

HIGHLIGHTS

[Potomac Incorporated](#), a leading Washington-based market and opinion research firm specializing in education issues, has released a study of university officials nationwide, shedding new light on the popular college rankings marketed by major publications such as *U.S. News & World Report* and *The Princeton Review*.

The research shows that leading administrators at undergraduate institutions and law schools across the country find the *U.S. News* rankings flawed and inaccurate, and worry that students place far too much emphasis on them. Most of the 282 undergraduate and 46 law school officials responding to the online survey decry their own schools' rankings as unfair and too low, while indicating that they apply highly subjective filters themselves as they rank their peer institutions each year.

The Princeton Review, a ranking of higher education institutions by students, fares much better in the view of these survey respondents. Compared to *U.S. News*, academic officials are far less familiar with *The Princeton Review* rankings, however.

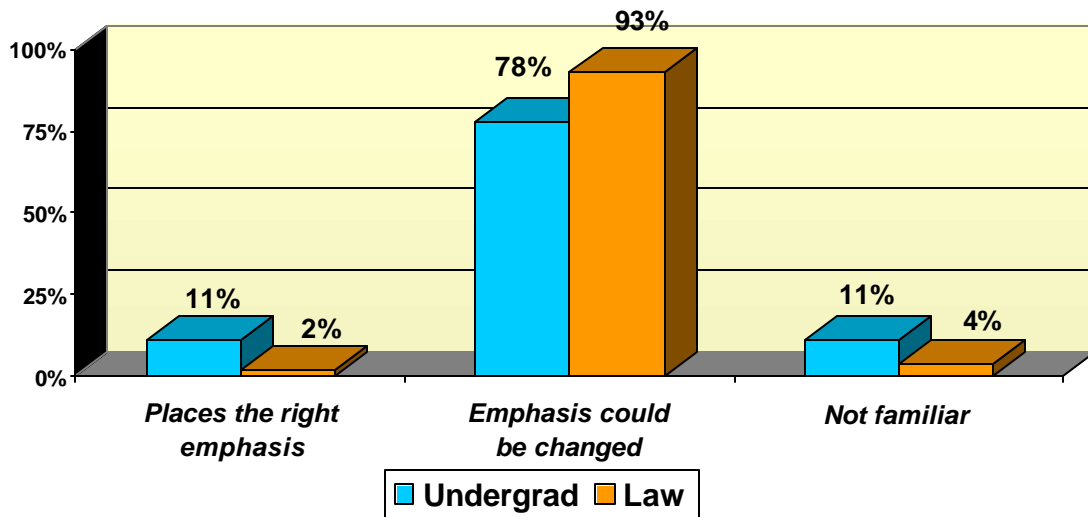
The survey was conducted in May 2003 as part of a broader national study of higher education issues. A detailed discussion of the [Research Methodology](#) is included at the end of this summary. Respondents were undergraduate presidents, provosts, and deans of admissions, mirroring the *U.S. News* respondent pool; law deans were also surveyed.

The key findings are presented below in more depth, supported by the actual tabulations from the online questionnaire. Respondents were encouraged to offer longer-form narrative comments, as well, and those that are indicative of many others are included unedited with this summary.

KEY FINDINGS

Conclusion 1: An overwhelming majority of academic officials believe the U.S. News methodology needs to be changed.

Only one in ten undergraduate officials, and a far smaller percentage of law deans, feel the U.S. News system of computing rankings “places the right emphasis on all the factors that make up a college or university’s/law school’s profile.”



“Do you think the methodology U.S. News uses to create its rankings places the right emphasis on all the factors that make up a college or university’s/law school’s profile?”

These numbers are striking, and pinpoint widespread dissatisfaction with the rankings system employed by the publication. Dissatisfied respondents were invited to comment at length on specific areas where the methodology could be improved – indicating both where the current system places too much emphasis, and where it places too little.

These comments were typical of those offered by peers. First, a predominant theme was the inaccuracy of rankings that may be based on loose measures of institutional reputation, which is seen as highly subjective, ill-informed, and favoring the better-known schools:

SUBJECTIVE INFORMAL RATINGS BY UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS--TOO LARGE A PERCENTAGE IS PLACED ON THIS ASPECT OF THE RATINGS WHICH GIVES THE APPEARANCE OF A POPULARITY CONTEST AND NOT A TRUE MEASURE OF ACADEMIC QUALITY BASED ON STUDENT LEARNING.

