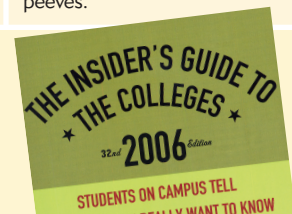
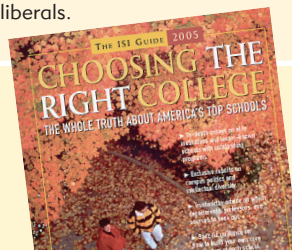
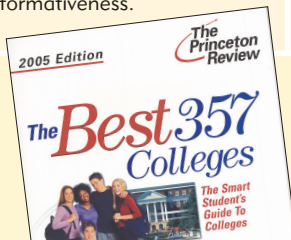


GUIDE TO THE GUIDES In 1979 the education expert Edward Fiske warned in these pages of a “promotional and marketing mentality” in the college-admissions process. Today his Fiske Guide to Colleges, one of the first to grade schools nationwide, fights for shelf space with a raft of competing rankings—a selection of which are evaluated here.

| TITLE | The Best 357 Colleges <i>Princeton Review</i> | Choosing the Right College <i>Intercollegiate Studies Institute</i> | America's Best Colleges <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> | The Insider's Guide to the Colleges 2006 <i>Yale Daily News</i> |
|-------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| ANGLE | The Margaret Mead of the dorm room. Wide-ranging and dishy descriptions of both academics and day-to-day life on campus: the quality of cafeteria food; the availability of parties, booze, and drugs; and the happiness level of the student body. | Bill Buckley without the wit. The emphasis is on “right”; it’s an “absolutely prejudiced” (and long-winded) guide for students who prefer their academic canons and administration buildings unmolested. | The 800-pound gorilla. It has made itself the arbiter of higher education’s pecking order by sorting 1,400 schools into tiers and rankings based on a single ostensibly comprehensive formula. | The Ivy League lowdown. A bunch of ink-stained Elis get dirt on academics, campus environment, and the social scene from their peers at other schools, and offer a perspective unfiltered by grown-ups. |
| TONE | ENCYCLOPEDIA. Ratings of a school’s quality of life and most distinctive features lead into a short essay that breaks down academics, student life, and the makeup of the student body. The often provocative quotations offer such nitty-gritty details as whether a school is cliquy and how much people cheat. | HISTORY TEXTBOOK. This guide has the highest page-to-college ratio of all; a long narrative history of each school (“In 1833 Alsatian pastor John Fredrick Oberlin sent two Yankee ministers west to found a college ...”) offers every detail on professors, campus politics, and courses about dead white males that a conservative might want. | FINANCIAL PAGES. A delight for those who dream in spreadsheets, this guide consists of page after page of eye-glazing data, and lacks the details that bring a school to life. (It does, however, offer a long essay on how to game every part of the admissions process, from test prep to financial aid.) | GOSSIP SHEET. Offers an unvarnished view of college life, through snarky anonymous quotations: Caltech’s curriculum is “like drinking from a firehose”; at Case “a large portion of guys are already in serious relationships with their video game consoles.” |
| HOW SCHOOLS ARE RANKED | Sixty-four lists rank schools by academics, campus politics, demographics, extracurriculars, and quality of life (and include such subcategories as “Dorms Like Palaces” and “Reefer Madness”). | There’s no explicit ranking, but descriptions tend to fall into one of two categories: left-leaning or just right. | In addition to the multi-tiered caste system that ranks every school, <i>U.S. News</i> provides more than 150 category-specific rankings: “best value” southern universities, top schools for undergraduate aerospace-engineering, etc. | The editors create “Insider’s Top-Ten Lists,” such as “Schools That Attract Famous Students” and “Schools With the Rowdiest Parties.” |
| WHO DOES THE RANKING | A panel of “50 independent educational consultants from throughout the nation” helps pick the best schools; the rankings by category are compiled from anonymous student surveys. | A staff of researchers, consultants, and contributing editors do the ranking; alums and ISI staffers write the essays on individual schools. | Schools report fifteen “indicators of academic quality”—a combination of hard data (retention rate, money spent on faculty, etc.) and a survey in which administrators grade their competitors. | The staff of the <i>Yale Daily News</i> chats up more than a hundred “friends [and] friends of friends” and randomly selected students at the profiled schools each year. |
| MOST HELPFUL FOR ... | ... students who want expert opinion and insider gossip. | ... intellectually minded members of the vast right-wing conspiracy. | ... status-hungry meritocrats. | ... applicants who put a premium on student life (and are willing to trust Yalies). |
| BEST FEATURE | COMPREHENSIVENESS. The two-page descriptions provide a quick but complete introduction to each school; the format makes side-by-side comparisons a snap. | OBSESSIVE DETAIL. Conservatives who want the full dossier on a college will be able to find out how it weathered every battle in the culture wars. | HARD DATA. Though <i>U.S. News</i> -bashing has become a beloved higher-education pastime, the magazine can’t be beat for objective data about how schools stack up. | STRAIGHT TALK. The guide feels as intimate as a late-night chat in a dorm room, and even offers a glossary of terms such as “beer goggles” and “townie.” |
| WORST FEATURE | A BIT DRAB? The grayish paper could use an upgrade, but that’s a quibble. This guide doesn’t lack much in the way of charm, ease of use, or informativeness. | MISLEADING COVER. Though conservative to its core, the guide doesn’t telegraph its politics. A warning label might be in order for unwary liberals. | REDUCTIVENESS. Though the guide satisfies the “best of” fetish, it offers only numbers, not the details that actually determine how happy a student will be. | HE SAID, SHE SAID. The heavily anecdotal style sometimes leads to a <i>Rashomon</i> problem: the entries can be inconsistent and overly influenced by individual students’ pet peeves. |





