To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Michele McManus Howard entitled “Student Use of Rankings in National Magazines in the College Decision-Making Process.” I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Education.

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STUDENT USE OF RANKINGS IN NATIONAL MAGAZINES IN
THE COLLEGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michele McManus Howard
December 2002
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving parents, Mary and Jack McManus, and my wonderful husband, Micheal Howard, in thanks and gratitude for their encouragement, inspiration, patience, love and support over the past several years. I honestly could not have done this without you and I love you all very much.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Grady Bogue, my major professor, provided me a great deal of guidance, determination, and encouragement to complete this work despite the many changes and challenges in my life. I truly appreciate Dr. Bogue’s faith, compassion, and patience over the past eight years. In addition, Dr. Jeff Aper, Dr. Ralph Brockett, and Dr. Faye Julian who all served as members of my committee provided me with a great deal of insight and support during my doctoral studies.

Mary Stuart Hunter, my long-time mentor from the University of South Carolina, played an indispensable role in the completion of this research. For her help and support, I am eternally grateful. I am also indebted to Dr. Linda Sax and Mr. William Korn from the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA for their expertise and willingness to assist with this research initiative. In addition, Cary Springer from the UT Statistical Consulting Center was a godsend and an incredible asset to me during the completion of this dissertation. Words cannot express my sincere appreciation for all of her hard work, dedication, time, and patience with my many questions.

I am also thankful for the support of my boss, Chuck Lynch, and the Dean of Students staff at UNC Charlotte. Your encouragement and patience are truly appreciated. Numerous friends, especially Dotti Bressi, Karen Griffin, and Ted Elling, have served as sounding boards and advice givers and made me realize that I can achieve this goal. Finally, I am forever grateful for the understanding, unconditional love, and support of my parents, Mary and Jack McManus, and my husband, Micheal Howard. Without you, none of this would have been possible.
ABSTRACT

College rankings are widely depicted as vital tools for making informed decisions about the college selection process. Based on sales volume and the diversity of ratings currently in existence, there is little doubt that rankings are big business and are undeniably here to stay. On the other hand, very little factual information is available about students’ actual use of rankings in the college decision-making process.

It is clear that rankings such as those published by *US News & World Report* are now part of the landscape in our system of higher education. However, the problem is to establish the extent students use rankings and to determine user characteristics based on demographics and institutional type. The paramount purpose of this research study is to determine the importance of college rankings in national magazines on students’ institutional choice. Analysis of data provided by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) provides a greater understanding of the impact of rankings on students’ college decision-making process. Specific research questions for this study include:

1) Do students perceive college rankings to be an important factor in selecting their institution of choice?

2) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national universities and those schools that are not ranked?

3) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national liberal arts colleges and those colleges that are not ranked?
4) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending public or private national universities?

5) Does the importance attached to college rankings in national magazines vary significantly when response patterns are examined by gender, age, place of residence, distance from permanent home, academic achievement, financial status, or ethnicity?

Utilizing two US News ranking categories, a total of 40 institutions from 13 states in differing geographic regions were selected for this research. Public and private institutions and ranked and unranked schools were included in this analysis. In addition, each of these colleges participated in the CIRP for fall 2000. For this study, there are 14,541 first-time, full-time freshmen represented in the sample. Of these students, 8827 attend national universities while 5714 are enrolled in liberal arts colleges.

The majority of students included in this study placed some level of importance on college rankings. Ratings in newsmagazines are of particular importance to first-time, full-time freshmen attending ranked, private institutions. In addition, students who deem rankings as important are traditionally aged, live on-campus, attend a school a significant distance from home, and have a high level of financial status.

Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that members of the higher education community rethink their stance on college rankings in national newsmagazines and acknowledge their influence on prospective college students.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been increased emphasis, utilization, and scrutiny of college rankings published in national magazines such as *US News & World Report* and *Money*. Much like pre-season college football rankings, the annual publication of *America’s Best Colleges* each fall comes with a great deal of anticipation and speculation as to who will be selected for the coveted spot of Best National University Doctoral. For many high school students and their parents actively engaged in the college decision-making process, these rankings appear to provide the only factual, concise, quantifiable, and comparable measures of institutional quality for colleges and universities. Rankings provide an alternative approach to selecting a college based on more important factors than a successful football program. “Media lists at least encourage students (and their parents) to make college choices on grounds other than the UPI coaches’ poll. And that is a gain for everyone” (Gilbert, 1992, p. 36).

The use of rankings in the college decision-making process is perhaps a direct result of society’s love affair with top ten lists and product ratings in general. In today’s fast paced society, consumers want immediate access to information presented in a clear and concise manner:

After a long day, we may have time and energy only to view the briefest of summaries, a list of rankings, and the media juggernaut (including web sites of all sorts) is only too happy to oblige. Should we be surprised that in an age increasingly identified with the graphics on a computer screen and obsessed with
the speed at which they appear, we are attracted to the oasis of information that rankings and lists seem to offer? (Singh, 1998, p. 5)

It has now become commonplace to consult publications such as Consumer Reports prior to purchasing any major appliance, automobile, or computer equipment. According to McGuire (1995), “certainly the popularity of Consumer Reports attests the public’s predisposition to ‘comparison shopping,’ using as a guide an objective third party’s research-driven evaluations of competing products or service providers. Why should higher education be immune to this societal phenomenon” (p. 57)? Furthermore, magazine editors argue, “When consumers invest in simple household appliances, this sort of information is freely available. We think it should be similarly available for an educational investment that can cost more than $110,000” (Thompson, 1996, p. B-9).

Based on the success and sales volume of US News & World Report’s annual rankings of colleges and universities, they appear to be providing a service to consumers in higher education and are undoubtedly here to stay.

In the United States, the process of ranking colleges and universities first began in the early 1900s with the focus predominantly on graduate programs (Webster, 1986a). In the early 1980s, US News & World Report began printing undergraduate rankings for colleges and universities, which provided basic information and a means for measuring institutional quality. Other national magazines such as Money, Business Week, Time, and Newsweek followed suit with their own versions of college rankings (Hossler, 1998).

The rapid rise of rankings and guidebooks as the yardsticks for quality in higher education has caught many college and university administrators by surprise. The competitive nature of American higher education and a strong consumer oriented
relationship between students and institutions have created an environment that has facilitated the success of college ratings and guidebooks. (The College Board for Education Professionals, 1997, para. 20)

While it appears there is an enormous market and increasing demand for rankings in national magazines, their impact on the college decision-making process is still rather uncertain.

According to McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez (1998), *US News & World Report* sold an estimated 2.3 million copies of its college rankings issue and an additional 700,000 copies of *America’s Best Colleges*. By combining these sales totals with those of other national magazine rankings, approximately 6.7 million copies of these publications are sold each year, which equates to an estimated $15 million in total sales (McDonough et al., 1998). Furthermore, the *US News* website has at least 25 to 40 million hits each month, the majority of which (70 percent) are in the education section (Britz & Lawlor, 2001). While it is fairly easy to determine the volume of sales for these publications, it is much more daunting to establish how and if they are actually used in the college decision-making process.

**Statement of the Problem**

Rankings are widely depicted as vital tools for making informed decisions about the college selection process. While there has been a great deal of research and scrutiny of college rankings as predictors of institutional quality, there is very limited information available on student use of rankings in the college selection process. Some studies in this area support the belief that rankings in national magazines do have an impact on students’ college decision-making process while others demonstrate a nominal impact if any.
The problem is to establish the extent students use rankings and to determine user characteristics based on demographics and institutional type. “What is still unknown is the extent to which rankings have both a direct effect on student’s admissions behavior, and an indirect effect on student choice by influencing a prospective student’s parents and peers” (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999, p. 43). “Because the high visibility of guidebooks and rankings is still a very recent phenomenon, it is difficult to determine their long term impact on institutions or their impact as an important source of information for students and parents” (The College Board for Education Professionals, 1997, para. 21).

**Purpose and Research Questions**

It is apparent there is a great deal to be learned about students’ use of rankings in deciding which college to attend. The purpose of this study is to determine the importance of college rankings in national magazines on students’ institutional choice. This study will explicitly address the following research questions:

1) Do students perceive college rankings to be an important factor in selecting their institution of choice?

2) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national universities and those schools that are not ranked?

3) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national liberal arts colleges and those colleges that are not ranked?
4) Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending public or private national universities?

5) Does the importance attached to college rankings in national magazines vary significantly when response patterns are examined by gender, age, place of residence, distance from permanent home, academic achievement, financial status, or ethnicity?

The focus of this research will be on entering freshmen at 40 institutions from 13 states in different geographic regions. All of these colleges and universities are included in the Best National Universities and the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking categories in the fall 2000 issue of *America's Best Colleges*. Since both of these *US News* ranking categories include institutions from a national rather than a regional perspective, they will be more conducive to this study. These 40 colleges and universities represent a diversity of institutional missions and Carnegie Classifications. For the Best National Universities category, this study will include public and private institutions in addition to both ranked and unranked schools based on the fall 2000 edition of *America's Best Colleges*. The vast majority of institutions appearing in the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking category are private colleges. Therefore, no public schools were selected from this *US News* ranking category for inclusion in this study. Ranked and unranked schools will also be selected for this category as well. These 40 institutions were selected based on their rankings in the fall 2000 issue of *US News & World Report* in addition to their participation in the fall 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program.
Data collected from each institution by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) will be used to address the research questions in this study. Beginning in 1966 at the American Council of Education, the CIRP is a national survey of entering students and is the nation’s longest and most comprehensive study of American higher education. The CIRP is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2000).

**Significance of the Study**

“Clearly, college guidebooks do sell, otherwise they would not be published. And undergraduates do look at them. However, how many undergraduates make their
decisions on which college to attend on such a rational basis as this”(Machung, 1995, p. 69)? Based on sales volume and the diversity of rankings currently in existence, there is little doubt that rankings are big business and are undeniably here to stay. On the other hand, very little factual information is available about students’ actual use of rankings in the college decision-making process.

The paucity of research on rankings usage by prospective college students leads numerous institutions to make assumptions about their overall importance and influence on college choice. These assumptions may lead schools to change institutional priorities and policies, admission standards, and enrollment practices in order to obtain a more favorable ranking each fall. This study will add to the limited research currently available on student use of rankings in national magazines and will provide institutions with valuable information about usage patterns in both ranked and unranked institutions. In turn, college administrators will have access to data from a national study on this topic, which may be utilized for decision-making on their campuses.
Definition of Rankings and Institutional Quality

So, what exactly are college rankings? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (1998), a ranking is “having a high position; foremost” (p. 431). Similarly, the verb rank means to “to rate above (as in official standing)” and “to take or have a relative position” (p. 431). Another definition of ranking provided by Scriven (1991) states that ranking entails “placing individuals in an order usually of merit, on the basis of their relative performance on a test or measurement or observation” (p. 299). Based on this definition, it could be determined that ranking is an evaluative measure used to compare the quality of two comparable entities.

Within the context of college rankings in national magazines, it is important to examine the definition of academic quality rankings. According to Webster (1986a), an academic quality ranking

must be arranged according to some criterion or set of criteria which the complier(s) of the list believed to be measured or reflected academic quality. It must be a list of the best colleges, universities, or departments in a field of study, in numerical order according to their supposed quality, with each school or department having its own individual rank, not just lumped together with other schools into a handful of quality classes, groups, or levels. (p. 5)

Based on this definition, it appears that most college rankings in national magazines, particularly those published by US News & World Report, meet these specific criteria. Webster’s definition is widely used and provides a means of common understanding for academic quality rankings. However, it is much more difficult to clearly define institutional quality in higher education.
Simply speaking, “quality is conformance to requirements” (Crosby, 1984, p. 60). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (1998), quality is “peculiar and essential character; degree of excellence; a high social status, or a distinguishing attribute” (p. 426). When defined in the context of total quality management, quality is “primarily concerned with the needs of the consumer” (Nedwek & Neal, 1994, p. 78). Bogue and Saunders (1992) developed one of the most widely utilized definitions of educational quality. “Quality is conformance to mission specification and goal achievement-within publicly accepted standards of accountability and integrity” (p. 20).

When applying Bogue and Saundert’s definition of quality to college rankings, it is highly debatable whether these annual report cards of higher education truly measure institutional quality. These “journalistic exercises have become the nation’s most widely known quality reports. They have certainly become the most intensely debated approaches to quality assurance among college educators” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 65). According to Schmotter, higher education

... has not been able to develop a means of evaluating and certifying quality that is either relevant or intelligible to those who invest in it through their tuition payments or gifts. Developing clearer institutional goals and employing more honesty and accuracy in presenting them to the public are good ways to begin to reclaim the ground we in higher education have ceded to our colleagues in journalism. (1989, p. A40)

It could certainly be argued that accreditation processes have historically been an avenue within the academy for “evaluating and certifying quality” (Schmotter, 1989, p. A40) even though there is also a great deal of criticism for this process as a means for quality
assurance. However, while the higher education community continues to dispute the value of college rankings and accreditation as measures of institutional quality, consumers still flock to purchase ratings of America’s best colleges and universities. However, the impact of these magazine purchases on the college decision-making process has yet to be fully determined.

**Other Significant Terms**

1) *Carnegie classification* – a categorization of American colleges and universities that is degree granting and accredited by agencies representing the U. S. Secretary of Education. This classification “identifies categories of colleges and universities that would be relatively homogeneous with respect to the functions of the institutions as well as with respect to characteristics of students and faculty members” (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973, p.v). In 2000, the Carnegie Classifications changed by condensing the categories of doctoral institutions from four to two and including a new category for baccalaureate colleges. Definitions for the new classifications are listed below in addition to the previous names of these categories.

2) *doctoral/research universities-extensive*-these institutions award bachelors, masters, and 50 or more doctoral degrees in at least 15 disciplines. They were previously classified as Research Universities I and II.

3) *doctoral/research universities-intensive*-these schools award bachelors, masters, and at least ten doctoral degrees in a minimum of three disciplines. In the previous classifications, they were called Doctoral Universities I and II.
4) *master's colleges and universities I* – these institutions award bachelor’s degrees and 40 or more master’s degrees in at least three disciplines and were formerly called Master’s Comprehensive Colleges I.

5) *master’s colleges and universities II* – consists of those schools that award bachelor’s degrees and 20 or more master’s degrees per year and were previously titled Master’s Comprehensive Colleges II.

6) *baccalaureate colleges-liberal arts* – contains primarily undergraduate colleges with at least half of all degrees awarded in liberal arts fields. This category was formerly called Baccalaureate (Liberal Arts) Colleges I.

7) *baccalaureate colleges-general* – these schools focus on undergraduate education with less than half of all degrees awarded in liberal arts and previously included institutions in the Baccalaureate Colleges II category.

8) *baccalaureate/associate’s colleges* – this new category consists of undergraduate colleges where most degrees conferred are below the baccalaureate level with bachelor’s degrees consisting of at least ten percent of all degrees. Some of the institutions in this category were previously listed as Baccalaureate College II.

9) *associate’s colleges* – these schools offer associate’s degrees and certificate programs.

10) *specialized institutions* – specialty schools offering degrees in a single field.

11) *tribal colleges and universities* – colleges which are located and controlled by Indian tribes (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 2000).

12) *Best National Universities* – a classification used by *US News & World Report*, which combines the two categories of doctorate granting institutions from the Carnegie Classifications. This category depicts the most prestigious ranking in *US News & World*
Report. The most recent issue of America's Best Colleges (Carpenter, 2002) refers to this category as Best National Universities Doctoral.

13) Best National Liberal Arts Colleges- a US News & World Report category that includes those institutions listed as Baccalaureate Colleges-Liberal Arts in the Carnegie Classifications. The primary focus of schools listed in this ranking is on undergraduate education. Best National Liberal Arts Colleges is the second most prestigious ranking in US News & World Report. This category is called Best Liberal Arts Colleges Bachelor’s (Nationally) in the fall 2003 issue.