MOST SCHOOLS HAD NO REPUTATION UNTIL U.S. NEWS CREATED ONE FOR THEM. BUT THE REPUTATION IS BASED ON VIRTUALLY NO INFORMATION. IMAGINE IF THE ACADEMY AWARD FOR THE BEST PICTURE WAS HANDED OUT BASED ON A POLL OF PEOPLE WHO HAD NOT SEEN ANY OF THE MOVIES. IMAGINE IF A MAGAZINE RANKED RESTAURANTS BASED ON A POLL OF PEOPLE WHO HAD NOT EATEN AT ANY OF THE RESTAURANTS. WE WOULD LAUGH AT THE ABSURDITY. BUT THIS IS WHAT U.S. NEWS DOES.

AT BEST, RATERS CAN KNOW ONLY A HANDFUL OF INSTITUTIONS SUFFICIENTLY TO RATE THEIR QUALITY. SO WHAT THEY'RE DOING IN MOST CASES IS REACTING TO THE MARKETING OF INSTITUTIONS--WHICH IS OFTEN BASED ON U.S. NEWS RANKINGS. PRETTY CIRCULAR, NO?

TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON "REPUTATION," BASED ON OUT-OF-DATE, OFTEN BIASED OR SPECULATIVE OPINIONS.

THE RESPONDENTS ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT THEY CAN SKEW THE RESULTS BY REGISTERING A LOW RATING FOR A GOOD INSTITUTION. REPUTATION IS AN ELUSIVE CRITERION, AND THE CURRENT SURVEY TO DETERMINE REPUTATION IS NOT VERY EFFECTIVE.

VERY ELEMENTARY DATA ON REPUTATION, WHICH IS BASED ON OFTEN UNINFORMED OPINION FROM SENIOR OFFICERS AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. I AM ASKED ABOUT THE ACADEMIC QUALITY OF PRESTIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS, BUT I HAVE LITTLE DIRECT EVIDENCE OF THE QUALITY OF SUCH INSTITUTIONS. I AM ONLY AWARE THAT THEY CARRY A GREAT DEAL OF PRESTIGE AND NAME RECOGNITION. THAT IS NOT AN APPROPRIATE MEASURE OF QUALITY, IN MY ESTIMATION.

I MAKE IT A POLICY NOT TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONNAIRE THAT I AM SENT YEARLY. I DO NOT KNOW MOST OF THE LISTED SCHOOLS -- AND I DARE SAY THAT I AM NOT THE ONLY ONE. I FEEL THAT THE RANKINGS ARE BASED ON A "WHO DO YOU LIKE", "WHAT NAME SOUNDS GOOD", "I'VE HEARD ABOUT THIS SCHOOL BEFORE" PREFERENCE.

HERE IS THE PROBLEM. I CAN'T VALIDLY RANK THE SCHOOLS. I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT MOST OF THEM. YES, THERE ARE SOME HARD DATA AVAILABLE, BUT A LOT OF IT IS ON THINGS THAT ARE NOT IMPORTANT. IN SHORT, I HAVE THIS LIST OF 190 SCHOOLS. I KNOW NEXT TO NOTHING ABOUT MAYBE 170 OF THEM. THE DATA I HAVE AVAILABLE ARE ONLY A SMATTERING OF WHAT I WOULD WANT TO KNOW IN ORDER TO RANK THEM. AND NO ONE ELSE DOING THE RANKINGS IS IN A POSITION ANY BETTER THAN WHAT I AM IN. MY DECISION IS BASED ON NEXT TO NOTHING AND THAT IS TRUE FOR EVERYONE.

Many of the survey respondents are looking for a more outcomes-based ranking model, which looks at the product of the institution, rather than its “inputs.”

THE EMPHASIS IS ON EASY-TO-MEASURE AND EASY-TO-REPORT INPUTS AND DATA. LOST IN THE REPORTS ARE WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS TO STUDENTS IN TERMS OF VALUE ADDED AND LEARNING.

NOT ENOUGH ON THE END RESULT. WHERE DO GRADUATES GO? HOW SUCCESSFUL THEY ARE, ETC.

THE CRITERIA DO NOT LOOK AT THE ACADEMIC NATURE OF THE INSTITUTION OR WHAT HAPPENS IN THE CLASSROOMS AND LABS. THESE SHOULD BE THE MOST IMPORTANT CRITERIA OF ALL.

