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mitation is the highest form of flattery, then *US News & World Report* should be blushing. Despite harsh criticism from some of the same colleges that use their

positions in the rankings as recruiting tools, the 2.1-million-circulation national newsmagazine's annual listing of America's top universities and liberal arts colleges has spawned a proliferation of school guides across a wide range of magazines. This has happened despite the fact that *US News* claims it gets no immediate sales boost from publishing its famous (or is it infamous?) guide.

Why so many copycats, then?

Well, since its beginning in 1983, the *US News* "America's Best Colleges" guide has gained a reputation for being the definitive ranking students use to figure out where to spend the next four years — and colleges use to recruit top students. The ranking formula has helped the magazine promote its brand and attract long-term readers and advertisers.

To create its rankings, *US News* starts by assigning schools to categories: national universities, liberal arts colleges, best universities, master's, best comprehensive colleges, bachelor's (by region). It then gathers data on indicators of academic quality from each school: peer assessment, graduation and retention rate, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, and alumni giving. Each factor is then assigned a weight, and after calculating a total weighted score for each school, *US News* then ranks the colleges

from highest to lowest within their predetermined categories.

Some *US News* copycats have taken that basic ranking formula and customized it for the specific interests of their own readers; others have created unique, even tongue-in-cheek, listings that seem to poke fun at the top magazine's stodgy formula. But in each case, the new school guides have taken inspiration from the success and prestige of the *US News* formula and created something more specialized and more meaningful for their readers — from *New Mobility* magazine's top 10 disability-friendly US colleges to *Newsweek's* unranked list of "America's 25 hot schools."

Black Enterprise is just one of the magazines that have tinkered with the *US News* formula to create a ranking for its readers. Since 1999, *Black Enterprise* has published a biannual ranking of the top 50 colleges for African Americans. (Morehouse College nabbed the top spot in the October 2004 guide.) The schools are categorized using the same classification protocol developed by *US News*, but, to add a twist to its list, *Black Enterprise* looks at the colleges' five-year graduation rates for

African Americans and the schools' percentages of African-American undergraduate students. According to Tanisha A. Sykes, the magazine's consumer affairs editor, it also looks at their academic and social environments — students' grades and the presence of guidance counselors, academic advisers, peer groups, fraternities, sororities, student unions, and school newspapers.

The money-savvy *BusinessWeek* is another example of a magazine that created a formula specifically designed for its readers. Every other year since 1988, *BusinessWeek* has ranked the top master's in business administration programs. The publication uses surveys of corporate recruiters and B-school graduates to rank the top 30 national and top 10 international MBA programs. In 2002, the magazine started to measure each school's intellectual capital by tallying the number of articles faculty members have published in academic journals and adding points if professors' books were reviewed in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*,

and *BusinessWeek*. Strong performance in those areas paid off for Northwestern University, which beat the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania for the highest ranking in the October 2004 guide.

But it isn't just the corporate elite on the college guide bandwagon. Since 1993, the leftist, muckraking *Mother Jones* magazine has provided an annual roundup of the top 10 activist campuses. Activists at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez put the school at the top of *Mojos*' roundup in the September/October 2004 issue. Drawing on informa-

tion from campus publications, local newspapers, and newswires, as well as original reporting, *Mother Jones* listed schools where students staged camp-ins, marches, and protests, or took other actions to change campus policies. The listing reflects "what is going on in terms of politics, activism, and issues important to students on campuses," said Dave Gilson, its research editor.

New Mobility's ranking of disability-friendly colleges came out in 1998, with the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana at the top, but it still is generating buzz. All those years ago, *New Mobility* sent a questionnaire to disability-resource-office directors at 50 public universities and colleges selected from the top tier of the *US News* rankings. Using that information, *New Mobility* created easy-to-read charts that listed services such as wheelchair rental and repair, adaptive computers, and availability of note-takers. *New Mobility* says it may come out with a new ranking if it can find the money and the right person to spearhead the project, said Jean Dobbs, editorial director.

One of *US News's* direct competitors, *Newsweek*, rolled out a listing of

By Channing Joseph & Catherine Payne

Making the Grade

Inside the flattery academy of college rankings

Guides	Stuffed with Details	Can't Put It Down	Full Practical Info	Fresh Info	Looks Cool
Black Enterprise			✓	✓	✓
New Mobility	✓		✓		
Newsweek				✓	
Out		✓			✓
US News & World Report	✓		✓	✓	

America's hot schools. Instead of ranking colleges by academic excellence, *Newsweek* named the top schools in various categories, such as

the "hottest [school] for political junkies" (George Washington University) and "hottest [school] for city haters" (Cornell University).