14) Best Regional Schools-Universities-this ranking in US News is a combination of the two Carnegie Classifications for Master’s Colleges and Universities. These institutions offer a diversity of undergraduate programs and provide graduate education through the master’s level. In US News & World Report, this category is subdivided into the south, north, west, and midwest rankings. The fall 2003 issue refers to this category as Best Universities-Master’s (By Region).

15) Best Regional Schools-Liberal Arts Colleges-this final ranking category in US News is a combination of the Carnegie Classifications of baccalaureate colleges-general and baccalaureate/associate colleges. Schools listed in this category focus on undergraduate education but confer less than 50% of all degrees in the liberal arts. Similar to Best Regional Schools-Universities, this ranking category is broken up into four geographic regions and is called Best Comprehensive Colleges-Bachelor’s (By Region) in the fall 2003 issue of America’s Best Colleges. (US News & World Report, 2001c)

16) Institution-a college or university.
17) *Freshman*-a new entering undergraduate student attending a college or university. Freshmen have not previously been enrolled on a full-time basis in a higher educational institution.

**Limitations/Delimitation**

This study is limited to 40 institutions from the continental United States who administered the CIRP freshman survey for the fall 2000 semester. While there are many colleges and universities that participate in the CIRP study each year, this research only focused on those schools that were Doctoral/Research Universities (Extensive and Intensive) and Baccalaureate Colleges Liberal Arts. In addition, 20 schools were selected for this study based on their selection as one of the top 50 schools in their *US News* ranking category. There are certainly many institutions that could be utilized for further study.

A limitation of this study was the selection of only those institutions that administered the CIRP and were included in *US News & World Report*. This approach lessened the number of institutions eligible to participate in this study. Efforts were made to incorporate a diversity of institutions within the same Carnegie Classification categories in order to gain a broader perspective on this topic.

In addition, the various methods of administering the Student Information Form (SIF), the instrument used to collect CIRP data, serve as a limitation for this study. The SIF is administered during new student orientation, freshman seminar classes, fall semester registration, freshman-level English courses, or at other times during the summer or within the first few weeks of school. Institutional representatives administer and proctor the SIF on each individual campus (Sax et al., 2000). Since each participating
institution is responsible for survey administration, there may be inconsistencies in data
collection for the 40 schools selected for this study.

Another possible limitation of this study would be the omission of all schools in
the Master’s Colleges and Universities (I and II), the Baccalaureate Colleges-General and
the Baccalaureate/Associate’s Colleges categories in the Carnegie Classifications. In
order to gain a broader perspective on the impact of college rankings on all institutional
types, it might be interesting to include these schools in a future study.

There are many other institutions that could be utilized in further examination and
research of the importance of college rankings in national magazines on students’
institutional choice. This study may provide some impetus for further exploration in the
future.

Outline of the Study

The next chapter will examine institutional quality, the history of rankings and
reasons for their use in the college decision-making process. It will also include
information on existing research on student use of rankings in selecting an institution of
choice. Chapter three will focus on specific methods for this study with the following
chapter providing results of data analysis performed in the quest for information on this
topic. The final chapter will present conclusions determined through this study and will
offer recommendations for the future.
Chapter 2

COLLEGE RANKINGS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES, CURRENT TRENDS

Over the past 25 years, there has been a great deal of research, critique, scrutiny, and debate on college rankings. This has been especially true for rankings published in national magazines such as *US News & World Report* and *America’s Best Colleges*. In order to gain a broader perspective of this vast topic, it is important to review the existing literature and research on college ratings and, more specifically, on students’ use of rankings in selecting their institution of choice.

Consumers of higher education such as new students and their parents may often view these publications as the primary means of determining educational quality. Thus, we begin by reviewing the concept of institutional quality and its relationship to college rankings. Various explanations of quality along with Astin’s interpretation of excellence will be presented and related to the practice of college rankings.

In order to fully understand the rise in popularity and possible use of rankings, it is important to review the history of their creation and utilization in higher education. A history of college rankings in both graduate and undergraduate education will be presented. Specific emphasis will be placed on undergraduate rankings and their inclusion in popular newsmagazines such as *US News & World Report*.

After outlining the history of college rankings, emphasis will be placed on the overall need and purpose of these annual listings included in national magazines. Topics ranging from service to the general public to sales volume will be examined. In addition, reasons for using the rankings and specific ways to effectively utilize them in the college
selection process will be presented. Perspectives from publishers, parents, and high school guidance counselors will provide further insight to student use of rankings.

The final section of this chapter will focus on existing research on student use of college rankings in national magazines. As previously noted, there are limited resources available on student utilization of rankings. However, information will be presented on four studies directly related to this topic. Specific emphasis will be placed on the Hossler and Foley Study (1995) and the research conducted by McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez (1998). The results of these studies provide the foundation for further exploration on this topic and are directly related to this research.

The review of existing literature on this topic and, more specifically, the limited research on student utilization of college rankings, provides rationale for additional study of this phenomenon. This analysis will further explore student use of college rankings in national magazines and the importance placed on these publications by students when selecting an institution of choice.

**Institutional Quality and Its Relationship to College Rankings**

Based on perceptions from the general public, college rankings appear to provide factual and concise measures of institutional quality for many American colleges and universities. Prospective students and their parents often view these journalistic endeavors as the ultimate guide into American higher education and, in turn, as indicators of their future success beyond the halls of academe. For many, rankings such as those published in *US News & World Report* provide the sole means for the general public’s definition of academic quality. According to Hunter (1995),
Student and parent consumers who blindly and foolishly, but consistently, accept the results of annual rankings rather than conduct their own research toward what would be a student’s best college match, and colleges that allow the specter of their rankings to dictate their institutional practices and procedures are helping to perpetuate what has become an annual charade in higher education. (p. 10)

Since there are conflicting viewpoints on the determination of quality in higher education, it may be necessary to pause for a moment in our study of college rankings and briefly examine the concept of institutional quality.

When considering quality in higher education, several assumptions immediately come to mind. These assumptions include

- Quality can only be found at institutions with abundant resources and large endowments.
- Quality exists only at very expensive, private colleges and universities.
- Quality is seldom found at state institutions and never at those schools with a regionally based mission and focus.
- Quality can only be found at highly selective and prestigious colleges.
- Quality is available on a very limited number of college campuses (Bogue & Saunders, 1992).

These assumptions can lead one to believe that quality is rare in higher education and is only limited to a select few institutions. If one conforms to this belief, it is quite easy to understand the popularity of college rankings in national magazines.

The growing interest in comparative college quality among the public is premised upon two desires. The first is the desire to obtain a good bargain for the money
spent on higher education, which has become more important as the costs of higher education have accelerated. The second is the desire of many students to obtain a degree from the most prestigious institution of higher education possible, because the prestige of one’s undergraduate institution is seen as facilitating success later in life. High prestige institutions are seen as worth the high costs of attendance. (Nordvall & Braxton, 1996, p. 483)

Based on recent sales figures, it is clear that many people purchase magazines containing information on college rankings. However, are these rankings true measures of institutional quality? According to Orr (1984), college rankings must be questioned, as they seem to reflect the view that universities and colleges have an immutable and ascertainable dimension called ‘quality’. Quality is in the eye and heart of the beholder. Opinions about quality are virtually the only relevant measures of quality that can be collected. (p. 48)

What exactly is quality? How can it be determined in higher education? Are there significant dimensions of quality that can be gathered and compared to differing types of institutions?

In addition to the definitions of quality already presented in chapter one, there are other ways to characterize this concept. In the “fitness-for-use definition, quality lies in the eye and judgment of the client or customer and in the utility of the product or the service as judged by that client” (Bogue & Aper, 2000, p. 85). According to Guaspari (1985), “customers aren’t interested in our specs. They’re interested in the answer to one simple question: did the product do what I expected it to do” (p. 68)? Mayhew, Ford, and Hubbard (1990) stated “quality undergraduate education consists of preparing learners
through the use of words, numbers, and abstract concepts to understand, cope with, and positively influence the environment in which they find themselves” (p. 29). Two other definitions of quality are provided by Davies (1991). From his perspective, quality is “whatever is valued (and paid for) in a society” (p. 39). Quality may also be defined as “whatever the prevailing cultural and economic hegemony defines it to be” (p. 41).

Astin’s Interpretation of Quality and Excellence

Alexander Astin is one of the foremost researchers and writers on quality and excellence in higher education. In *Achieving Educational Excellence* (1985), Astin presents four notions of excellence in American higher education: reputation, resources, outcomes, and content.

Excellence Defined By Reputation

According to Astin, the reputation perspective of excellence is whatever people define it to be.

There exists in the minds of educators and of many laypersons a shared set of beliefs (a folklore, if you will) about which are the best or most excellent institutions. This folklore, which forms the basis for the institutional hierarchy in American higher education, is also the source of the reputation view of excellence. (Astin, 1985, p. 25)

Rankings in national magazines are certainly one approach of examining educational quality from a reputation perspective. In these rankings, “the higher an institution’s perceived place in the institutional pecking order, the higher the quality of the institution” (Nordvall & Braxton, 1996, p. 484). This approach suggests that excellence is available only in limited supply in the American higher education system. While reputational
rankings are often scrutinized, they do appear to have some appeal to the general public based on the sales volumes from these magazines. “The fact is that institutions aggressively seek (and loudly celebrate) reputational success, even as they publicly deplore the particular arenas in which it is bought and sold” (Ewell, 1998, p. 4).

**Excellence Defined By Resources**

Excellence can also be defined from the perspective of resources such as faculty and staff, students, facilities, and finances. This is perhaps a less subjective approach to determining quality since it is often based on numbers and data collected by an institution. “Educators and policy makers who want more objective indicators are inclined to embrace the resources conception. For instance, resource measures are the ones most favored by institutional accrediting agencies” (Astin, 1985, p. 37). This perspective on excellence is best demonstrated through the accreditation process (Astin, 1985). In this approach, higher numbers often equate to an increased level of institutional quality. Similar to the reputation concept, there are a limited number of resources available. “Thus, in a highly competitive and meritocratic educational system, the distribution of these resources tends to be highly skewed, with the few ‘top’ institutions monopolizing a disproportionate share and the many ‘mediocre’ institutions making do with whatever is left” (Astin, 1985, p. 54).

It is important to note significant changes have been made to the institutional accreditation process since the time of Astin’s creation of these notions of excellence. Measures are now currently in place within accreditation which examine institutional effectiveness rather than simply concentrating on process indicators. A more
comprehensive approach to this quality assurance method with a focus on institutional outcomes is now utilized by accrediting agencies.

Finally, the reputation and resources concepts of defining excellence are quite interdependent. In fact, institutional resources are often used as quality indicators for college rankings in national magazines.

As these strong intercorrelations suggest, the reputation and resources conceptions of excellence tend to be mutually reinforcing. That is, if the reputation folklore views a particular institution as being excellent, this view gets reinforced by the fact that the institution also has highly able students, a highly paid and prestigious faculty, large endowments, and other financial resources. (Astin, 1985, p. 39)

Based on this information, it is apparent why so many people, both inside and outside the academy, equate resources with educational excellence.

**Excellence Defined By Outcomes**

Astin also defines excellence from the perspective of outcomes and content. In this context, outcomes “simply refer to some performance measure such as retention rates, alumni achievements, and so on. No causal connection between the outcome and the institutional environment can be inferred” (Astin, 1985, p. 44). This approach focuses on the “quality of its products” (Astin, 1985, p. 43) as opposed to reputation or resources.

If the emphasis on outcomes leads an institution to strengthen its educational programs, then the system’s excellence is enhanced. On the other hand, if the institution tries to improve outcomes merely by acquiring more resources (brighter students, more productive faculty members), the excellence of the system as a whole remains unchanged. (Astin, 1985, p. 55)
In turn, it could be construed that an outcomes perspective of excellence could also be interdependent on the reputation and resources approach. However, outcomes can prove to be highly valuable to an institution if utilized for overall quality improvement efforts.

**Excellence Defined By Content**

Astin’s fourth notion of excellence is the content view, which is based on what is actually taught at an institution. A major focus of this perspective is based on the importance of the liberal arts in the undergraduate curriculum (Astin, 1985). The significance of this construct can be clearly demonstrated by examining the general education requirements, often called the “core curriculum” at many colleges and universities. Based on Astin’s research, it appears that “the most prestigious institutions emphasize the traditional liberal arts, especially the sciences. The only exceptions are the technologically oriented universities such as the California Institute of Technology, which awards a very large proportion of degrees in engineering” (Astin, 1985, p. 48).

**Excellence Defined As Talent Development**

After presenting these four concepts, Astin concludes that neither the reputation, resources, outcome, nor content view truly defines excellence in American higher education. Therefore, he presents excellence from the talent development view.

The talent development view of excellence emphasizes the educational impact of the institution on its students and faculty members. Its basic premise is that true excellence lies in the institution’s ability to affect its students and faculty favorably, to enhance their intellectual and scholarly development, and to make a positive difference in their lives. The most excellent institutions are, in this view, those that have the greatest impact-‘add the most value,’ as economists would
say-on the student’s knowledge and personal development and on the faculty
member’s scholarly and pedagogical ability and productivity. (Astin, 1985, p. 61)

Unlike other definitions of quality or excellence, this interpretation focuses on the
difference that the college experience makes on students’ academic growth and overall
development. While this definition relates truly to the heart of our educational system and
the overall mission of American higher education, it may be rather difficult to assess
within an institution. It also provides no means for comparisons of excellence between
two similar schools.

By reviewing these differing perspectives on quality and excellence in higher
education, it is apparent there is no consensus on the exact meaning or a precise
definition of this concept. This deficiency could be attributed to some of the popularity of
college rankings in national magazines. “It is possible that the high visibility these
guidebooks have achieved may cause students and parents to think about the importance
of institutional quality and the attributes of quality in new and more focused ways”
for quality to show through in whatever indicator or evidence we may select to
demonstrate quality. It may be equally important for us to attend to public perceptions of
quality as well” (p. 66). Since the public may indeed view rankings in national magazines
as a strong measure of institutional quality, it is important to have a greater understanding
of this practice.

The History of Quality Rankings in Graduate Education

The emphasis on institutional quality and performance can be traced to the late
1800s and early 1900s with the emergence of college ranking studies. These initial
rankings focused entirely on the quality of graduate education (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). “Institutional comparisons have long been the most common method for public assessment of quality” (Borden & Bottrill, 1994, p. 6). Over a 20-year period in the late 1800s, the United States Bureau of Education started printing data, which eventually led to a form of rankings. Once this data were no longer published, Kendric Charles Babcock created a categorization for colleges and universities, which never truly materialized into a means of quality rankings. During this same period, many professional organizations and religious groups began to print classifications of institutions, which in some instances lead to listings of acceptable and unacceptable schools (Stuart, 1995).

Psychologist James McKeen Cattell published the first true rankings in American higher education in 1910. This ranking was based on the institutions where prominent scientists attended college or where they served on the faculty. Unlike previous attempts at quality rankings, Cattell’s listing was presented in rank order as opposed to classifications of institutions into select groups. The chosen criterion for this ranking was the number of prominent scientists affiliated with each institution which lead them to be called *The Scientific Strength of the Leading Institutions*. It should be noted that Cattell’s listing included not only institutions of higher education but also other organizations such as the Department of Agriculture and the Geological Survey (Cattell, 1933). Cattell’s scheme remained one of the most significant quality rankings until the 1960s (Webster, 1986a).