I THINK THE ENTIRE ENTERPRISE IS FLAWED AND DAMAGING. SO, I WOULD JUNK THE WHOLE THING. THEY WOULD NEED TO GET AT SOMETHING MUCH MORE INEFFABLE BUT IMPORTANT, THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION DELIVERED, THE QUALITY OF THINKING PRODUCED IN GRADUATES.

A large number of respondents object to any use of financial data such as alumni giving and endowment size, considering those factors as prestige or customer satisfaction measures, but not true indicators of academic excellence. These comments were typical:

THE SURVEY MOSTLY RANKS INSTITUTIONS BY WEALTH (ENDOWMENT, FACULTY PAY, ETC.) WHILE WEALTH DOES INDICATE THE CAPACITY FOR QUALITY IT DOES NOT MEASURE INSTITUTIONS ACTUAL PERFORMANCE FOR A PARTICULAR STUDENT.

THERE IS TOO MUCH EMPHASIS, IN MY OPINION, ON THE PERCENTAGE OF ALUMNI GIVING. IF ALUMNI ARE FROM AN UNDERPRIVILEGED BACKGROUND, LIKE OURS, THEN THEY WILL NOT BE AS ENTHUSIASTIC OR CAPABLE ABOUT PHILANTHROPY.

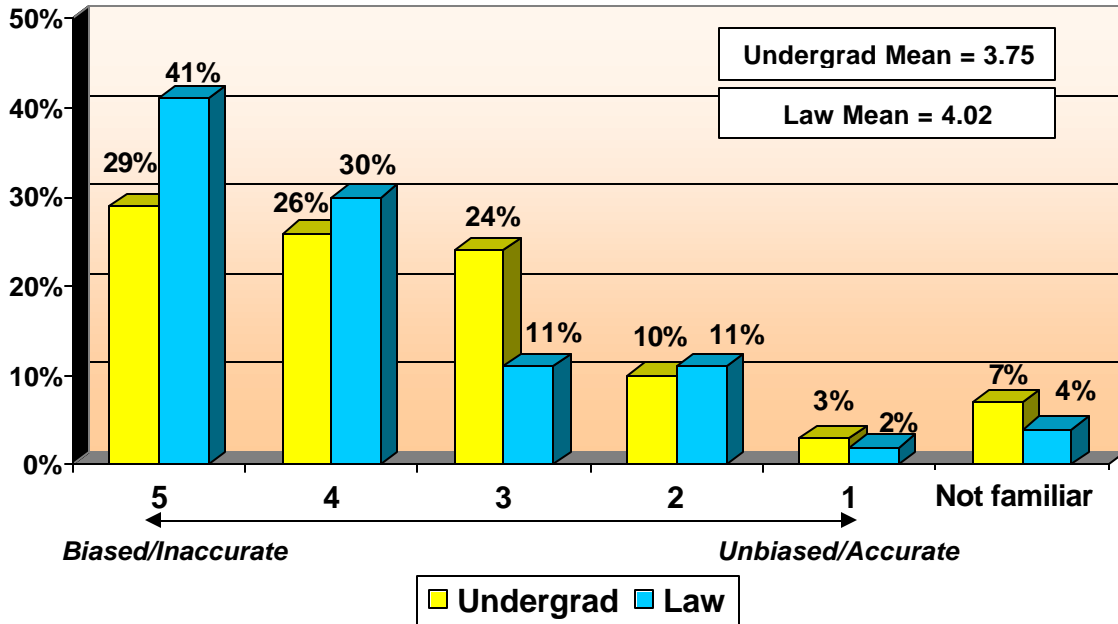
FACULTY RESOURCES AND ALUMNI GIVING--PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS ARE CLEARLY AT A DISADVANTAGE IN THESE AREAS.

Acceptance rates were widely criticized as a criterion. These two simple comments were extremely typical:

THE PERCENTAGE OF ACCEPTANCES CAN BE MANIPULATED BY INSTITUTIONS.

TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON GENERATING LOTS OF APPLICATIONS FOR SELECTIVITY PURPOSES.

