



September 29, 2016

The Honorable Christopher A. Coons
United States Senate
127A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Coons:

I appreciate you reaching out about the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges rankings. We share your dedication to helping all students access accurate information about colleges and universities.

For over 30 years, U.S. News, has been committed to making higher education data more transparent for prospective students and their parents. Robert Morse, the leader of the U.S. News Data group, has played a critical role in the standardization of higher education data and definitions for both universities and the U.S. federal government, and is often turned to by government leaders such as yourself – including representatives from the White House, the Department of Education and Congress – for input on how to best assess our institutions of higher learning for the benefit of students. In his 30+ years with U.S. News, he has closely studied the issue of access, affordability and diversity in higher education.

We agree that understanding the extent to which colleges and universities admit low-income students is critical. This is why U.S. News & World Report does take into account the percentage of undergraduates receiving Pell Grants which are most often given to undergraduates with family incomes of less than \$20,000 as a key component of the graduation rate performance calculation. This is to ensure that colleges and universities are not penalized for accepting low-income students. U.S. News also provides detailed information for students and their families on [Economic Diversity](#) and [Ethnic Diversity](#) at colleges and universities in separate tables.

The rankings also do not penalize schools who try to innovate with new admissions criteria. The U.S. News methodology reflects the current higher education landscape and what outside experts, including admissions officers, view as indicators of academic quality. Currently, the vast majority of U.S. colleges continue to believe that the SAT/ACT scores are an indicator of likely student success in college. As a result, test scores are still required and play a key part of admissions decisions. However, it is worth noting that the SAT/ACT are not the most heavily weighted factors in the Best Colleges methodology. They only account for 8.125 percent. For comparison, outcome measurements, such as graduation rates and retention rates, account for 30 percent of the U.S. News rankings and are the most heavily weighted factors.

Further, U.S. News does not penalize schools that offer its applicants the test optional choice. These schools are included in our rankings, just like everyone else. We do not think test-optional should equate with low-income. Schools generally go test optional because they are facing a shrinking applicant pool. In some cases they may be taking less-qualified students, which can lower their graduation rates. Taking less-qualified students could indeed penalize them in the rankings, but appropriately so, as it would reflect diminished academic quality.

Schools that do not use test scores in their admission process are listed as “unranked.” In the U.S. News rankings being “unranked” is not a penalty. It means that we do not have enough key data to rank them in comparison to other schools.

The notion that we promote an “arms race” is misguided, in that we only give credit for spending on academic resources, not “amenities.” We think that schools with more academic resources have an advantage over those with less.

On price, we know that rankings produced by other publishers place a high value on their estimates of low prices. In our view, the results of those rankings are eccentric and do not reasonably measure overall academic excellence. U.S. News provides a wealth of information on affordability and the true cost of attending a university. In addition to our robust editorial content on paying for college, we have rankings of the Best Value Schools and lists of those that graduate their students with the Least and Most Amount of Debt.

We believe that the issue of how much merit aid a school grants should be left to the discretion of the school. Using financial incentives to recruit better students seems to us an entirely legitimate way for schools to improve.

I hope this addresses your questions and concerns. U.S. News evaluates colleges and universities using the best available, valid data and agreed upon measures of academic quality. We are confident in the accuracy and value of our rankings. Our job is to help students and parents understand all of their higher education options. And while we appreciate that we have an influence on the behavior of some schools, we don’t believe it is our role as journalists to induce them to reengineer their priorities.

I’m happy to discuss any of these issues with you on an informal basis at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Brian Kelly

Editor and Chief Content Officer, U.S. News & World Report