Soon after Cattell began ranking American colleges and universities, the United States Bureau of Education completed a report, which placed schools in five categories
based on how well their students were prepared for graduate schools. According to Webster (1992a),

a few deans and presidents got hold of the galley proofs and protested so heatedly that two US presidents—first William Howard Taft, then Woodrow Wilson—prevented the report from being published. Since then, with negligible exceptions, no government agency has ever attempted to rank colleges and universities. (p. 19)

Since the government was no longer in the business of ranking higher education, it was necessary for members within the academy to continue to identify a means for quality comparisons.

In 1925, Raymond M. Hughes published his first ranking of graduate schools, which he called *A Study of the Graduate Schools of America*. Hughes asked his colleagues at Miami University to share with him the names of those schools doing outstanding graduate education and the names of prominent scholars in their fields at other schools (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Hughes believed these ratings would be of distinct value to the college president or dean who is seeking men to fill vacancies on his staff. Such a rating also seems proper and desirable in printed form, so that any one interested can turn to it readily for a rough estimate of work in a given field. (1925, p. 3)

After his initial ranking, Hughes chaired a study of graduate education for the American Council on Education in 1934, which expanded on his previous work (Stuart, 1995). Institutions included in this research “were derived from a study of catalogues and reports of graduate deans. Learned societies in each of the fields were asked to supply a list of
100 scholars in that field, to whom the rating forms were circulated” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 67). These scholars were instructed to select those departments sufficiently prepared for graduate study and highlight the top 20 percent of these organizations. Similar to previous studies, these rankings were based only on specific disciplines and did not provide overall institutional data (Webster, 1992c).

Beginning with the foundation laid by Hughes in the 1920s and 1930s, Hayward Keniston also studied academic quality rankings of American higher education. “The era of the ascendancy of ‘academic origins’ studies and the dormancy of reputational rankings ended in 1959, when Hayward Keniston published his reputational ranking of 25 leading universities” (Webster, 1986a, p. 18). His own institution, the University of Pennsylvania, sponsored this study of academic department chairs at 25 schools. Keniston pooled the rankings into categories for the “humanities, social sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences, and institutions as a whole” (Stuart, 1995, p. 15). The results of Keniston’s ranking included the same institutions in Hughes’s 1925 study with the exception of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), New York University, and the University of Washington (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). This finding could lead one to conclude, “there has been, then, a considerable stability over the thirty-two-year history of the ratings” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 68).

In the late 1960s, Allan M. Carter with the American Council on Education created one of the most widely known and utilized graduate quality rankings with his *Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education* (Cartter, 1966). In presenting the rationale for his rankings, Cartter stated, “just as consumer knowledge and honest advertisement are requisite if a competitive economy is to work satisfactorily, so an improved
knowledge of opportunities and of quality is desirable if a diverse educational system is to work” (Cartter, 1966, p. 3). When justifying his rankings based on the diversity of institutions present in American higher education, Cartter counters diversity can be a costly luxury if it is accompanied by ignorance. Our present system works fairly well because most students, parents, and prospective employers know that a bachelor’s degree from Harvard, Stanford, Swarthmore, or Reed is ordinarily a better indication of ability and accomplishment than a bachelor’s degree from Melrose A & M or Siwash College. (Cartter, 1966, p. 3) These rankings were based on the “limited demand” perspective of educational quality, which may still exist in American higher education. Similar to today’s college rankings in national magazines, Cartter’s ratings were quite popular and were “considered in its time a runaway best-seller as rankings go, selling some 26,000 copies” (Webster, 1992b, p. 20).

Two other rankings of graduate programs occurred in the early 1970s. Kenneth D. Roose and Charles J. Anderson simulated the previous study conducted by Cartter with some minor changes (Stuart, 1995). In this study, Roose and Anderson “attempted to minimize the importance of an absolute rank order of the 130 institutions studied” (Stuart, 1995, p. 15). Peter Blau and Rebecca Zames Margulies provided one of the first rankings of professional schools in American higher education. Due to the low response rate on their survey of professional school deans, Blau and Margulies concluded, “deans in high-prestige fields, such as medicine, responded in smaller proportions than did deans in low-prestige fields” (Webster, 1992c, p. 256). Based on the low response rate in this study, Cartter and Lewis Solmon performed a similar study in the fields of education,
business, and law. Even though they used a significantly different methodology in their study, they achieved similar results to the rankings conducted by Blau and Margulies (Webster, 1992c).

The History of Quality Rankings in Undergraduate Education

While rankings of graduate programs in American higher education can be traced to the early 1900s, rankings of undergraduate programs are a much more recent phenomenon. “So few ratings of undergraduate programs and institutions have been published that what has been done is routinely slighted or ignored entirely” (Webster, 1986c, p. 34). One of the first quality rankings of undergraduate education began in 1946 when a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, Chesly Manly, wrote a story about unpublished rankings of member institutions of the Association of American Universities. He next devised six different rankings using the advice of others deemed as experts in higher education (Webster, 1986c). Manly “amassed a large amount of objective data that he used to determine the order of rating when there was no clearly defined consensus among his experts” (Webster, 1986c, p. 38). These rankings were the “10 best universities, coeducational colleges, men’s colleges, women’s colleges, law schools, and engineering schools” (Webster, 1992c, p. 243).

Beginning in 1967, Jack Gourman published ranking guides that were frequently used in American higher education as quality indicators and means for institutional comparisons. They “have been widely and often favorably reviewed in newspapers and magazines. Their rankings have been soberly reported in dozens of college newspapers and alumni magazines” (Webster, 1986b, p. 323). However, the Gourman Reports are also one of the most controversial rankings in higher education.
Gourman’s first book, although it seems to have been an honest attempt to rate colleges and universities, had so many flaws that it was nearly useless and in the next nine books Gourman apparently did not even make a serious attempt to rate colleges and universities…. No one who has reviewed any of Gourman’s ten books has ever been able to find a single college or university administrator, faculty member, or student who recalls ever having been contacted for information by letter, phone call, or personal visit from Gourman or any employee, agent, or assistant of Gourman. (Webster, 1986b, p. 324)

The major flaw of the Gourman report related to the mystique surrounding the methods used to collect this data and the identification of participants in this rating process. This secrecy of research methods was certainly foreign to acceptable practices within the higher education community and resulted in increased scrutiny of Gourman’s rankings. Based on these varied responses to these ratings, it appears there was a greater level of acceptance of these rankings from the general public than from those scholars within the academy. Interestingly enough, this sentiment still holds true with the increasing popularity of college rankings in national magazines in the general public and their relentless criticism within the higher education community.

In the late 1960s, Abram Samuels, a manufacturer from Allentown, Pennsylvania, began publishing brochures which ranked colleges based on the quality of undergraduate programs. While rather simplistic compared to the Gourman Reports, these rankings proved to be quite successful (Webster, 1986c). Several years after the initial publishing of these brochures, Samuels indicated “that he had never regarded [his work rating
colleges] as an accurate indicator of college rankings—I always thought it was more of a conversation piece than anything else” (Webster, 1986c, p. 40).

**Astin and Solmon Study**

In the early 1980s, Alexander Astin and Lewis Solmon explored the need for reputational rankings in a pilot study using seven academic fields at all four-year institutions in California, Illinois, New York, and North Carolina. In this study, faculty members were asked to rank institutions from their own state and from a national list of well-known institutions in these seven fields (Astin & Solmon, 1981). Rating criteria used in this study included “(a) overall quality of undergraduate education; (b) preparation of student for graduate school; (c) preparation of student for employment; (d) faculty commitment to undergraduate teaching; (e) scholarly accomplishments of faculty; and (f) innovativeness of curriculum” (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 19).

Astin and Solmon were able to draw several conclusions from this study. First of all, faculty members’ “judgments of the overall quality of an undergraduate department are heavily influenced by their perceptions of the scholarly accomplishments of the faculty in that department” (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 15). In turn, an institution may have an overall excellent reputation based on the merits of faculty members in one academic department. Thus, “reputational rankings seem to be heavily influenced by the halo effect” (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 16). Astin and Solmon also indicated a regional basis in reputational rankings by noting, “there seems to be a bias in the direction of favoring institutions in one’s own home state” (1981, p. 18).

The findings from this study may lead us to assume that reputational rankings are not worth the time, money, and resources needed to determine them. Rather, “if one
knows something about the admissions selectivity and size of a campus, then one can reasonably expect the institution to be viewed as a high quality institution” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 77). However, Astin and Solmon are quick to highlight some of the limitations of their study in order to prevent a hasty judgment on the importance of rankings. First, they note the small number and diversity of institutions included in this pilot study. “Properly constructed reputational surveys are probably most interesting when they identify good departments in otherwise undistinguished institutions” (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 19). Another limitation of this study is the six rating criteria used to evaluate academic departments.

If other criteria of excellence can be identified, either through additional reputational rankings or by means of longitudinal value-added studies of students, objective characteristics such as size and selectivity might provide much poorer estimates than they do for the quality ratings that we have used in this pilot project. (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 19)

The final limitation of this study is its inability to determine “how ‘quality’ as reflected in such expert judgments is related to the educational development of the student” (Astin & Solmon, 1981, p. 19). “One cannot know from reputational rankings what direct educational benefit is conferred on a student; that is, whether the institution does, in fact, make a value-added difference” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 77).

Based on their findings and the limitations of this pilot study, Astin and Solmon conclude while our analysis suggests that reputational ratings of undergraduate programs may indeed be unnecessary because they seem to be redundant with other known
information about institutions, we must defer our final judgment about the value of such ratings until additional ratings covering more fields and possibly more diverse quality criteria can be obtained, and until longitudinal value-added studies can be carried out to test the validity of such ratings. (1981, p. 19)

**Rankings in National Magazines**

While Astin and Solmon studied institutional rankings from within the academy, there were numerous journalistic endeavors in the popular press that presented college ratings based on a wide array of indicators. For example, beginning in 1968, *Playboy* presented its annual rating of the 25 most sexually active college campuses. In the early 1980s, *The Official Preppy Handbook* rated the 20 most preppy colleges and the top ten party schools (Webster, 1986c). In 1982, *Rolling Stone* even got into the ratings business by publishing its first annual *College Guide* (McDonough et al., 1998). During this same year, Edward B. Fiske, education editor for the *New York Times*, had the audacity, in the *New York Times Selective Guide to Colleges*, to accord colleges and universities from one to five stars in each of three areas—academics, social life, and overall quality of life. The uproar that followed prompted the *New York Times* to make him leave its name off subsequent editions of his book. (Webster, 1992a, p. 20)

Throughout the history of quality rankings, much research and study in this area was conducted within the higher education community and was of little interest to the general public.

For most of their history, mostly professors and academic administrators read academic quality rankings. They usually appeared in publications far too obscure,
with circulations far too tiny, for many college students, prospective college
students, and their parents to find them, much less read them. (Webster, 1992b, p. 20)

During the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of publications began to produce what was
construed as academic quality rankings of American colleges and universities. “More
recently, mass media publications in Europe and North America have discovered a
political vacuum in the higher education environment and have created numerous
‘reports’ that masquerade as measures of quality” (Nedwek & Neal, 1994, p. 76).

According to Webster (1992b),

> for the first time, large numbers of prospective students and their parents have
easy access to rankings of what these magazines consider the best colleges and
universities as well as the colleges and universities they consider the best value
for the money. (p. 20)

There is a diversity of national magazines that now provide this service to consumers of
higher education. *The National Review’s College Guide* highlights 50 institutions based
on undergraduate education and general education requirements. *The Insider’s Guide to
Colleges* is written by students and is based on their perceptions of academic quality at
selected institutions (Stuart, 1995). *Barron’s Best Buys in College Education* includes the
top 300 institutions based on “the best combination of sound data and student
satisfaction” (Solorzano, 1992, p. v).

Buys Now*, which “factors competitive cost and quality into the equation of selecting an
undergraduate education” (Stuart, 1995, p. 17). Unlike some other college rankings, the
majority of the colleges and universities on *Money*’s annual listing are public institutions as opposed to private schools. “One critic argues that the *Money* rankings unintentionally do a disservice to students by steering them away from some schools that offer a better education and toward others offering a poorer one” (Webster, 1992b, p. 29).

**US News & World Report**

Beginning in 1983, *US News & World Report* has published one of the most widely known yet also the most controversial rankings of undergraduate programs in American colleges and universities (Stuart, 1995).

Since their introduction in 1983, the rankings have evolved dramatically. In 1983, 1985, and 1987, the rankings were based solely on reputation surveys and were published as part of USNWR magazine. In 1987, a separate guidebook was published for the first time. Since 1988, the ranking methodology has been a mix of reputation and statistical data. And since 1997, USNWR’s *America’s Best Colleges* rankings have been available for free online at www.usnews.com. (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 9)

During the first three publication years (1983, 1985, and 1987), reputational surveys were sent only to college and university presidents and were the sole means of determining institutional quality. Beginning in 1988, *US News* published college rankings on an annual basis and incorporated other quality indicators in addition to reputation to determine their ratings. Reputation now only constituted 25% of an institution’s rank while other quality indicators such as retention and graduation rates counted for 75% of the total score. During this same year, reputational surveys were sent to deans and directors of admissions in addition to college presidents. It should be noted that the
rankings formula used by *US News & World Report* has changed on an annual basis since 1988 (Clarke, 2000).

The success of these rankings can be clearly determined through the sales volumes of these publications. “The *US News* issues that rank colleges sell so many more copies than an average issue that James Whalen, president of Ithaca College, calls them, in a reference to *Sports Illustrated*, the ‘swimsuit’ issues” (Webster, 1992b, p. 20). Due to the popularity of the rankings, *US News* began to publish *America’s Best Colleges* in 1990, which also enabled them to provide more detailed information on all schools included in this annual publication (Stuart, 1995).

*US News & World Report* was one of the first publications to assign a specific rank to each institution as opposed to simply grouping them into categories of academic quality.

Before the advent of the USNWR rankings, administrators, faculty, students, and alumni had to worry only about in which selectivity group their institution was placed. Once classified in a group, the institution was accorded roughly the same ‘prestige’ as all other institutions in the group. With the advent of USNWR rankings, they must now worry about how their institution is numerically ranked relative to its close competitors. (Ehrenberg, 2000, p. 51)

The assignment of a particular rank to each institution listed in the top 50 of each rating category in *US News* created quite a bit of controversy within the higher education community.

One reason college administrators hate rankings in *US News* is that, although academic quality rankings are almost 100 years old, the *US News* ratings are far
more widely read and far more influential with prospective college students than any previous ones. (Webster, 1992b, p. 20)

According to Nedwek and Neal (1994), “this unfortunate movement toward undisciplined consumerism appears to be gaining momentum. Although this approach has been labeled fundamentally dangerous and largely devoid of meaning, its popularity is growing and its effect on institutional decision-making is increasing” (p. 76). While there is a great deal of debate and criticism of the *US News* rankings, Daniel Webster, one of the leading national authorities on academic quality rankings, feels they are worthy of merit.

The *US News* rankings, although not without faults, have improved over the years to become, in the last two or three years, by far the best of the few rankings of undergraduate education that have ever been published—and among the best rankings ever published of any level of higher education. (Webster, 1992b, p. 21)

For the purposes of this study, the main rankings utilized will be those published by *US News & World Report* since they are the most renowned and researched ratings published in national magazines.

**Purpose and Need for College Rankings**

According to Robert Morse, Director of Data Research for *US News & World Report*, the rankings were first developed to “create an editorial product that was of interest to our readers” (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 10). As the publisher of one of the major newsmagazines in this country, the editors felt it was their duty to provide information to readers, which would assist them in their daily decision-making processes. In turn, college rankings would provide a valuable service to readers and could increase
the sales volume of magazines. Anne McGrath, Managing Editor of *America’s Best Colleges*, states “college choice is of such huge importance to a student’s academic and career success, and so costly, that we felt this was an area where our readers could use some comparative information about schools” (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 10).