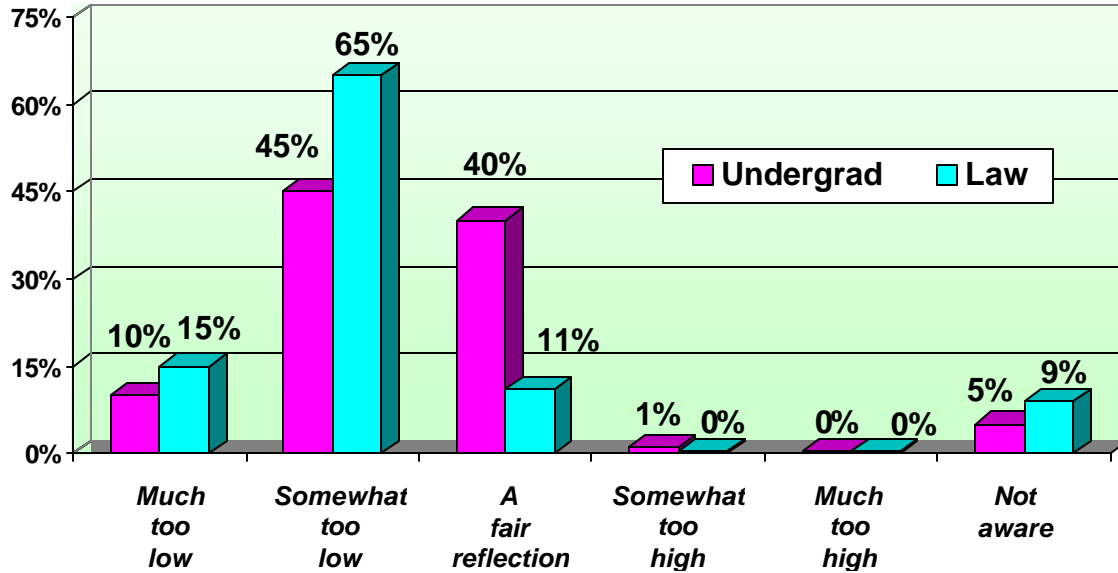
As a further indictment, a majority of survey respondents see the *U.S. News* peer ratings as “fairly biased and inaccurate.” Keeping in mind that these are the very individuals who are invited by *U.S. News* to rate their fellow institutions, 55 percent of undergraduate academic peers and 71 percent of law school peers see the peer rankings as biased and inaccurate.



“What is your impression of institutional ratings by academic peers? Are they mostly unbiased and accurate, or do you see them as fairly biased and inaccurate?”

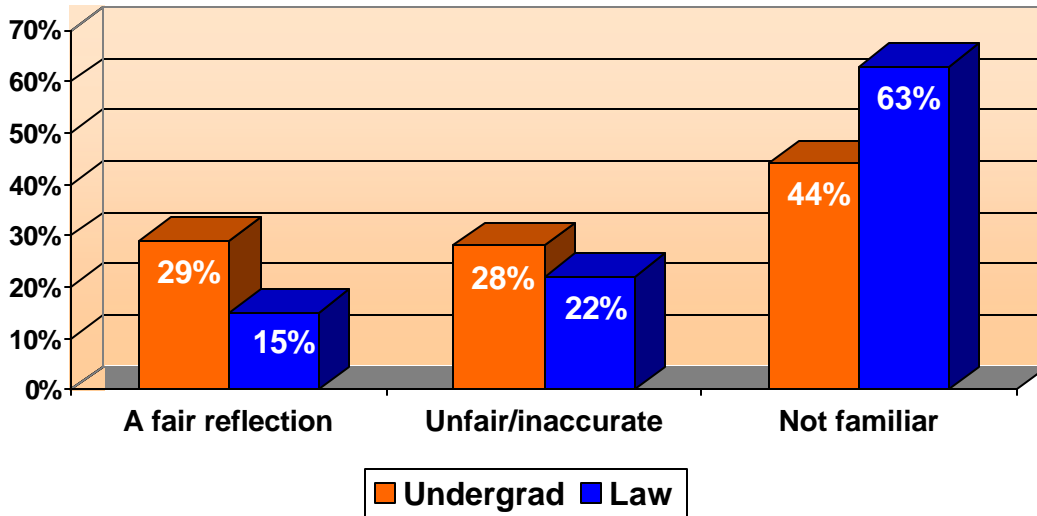
Conclusion 2: In the minds of nearly all academic officials surveyed, these methodological flaws skew their own institution's ranking too low, rather than giving them a higher-than-deserved score.

Again, the numbers are conclusive, as nearly six in ten undergraduate officials and eight in ten law deans feel their schools are ranked too low by *U.S. News*.



*“How would you characterize your institution's own standing in the U.S. News rankings?
Would you say your institution's ranking is...?”*

Perhaps *The Princeton Review* fares better in the eyes of academic administrators, though it certainly has a lower profile. Among undergraduate officials, as many say *The Princeton Review* provides “a fair reflection of your institution” as say it is “unfair or inaccurate in some ways.” Law deans are just slightly less positive about this publication’s rankings, though large numbers simply do not seem to be familiar with it at all.