Out magazine featured a September 2004 gay guide to colleges. In its listing of 15 schools, *Out* named Brown University the best school for "theater queens" and "art fags," the University of Virginia the best campus to rush frats, the University of Texas at Austin the best place to meet Mr. Right, and the Parsons School of Design the college with the most future fashion dictators.

"We decided that we couldn't and shouldn't do the *US News & World Report* ranking," said Bruce Shenitz, executive editor of *Out* magazine, adding that his magazine didn't have the resources to do the data crunching and wanted to do something of interest to gay readers. The idea was to have a "fun piece to provide a way to look at how gay life is lived on campus."

Still, the *US News* ranking is the one that colleges and students pay the most attention to. Harvard University, ranked No. 1 by *US News* in the 2005 guide, admits that it pays some attention to the listing (as you might expect). The guide provides useful data in the charts, said Marlyn McGrath Lewis, admissions director at Harvard. But, she said, the ranking is misleading because it is based on an assumption that schools can be ranked by an objective comparison of excellence. Unsurprisingly, New School University, which is listed as No. 120 in *US News*, says it does not let the rankings dictate its policies. The overall ranking does not reflect the unique character of the various schools, said Elizabeth Ross, New School associate provost.

Wesleyan University admissions officers have *US News* in the back of their minds, said Jacques Steinberg, a *New York Times* reporter who wrote the book "The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College." He said that they kept an eye on the median SAT score, which is a factor in the student selectivity rating in the *US News* ranking, among other things. "The dean or deputy would say, 'We're running ahead of last year's class, we can take some risks; or we're running a little behind, so let's be careful. They never say it's because of *US News*, but it's implicit. It's one of the few things in that ranking they can control.'"

College administrators care about the ranking because of alumni donations, which are weighed in the *US News* formula, and school pride. "Alumni don't like to open up *US News* and see that their college fell a step," Steinberg said.

"A case can be made that [the rankings] are of dubious value to a kid trying to make a decision about a college," Steinberg added.

"Colleges know that, too. But these are the rules of the game."

Some people much closer to the ranking process have gone even

further in their criticism. James Fallows — former *US News* editor-in-chief who left after intense disagreements with the magazine's owner, Mort Zuckerman — said: "The *US News*-style rankings have on the whole done more harm than good to higher education. They have tempted some unsophisticated students and parents to think that, say, the No. 6-ranked school is overall 'better' than every one ranked No. 7 or below, and they have tempted some unscrupulous educators to distort their practices in hopes of moving up in the rankings," adding that colleges were as much to blame as *US News* for this practice.

Although very broad category assessments for schools could be useful to students, Fallows said, "Strict 1-through-50 numerical rankings are ridiculous, since there is no way to say whether Cal Tech is 'better' than West Point, or Smith is 'worse' than Cal-Berkeley. These institutions have different goals and attract different students, so they can be better or worse for each individual."

Robert Morse, *US News*' director of data research — the man responsible for overseeing the creation of each year's college guide since 1987 — has heard all of the opinions of colleges and education experts, and, surprisingly, even he agrees with some of it. "It's impossible to measure complex institutions," he said, recalling some of the criticisms leveled against his life's work by some schools. "It's absolutely true. There are many important things that can't be measured quantitatively."

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But, Morse said, just because he and his eight-person staff of data researchers can't quantify things like teaching quality and student engagement based on colleges' responses to surveys, that doesn't mean the annual ranking is not a worthwhile pursuit, as long as people realize its limitations.

Morse for that matter, doesn't mind being copied. "Each of the other rankings has its own separate methodology, which is different," he added, "and is generally aiming to reach a more specific audience than *US News*. The more rankings, the better." *

NYRM's Guide to School Guides

- Best guide for prep-school, Ivy League aspirants who use "summer" as a verb: *US News*
- Best guide for Paris Hilton think-alikes who want to marry the next Donald Trump: *BusinessWeek*
- Best guide for individualists (read "egotists") who want their classmates to be their doppelgängers: *Newsweek*
- Best guide for clove-smoking, PETA-card-carrying protest-lovers: *Mother Jones*
- Best guide for people with totally empty closets: *Out*