Prior to the early 1980s, most college rankings were only found in academic journals, contained a great deal of statistical information about institutions and were not readily accessible to students and parents involved in the college decision-making process. According to Morse and Gilbert,

the main purpose of the *US News* rankings is not to publish for a mass readership a document with a long, detailed statistical methodology spelled out over many pages. Surely, this type of presentation would be vital if the only readers of *America’s Best Colleges* were members of the academic community. (1995, p. 91)

Morse and his colleagues at *US News* were intensely aware of their clientele (students and their parents) and their need for a great deal of information presented in an understandable and concise format. “An academic document would be of limited interest to the overwhelming majority of our readers and would be a financial flop from a publishing point of view” (Morse & Gilbert, 1995, p. 91).

**Service to the General Public**

So, why did *US News & World Report* decide to enter the college rankings business almost 20 years ago? At that time, there was “little, if any, easily usable or obtainable comparative information of the relative merits of schools currently available to students and their parents. *US News* feels that it is filling this void in higher education consumer information” (Morse & Gilbert, 1995, p. 92). While parents and students
involved in the college search process receive a great deal of information in the form of viewbooks, websites, CD roms, and well established college guidebooks, these informational tools do not provide a means for quick and easy comparisons between institutions. According to Morse and Gilbert (1995),

parents and students need and are demanding, based on the response that

*America’s Best Colleges* has achieved in the marketplace, a third party that can make an objective analysis, with easy-to-use statistical comparisons and carefully collected up-to-date information on the relative merits of various kinds of institutions in different educational categories… *US News* strongly believes that comparative information that measures the relative merits of institutions should be available when students consider a college education that, in some cases, now costs nearly $120,000. (p. 92)

Service to the general public prevails as the most common reason the publishers of *US News* give for continuing to rank American colleges and universities. They have assumed the duty of helping students make this all-important decision.

Your investment in a college education could profoundly affect your career opportunities, financial well-being, and quality of life….To find the right college, you need a source of reliable and consistent data-information that lets you compare one college with another and find the differences that matter to you. That’s what we do with our rankings. (*US News & World Report*, 2001f, para. 3, 5)

While newsmagazines such as *US News & World Report* have assumed the responsibility for providing this service to consumers, they must also acknowledge the public’s desire
for accuracy as well. Consumers of higher education expect “informed and meaningful interpretation of how to assess the quality and costs of undergraduate education, and the ability to collect and analyze appropriately the data used in the numerous pages of evaluation tables published in their guides” (Mallette, 1995, p. 32).

**Access to Information**

Another purpose of college rankings is their provision of a great deal of information about hundreds of institutions in a concise and understandable format.

According to Loretta Hardge, External Relations Coordinator for George Washington University’s National Center for Communication Studies, “there are thousands of colleges and universities in this country; somehow there has to be a way to differentiate among them. The general public is hungry for some kind of gauge” (Hay, 1992, p. 15). Unfortunately, those of us within higher education have not done a very good job of providing information on institutional comparisons for our customers.

The products of a service organization such as a university are intangible; the consumer finds it difficult to evaluate the service and the university finds it difficult to promote their specific product as well as the relative merits of their product over similar products. (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 515)

This has certainly helped to contribute to the popularity of college rankings in national magazines. Roger Williams, Assistant Vice President and Director of University Relations at the Pennsylvania State University, noted “higher education as an industry does not make these kinds of quality assessments. If we’re not going to do it, somebody else is” (Hay, 1992, p. 15). In fact, “the service marketing literature suggests that in the
face of ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in intangible purchases, ratings may serve to reduce uncertainty” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 515).

The college decision-making process can be quite stressful and overwhelming for many prospective students and their parents. Rankings may be seen as a means to make this vital process less difficult and challenging while also helping to boost students’ and parents’ confidence in their decision-making ability (McDonough et al., 1998).

Choosing a college is an intangible, expensive purchase perceived to be fraught with risks, and parents and students may be using national rankings as impartial sources of reliable information. The more uncertain the decision, the greater the likelihood that consumers consult ratings information in an attempt to lower their risks. Thus, theoretically, newsmagazine college rankings could help students and parents make college choices by not only providing them with reputational assessments but by emotionally bolstering their confidence in their high-stakes decisions. (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 516)

Sales Volume

It would be remiss not to mention one other purpose for national magazines to publish annual ratings of American colleges and universities. This purpose is related to the huge volume of sales and, in turn, the high income and advertising dollars received by the publishers. According to McDonough et al. (1998), *US News* sells approximately 2.3 million copies of its annual college rankings issue in addition to roughly 700,000 issues of *America’s Best Colleges*. Combining these sales figures with those of other national magazines totals approximately $15 million in annual sales without factoring in advertising revenue. It is apparent that college rankings are big business for these
magazines. “We wonder whether the variable most closely correlated with these rankings is the sales volume of the issue; if you are in the business of selling magazines, that is of legitimate and keen interest” (Bogue & Saunders, 1992, p. 89). “Each year there’s a new ‘winner’ on top of a new list. But the only consistent ‘winner’ from year to year is US News” (Machung, 1998, p. 16).

Reasons for Using Rankings in the College Decision-making Process

Selecting a college may be one of the most difficult and challenging decisions facing high school juniors and seniors. Up until this time, most students had little, if any, input into the primary and secondary schools they attended. The college decision-making process is a whole new world for them and can be overwhelming and stressful at times. College rankings in national magazines provide the means for reviewing and comparing information from a large number of institutions in a clear and concise format.

It is not surprising that consumers will seek out information sources that can provide an objective third-party point of view, simplify the overwhelming complex college selection process, and provide some comparative sense of institutional quality. College guidebooks and reputational studies supply the first of these services; only reputational studies, with their emphasis on statistical summaries and rank ordering, tend to supply the others. Nor is it surprising that reputational studies are especially popular in this age of statistical obsession and an all-but-incomprehensible higher education marketplace, where the need for simplification and quantification is most accurate. (McGuire, 1995, p., 45)

Robert Morse, Director of Data Research for US News, expresses a similar reason for using the rankings. “We think our guidebook, and its rankings, are a rich source of hard
information that provides a real starting point in the arduous process of finding the right college” (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 14).

Due to the competition and pressure involved in selecting the best college or university, any resources that help facilitate this process have become hot commodities. “Students have socially constructed themselves as college applicants needing professional assistance to stay competitive in the college access contest and have managed to create the conditions of a growth industry” (McDonough, 1994, p. 444). According to Hossler and Foley (1995), this factor may be a compelling reason why students and parents appear to place so much importance on college rankings.

**Prestige**

Many students also want to attend the most prestigious institutions possible. “Students are eager, and more than willing to pay, to attend a college with the reputation that they believe will lead to high-paying jobs or top professional schools” (Evenson, 1998, p. 11). Since high school students and their parents really have no way to evaluate institutional quality, they may tend to rely on perceived reputations and prestige in selecting colleges. According to Anne McGrath, Managing Editor of *America’s Best Colleges*,

it may be that some baby-boomer hyperparents think that doing the best for their child means automatically choosing the highest-ranked school possible. But using the tables that way is analogous to looking at a list of top-ranked stocks and sending off a fat check without considering whether the investment fits in your portfolio or suits your tolerance for risk. We hope that we have a positive impact
on the way students choose colleges….Our overall goal is helping families to make good choices. (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 11)

For many consumers of higher education, institutions appearing in the top 50 lists of the US News ranking categories are indeed the most prestigious colleges and universities in our country. “Who, 15 years ago, would have imagined a for-profit newsmagazine having this kind of clout to measure, and ultimately shape, perceptions of institutional prestige” (Machung, 1998, p. 16)?

**Parental and High School Counselor Influences**

It should be noted parents are also a major market for college rankings in national magazines. In a study conducted by the Art and Science Group, parents had a tendency to place more emphasis on the rankings than their children. Two-thirds of parents participating in this study indicated rankings were very helpful in determining the quality of an institution (Machung, 1998).

In addition, there are limited resources on the college decision-making process available to students through their high school guidance counselors. Often, these counselors are assigned large numbers of students to work with thus preventing them from providing a great deal of information and support to individuals.

Secondary and postsecondary educational institutions have left college access concerns high and dry by not having educators assigned to the task of helping students make the transition to college. The profit-making sector has stepped into that vacuum and filled in the gap-college knowledge-that it could. The result of this commodification of college knowledge is that the corporate sector provides what will sell to those who can afford to buy it. (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 532)
In a recent study on college rankings, high school guidance counselors indicated “that rankings guides had become as much a part of school culture as textbooks. Moreover, an increasing number of students and their families are relying heavily on them for information” (Blair, 2000, p. 6). Other guidance counselors felt rankings “can give students some guidance and direction. I do use these as one facet of helping students make choices about college” (Evenson, 1998, p. 30). Another counselor added, “Reputational rankings help students to learn about the existence of some smaller schools and their programs which they then may consider attending” (Evenson, 1998, p. 31). Finally, high school guidance counselors viewed rankings “somewhat of a positive indicator to students but should not be the only factor to determine final choice. Parents and students need to have some idea of where programs stand in comparison because of the investment involved” (Evenson, 1998, p. 31).

**Ways to Use College Rankings in National Magazines**

There are many suggested ways to use rankings in national magazines in the college decision-making process. Anne McGrath, Managing Editor of *America’s Best Colleges*, writes

I feel so strongly that parents and students should know that there is a proper way to use the rankings: as one tool in what ought to be an exhaustive research effort. The rankings can provide a wealth of information, but they don’t provide an easy answer. (Britz & Lawlor, 2001, p. 15)

McGrath and her colleagues at *US News* suggest the rankings be used as the starting point in selecting a college or university to attend since they offer a great deal of information in a single publication (Britz & Lawlor, 2001). “The [ranking] tables are a source of highly
useful information about colleges that is otherwise hard to obtain and which will help you narrow your search to a small number of colleges that are a good fit” (McGrath, 2001, p. 70). Students can use the rankings to select schools of interest to them and compare academic quality based on the indicators used by *US News*. They can then use the institutional data printed in the magazines to determine which factors or indicators are most important to them. Students can next focus on these specific indicators in addition to the school’s overall rank to further reduce the number of schools they are considering (*US News & World Report*, 2001b).

Geoffrey Bannister, President of Butler University, offers his suggestions for using college rankings. His comments are based on his position as a college president and his role as the parent of a college student. College rankings are one way for students and their families to identify institutions which best fit their needs. They also enable families to sort institutions based on geographic locations and Carnegie Classifications. In addition, Bannister recommends that students should take a careful look at institutional data such as the student/faculty ratio and ACT and/or SAT scores. This information will help determine the best fit for a student and will possibly indicate if a student is actually admissible to particular colleges and universities (Bannister, 1996).

The editors at *US News* offer these final tips for using their rankings in the college search process.

- Do use the rankings as one tool to select and compare schools.
- Do not rely solely on rankings to choose a college.
- Do use the search and sort capabilities of this website to learn more about schools.
• Do not wait until the last minute. College matters. Take your time and choose carefully.
• Do think long and hard about the right place for you. (*US News & World Report*, 2001f, para. 7)

They conclude by adding the following words of caution.

Simply because a school is tops in its category does not mean it is the top choice for everyone. A prospective student’s academic and professional ambitions, personal preferences, financial resources, and scholastic record, as well as a school’s size, atmosphere, and location, should play major roles in determining a college choice. Moreover, it is crucial to remember that schools separated by only a few places in the rankings are extremely close in academic quality. (*US News & World Report*, 2001b, para. 23)

There are many reasons and ways to use rankings in national magazines in the college decision-making process. David Webster, a leading national authority on academic quality rankings, best illustrates their use by stating

Rankings, to be sure, have their faults. Nonetheless, they are far more useful for providing information on the comparative quality of American colleges and universities than are accrediting agencies, college catalogs and viewbooks, and most college guidebooks. Democracy, said Winston Churchill, is the worst form of government except for all the others. So may academic quality rankings be the worst means of comparing the quality of American colleges and universities—except for all the others. (Webster, 1992a, p. 22)
Student Use of College Rankings in National Magazines

Over the past 20 years, there has been a great deal of research and scrutiny of college rankings as indicators of institutional quality. However, there is very limited information available on student use of rankings in the college decision-making process. In 1995, the Art and Science Group conducted a study of 500 high school seniors who planned to enter college for the 1995 fall semester. Each participant had at least a 1,000 on the SAT with a proposed major in the fields of engineering, science and technology, humanities and social sciences, business, education, and health professions (Art & Science Group, 1995).

Findings of this study indicated “students utilize newsmagazine rankings of colleges and universities far less frequently than other major sources of information that influence college choice” (Art & Science Group, 1995, p. 3). Approximately 54 percent of respondents indicated they had consulted the rankings in deciding which colleges to apply and attend. Furthermore, “among the students who utilized them, the value of the newsmagazine rankings in college choice is far lower than that of other major sources of information and advice” (Art & Science Group, 1995, p. 2). An estimated 21 percent of participants in this study indicated the rankings were “extremely valuable” while 18 percent rated them “not valuable at all”.

Another finding of this study was “the overall impact of newsmagazine rankings on college choice is among the lowest of all major sources of information and advice” (Art & Science Group, 1995, p. 4). College catalogs, parents, and admissions representatives were rated as the most valuable sources of information with rankings having a significantly lower impact on student choice. Finally, this study found “for
students who utilize the *US News* ratings, the rankings serve largely to validate and inform pre-existing college interests and evaluations” (Art & Science Group, 1995, p. 8).

By reviewing the findings of this study, researchers with the Art and Science Group were able to conclude

*US News* functions much like a guidebook for the students who read it, confirming what they already know, providing additional information and insights, and suggesting where further inquiries might be made. In some cases, students told us *US News* rankings did have an effect on their application and matriculation decisions. Far more frequently, however, its role was an informational one. (Art & Science Group, 1995, p. 8)

**Hossler and Foley Study**

Due to the unavailability of information on the use of student rankings, Hossler and Foley in 1995 conducted an informal poll of college admissions directors to learn more about this topic. While this was not a scientific study based on the collection of quantitative data, Hossler and Foley were able to identify frequent themes and draw some conclusions from their work. The Director of Admissions at Indiana University suggested, “that if prospective students know little about an institution, then guidebooks and ratings may be more important. If a school has a high degree of visibility in a region or nationally, ratings and guidebooks have little effect” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 27). Conversely, the Director of Admissions at Macalester College commented “that many good students from suburban high schools may find guidebooks and ratings useful because of the high student-to-counselor ratio” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 27). According to the Director of Admissions at DePaul, “receiving high marks in a guidebook or rating
book can have a very positive effect on small, less visible colleges. For larger, more visible colleges and universities, however, ratings and guidebooks have a negligible impact on students’ decisions” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 28).

Based on these comments and others from their study, Hossler and Foley (1995) were able to conclude rankings have a very insignificant impact on the college decision-making process for most students. First generation college students and those in lower socioeconomic classes tend to use the rankings less than other students. Finally, Hossler and Foley suggest

that only middle-income students are extensively influenced by guidebooks and ratings. In addition, it may be that those middle-income students considering smaller private and public institutions are most likely to use ratings and guidebooks.…For many students and their families, these guidebooks may have little impact or serve only as confirmatory devices, helping them to feel comfortable with decisions they have already made. (1995, p. 28)

**McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez Study**

McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez conducted the most comprehensive study on the use of college rankings in 1997. Data were used from the 1995 freshman survey, conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at UCLA. The sample for this study consisted of 221,897 new freshmen at 432 four-year institutions in the United States. Of the students included in this sample, 59.9% considered rankings in national magazines not important, 29.6% found them to be somewhat important, while 10.5% indicated rankings to be very important in the college decision-making process (McDonough et al., 1998).
Similar to the study conducted by Hossler and Foley, McDonough et al. found first generation college students placed lesser importance on the rankings than their colleagues from families with college educations. In addition, a higher percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds do not see the rankings as important. Conversely, the majority of students from families with high incomes ($75,000 and up) view the rankings as very important in the college selection process (McDonough et al., 1998).