“How would you characterize your institution’s own standing in the Princeton Review rankings?”

With regard to rankings by *The Princeton Review*, those respondents who feel most positive about them are likely to mention the value of a student-as-consumer rating of the institution:

THE COMMENTS ARE FROM STUDENTS ACTUALLY INVOLVED WITH THE COLLEGE NOT BY A PRESIDENT WHO PROBABLY DOES NOT REALLY KNOW HOW GOOD ANOTHER INSTITUTION MIGHT BE.

OFTEN STUDENT OPINIONS REFLECT EXPERIENCE IN THE TRENCHES.

CURRENT CONSUMERS OFFER GREAT INSIGHT INTO THE HEART AND SOUL OF AN INSTITUTION.

BECAUSE STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BELIEVE OTHER STUDENTS, NOT THE PR PEOPLE WHO WRITE THE REVIEWS.

The Princeton Review is seen by some as more independent than *U.S. News*, whose rankings are widely viewed as subject to manipulation:

THEY RESPOND TO A NEED FOR EVALUATIONS OUTSIDE OF THE PROMOTIONAL INFORMATION PRODUCED BY INDIVIDUAL INSTITUTIONS.

THE PRINCETON REVIEW DOES NOT USE A ONE-SIZE FITS ALL APPROACH AND TRIES TO RANK SCHOOLS AGAINST DIFFERENT STANDARDS. ALSO, THE PRINCETON REVIEW ACTUALLY SENT PEOPLE TO OUR SCHOOL AND THEY KNEW SOMETHING ABOUT US BEFORE THEY EVALUATED US.

Specific methodological advantages, or strengths of presentation, of *The Princeton Review's* rankings are also mentioned:

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE INSTITUTION IS MORE CENTRAL TO THE PUBLICATION'S DESIGN.

I THINK THERE'S A BROADER SCOPE OF INFORMATION PRESENTED ABOUT EACH COLLEGE THAT IS REASONABLY HELPFUL TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS.

WHILE THEY ARE NOT ALWAYS ACCURATE, THEY TEND TO PRESENT SUBJECTIVE FEATURES IN BOTH NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE CATEGORIES. SOMETIMES THEY JUST DESCRIBE COLLEGE FEATURES, ALLOWING THE STUDENT TO EVALUATE THEM.

Negative comments about *The Princeton Review*, while fewer, tend to focus on its capricious subjectivity and apparent casual handling of the facts. These comments are typical:

THE PRINCETON REVIEW APPARENTLY BELIEVES IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO BE CATCHY AND CLEVER THAN ACCURATE -- ITS INFORMATION IS WILDLY INACCURATE, AND IT REFUSES TO MAKE CORRECTIONS IN A TIMELY MANNER.

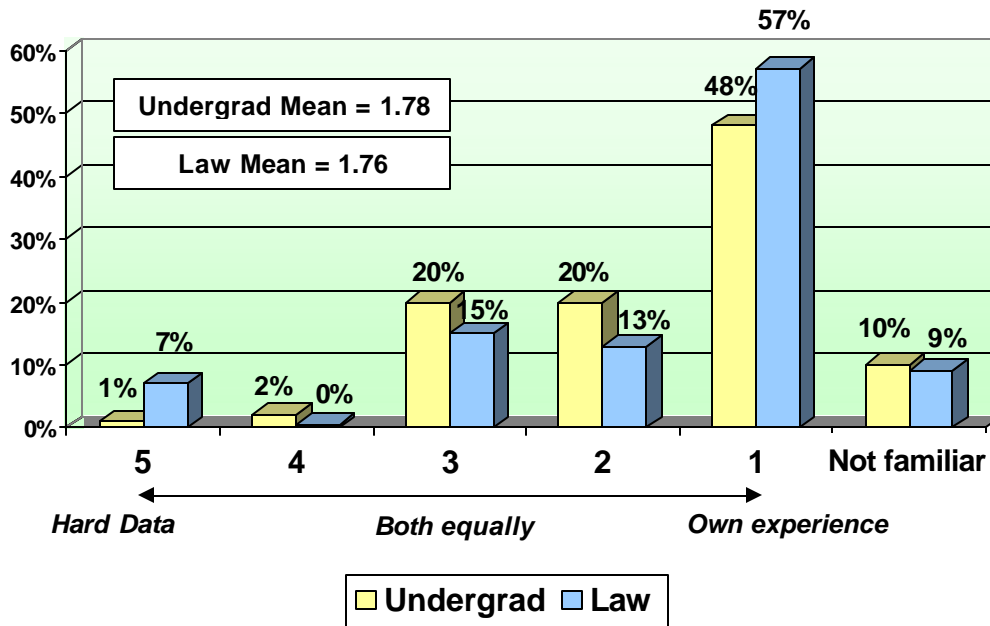
ALTHOUGH THE EFFORT TO GET AT THE REAL EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL IS POSITIVE, THE CASUAL AIR OF THE REVIEWS AND THE TENDENCY TO INCLUDE OUTDATED ANECDOTES CAN DISTORT STUDENTS' VIEWS

