll in the Combined Plan and the School of General Studies, which do not meet demonstrated financial need.

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- U.S. News figures on student debt exclude transfer students, so their debt burden upon graduation does not affect the ranking and is difficult to estimate.
- The exclusion of transfer students from the U.S. News data creates incentives to take better care of non-transfer students, while treating transfer students more as a source of tuition revenue.

CONCLUSION

- No one should try to reform or rehabilitate the U.S. News ranking: it is irredeemable.
- Students are poorly served by rankings, and they create harmful incentives for universities.
- Even worse, the data on which rankings are based cannot be trusted.
- The pattern of inaccurate and misleading statements in Columbia's reporting is troubling.
- Root-and-branch reform — not confined to rankings alone — is needed at Columbia.

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