For those students who indicated college rankings were somewhat or very important, they are more likely to have frequently asked a teacher for advice in high school, more likely to be high-achieving students, and more likely to aspire to doctoral, law, and medical degrees. Moreover, 65% of [these students] anticipate being satisfied with college, compared to just 44% of those who find them to be not important. (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 520)

These students are also more concerned about the academic and social reputation of an institution than their peers who view rankings as not important. Students who indicate rankings are very important place much greater emphasis on the acceptance rate of graduates into prestigious masters and doctoral programs. In turn, they are “twice as likely to give weight to a college’s reputation for graduates to land good jobs compared to students who find them to be not important” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 523).

In addition, McDonough and her colleagues found Asian American students were more likely to see the rankings as very important as compared to other racial and ethnic groups. On the other hand, Chicano/a students placed significantly less importance on
rankings in selecting an institution. Students who are United States citizens are also less likely to place a great deal of importance on the rankings (McDonough et al., 1998).

In terms of institutional types, students who view college rankings as very important “are more likely to consider the size of a college in their decision, and of the students attending private universities, three times as many students find the rankings to be very important compared to those who consider them not important” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 523). These students more frequently choose an institution based on reputation, distinct course offerings and programs, recommendations from high school counselors, and college recruitment efforts (McDonough et al., 1998).

McDonough et al. also determined students who attend a college or university in their hometown (within a 10 mile radius) are less likely to see rankings as somewhat or very important compared to students who attend institutions farther away. In addition, students who apply at a greater number of schools see the rankings as more important in their college selection. In essence, “students (and families) who make extra investments into a college education in terms of leaving home for school and investing the time and money required for numerous applications are more likely to be those taking national rankings to heart” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 527).

After reviewing all of the data analyzed in this study, McDonough and her colleagues provided the following conclusions.

The top student and institutional characteristics associated with the use of newsmagazine rankings in choosing a college are students who are focused on the college’s academic reputation; high-achieving students; students who seek advice from their teachers, school, and private counselors in making their college
choices; students attending public universities; students motivated to choose their college because of a liberal education ideal; students attending more selective colleges and universities; and high-income students. Overall, this study points to use of newsmagazine rankings as a phenomenon of high-socioeconomic status, high-achieving students who attend highly competitive post-secondary institutions and are focused on colleges that will provide them with a good liberal education but that will also position them well for graduate school and professional opportunities. (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 529)

At the time of this study, an estimated 400,000 students were using rankings in newsmagazines compared with the total freshman enrollment of approximately one million students (McDonough et al., 1998). Therefore, it appears that rankings in national magazines have little impact on the college decision-making process for most students. For those students who do use the rankings, they “have fine-tuned perceptions of what is important in choosing a college and already know, and act on, notions of which institutions are ‘best’. Newsmagazine rankings are merely reinforcing and legitimizing these students’ status obsessions” (McDonough et al., 1998, p. 531).

2002 Art and Science Group Study

In October 2002, the Art and Science Group published the findings of their newest study which replicated their 1995 research on the importance of rankings on students’ college decision-making process. The 500 participants in this study included seniors in high school (or perhaps their parents) who planned to enter college for the following fall semester and who had at least a 800 on the SAT I (Art & Science Group, 2002).
Findings from this study indicated only 20% of students acknowledged actually reading college rankings when making decisions about which schools to apply and to attend. In addition, “only 10% of the respondents strongly agreed that rankings are very important in trying to sort out the differences between colleges” (Hesel, 2002, question 7, para. 2). However, it should be noted 57% of respondents agreed somewhat with the statement that rankings are helpful in identifying colleges to apply and possibly enroll. For those students who do utilize rankings in selecting a college of choice, the majority of students (26%) read the ratings in *US News & World Report*. In addition, a higher proportion of the most highly qualified students were more likely to have read *US News* rankings than students with lower test scores. Students from families with higher incomes also were more likely to have read *US News* rankings in college decisions than students with family incomes below $75,000 (Hesel, 2002, question 1, para. 2).

This most recent study by the Art and Science Group found rankings matter less in the college decision-making process than other factors such as campus visits, college websites, and viewbooks. They conclude by suggesting college leaders would be much better off if they gave the time now devoted to hand-wringing over the rankings to more vigorous pursuits of academic innovation, careful consideration of how campus tours are handled, the content and quality of communications with parents, or determining with greater imagination and conviction the true distinctions of their institutions (Hessel, 2002, para. 4).
Summary

Reviewing information on the history of college rankings, their purpose and need, and reasons and ways for utilization help to create a greater understanding of their vast impact on American higher education. *US News & World Report* has been in the rankings business now for almost 20 years and has unquestionably captured the attention of the academy throughout this time. Debates on the accuracy, methodology, integrity, and value of rankings are inevitable each September in anticipation (or response) to the latest top 50 listing.

For this research, the problem is to establish the extent students use rankings and to determine user characteristics based on demographics and institutional type. While there is a great deal of information and research done on the overall quality and legitimacy of rankings in national magazines, there is very limited research on their importance in students’ college decision-making process. According to Bogue and Aper (2000), “rankings have been referred to as ‘quantified gossip’ and ‘navel gazing’ material for academic journals. While media reports of college rankings feature the ‘consumer choice’ strength of such rankings, the evidence for their use in this way is uncertain” (p. 92). Although rankings are definitely “big business” for national magazines such as *US News & World Report, Money, and Newsweek*, their overall impact on consumers and college choice is yet to be determined.
Chapter 3

METHOD FOR THE STUDY

The initial step in this study was to determine the appropriate newsmagazine containing college rankings to be utilized as a model for this research. Based on the literature review previously noted and the sales figures from the McDonough study (McDonough et al., 1998), college rankings appearing in *US News* were the most widely read, intensely studied, and highly debated. Since these rankings have been published since 1983, they were also more established than those appearing in other magazines. The Fall 2000 edition of *America’s Best Colleges*, published by *US News & World Report*, was the magazine utilized to determine ranked and unranked schools for this research.

*US News* Ranking Categories

In the fall 2000 edition, *US News* placed colleges and universities in four ranking categories, which were Best National Universities, Best National Liberal Arts Colleges, Best Regional Schools-Universities, and Best Regional Schools-Liberal Arts Colleges. National rankings were done in the Best National Universities and Best National Liberal Arts Colleges categories. For the Best Regional Schools-Universities and Best Regional Schools-Liberal Arts Colleges categories, rankings were done within four geographic areas (north, south, midwest, and west) and were not compared on a national basis (McGrath, 1999). It should be noted that *US News* modified the names of their ranking categories for the fall 2002 issue of *America’s Best Colleges* due to changes in the Carnegie Classifications in 2000. For the purposes of this study, these new Carnegie
Classifications were utilized. Specific definitions and revised names of each US News ranking category and correlating Carnegie Classification are provided in chapter one of this manuscript.

In addition to the top 50 schools in each ranking category, US News listed institutions in the second tier, third tier, or fourth tier. While these schools were presented alphabetically, the editors did provide the numerical rankings at the beginning of each tier. For example, in the Best National Universities category, rankings in the second tier began at 51, with the third tier starting at 121 and the fourth tier at 177 (McGrath, 1999).

This study focused on those institutions that were included in the Best National Universities and the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking categories in US News. Best National Universities was a combination of the doctoral/research universities-extensive and intensive categories of the Carnegie Classifications. Best National Liberal Arts Colleges consisted of those schools listed as Baccalaureate Colleges-Liberal Arts (McGrath, 1999). It is important to note changes made to the Carnegie Classifications in 2000 did not significantly alter institutions in these two US News & World Report categories.

Since both of these ranking categories included institutions from a national rather than regional perspective, they were more conducive to this study and eliminated any geographic bias. In addition, institutions were selected from not only the top 50 schools in these two US News categories, but also from the fourth tier listing as well. Schools appearing in the fourth tier were not ranked but were simply presented in the form of an alphabetical listing. However, the tiers were presented in a hierarchical format with the second tier containing higher ranked institutions and with the fourth tier consisting of
lower ranked schools. For the purposes of this study, ranked schools only consisted of those institutions appearing in the top 50 listings. Since institutions included in the fourth tier were the lowest ranked in each US News category, they were referred to as unranked schools for this study.

**Cooperative Institutional Research Program**

Another factor in the selection of institutions was their participation in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) for fall 2000. The CIRP is a national survey of entering students and is the nation’s longest and most comprehensive study of American higher education. Data collected in this annual survey help to determine the attributes and characteristics of first year, full-time freshmen attending one of over 700 American colleges and universities (Sax et al., 2000).

The principal purpose of the CIRP is to assess the effects of college on students. During the past 35 years, the CIRP has generated an array of normative, substantive, and methodological research about a wide range of issues in American higher education. A recent study of the higher education literature showed the CIRP publications and research based on CIRP data are among the sources most cited by researchers. (Sax et al., 2000, p. 1)

Since 1993, only institutions with regional accreditation were included in the CIRP study. A total of 1,560 institutions were eligible to participate in fall 2000. Out of these schools, 404,667 new freshmen at 717 colleges and universities participated in the CIRP (Sax et al., 2000).

For the purposes of the 2000 CIRP, the population has been defined as all institutions of higher education admitting first time freshmen and granting a
baccalaureate-level degree or higher listed in the Opening Fall Enrollment (OPE) files of the U.S. Department of Education’s Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS). An institution is considered eligible [to participate in the CIRP] if it was operating at the time of the HEGIS survey and had a first-time full-time (FIFT) freshman class of at least 25 students. (Sax et. al., 2000, p. 114)

Selection Process for Institutions

The 717 institutions participating in the CIRP for fall 2000 were then compared to colleges and universities appearing in rankings in the fall 2000 issue of America’s Best Colleges, published by US News & World Report. In the Best National Universities ranking category, 32 of the top 50 institutions participated in the CIRP. These 32 schools were reviewed to identify geographic regions, student characteristics, and institutional type (public or private). Specific factors considered when selecting institutions included geographic location (such as urban, suburban, small town, etc), undergraduate enrollment, freshman retention rates, and student/faculty ratio. Student characteristics examined related to gender breakdown, percentage of students from out-of-state and from other countries, ethnicity of student body, and number of students living on-campus in the residence halls. After reviewing these factors, ten institutions including public and private schools were selected from 13 states representing different regions.

The fourth tier listing of the Best National Universities ranking category contained 52 schools with 16 participating in the CIRP for fall 2000. These 16 schools were then reviewed using the same conditions as noted above. This selection process was utilized to ensure consistency across the rankings and tiers and to provide a means for
comparison in addressing the research questions for this study. Ten schools, including public and private institutions, were selected from this fourth tier listing. In summary, a total of 20 institutions, 10 ranked and 10 unranked, were selected from the Best National Universities category.

A comparable process was used to select schools listed in the top 40 ranking for Best National Liberal Arts Colleges. It is important to note all ranked schools in this listing were private institutions, which was perfectly reasonable since they were all liberal arts colleges. In this *US News* ranking category, 41 of the 42 institutions participated in the fall 2000 CIRP study. These 41 schools were reviewed to identify geographic regions and student characteristics. Of these 41 schools, ten institutions were selected from 13 states representing different regions.

The fourth tier listing of the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking category contained 37 schools with 22 participating in the CIRP for fall 2000. These 22 schools, all private institutions, were then reviewed using the same conditions as noted above. Ten schools from the fourth tier of this ranking category were selected for this study. Combining these 20 liberal arts colleges with schools selected from the Best National Universities listing provided a total of 40 institutions for this research study.

**Random Sampling Process for Participating Institutions**

The 40 institutions selected for this study had considerably dissimilar student enrollments, especially in the Best National Universities category. In addition, each college surveyed varying percentages of their first-time, full-time freshman population. These factors lead to vastly different sample sizes from each participating school, which
could have resulted in one or two institutions dominating the statistical findings for this research.

In order to offset this factor, a random sample of 500 observations was selected from the colleges and universities in this study with over 500 participant responses on the CIRP. Random numbers were generated for each response. Observations were then sorted by these random numbers with the first 500 retained for this study.

**Student Information Form**

The instrument used to collect the CIRP data is called the Student Information Form (SIF). This survey is revised on an annual basis in response to societal and student trends and faculty and administrator’s research interests. The SIF is administered during new student orientation, freshman seminar classes, fall semester registration, freshman English classes, or at other times within the first few weeks of school (Sax et al., 2000). This assessment tool is “designed for self-administration under proctored conditions and for processing onto magnetic tape with a mark reflex reader” (Sax et al., 2000, p.117). A sample version of the 2000 Student Information Form is included in Appendix A. In addition, the 2001 version of this assessment instrument may be found at http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp_2001s.pdf.

The 2000 SIF contained 39 questions with over 300 individual data elements. One of the questions on the SIF pertained to various reasons why students selected their institution of choice. This particular item, question number 35, stated, “Below are some reasons that might have influenced your decision to attend this particular college. How important was each reason in your decision to come here” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129)? Factors such as high school teachers, parents and family members’ influence, cost, and
scholarship availability were listed as possible reasons for choosing this specific school. The most significant response presented for this question, which directly related to this study, was “rankings in national magazines” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129). Students were asked to assess the level of influence rankings have on their college decision-making process as “very important, somewhat important, or not important” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129). Therefore, this response to the SIF was utilized to determine the relationship between the level of importance placed on college rankings and selected other variables specified in the research questions for this study.

**Study Participants**

Subjects for this study were entering freshmen who participated in the CIRP for fall 2000 and who attended one of the 40 institutions selected for this analysis. No individual responses on the Student Information Form (SIF) were used for this research. Rather, individual student data for each institution selected for this study were assembled in aggregate form along with other schools from each US News ranking category. In addition, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) did not provide data from each specific institution included in this study. The Higher Education Research Institute provided aggregate responses for the four sets of ten institutions within the two US News ranking categories. For example, student responses for all ten institutions selected in the fourth tier of the Best National Universities category were presented in aggregate form.

Crosstabulations were conducted within each ranking category as a means of analysis for the specific research questions for this study. The chi-square analysis was used to determine relationships between ranking importance and selected variables such as attendance at ranked or unranked schools and public or private institutions. This was
the most appropriate statistical test for this research since all data utilized were categorical.

You use the chi-square test when both the independent and dependent variables are categorical….When the expected frequencies are determined, it is assumed that the two independent variables are unrelated. Therefore, if the observed frequencies for the groups are different from the expected frequencies, there is a relationship between the independent variables. (Hale, 1992, p.134)

Based on this information from Hale, the chi-square analysis was the most suitable statistical test when comparing two categorical measures. It was used to address the underlying research questions for this study.

**Importance Placed on Rankings**

The prevailing research question for this study pertained to the importance students place on rankings in national newsmagazines. In particular, do students perceive college rankings to be an important factor in selecting their institution of choice? Data from all 40 institutions included in this study were complied to address this research question.

Table 3.1 represents comparisons for data analysis using simple descriptive statistics. Participant response patterns (very important, somewhat important, not important) were examined to determine the importance placed on college rankings by entering freshmen. In addition, the chi square goodness of fit test was utilized to determine the significance of this data analysis.
Table 3.1  Data Analysis for Importance of Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Importance</th>
<th>Rankings in National Magazines (One Response for Question SIF 35)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Level of Importance for Ranked and Unranked Institutions

Another research question for this study was related to the level of importance placed on college rankings for those students attending ranked and unranked national universities. Specifically, does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national universities and those schools that are not ranked? The ten ranked schools and the ten unranked schools selected from the Best National Universities category were used as the sample for this research question. Using the response “rankings in national magazines” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129) from question number 35 on the SIF, the chi square analysis was used to answer this research question. Table 3.2 represents the process for data analysis based on this variable.