USING THE PRINCETON REVIEW SPECIFICALLY AS AN EXAMPLE, THESE PUBLICATIONS TEND TO CHOOSE THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS STATEMENTS, OR STATEMENTS FROM THE MOST DISENCHANTED STUDENTS TO BUILD THEIR REPORTS.

INACCURATE INFO BASED ON THE WAY IT IS COLLECTED. ONE COMMENT FROM AN UNHAPPY STUDENT BECOMES THE STATED TRUTH. NOT ENOUGH FOLLOW UP TO DETERMINE HOW ACCURATE ISOLATED COMMENT MAY BE.

Conclusion 3: When approaching the evaluation themselves, many peers say they use their own subjective opinions to rate the schools rather than relying on hard data about the academic institutions. And when it comes to hard data, peers seem to rely most on basic academic measures and least on admissions and alumni giving.

Two-thirds of both undergraduate and law school respondents said they tend to rely on their own university knowledge and experience to assign ratings, rather than seeking out hard data. The percentage who say they rely primarily on data lingers in the single digits.



“As you approach the U.S. News peer questionnaire each year, how do you approach the job of rating your peer institutions? Do you tend to rely more on your experience and knowledge of each institution, or do you depend more on hard data such as SAT/LSAT scores, acceptance rates, and student-to-faculty ratios?”

When it does come to hard data, peer reviewers seem to place the highest value on indicators of student achievement and ability. Undergraduate administrators were asked to score the importance to them personally of seven indicators included in the *U.S. News* methodology; law deans were asked to score eight.

Undergraduate

	4	3	2	1	Mean
SAT/ACT score	43%	46%	8%	1%	3.33
Graduation rate	40%	48%	9%	1%	3.29
Retention rate	41%	42%	13%	2%	3.25
Student/faculty ratio	39%	44%	12%	2%	3.23
Full-time faculty	18%	56%	18%	6%	2.87
Acceptance rate	9%	39%	39%	11%	2.47
Alumni giving rate	7%	29%	44%	17%	2.28

Law

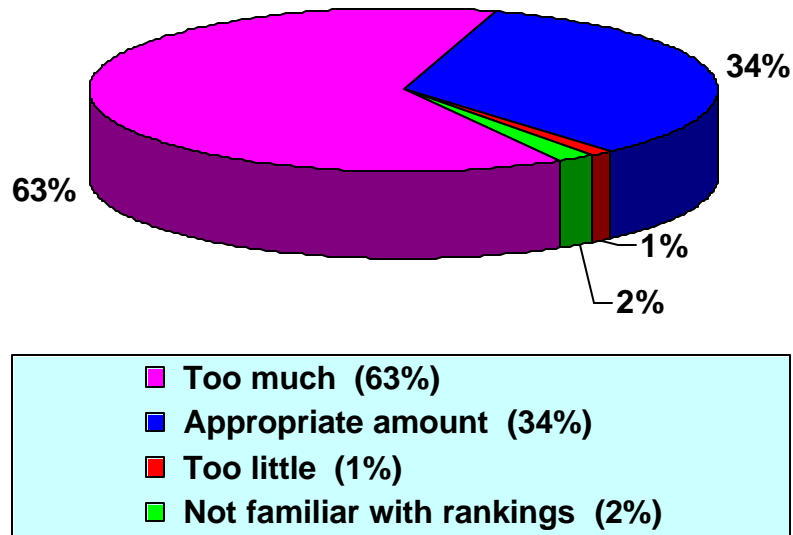
	4	3	2	1	Mean
Bar passage	41%	48%	9%	2%	3.28
Student employment	33%	48%	15%	4%	3.09
LSAT score	17%	63%	17%	2%	2.96
Student/faculty ratio	20%	50%	28%	2%	2.87
Full time faculty	20%	43%	30%	7%	2.76
Graduation rate	22%	41%	26%	11%	2.74
Acceptance rate	13%	50%	30%	7%	2.70
Alumni giving	7%	28%	33%	33%	2.09

“These are some items that might factor into the rating that you or a colleague gives to a peer institution. As you attempt to rank other colleges and universities/law schools, how important is each of these for you?”

