



RANKINGS STRESS COLLEGE BOUND STUDENTS

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Many high school seniors applying to college feel pressure to attend the nation's top schools, making an already stressful process even more difficult.

A survey conducted by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling found that the stress level among high school seniors applying to college was higher for students in the class of 2002 than it had been in previous years-- part of a general trend.

"In visits with students and parents I hear a lot of them say that the stress levels are higher," said Dean of Admission at University of Virginia John Blackburn, who has worked at the university for 24 years.

The reasons why students are feeling a greater need to compete may be vague, but many have looked to the emphasis on ranking as a major part of the problem.

The 'Right' School

"A lot of guidance counselors say that parents come in and say that I want my child to go to any of the top 25 universities," Blackburn said.

Thirty percent of the 772 guidance counselors surveyed by NACAC reported that the increase in stress among students was largely related to "getting into the right college."

"They worry about attending a school with a good name – name on your sweatshirt syndrome," Judith Hingle, director of professional development at NACAC, said.

Kyle Strayer, a 17-year-old student in the top percentage of his class at Fairview High School in Erie, Pa., has applied early decision to Wake Forest University and is anxiously waiting to find out if he was accepted.

"There is a lot of pressure. I know that I want to go to the best school that offers the best education for me," Strayer said.

In the News

The ranking frenzy is fed by the media, according to many experts.

“There is a much wider media buzz about college admissions now,” Hingle said. “When the cover of Time magazine is about the SATs then students see what a big picture they are part of, and they do not feel competitive enough.”

Magazines such as U.S. News and World Report, which has famously ranked colleges and universities since 1983, could fill in another piece of this puzzle.

"Ranking started in the early '80s and I think shortly after that started there was a greater focus by the American public on the top 25," Blackburn said.

The increased attention on rankings has added to the stress, according to Blackburn. But, he adds, the rankings are "certainly here to stay."

Critics and Supporters

U.S. News and World Report's college ranking method has changed since the first issue, but the attention it has received and the magazine's place in the college selection process has only grown.

To many, the college ranking edition of U.S. News and World Report is known as the "Swimsuit Issue," with about 2.3 million copies sold.

At a recent seminar on the campus of the University of Wisconsin Madison the director of data research at U.S. News and World Report's ranking issue, Robert Morse, responded to comments made about its methods and consequences.

Morse defended the attacks of educators who say the rankings are an insufficient measure of a university's real character, saying that the rankings perform a valuable service to students.

"Our measures are measures of academic quality," he said, according to the Madison State Journal.

The University of Wisconsin's admission director Robert Seltzer agreed that the rankings could be a good tool. He said, however, that there was too much emphasis on their importance.

"There are students who really do think there's a difference between No. 12 and No. 15," Seltzer said.

Paul Boyer, author of "College Rankings Exposed," said that the annual U.S. News survey and other ranking guides have transformed choosing a college into a ratings game.

He said colleges are forced to spend money on "superficial changes" that will raise their rating, at the expense of real innovation in the undergraduate classroom.

For example, some universities concentrate on raising money and being more "selective" to increase their rankings.

"It's damaging at many levels and keeps getting worse every year," Boyer said.

Excitement Remains

Whether students pay attention to the ratings or not, leaving for college is still one of the most anticipated moments for many high school seniors.

"It's gonna be weird leaving a lot of my friends but at the same time it's gonna be a new experience. The whole college thing is going to be overwhelming ... but I think it's exciting," Strayer said.

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