The next research question for this study concerned the importance placed on rankings by students attending liberal arts colleges. Does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national liberal arts colleges and those colleges that are not ranked? The ten ranked schools and the ten unranked schools selected from the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges category were used as the sample for this research question. Using the response “rankings in national magazines” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129) from question number 35 on the SIF, the chi square analysis was used to answer this research question. Table 3.3 represents the process for data analysis used for this research question.
Table 3.2  Data Analysis for Ranked and Unranked Schools in the Best National Universities Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking Category</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best National Universities Ranked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best National Universities Not Ranked (Tier 4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3  
Data Analysis for Ranked and Unranked Schools in the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking Category</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best National Liberal Arts Colleges Ranked</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best National Liberal Arts Colleges Not Ranked (Tier 4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Level of Importance for Public and Private Institutions

An additional question for this study pertained to the level of importance placed on rankings by students attending public or private institutions. Specifically, does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending public or private national universities? Data from 16 of the 20 institutions selected for this study from the Best National Universities *US News* ranking category were collected to address this research question. An equal number of public and private universities were chosen from the top 50 listing and from the fourth tier of this category. Using the response “rankings in national magazines” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129) from question 35 on the SIF, the chi square analysis was used to answer this research question. Table 3.4 represents the data analysis for this variable.

Student Demographics

There were other questions included on the Student Information Form, which collected demographic information about entering college students. Some of these items pertained to gender, age, college place of residence, distance from home, average high school grades, parents’ socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Sax et al., 2000). For this study, these items served as a means to determine specific demographic information about the students who specified rankings as an important factor in their college decision-making process. This information was utilized to answer the following research question for this study. Does the importance attached to college rankings in national magazines vary significantly when response patterns are examined by gender, age, place of
Table 3.4   Data Analysis for Public and Private Schools in the Best National Universities Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public National Universities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private National Universities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
residence, distance from permanent home, academic achievement, financial status, or ethnicity?

Data from all 40 institutions included in this study were compiled to address this research question. A separate statistical analysis was conducted for each demographic factor using the response “rankings in national magazines” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 129) from question number 35 on the SIF. Participant response patterns (very important, somewhat important, and not important) were examined to determine the gender, age, place of residence, distance from permanent home, academic achievement, financial status, and ethnicity for those students who placed more importance on college rankings. The chi square analysis was used to answer this research question.

Table 3.5 represents the methods of analyses for determining the importance of rankings based on gender. In terms of participants’ age, the SIF presented ten response options for question number two, which reads, “How old will you be on December 31 of this year” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 127)? For the purposes of this study, these ten categories were collapsed into two, which were called Traditional Freshmen and Non-traditional Freshmen. Traditional Freshmen were between the ages of 16 or younger and 19 and Non-Traditional Freshmen were age 20 and older. Table 3.6 presents the methods of analyses used to determine ranking importance based on age.

To determine participants’ place of residence, the SIF presented six responses to question number 13, which read, “Where do you plan to live during the fall term” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 127)? These six responses were collapsed into three categories for this study: On-campus, Off-campus with Family, and Off-campus without Family. The On-campus category included “college dormitory, fraternity or sorority house, and other campus
Table 3.5 Data Analysis for Importance Based on Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.6  Data Analysis for Importance Based on Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Traditional Freshmen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Freshmen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
student housing” (Sax et al., 2000, p.127). Off-campus with Family included the “with my family or other relatives” SIF response while Off-campus without Family consisted of the “other private home, apartment, or room” answer (Sax et al., 2000, p.127). Table 3.7 presents the method of analysis used to determine place of residence as compared to level of importance placed on college rankings.

In terms of distance from home for participants, several responses were presented for question six on the SIF, which read, “How many miles is this college from your permanent home” (Sax et al., 2000, p.127)? Two responses, “5 or less miles, and 6-10 miles” (Sax et al., 2000, p.127), were collapsed into ten or less miles for the purposes of this study. Table 3.8 presents the methods of analysis used to identify the distance from home of participants based on ranking importance.

Table 3.9 presents the method of analyses used to determine academic achievement for students based on the level of importance placed on college rankings. Eight responses on the SIF were presented for question seven which stated, “What was your average grade in high school” (Sax et al., 2000, p.127)? These eight responses were collapsed into three categories for this study: A (included A or A+ and A-), B (combined B+, B, and B-), and C or Below (incorporated C+, C, and D).

To determine participants’ financial status, question 20 on the SIF stated, “What is your best estimate of your parents’ total income last year? Consider income from all sources before taxes” (Sax et al., 2000, p.128). There were 14 responses presented for this item, which were collapsed into four for the purposes of this research study. Lower Income consisted of total earnings of less than $6,000 to $24,999 with Middle Income ranging from $25,000 to $59,999. Upper Income was defined as total earnings from
Table 3.7  Data Analysis for Importance Based on Place of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-Campus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Campus with Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Campus without Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Home</td>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten or Less Miles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-50 miles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100 miles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-500 miles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 500 miles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.9  Data Analysis for Importance Based on Academic Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or Below</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
$60,000 to $149,999 while Top Income was those earning $150,000 or higher. Table 3.10 presents the methods of analysis used to identify the financial status of participants based on the importance of rankings.

In terms of ethnicity, the SIF form asked participants if they were “White/Caucasian; African American/Black; American Indian; Asian American/Asian; Mexican American/Chicano; Puerto Rican; Other Latino, or Other” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 128). Unlike other demographic information on the SIF, this question directed students to “mark all that apply” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 128). In order to discover the ethnicity of students who viewed rankings as important, those students who marked only one race were included in the analysis of this question. In addition, the eight responses to this item were collapsed into four, which were now called White/Caucasian, African American/Black, Asian American/Asian, and Hispanic/Latino. The “Mexican American/Chicano, Puerto Rican, and the Other Latino” SIF responses were collapsed into the Hispanic/Latino category for this study (Sax et al., 2000, p. 128). Table 3.11 presents the method of analysis used to examine ethnicity based on ranking importance.

The results of the data analysis for this research question were also compared to findings in previous studies on student use of college rankings conducted by Hossler and Foley (1995) and McDonough et al. (1998). As previously noted, these studies indicated students in lower socioeconomic classes tend to use the rankings less than other students (Hossler & Foley, 1995). Conversely, the majority of students from families with high incomes viewed the rankings as very important in the college selection process (McDonough et al., 1998). McDonough and her colleagues also determined students who attend a college or university in their hometown were less likely to view rankings as
Table 3.10  Data Analysis for Importance Based on Financial Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Status</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/ Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American/Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
important. Findings from these two studies were utilized as a source of hypotheses for this research.

The purpose of this study was to determine the importance of college rankings in national magazines on students’ institutional choice. Analysis of student data from 40 diverse institutions in 13 states provided further insight and understanding of this phenomenon in American higher education.
Chapter 4

STUDENT USE OF COLLEGE RANKINGS: DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 40 institutions representing two *US News* ranking categories were selected for this research. In addition, each of these schools participated in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) for fall 2000. For this study, there were 14,541 first-time, full-time freshmen represented in the sample. Of these students, 8827 attended national universities while 5714 were enrolled in liberal arts colleges.

Participant responses from the CIRP Student Information Form (SIF) were analyzed to address each of the research questions for this study. While some questions utilized responses from all 14,541 new freshmen, other analyses were conducted with specific data subsets.

**Importance Placed on Rankings**

The foremost research question for this analysis was related to the importance students place on college rankings in national newsmagazines. Specifically, do students perceive college rankings to be an important factor in selecting their institution of choice? Responses to question number 35 on the SIF were reviewed for all 14,541 freshmen from the 40 schools selected for this study. Simple descriptive statistics are presented for this analysis. Table 4.1 represents the responses for this research question.

These data indicated 19.1% of students viewed rankings in national magazines as very important while 37.6% of new freshmen considered rankings as somewhat important in the college decision-making process. The majority of respondents, 43.4%, perceived
Table 4.1  Importance of Rankings in Selecting An Institution of Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>6304</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>5461</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>2776</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14541</td>
<td>95.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15241</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
rankings as not important in the selection of their institution of choice. A chi-square goodness of fit test was run to determine the significance of this analysis. Utilizing all three responses on the SIF, the expected frequency in each of these cells was 4847. The results of the chi square = 1400.637, df=2, p<.001 which indicated a significant relationship between frequency of responses and level of importance placed on rankings.

It could also be inferred that the responses “very important” and “somewhat important” both indicated students’ placement of some level of importance on college rankings. When combining response frequencies for these two items, 56.7% of freshmen placed some level of importance on rankings in national magazines. Once again, the chi square analysis goodness of fit test was used to determine the significance of the relationship between the combined responses of “very important” and “somewhat important” with the “not important” response. The results of the chi square = 656.958, df=1, p<.001 which again demonstrated a significant relationship between these factors.

Level of Importance for Ranked and Unranked Institutions

Another significant inquiry for this research study related to the level of importance placed on ratings based on student attendance at ranked and unranked institutions. Two research questions using separate samples were created to determine this factor.

Best National Universities

The first part of this analysis was conducted for those schools included in the US News Best National Universities ranking category. Of the 20 institutions included in this sample, ten were selected from the top 50 listing of US News while another ten were chosen from the fourth tier of this ranking category. The sample for this research question
included 8827 freshmen with 4473 attending ranked schools and 4354 from fourth tier institutions.

Analyses of student responses to question 35 on the Student Information Form (SIF) were used to address the next research question for this study. Specifically, does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national universities and those schools that are not ranked? Table 4.2 presents the data analysis used to address this research question.

This analysis showed 76.8% of freshmen attending ranked institutions found ratings in national magazines to be very important or somewhat important in their college decision-making process. On the other hand, only 31.8% of students attending institutions listed in the fourth tier of *US News* felt rankings were very important or somewhat important. A chi-square analysis was run to examine attendance at ranked or unranked schools with regard to the importance of ratings. The results of the analysis were Pearson chi square=1935.98, df=2, p<.001 which indicated a significant difference in the level of importance placed on college ratings by freshmen attending ranked and unranked institutions. Students attending ranked national universities placed a higher level of importance on college ratings than their colleagues attending unranked schools.

**Best National Liberal Arts Colleges**

The next focus of this research was on first-time, full-time freshmen who attended a school included in the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking category in *US News*. For the 20 colleges included in this sample, ten were selected from the top 40 listing while another ten were chosen from the fourth tier of this ranking category. The sample for this research question consisted of 5714 freshmen with 3287 attending
Table 4.2  Ranking Importance Based on Ranked and Unranked Schools in the Best National Universities Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Universities Best Count</td>
<td>1038</td>
<td>2057</td>
<td>1378</td>
<td>4473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth tier Count</td>
<td>2967</td>
<td>1103</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>4354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>68.1%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Count</td>
<td>4005</td>
<td>3160</td>
<td>1662</td>
<td>8827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=1935.98, df=2, p<.001
ranked institutions and 2427 attending unranked schools. Data obtained from this sample were utilized to address the following research question: does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending ranked national liberal arts colleges and those colleges that are not ranked? Table 4.3 provides the data analysis for this research question.

For those students attending a ranked liberal arts college, 77.2% indicated ratings in national magazines to be very important or somewhat important in choosing an institution. However, freshmen enrolled in an unranked college placed lesser importance on ratings with only 36.1% of respondents viewing them as very important or somewhat important. The chi-square analysis found significant differences in the level of importance placed on rankings by students attending top 40 schools and those listed in the fourth tier (Pearson chi square=1033.25, df=2, p<.001). Therefore, there was a significant difference in the level of importance placed on college rankings in national magazines by students attending ranked liberal arts colleges and those schools that were not ranked.

**Level of Importance for Public and Private Institutions**

The next focus of this research examined differences placed on the value of college rankings in newsmagazines for students attending public versus private institutions. This analysis was conducted to address the research question which asked, does the importance attached to rankings vary significantly when response patterns are examined between students attending public or private national universities?

The population for this analysis consisted of student responses from 16 of the 20 institutions selected for this study from the Best National Universities *US News*
Table 4.3  Ranking Importance Based on Ranked and Unranked Schools in the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts Colleges Best</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>749</td>
<td>1611</td>
<td>927</td>
<td>3287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth tier</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>2427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2299</td>
<td>2301</td>
<td>1114</td>
<td>5714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=1033.25, df=2, p<.001
ranking category. An equal number of public and private institutions were selected from the top 50 listing and from the fourth tier of this category. Responses from 7228 first-time, full-time freshmen were analyzed for this research question with 3748 attending public institutions and 3480 enrolled in private colleges. Table 4.4 presents the results of analysis to determine the level of importance placed on rankings by students attending public or private institutions.

For students attending a public university, the data demonstrated 16.1% of participants viewed rankings as very important, 34.9% as somewhat important, and 49% as not important in their college decision-making process. However, 24.7% of students attending a private college or university regarded rankings as very important, 38.2% as somewhat important, and 37% as not important in deciding to attend their institution of choice. In addition, 51% of freshmen attending a public institution found rankings to be very important or somewhat important while 62.9% of students attending private schools viewed rankings as important in their college decision-making process.

A chi-square analysis was run to examine differences in responses from students attending public or private institutions based on the importance of rankings. The results of this analysis were Pearson chi square=131.66, df=2, p<.001 indicating significant differences in the importance placed on college rankings based on student attendance at public or private schools. Students attending public colleges and universities were less likely to find rankings in national newsmagazines as important in the college decision-making process as opposed to their colleagues attending private institutions.
Table 4.4  Ranking Importance Based on Public and Private Schools in the Best National Universities Ranking Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Universities Public</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1836</td>
<td>1308</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>3748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>49.6%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1288</td>
<td>1331</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>3480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>3124</td>
<td>2639</td>
<td>1465</td>
<td>7228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=131.66, df=2, p<.001
Another research question for this study pertained to the identification of demographic information on those students who viewed rankings as an important factor in the college decision-making process. Specifically, does the importance attached to college rankings in national magazines vary significantly when response patterns are examined by gender, age, place of residence, distance from permanent home, academic achievement, financial status, or ethnicity? There were several questions included on the Student Information Form (SIF) which identified these participant characteristics. These factors were each separately examined based on the level of importance placed on college rankings.

The analysis for this research question utilized data from all 40 institutions selected for this study. The exact sample size for each demographic factor varied since every student did not respond to each item included on the SIF. Therefore, the specific sample size for each demographic item was included in this synopsis.

**Gender**

Gender was the first demographic variable to be examined in this study. Table 4.5 presents the results of analysis to determine the level of importance placed on rankings by men and women.

The sample size for this item consisted of 6382 males and 8138 females for a total population of 14,520. This data analysis indicated 57.8% of males found rankings to be very important or somewhat important in their college selection while 55.8% of females viewed ratings as very important or somewhat important. A chi-square analysis was run to examine gender differences with the importance of rankings. The results of the
Table 4.5  Ranking Importance Based on Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2694</td>
<td>2392</td>
<td>1296</td>
<td>6382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3601</td>
<td>3064</td>
<td>1473</td>
<td>8138</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6295</td>
<td>5456</td>
<td>2769</td>
<td>14520</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=12.59, df=2, p=.002
analysis were Pearson chi square=12.59, df=2, p=.002 indicating a significant gender difference in the importance placed on college rankings.

Although the difference in ranking importance between males and females was statistically significant, it was not practically or clinically significant. In other words, the difference between these two groups was so small that it was not important for the purposes of this study. For this demographic factor only, this result was directly related to the sensitivity of the chi-square when used with large sample sizes.