Conclusion 4: Most academic officials believe prospective students place “too much emphasis” on the U.S. News annual rankings.

Only one-third of undergraduate college and university presidents, provosts and deans of admission feel student prospects place an “appropriate amount” of emphasis on those rankings.

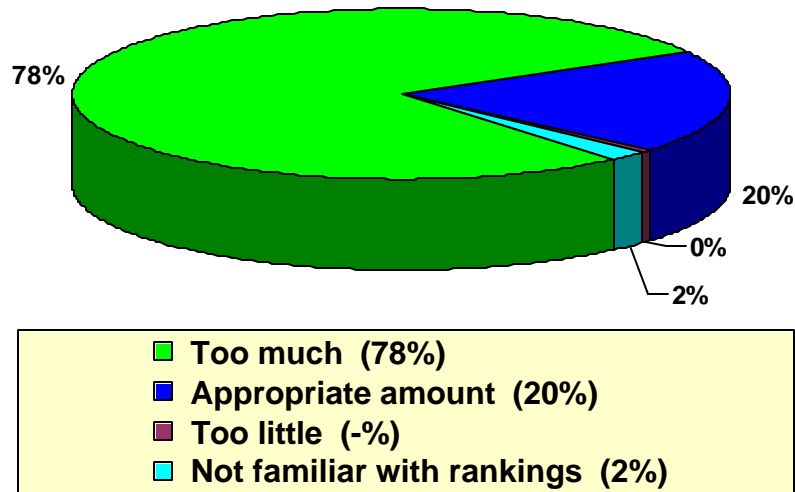
Undergraduate Respondents



“What do you think about the amount of emphasis placed on the U.S. News rankings by prospective students?”

Among law deans, the numbers are even more stark, with only one in five saying prospective students place appropriate emphasis on the rankings. More than three out of four feel the *U.S. News* rankings are given too much emphasis by students.

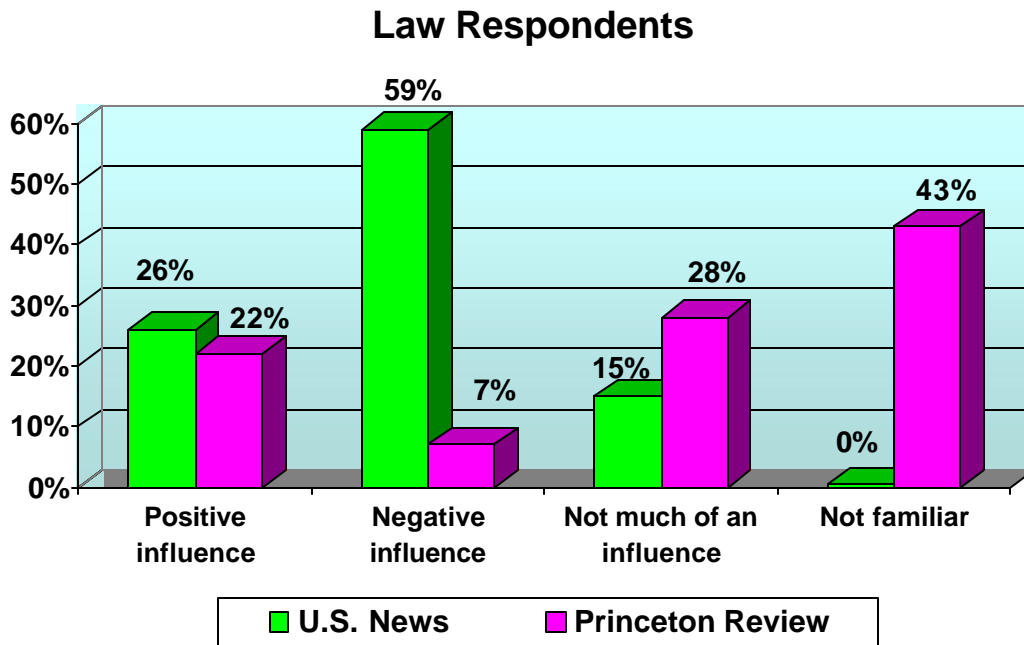
Law Respondents



“What do you think about the amount of emphasis placed on the U.S. News rankings by prospective students?”

