

U.S. News & World Report 2019 Best College Rankings

Appendix B: Methodology

U.S. News 2019 Best Colleges Rankings Methodology

Expert Opinion (academic reputation)	20.0% <i>(down from 22.5%)</i>	Peer assessment survey	15%
		High school counselors' ratings	5%
Outcomes (graduation/retention)	35.0% <i>(up from 30%)</i>	Social Mobility (Pell)	5%
		Average graduation rate	17.6%
		Average freshman retention rate	4.4%
		Graduation Rate Performance	8.0
Faculty resources	20.0%	Faculty compensation	7%
		Percent faculty with terminal degree in their field	3%
		Percent faculty that is full time	1%
		Student/faculty ratio	1%
		Class size	8%
Student Excellence (Selectivity) (Fall 2017 entering class)	10.0% <i>(down from 12.5%)</i>	High school class standing in top 10%	2.25%
		Critical Reading and Math portions of the SAT and the composite ACT scores	7.75%
Financial Resources (the average of fiscal years 2016 and 2017)	10.0%	Financial resources per student	
Alumni Giving (Average of 2015-16 and 2016-17)	5.0%	Average alumni giving rate	

Outcomes (35 percent, up from 30 percent in 2018)

More than one-third of a school's rank comes from its success at retaining and graduating students within 150 percent of normal time (six years). It receives the highest weight in our rankings because degree completion is necessary to receive the full benefits of undergraduate study from employers and graduate schools. We approach outcomes from angles of social mobility (5 percent), graduation and retention (22 percent), and graduation rate performance (8 percent).

Social mobility: New this year, we factored a school's success at promoting social mobility by graduating students who received federal Pell Grants (those typically coming from households whose family incomes are less than \$50,000 annually, though most Pell Grant money goes to students with a total family income below \$20,000). See below the two measures that factor into social mobility.

- Pell Grant graduation rates are weighted at 2.5 percent. This new ranking indicator measures the success of Pell Grant students on an absolute basis. To calculate this indicator, we use a school's six-year graduation rate among new fall 2011 entrants receiving Pell Grants. This assesses each school's performance graduating students from low-income backgrounds. A higher Pell Grant graduation rate scores better than a lower one.
- Pell Grant graduation rates compared with all other students are weighted at 2.5 percent. This additional new ranking factor compares each school's six-year graduation rate among Pell recipients who were new fall 2011 entrants graduating in 2017 with the six-year graduation rate among non-Pell recipients at the same school by dividing the former into the latter. The minority of schools whose Pell graduation rates are equal to or greater than non-Pell graduation rates score the highest. Altogether, this metric assesses each school's performance at supporting students from underserved backgrounds relative to all of its other students. The lower a school's Pell graduation rate relative to its non-Pell graduation rate, the lower it scores on this indicator.

Scores for the new social mobility indicators were then adjusted by the proportion of the entering class that was awarded Pell Grants because achieving a higher low-income student graduation rate is more challenging with a larger proportion of low-income students.

Graduation and retention rates: 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. This has two components: the average six-year graduation rate is 17.6 percent, down from 18 percent in 2018; and the average first-year retention rate is 4.4 percent, down from 4.5 percent in 2018.

The graduation rate indicates the average proportion of a graduating class earning a degree in six years or less; we considered first-year student classes that started from fall 2008 through fall 2011. First-year retention indicates the average proportion of first-year students who entered the school in the fall 2013 through fall 2016 and returned the following fall. Graduation is given four times more weight than retention. We weighted it at 22 percent total, down from 22.5 percent in 2018.

Graduation rate performance: We compared each college's actual six-year graduation rate to what we predicted for its fall 2011 entering class. The predicted rates were modeled from admissions data, proportion of undergraduates awarded Pell Grants, school financial resources, and national universities' math and science, or STEM, orientations. We weighted it at 8 percent, up from 7.5 percent in 2018.

The graduation and retention rate numerical ranking published on usnews.com for the 2019 Best Colleges is based on a school's total score in the following four ranking indicators: average six-year graduation rates, average first-year retention rates, Pell Grant graduation rates and Pell Grant graduation rates compared all other students. Previously, the graduation and retention rate numerical ranking published on usnews.com was based on a school's total score in these two ranking indicators: average six-year graduation and average first-year retention rates.

Faculty Resources (20 percent)

Research shows the greater access students have to quality instructors, the more engaged they will be in class and the more they will learn and likely graduate. U.S. News uses five factors from the 2017-2018 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction: class size, faculty salary, faculty with the highest degree in their fields, student-faculty ratio and proportion of faculty who are full time.

- **Class size** is the most highly weighted faculty resource measure, at 8 percent. Schools score better the greater their proportions of smaller classes. Schools receive the most credit in this index for the proportion of their fall 2017 term undergraduate classes with fewer than 20 students. Classes with 20 to 29 students score second highest, 30 to 39 students third highest and 40 to 49 students fourth highest. Classes that have 50 or more students receive no credit.
- **Faculty salary** is weighted at 7 percent and is the average faculty pay, plus benefits, during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic years, adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living using indexes from the consulting firm Runzheimer International.
- U.S. News also factors the **proportion of full-time faculty with the highest degree in their fields** (3 percent), **student-faculty ratio** (1 percent) and the **proportion of faculty who are full time** (1 percent).

Expert Opinion (Academic Reputation) (20 percent, down from 22.5 percent in 2018)

We survey top academics – presidents, provosts and deans of admissions – asking them to rate the academic quality of peer institutions with which they are familiar on a scale of 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). To get another set of important opinions, U.S. News also surveyed nearly 24,400 counselors at public, private and parochial high schools from all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Academic reputation matters because it factors things that cannot easily be captured elsewhere. For example, an institution known for having innovative approaches to teaching may perform especially well on this indicator, whereas a school struggling to keep its accreditation will likely perform poorly.

- The **peer assessment** survey averages results from spring 2017 and 2018. It is weighted at 15 percent for National Universities. Of the 4,589 academics who were sent questionnaires, 35.5 percent responded (down from the 40.4 percent response rate in spring 2017).
- The **high school counselor assessment** survey averages results from spring 2016, 2017 and 2018. It is weighted at 5 percent (down from 7.5 percent in 2018) and only applies toward National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges. For the high school counselor survey, approximately half of the high school counselors (12,200) were asked to rate the schools in the National Universities ranking category and the other half were asked to rate schools in the National Liberal Arts category.

Financial Resources (10 percent)

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

Student Excellence (10 percent, down from 12.5 percent in 2018)

A school's academic atmosphere is influenced by the selectivity of its admissions. 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. New for 2019, acceptance rate (1.25 percent in last year's ranking) has been completely removed from the ranking calculations to make room for the new social mobility indicators.

Also, we reduced the weight of the two remaining student excellence factors assessing the fall 2017 entering class – standardized tests and high school class standing.

Standardized tests: U.S. News factors admissions test scores for all enrollees who took the mathematics and evidence-based reading and writing portions of the SAT and the composite ACT. The SAT scores used in this year's rankings and published on usnews.com are for the new SAT test administered starting March 2016. We weighted standardized tests at 7.75 percent, down from 8.125 percent in 2018.

High school class standing: U.S. News incorporates the proportion of enrolled first-year students at National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges who graduated in the top 10 percent of their high school classes. For Regional Universities and Regional Colleges, we used the proportion of those who graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes. We weighted this at 2.25 percent, down from 3.125 percent in 2018.

Alumni Giving (5 percent)

This is 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 post-graduate engagement.