Age

Question number two on the Student Information Form (SIF) asked participants “How old will you be on December 31 of this year” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 127)? Responses to this item were collapsed into two categories called Traditional Freshmen and Non-Traditional Freshmen. Traditional Freshmen ranged in age from 16 and below to 19 while Non-Traditional Freshmen were age 20 and older. Table 4.6 presents the data analysis for this demographic factor.

There were 14,422 first-time, full-time freshmen included in the sample for this item, which consisted of 14,253 traditional and 169 non-traditional freshmen. For the traditionally aged students, 56.9% viewed rankings in national magazines as very important or somewhat important while 45.5% of non-traditional students indicated rankings as very important or somewhat important in the college decision-making process. The chi-square analysis found significant age differences with regard to the importance of rankings (Pearson chi square=10.399, df=2, p=.006). Traditional Freshmen (ages 19 and below) were more likely to find rankings somewhat to very important than Non-traditional Freshmen (ages 20 and up).
Table 4.6  Ranking Importance Based on Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Age as of 12/31/2000</th>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-traditional</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>.8%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>6154</td>
<td>5383</td>
<td>2716</td>
<td>14253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>98.5%</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
<td>98.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>6246</td>
<td>5428</td>
<td>2748</td>
<td>14422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=10.399, df=2, p=.006
Place of Residence

The next demographic factor examined in this study pertained to students’ place of residence for the upcoming fall term. The Student Information Form (SIF) presented six responses for this variable, which were collapsed into three categories for this research. They were On-campus (which included residence halls, Greek housing, and other university owned housing options), Off-campus with Family, and Off-campus without Family. The sample size for this item consisted of 14,467 students with 13,002 living On-campus, 994 residing Off-campus with Family, and 471 living Off-campus without Family. Table 4.7 represents the data analysis to determine the level of importance placed on rankings based on students’ place of residence.

For those students who lived on-campus, 59.2% felt rankings were very important or somewhat important in their college decision-making process while only 34.5% of students living off campus with family viewed rankings as very important or somewhat important. Of the 471 freshmen living off-campus without family, 35.2% designated rankings in national magazines as very important or somewhat important. A chi-square analysis was run to examine differences in place of residence with the importance placed on college rankings. The results of the analysis were Pearson Chi Square=333.91, df=4, p<.001 which indicated significant differences in place of residence and ranking importance. Freshmen living on-campus were more likely to find college rankings in national magazines somewhat to very important compared to freshmen living off-campus (with or without family).
### Table 4.7 Ranking Importance Based on Place of Residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan to Live in Fall 2000</th>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Row %</th>
<th>Col %</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Row %</th>
<th>Col %</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Row %</th>
<th>Col %</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Row %</th>
<th>Col %</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On campus</td>
<td></td>
<td>5308</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>5054</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>93.0%</td>
<td>2640</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>95.4%</td>
<td>13002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus with family</td>
<td></td>
<td>652</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>994</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off campus without family</td>
<td></td>
<td>305</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>471</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>6265</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>5435</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>2767</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>14467</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi Square = 333.91, df = 4, p < .001
Distance from Permanent Home

The Student Information Form (SIF) also collected data on the distance of students’ college of choice from their permanent home. Although there were six responses for this survey question, two responses, “5 or less miles, and 6-10 miles” (Sax et al, 2000, p. 127), were collapsed into one category, which consisted of ten or less miles. The sample for this demographic factor consisted of 14,320 participants with the majority of respondents (9105) attending a college or university over 101 miles from their permanent home. Table 4.8 illustrates the data analysis for this student demographic factor.

For those students whose permanent residence was 10 or less miles from college, 39.5% viewed rankings as very important or somewhat important as opposed to 50.6% of students who lived 11 to 50 miles away. Of students who attended college 51 to 100 miles from their home, 50.3% indicated rankings as very important or somewhat important while 57.7% of students who lived 101 to 500 miles away saw them as important. The majority of students (65.4%) who attended a college over 500 miles from their permanent home depicted rankings as very important or somewhat important.

The chi-square analysis found significant differences in distance from home with regard to importance of rankings (Pearson chi square=353.02, df=8, p<.001). As the distance from permanent home increased, the level of importance placed on college rankings in national magazines also increased.

Academic Achievement

The next student demographic factor to be examined in this research pertained to high school academic achievement. Eight responses on the Student Information Form
Table 4.8  Ranking Importance Based on Distance from Home

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Miles From College to Home</th>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or less miles</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 50 miles</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 100 miles</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 500 miles</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 500 miles</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=353.02, df=8, p<.001
(SIF) were presented for question seven, which stated, “What was your average grade in high school” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 127)? These eight responses were collapsed into three categories (A, B, and C or Below) for this study. It should be noted that responses to this item (like all questions on the SIF) were self-reported by survey participants. For the data analysis for this demographic factor, there was no method to cross-reference these responses with actual academic performance data for each student. Table 4.9 presents the data analysis for the level of importance placed on college rankings based on academic achievement.

The sample size for this analysis consisted of 14,382 first-time, full-time freshmen with the greater portion (8686) obtaining an A high school average. For those students whose high school performance was an A, the majority (65.5%) found college rankings in national magazines to be very important or somewhat important while 44.1% of B students and 33.9% of C or below students viewed rankings as important. A chi-square analysis was run to examine differences in academic performance with the importance of rankings. The results of the analysis were Pearson chi square=751.041, df=4, p<.001 which indicated significant differences based on academic performance. As the average high school grades decreased for participants in this study, the level of importance placed on college rankings also decreased.

Financial Status

The Student Information Form (SIF) also collected data about the financial status of entering freshmen by asking a question related to their estimated family income. Question 20 on the SIF stated, “What is your best estimate of your parents’ total income last year? Consider income from all sources before taxes” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 128).
Table 4.9  Ranking Importance Based on Academic Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ratings</th>
<th>Not Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Average High School Grade</td>
<td>Count 2996</td>
<td>3643</td>
<td>2047</td>
<td>8686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row % 34.5%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col % 48.1%</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
<td>74.5%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Count 2927</td>
<td>1660</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>5236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row % 55.9%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col % 47.0%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C or below</td>
<td>Count 304</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row % 66.1%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col % 4.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count 6227</td>
<td>5409</td>
<td>2746</td>
<td>14382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row % 43.3%</td>
<td>37.6%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col % 100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=751.041, df=4, p<.001
Many students completing the SIF might not have had a definitive answer to this question since they were unaware of their overall family income. Therefore, responses to this item were indeed a guesstimate of the financial status for each participant. For the data analysis for this factor, there was no process to cross-reference students’ response with actual financial information.

The SIF presented 14 responses for this question, which were collapsed into four for the purpose of this research study. Lower Income consisted of total earnings of less than $6,000 to $24,999 with Middle Income ranging from $25,000 to $59,999. Upper Income was defined as total earnings from $60,000 to $149,999 while Top Income consisted of those earning $150,000 or higher. Table 4.10 presents the results of analysis to determine the level of importance placed on rankings based on total parental income.

For this demographic factor, the sample consisted of 13,234 participants with the majority (5752) appearing in the Upper Income category. For students in the Lower Income category, 51.5% found rankings in national magazines to be very important or somewhat important as opposed to 51.7% of respondents in Middle Income. The majority of participants (57.3%) in the Upper Income grouping viewed rankings as very important or somewhat important while 68.7% of students in the Top Income category indicated ratings to be an important factor in the college decision-making process. The chi-square analysis found significant differences in financial status with regard to the importance of rankings (Pearson chi square=212.08, df=6, p<.001). Therefore, the level of importance placed on rankings in national magazines increased as the estimated parental income also increased.
Table 4.10  Ranking Importance Based on Financial Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated Parental Income</th>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower income</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>1489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle income</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1663</td>
<td>1226</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>3449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper income</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2454</td>
<td>2192</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>5752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top income</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>797</td>
<td>1107</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>2544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>5636</td>
<td>5009</td>
<td>2589</td>
<td>13234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=212.08, df=6, p<.001
Ethnicity

The final student demographic factor to be considered in this study related to the ethnicity of participants in correlation to the level of importance placed on college rankings. Unlike other questions on the Student Information Form (SIF), this item instructed participants to select all applicable responses. In order to learn the ethnicity of students who viewed rankings as important, those freshmen who marked only one race were included in the analysis of this question. In addition, the eight responses on the SIF for this question were reduced to four for the purposes of this research study. It should also be noted that the American Indian and Other responses were not included in the data analysis for this demographic factor. Table 4.11 presents the findings to determine the level of importance placed on rankings based on students’ racial background.

The total sample used to determine the ethnicity of participants in this study consisted of 13,109 first-time, full-time freshmen. This sample size was slightly less than others included in this research design which could directly relate to a decreased number of students willing to identify their race on a national survey. In addition, this sample might be lower in number since data were included for only those students who marked one race in response to this SIF question. The majority of participants (9433) were White/Caucasian while only 615 were Hispanic/Latino.

For the White/Caucasian participants in this study, 55.2% found rankings to be somewhat important or very important while 54.3% of African Americans viewed rankings as important. The vast majority of Asian American students (73.4%) regarded rankings as very important or somewhat important yet only 54% of Hispanic/Latino freshmen attached importance to college rankings.
Table 4.11  Ranking Importance Based on Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Racial Background</th>
<th>Importance of Rankings in National Magazines</th>
<th>Not important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>4229</td>
<td>3620</td>
<td>1584</td>
<td>9433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>73.2%</td>
<td>62.8%</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>538</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>1631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>1430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>5639</td>
<td>4946</td>
<td>2524</td>
<td>13109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Row %</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Col %</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Chi-Square=290.50, df=6, p<.001
A chi-square analysis was run to examine racial differences with the importance of rankings. The results of this analysis were Pearson chi square=290.50, df=6, p<.001 indicating significant racial differences in the level of importance placed on college rankings in national magazines. Asian American freshmen placed higher levels of importance on ratings than other racial groups while Hispanic/Latino students viewed rankings as less important.

**Overall Student Characteristics**

By examining student responses on the Student Information Form (SIF) from all 40 institutions included in this study, it was possible to determine demographic information on freshmen who perceived rankings as very important or somewhat important in the college decision-making process. These students were traditionally aged college freshmen (ages 19 and below) who lived on-campus in residence halls, Greek housing, or other university owned housing options. The majority of students who considered rankings as important attended a college or university over 100 miles from their permanent home and were from families with an average income of at least $60,000. As the distance from permanent home and parental income increased, the level of importance placed on college rankings also increased.

In addition, students who indicated rankings were an important factor in selecting their institution of choice obtained higher grades in high school than freshmen who placed less importance on ratings. The level of importance placed on rankings decreased as average high school grades decreased. Furthermore, Asian American freshmen placed more importance on rankings than other ethnic groups. On the other hand, Hispanic/Latino students viewed rankings as less important than other races.
Data analysis for all of the above student demographics was found to be statistically significant. When examining the importance placed on ratings by men and women, the research findings indicated a significant gender difference. However, this variance was not found to be practically or clinically significant. The difference between these two groups was so small it was difficult to make a definitive conclusion about the level of importance placed on rankings based on gender.

**Data Analysis Summary**

It is apparent that first-time, full-time freshmen place some importance on college rankings in national magazines when selecting an institution of choice. The majority of freshmen included in this study (56.7%) considered rankings to be a very important or somewhat important factor in selecting their institution. While only 19.1% of students viewed ratings as very important, 37.6% of freshmen saw them as somewhat important in their college selection process.

In addition, there was a significant difference in the importance placed on ratings by students attending ranked and unranked schools. In both the Best National Universities and the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges *US News* categories, students attending ranked institutions placed significantly higher levels of importance on ratings than their colleagues at unranked schools. For each of these ranking categories, this relationship was statistically significant at the .001 level. Therefore, it is clear that a relationship exists between student attendance at ranked institutions and the level of importance placed on college ratings in national newsmagazines.

When examining the level of importance placed on rankings by students attending public or private institutions, a significant statistical difference was also determined. For
the 16 public and private institutions in the Best National Universities category selected for this analysis, students attending private institutions placed higher levels of importance on rankings than their peers at public schools. This finding was statistically significant at the .001 level indicating a relationship between attendance at private schools and the level of importance placed on rankings.

The final area of review for this research study pertained to determining demographic information for those students who placed some level of importance on college rankings. When examining importance based on gender, it was determined no practical significant difference existed between men and women in this study. While a higher percentage of men placed some level of importance on rankings, no conclusions about usage patterns based on gender can be drawn from this finding.

Age was another demographic factor reviewed in this study. Traditionally aged freshmen placed a greater level of importance on rankings than non-traditional students. This analysis was found to be significantly significant at the p<.01 level indicating the existence of a relationship between participants’ age and the level of importance placed on college rankings in national magazines.

It is apparent the importance placed on college rankings in national magazines is directly related to students’ place of residence for the fall term and the distance of their school from their permanent home. Students who lived on-campus placed higher levels of importance on rankings than their peers living off-campus. In addition, as the distance of the college from students’ permanent home increased, the level of importance placed on rankings also increased. Both of these findings were statistically significant at the .001 level.
Other demographic factors considered in this study related to academic achievement and financial status. It is clear that students who obtained higher high school grades placed greater levels of importance on rankings in newsmagazines than their peers with inferior academic performance. This relationship was statistically significant at the .001 level. Therefore, there was a direct correlation between academic achievement and the level of importance placed on college rankings. In terms of financial status, students with higher family incomes placed significantly more importance on rankings than their peers. As the estimated family income increased, the level of importance placed on ratings also increased. Since this analysis was also statistically significant at the .001 level, it was evident that a direct relationship existed between financial status and college ranking importance.

Finally, there was a statistical difference on the level of importance placed on rankings based on ethnicity. Asian American students placed higher levels of importance on rankings while Hispanic/Latino freshmen viewed them as less important. Once again, the relationship between ethnicity and ranking importance was found to be statistically significant at the .001 level. Therefore, it was evident Asian American first-time, full-time freshmen placed a higher level of importance on rankings than their colleagues of other races.

In conclusion, students regarded rankings in national newsmagazines as an important factor in selecting an institution of choice. Significantly higher levels of importance placed on ratings were determined for students attending ranked schools and private institutions. In addition, traditionally aged freshmen who lived on campus and attended an institution over 100 miles from home placed higher levels of importance on
rankings than their colleagues. Furthermore, students who achieved higher grades in high school and whose family income was above $60,000 viewed rankings as more important in the college decision-making process. And, in terms of ethnicity, Asian American students placed significantly more importance on ratings than any other ethnic group.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Findings

Over the past 20 years, college rankings in national magazines such as *US News & World Report* have become an annual phenomena in American higher education with a plethora of offerings and listings available each fall. While *US News* was one of the first magazines to get into the rankings business, many popular newsmagazines such as Time, Newsweek, and Money now offer their own annual ratings of colleges and universities. With the emergence of the World Wide Web, data from these journalistic endeavors are readily available and accessible to prospective college students and their parents.

It is clear rankings such as those included in *America’s Best Colleges* are now part of the landscape in our system of higher education. However, the problem is to establish the extent students use rankings and to determine user characteristics based on demographics and institutional type. The paramount purpose of this research study is to determine the importance of college rankings in national magazines on students’ institutional choice. Data analysis for five research questions provides a greater understanding of the impact of rankings on students’ college decision-making process.

Importance Placed on Rankings

The underlying purpose of this research study was to determine the level of importance placed on rankings by students when selecting an institution of choice. The majority (56.7%) of first-time, full-time freshmen included in this research study
indicated rankings were either a very important or somewhat important factor in selecting their college or university.

In their 1995 study, Hossler and Foley concluded rankings have a very insignificant bearing on the college decision-making process for most students. “For many students and their families, these guidebooks may have little impact or serve only as confirmatory devices, helping them to feel comfortable with decisions they have already made” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 28). Based on the findings of this research study, most freshmen placed some level of importance on college rankings in national magazines when selecting their institution of choice. This discovery demonstrates an increase in the impact and level of importance placed on college rankings over the past five years.

