

U.S. News & World Report 2022 Best Colleges Rankings

Appendix B: Methodology

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Expert Opinion (academic reputation)	20%	Peer assessment survey	20%
Outcomes (graduation/retention)	40%	Average six-year graduation rate	17.6%
		Average freshman retention rate	4.4%
		Graduation Rate Performance	8%
		Social Mobility (Pell)	5%
		Graduate Indebtedness	5%
Faculty resources (AY 2020-21)	20%	Class size index	8%
		Faculty compensation	7%
		Percent faculty with terminal degree in their field	3%
		Percent faculty that is full time	1%
		Student/faculty ratio	1%
Student Excellence (Selectivity) (Fall 2020 entering class)	7%	Math and evidence-based reading and writing portions of the SAT and the composite ACT scores	5%
		High school class standing in top 10%	2%
Financial Resources	10%	Financial resources per student	10%
Alumni Giving	3%	Average alumni giving rate	3%

Outcomes (40%)

Forty percent of a school's rank comes from outcomes. Among them, average graduation and retention rates combine to be the most heavily weighted factor in our rankings, at 22%, because degree completion is necessary to receive the full benefits of undergraduate study from employers and graduate schools. Other outcome measures are graduation rate performance (8%), social mobility (5%) and graduate indebtedness (5%).

Graduation and retention rates: This has two components.

- A four-year rolling average of the proportion of each entering class (fall 2011-fall 2014) earning a degree in six years or less (17.6%).
- A four-year rolling average of the proportion of first-year entering students (fall 2016-fall 2019) who returned the following fall (4.4%).

Graduation rate performance: We compared each college's actual six-year graduation rate with what we predicted for its fall 2013 and 2014 entering class. The predicted rates were modeled from factors including admissions data, the proportion of undergraduates who were awarded Pell Grants, school financial resources, the proportion of federal financial aid recipients who are first-generation college students, and National Universities' math and science orientations. We divided each school's actual graduation rate by its predicted rate and took a two-year average of the quotients for use in the rankings.

Social mobility: This indicator measures how well schools graduated students who received federal Pell Grants. Students receiving these grants typically come from households whose family incomes are less than \$50,000 annually, with most money going to students with total family incomes below \$20,000. For the third consecutive year, U.S. News published a distinct social mobility ranking for all ranked schools. The social mobility ranking was computed by aggregating the two ranking factors assessing graduation rates of Pell-awarded students.

- **Pell Grant graduation rates** are the six-year graduation rates of Pell Grant students adjusted to give much more credit to schools with larger Pell student proportions. This is computed as a two-year rolling average.
- **Pell Grant graduation rate performance** is the factor that compares each school's six-year graduation rate among Pell recipients with its six-year graduation rate among non-Pell recipients by dividing the former into the latter, then adjusting to give much more credit to schools with larger Pell student proportions. The higher a school's Pell graduation rate relative to its non-Pell graduation rate up to the rates being equal, the better it scores. This, too, is computed as a two-year rolling average.

Graduate indebtedness: Affordability of college and the value of that degree after graduation – in terms of being able to earn enough money to make the loan payments – are prime concerns of prospective students and their families. Consequently, we assessed two measures of graduate indebtedness totaling 5% of each school's overall score..

- **Graduate indebtedness total:** (weighted 3%) assesses each school's average accumulated federal loan debt among its 2019 and 2020 bachelor's degree graduating classes by comparing it to the median debt amount among ranked schools.
- **Graduate indebtedness proportion:** (weighted 2%) is the percentage of graduates from the 2019 and 2020 bachelor's degree graduating classes who borrowed federal

loans. This ranking factor credits schools for meeting the full financial need without loans of their undergraduates (who would not be included in the graduate indebtedness total cohort) by comparing the proportions who borrowed to the median proportion among ranked schools.

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 be satisfied with their instructors. U.S. News uses five factors from the 2020-2021 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction: class size (8%), faculty salary (7%), faculty with the highest degree in their fields (3%), student-faculty ratio (1%) and proportion of faculty who are full time (1%).

- **Class size** is the most highly weighted faculty resource measure, at 8%. Schools score better with greater proportions of smaller classes for fall 2020. Schools have always been instructed to exclude classes taught fully online from this reporting, but pertaining to fall 2020 were instructed to include classes designed for in-person instruction, even if they were temporarily taught online because of the coronavirus. To down weight the influence of an irregular year due to the pandemic, schools' scores on the fall 2020 data were averaged against their scores from fall 2019 data – the first time U.S. News scored this ranking factor using a two-year average.
- **Faculty salary** is weighted at 7% and includes the average full-time faculty salaries for assistant, associate and full-time professors for 2020-2021, based on definitions from the American Association of University Professors. Salary data was once again adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living using the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities indexes and was based on regional prices indexes published in December 2020. We returned to calculating average faculty salary as a two-year average because this is the second rankings edition to use the latest AAUP definitions during data collection.

Expert Opinion (20 percent)

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.

We take a two-year weighted average of ratings from top academics – presidents, provosts and deans of admissions – who rate the academic quality of peer institutions with which they are familiar on a scale of 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). U.S. News collected the data by administering peer assessment surveys in spring and summer 2021. Of the 4,741 academics who were sent questionnaires on the overall rankings in 2021, 34.1% responded – just shy of the 36.4% response rate in 2020.

Financial Resources (10 percent)

Generous per-student spending indicates a college can offer a 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 2019 and 2020 fiscal years. Expenditures were compared with fall 2018 and fall 2019 full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate enrollment, respectively.

Student Excellence (7 percent)

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. This weighting has been reduced from 10% previously.

- **Standardized tests:** U.S. News factors average test scores for all enrollees who took the mathematics and evidence-based reading and writing portions of the SAT and the composite ACT in fall 2020. Both SATs and ACTs were converted to their 0-100 test taker percentile distributions and weighted based on the proportions of new entrants submitting each exam. For example, if a school had two-thirds of its test takers submitting ACT scores and one-third submitting SAT scores, its ACT scores

Schools sometimes fail to report SAT and ACT scores for students in these categories: athletes, international students, minority students, legacies, those admitted by special arrangement and those who started in the summer term. For any school that did not report all scores or that declined to say whether all scores were reported, U.S. News reduced its combined SAT/ACT percentile distribution value used in the ranking model by 15%.

A change for the 2022 edition – if the combined percentage of the fall 2020 entering class submitting test scores was less than 50% of all new entrants, its combined SAT/ACT percentile distribution value used in the rankings was discounted by 15%. In previous editions, the threshold was 75% of new entrants. The change was made to reflect the growth of test-optional policies through the 2019 calendar year and the fact that the coronavirus impacted the fall 2020 admission process at many schools.

- **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% of their high school classes, and for Regional Universities and Regional Colleges, the proportion who graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes. This contributes 2% toward schools' overall scores.

Alumni Giving (3 percent)

This is the average percentage of living alumni with bachelor's degrees who gave to their school during 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. Giving measures student satisfaction and post-graduate engagement.