50 Best Colleges for African Americans 2004
Black Enterprise magazine

The *U.S. News* of the black bourgeoisie. This guide essentially retools the leading formula from an African-American angle, adding how-to articles on succeeding at college and landing a corporate job.

JUST THE FACTS. The amount of information is paltry: a school's ranking for the past two years plus the data behind it. (Students who want a fleshed-out view should track down the out-of-print *DayStar Guide to Colleges for African American Students* [2000], written by the researcher behind this guide.)

The guide considers "large or well-known" schools and those with an African-American enrollment of at least three percent (sorry, Colby) and ranks them based on academics, social life, and the number of black students who enroll and graduate.

The *DayStar* ranking is based on black enrollment and graduation rates, and survey results from 1,855 black administrators rating the quality of academic and social life for blacks at each school.

... upwardly mobile African-Americans.

TIGHT FOCUS. No other guide assembles comprehensive measures of how well colleges integrate and educate black students.

ONE-TRICK PONY. Those looking for a more detailed picture of the different schools will be disappointed, and the advice is strictly for corporate climbers ("You don't want to become a social butterfly to the detriment of your schoolwork").

Gay Guide to Colleges 2004
Out magazine

Queer eye for the gay teen. With flamboyance and wit, *Out* cuts straight to what matters most (musical theater and beefcake).

DIRTY MINDS. The editors never met a double entendre they didn't like. (The entry for Yale—"Best Campus for Rich and Powerful Gays"—begins, "Whether you're into ego-stroking your ivory tower or cockily hobnobbing with WASPs in dominant positions ...")

Editors pick a top school for each of fourteen categories, from "Hottest Gay Students" (UC Berkeley) to "Campus With the Most Future Fashion Dictators" (Parsons School of Design).

A reporter on the college beat gets the inside scoop on gay campus life. The ranking methods behind, say, "Largest Gay Endowment" are, unsurprisingly, somewhat unscientific.

... Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.

SENSE OF HUMOR. For the frazzled, *Out* is a nice antidote to application anxiety. The list of "Sixteen Sweet, Sweet (Real) Gay-Sounding College Mascots" is worth the cover price alone.

SHALLOWNESS. This guide's bitchy charm is also its tragic flaw. Gay students curious about how they will fare in day-to-day life on campus will probably want to look elsewhere.

As a rankings holdout Reed is free to appoint talented young teacher-scholars, even if they are still completing their dissertations, without worrying about impairing the college's "proportion of professors with the highest degree in their fields" (a significant component of the *U.S. News* "faculty resources" index). We are also free to set academic policy without worrying about optimizing a "class size" ranking. (*U.S. News* gives positive weight to the percentage of classes with fewer than twenty students, and negative weight to the percentage with more than fifty.) Reed's average class size is, to be sure, very small (just below fourteen), reflecting agreement with the educational philosophy implicit in the *U.S. News* formula. But unlike many of our rankings-sensitive peers, we feel no pressure to use part-time adjunct faculty or teaching assistants as an inexpensive but educationally dubious technique for even further increasing the percentage of small classes. Conversely, we can embrace the educational benefits of combining large lectures with small laboratory sessions in some disciplines.

What lesson can be derived from the fact that Reed continues to thrive despite its refusal to cooperate with the *U.S. News* rankings? Some of my peers speculate that Reed's success has little application to their schools. Only a college as iconoclastic and distinctive as Reed, they argue, could pursue such a strategy and survive. I disagree. To me, our success says something important about the market for higher education as well as about Reed College. Participants in the higher-education marketplace are still looking primarily for academic integrity and quality, not the superficial prestige conferred by commercial rankings. They understand that higher education is not a mass-produced commodity but an artisan-produced, interactive, and individually tailored service of remarkable complexity. Trying to rank institutions of higher education is a little like trying to rank religions or philosophies. The entire enterprise is flawed, not only in detail but also in conception. This is not to say that schools should not be held accountable. Like its peers, Reed submits reams of data to the National Center for Education Statistics, to our accrediting agency, and to a consortium of commercial college guidebooks. The college publishes large amounts of information and descriptive material in its literature and on its Web site. Most important, it articulates its academic requirements in exquisite detail, and focuses on those measures of institutional performance that are most germane to its mission. At Reed these measures include the quality of senior theses, the amount of student research activity, the percent of graduates earning Ph.D.s, and the number of competitive prizes and awards received by students and graduates.

Before I came to Reed, I thought I understood two things about college rankings: that they were terrible, and that they were irresistible. I have since learned that I was wrong about one of them. ▣

Colin Diver is the president of Reed College.

—CHANNING JOSEPH and CATHERINE PAYNE