Conclusion 5: Six in ten law deans see the *U.S. News* rankings as a “negative influence...on prospective students’ evaluation” of their institutions. Undergraduate officials are less negative overall. *The Princeton Review* is much more benign, and much less of a factor.

By two-to-one, law deans feel the *U.S. News* rankings have a negative influence overall. This contrasts sharply with the three-to-one ratio who see the rankings by *The Princeton Review* as positive. Most, though, do not see *The Princeton Review* as much of a factor, or are not familiar with those rankings.

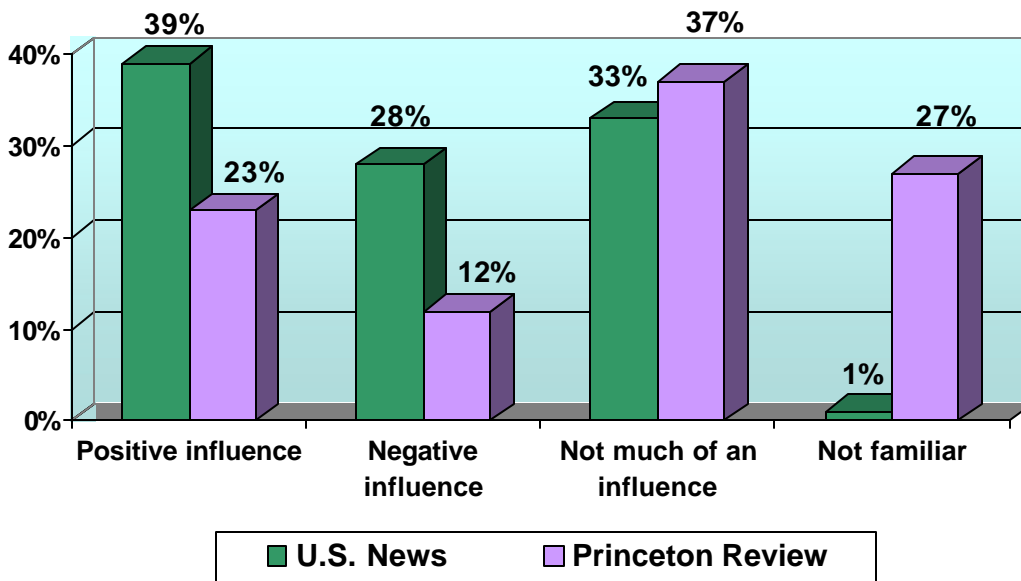


“Which of these best describes your view of the influence of the U.S. News rankings on prospective student’ evaluation of law schools?”

“Which of these best describes your view of the influence of The Princeton Review rankings on prospective students’ evaluation of law schools?”

Among undergraduate administrators, opinions about the *U.S. News* rankings are much more dispersed than the highly negative evaluation by their law counterparts. Sixty percent of undergraduate peers feel that *The Princeton Review* rankings are either a positive influence or not much of an influence either way.

Undergraduate Respondents



“Which of these best describes your view of the influence of the U.S. News rankings on prospective student’ evaluation of colleges and universities?”

“Which of these best describes your view of the influence of the Princeton Review rankings on prospective students’ evaluation of colleges and universities?”

Research Methodology

Potomac sought the opinions of undergraduate and law administrators regarding college rankings by issuing an emailed invitation with a link to a secure web-based survey instrument. A total of 1,358 undergraduate and 278 law school administrators were invited to participate. Non-responders were sent two follow-up email reminders over a three-week data collection period. For the undergraduate institutions, presidents, provosts or academic deans, and deans of admissions were invited to participate, the same group invited by *U.S. News* to participate in its annual peer rankings. Law deans were invited to participate on behalf of their institutions, as well. A total of 282 undergraduate and 46 law school officials completed the survey.

About Potomac Incorporated

Since its founding in 1982, Potomac Incorporated has grown into one of the Washington area's most influential full-service strategic communications and research firms. Potomac delivers expert guidance for a variety of governmental, non-profit, higher education and corporate clients. Potomac advises Fortune 500 firms such as Comcast, regularly polls on public issues for *The* (Baltimore) *Sun* and other media outlets, and helps many non-profit institutions draw closer to their donors, alumni, or members.

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