As previously discussed, McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez conducted a landmark study on college rankings in 1998 utilizing data from the 1995 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). The sample for their study consisted of 221,897 new freshmen at 432 four-year institutions. Of the students included in this study, 10.5% considered rankings in newsmagazines as very important in the college decision-making process, 29.6% found them to be somewhat important, while 59.9% indicated rankings to be not important (McDonough et al., 1998). Merging the data from the very important and somewhat important responses revealed 40.1% of students placing some level of importance on college rankings.

Conversely, the majority of first-time, full-time freshmen included in this study (56.7%) placed some level of importance on college rankings. While the sample size for this research was significantly smaller than the McDonough study, there was still a
marked difference in the level of importance placed on college rankings over this five-
year period.

**Level of Importance for Ranked and Unranked Institutions**

The next focus of this study examined the level of importance placed on college
rankings by students attending ranked and unranked institutions. Two ranking categories
from *America’s Best Colleges* were used to identify the 40 ranked and unranked schools
for this analysis. For the Best National Universities category, 76.8% of freshmen
attending ranked schools viewed ratings as very important or somewhat important.
However, only 31.8% of students attending unranked schools placed a level of
importance on rankings.

In the Best Liberal Arts Colleges category, the majority of students (77.2%)
considered rankings as very important or somewhat important in the college decision-
making process. On the other hand, freshmen attending unranked liberal arts colleges
placed significantly less value on ratings with only 36.1% indicating some level of
importance.

Based on these findings, there was a significant difference in the level of
importance placed on college rankings in newsmagazines by students attending ranked or
unranked schools. Students attending ranked national universities and liberal arts colleges
placed a higher level of importance on ratings than their colleagues enrolled at fourth tier
schools.

**Level of Importance for Public and Private Institutions**

This study also investigated the difference in value placed on college rankings by
students attending public or private institutions. For this research question, 16 of the 20
institutions selected for this study from the Best National Universities category were used with an equal number of public and private schools represented.

For students attending public institutions, 51% of freshmen placed some level of importance on college rankings while 62.9% of participants attending private schools viewed rankings as very important or somewhat important. Based on this analysis, it was clear that first-time, full-time freshmen attending private colleges or universities placed a higher level of importance on rankings in national magazines than their peers at public schools.

**Student Demographics**

The final objective of this research study was to determine demographic information on those students who viewed rankings in newsmagazines as an important factor in the college decision-making process. The data analysis for gender revealed 57.8% of males and 55.8% of females considered rankings to be very important or somewhat important in selecting a school of choice. While this differential was found to be statistically significant, it was not determined to be practically or clinically significant. Therefore, this study was unable to reveal a disparity between men and women on the level of importance placed on rankings in national magazines.

When examining participants’ age, it was discovered that 56.9% of traditionally aged freshmen (ages 16 and below to 19) viewed rankings as important while 45.5% of non-traditional freshmen (ages 20 and above) considered them to be very important or somewhat important. It was clear that traditionally aged freshmen were more likely to place some level of importance on rankings in newsmagazines than their non-traditional peers.
Place of residence for the fall term was another student demographic factor explored in this study. Students who lived on-campus (59.2%) placed a higher level of importance on rankings than their colleagues living off-campus without family (35.2%) or off-campus with family members (34.5%). Students who lived in campus facilities such as residence halls, Greek houses, or other on-campus options placed a higher level of importance on rankings in national magazines than off-campus freshmen.

Another demographic factor reviewed in this research pertained to the distance of students’ college of choice from their permanent home. Students who lived 10 or less miles from campus placed significantly less importance on rankings (39.5%) than their colleagues who lived farther away. However, the majority of students (65.4%) who attended a college or university over 500 miles from home considered rankings as very important or somewhat important.

The McDonough et al. study (1998) concluded students who attended a college in their hometown (within a 10 mile radius) were less likely to see rankings as somewhat or very important compared to students who attended institutions farther away. This conclusion was once again confirmed in this research. Based on the data analysis for this study, as the distance from permanent home increased, the level of importance placed on college rankings in national magazines also increased. Therefore, the correlation between the level of importance placed on college rankings and the distance from students’ permanent home appeared to remain constant over the five-year period between these two research studies.

The level of importance placed on college rankings was also examined with regard to students’ high school academic achievement. First-time, full-time freshmen
who obtained A averages (65.5%) in high school placed higher levels of importance on rankings than their peers earning a B average (44.1%) or a C or below average (33.9%). Based on this finding, it was apparent that as average high school grades decreased, the level of importance placed on rankings in newsmagazines also decreased.

Financial status was another student demographic factor considered in this research study. Students in the Lower Income category (family earnings less than $6,000 to $24,999) placed lesser importance on rankings (51.5%) than their peers in other income classifications. Conversely, the majority of students (68.7%) in the Upper Income category (earnings of $150,000 or higher) indicated rankings were very important or somewhat important in the college decision-making process.

In their 1995 study on rankings, Hossler and Foley concluded, “that only middle-income students are extensively influenced by guidebooks and ratings” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 28). Based on the findings from this research study, this no longer appeared to be the case. Higher percentages of students in the Upper Income and Top Income categories viewed rankings as very important or somewhat important in choosing an institution. In addition, a comparable percentage of students in the Lower Income (51.5%) and Middle Income (51.7%) groups placed some level of importance on college rankings.

The McDonough et al. study also examined the relationship between financial status and the level of importance placed on college rankings. They determined a higher percentage of students from lower financial status did not see the rankings as important while the majority of students from families with high incomes viewed ratings as very important in the college selection process (McDonough et al., 1998). The McDonough et al. finding was directly related to the results of this research study.
It should also be noted that financial status plays a major role in students’ ability to select and attend their institution of choice. While there are many students academically eligible to attend institutions such as Harvard and Swarthmore, they may not be financially able to afford these expensive, private schools. These students dream of attending highly ranked universities but are forced to attend less prestigious schools when faced with the realities of their financial situation. Therefore, their financial status plays a major role in selecting an institution and in their use of college rankings in this process.

In terms of financial status, the level of importance placed on rankings increased as the estimated family income also increased. Based on the findings of these two studies, the correlation between the level of importance placed on college rankings and financial status appeared to be consistent over the five-year period between these two research initiatives.

Ethnicity was the final student demographic factor to be examined in this analysis. The eight responses on the Student Information Form (SIF) for this question were collapsed into four for this research design. In addition, responses for American Indian and Other were eliminated from the data analysis for this variable.

A high percentage of Asian American students (73.4%) regarded rankings in newsmagazines as very important or somewhat important while 55.2% of White/Caucasian students indicated some level of importance. Slightly less African American freshmen (54.3%) viewed rankings as important with only 54% of Hispanic/Latino students attaching some importance to ratings.

In their study of college ratings, McDonough and her colleagues also reviewed the correlation between race and the level of importance placed on rankings in national
newsmagazines. Similar to this study, they found Asian American students more likely to see the rankings as very important as compared to other racial or ethnic groups. However, McDonough et al. indicated Chicano/a students placed significantly less importance on rankings in selecting an institution (McDonough et al., 1998).

The results of this research study showed 54% of Hispanic/Latino students viewed rankings as important while only 54.3% of African Americans found rankings to be very important or somewhat important. While there was still a difference between these two ethnic groups, it was certainly not as significant as the McDonough study represented five years ago.

Conclusions

Do students consider rankings in national magazines to be an important factor in selecting an institution of choice? The overwhelming response to this question is yes. Rankings have become an increasingly important aspect in the college decision-making process for prospective students. Over the past five years, it appears their availability, accessibility, use and influence have greatly amplified their role in American higher education.

In addition, the majority of students included in this study placed some level of importance on college rankings. This finding is certainly different from previous research, which concluded that predominantly high-achieving, high-income students utilized rankings in selecting their institution of choice. While these demographic factors still help to form a profile of freshmen who value rankings, there is now an increased emphasis placed on ratings from a wide array of students with differing characteristics and types.
College rankings in newsmagazines are of particular importance to first-time, full-time freshmen attending ranked, private institutions. This finding should be of specific interest to college presidents and admissions directors at private universities or liberal arts colleges. In addition, students who deem rankings as important are traditionally aged, live on-campus, attend school a significant distance from home, and have a high level of financial status. This “user profile” of students who value ratings in the college decision-making process should be closely examined by university administrators and cross-referenced with their own student demographic information when reviewing their institutional viewpoint on rankings.

According to McDonough et al., “we also believe that college and university presidents ought to be concerned about the impact of college rankings in students’ decision-making about college at least as much as they about how their own institution fared this year” (1998, p. 533). This statement is now truer than ever before and should once again serve as a wakeup call to university administrators about the value and importance of college rankings.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings from this study and the level of importance students do place on college rankings in national magazines, there needs to be a change in posture from the higher education community in response to this annual fall ritual. Rather than continually debating the value, precision, and worth of ratings or totally ignoring their existence, it is now time to focus on educating prospective students and their parents on appropriate ways to use ratings in the college search process.
Admissions officers should utilize information from *US News* and other reputable college guides to identify specific ways rankings are properly used in selecting an institution of choice. The existence and popularity of rankings should be acknowledged and promoted as one tool (as opposed to the only tool) in conducting a college search. Emphasis should be placed on the great deal of information about hundreds of colleges and universities presented in these guides as opposed to solely concentrating on the top 50 listings. By teaching students the proper way to use the rankings, admissions staff can better empower students to make this all-important decision and provide a more objective perspective on rankings.

In addition, college admissions officers should do a better job of notifying high school counselors about the value students place on rankings and the proper ways to utilize this educational tool. High school counselors need to have a better understanding of the current impact of rankings in the college selection process. They should no longer diminish the importance of these publications but rather work with admissions officers to better educate prospective college students about their use. A collaborative effort between admissions personnel and high school counselors can greatly assist these future college students by providing them with the information and tools needed to make this all important decision.

Over the past several years, *US News & World Report* has done an excellent job of providing more resources and information for students about college choice in its annual edition of *America's Best Colleges*. This publication now includes topics ranging from preparatory classes, advanced placement courses, admissions’ early decision practices, campus security, financial aid and scholarships, and diversity and
multiculturalism. This annual guide has now become much more than just a compilation of the latest college rankings. Rather, it has evolved into a useful tool in the college decision-making process. In addition, America’s Best Colleges has done a better job in trying to educate students and their parents about proper ways to use the rankings through their print and on-line editions.

Due to this change in strategy from US News, college admissions officers and high school guidance counselors need to recognize this newsmagazine as a helpful tool in the college search process. This statement is further evidenced through a recent personal conversation about the importance of college rankings with the Director of Admissions at a state regional university. The Director indicated her position on ratings in publications such as US News had changed over the past few years. Rather than being vehemently opposed to the rankings, she now regards them as a useful tool for students and their parents. While her comments only represent the perspective of one admissions’ professional, they may be indicative of changing viewpoints and shifting perceptions about college rankings from within the academy.

College presidents and other university administrators should review the findings of this study especially when making institutional decisions and policies based on the impact of rankings. A better understanding of usage patterns and characteristics of students who place importance on rankings could be very beneficial when determining a schools’ response and overall stance to this fall ritual. For example, one college president recently asked members of his executive staff for ideas and suggestions to better “position” their institution in future rankings. Of particular interest were ways to enhance student outcome measures and to highlight campus advances in this area. Information
from this study on student use of rankings would have been helpful to these administrators to review in preparation for their discussion on this topic. After examining the findings from this study, these campus decision-makers would have been more aware of the significance students place on rankings, the differing usage patterns based on attendance at ranked and unranked institutions, and demographic information on students who perceive rankings to be important. In turn, their decisions on this topic would then be based on sound statistical data as opposed to their desire for more institutional prestige.

Furthermore, there are numerous colleges and universities who continually find themselves in the fourth tier listing of their prospective *US News* ranking category. Many of these campuses expend a great deal of energy, time, and resources brainstorming ways to increase their ranking status. However, these fourth tier schools should instead focus more of their efforts on improving the overall educational quality on their campuses and increasing student outcome measures rather than their latest placement in the college rankings.

There are numerous institutions, many with very large student enrollments, included in fourth tier categories in *US News*. Based on enrollments at many of these schools, students are obviously choosing to attend these institutions without significant regard to rankings. In addition, in the Best National Universities category, there is very little upward movement in the schools selected for this study from the fall 2000 rankings to the fall 2003 edition since eight of the ten schools are still listed in the fourth tier. In essence, these institutions are consistently in the fourth tier and may indeed stay there for quite a while. Rather than continually focusing on ways to increase their ranking, these
colleges and universities should concentrate more on improving overall educational
group on their campuses. These efforts could lead to higher graduation and retention
rates, increased levels of student satisfaction, more emphasis on student outcomes, and an
overall better quality of educational experience for undergraduate students.

Conversely, colleges and universities appearing in the top 50 listings should strive
to continue to be included in this elite group of institutions. This study found students
attending ranked schools placed significantly higher levels of importance on rankings
than their colleagues enrolled in fourth tier colleges. This finding was even truer for the
private institutions included in this research. Based on the notoriety and the importance
students place on rankings, it is vital for these schools to consistently remain in this
public arena. In addition, it may be equally important for them to tout their ranking status
to prospective students and their parents. It should be noted, however, the emphasis
placed on rankings at these institutions should not be at the expense of quality and
improvement efforts on their campuses. Rather, initiatives to improve the overall
educational quality and student outcomes should always take precedence over flaunting
college rankings.

There are several future studies to possibly be undertaken as a direct result of this
research analysis. First of all, this initiative was based on participant responses obtained
on the Student Information Form (SIF), which is used to collect data for the Cooperative
Institutional Research Program at UCLA. Analyses for the research questions in this
study were based on the availability of questions and answers presented on this national
survey instrument. The only response options for question 35 on the SIF were “very
important, somewhat important, and not important” (Sax et al., 1998, p. 129). Based on
these three responses, it could be construed that students are forced to place some level of importance on rankings.

A future study on this topic could utilize the same approach yet present multiple response options to a similar question using a Likert scale for participant answers. Students would indicate the importance of rankings in the college decision-making process by selecting options such as 1=high importance, 2=moderate importance, 3=little importance, and 4=no importance. This approach, using a different survey instrument, would enable the researcher to better discriminate between levels of importance placed on ratings and, in turn, may provide a deeper understanding of students’ use of rankings in the college selection process.

In addition, the researchers at the Higher Education Research Institute should continually review questions and corresponding responses on the Student Information Form (SIF). While some of their responses are presented in the form of a Likert scale, the vast majority consists of answers such as “frequently, occasionally, or not at all” (Sax et al., 2000, p. 128). Changing the responses and scale on several items on the SIF may help future educators and students to better utilize this excellent data source in research initiatives.

This study on students’ use of rankings in national magazines in selecting an institution of choice focused on 40 colleges and universities from the Best National Universities and the Best National Liberal Arts Colleges ranking categories in the fall 2000 issue of America’s Best Colleges. A future study of interest could perhaps focus on those schools included in the Best Universities Master’s (By Region) and the Best Comprehensive Colleges Bachelor’s (By Region) US News ranking categories. Since
these rankings are done on a regional level as opposed to national, it would be interesting to examine the level of importance placed on college rankings in newsmagazines by students attending these schools. In turn, a comparison with this study could yield some significant information on ranking importance based on institutional type and Carnegie Classification.

Moreover, another possible research initiative about students’ use of rankings could include institutions from all *US News* ranking categories in addition to schools in the top 50 and each of the three tiers. This would certainly provide a more comprehensive and thorough review of this topic by incorporating all institutional types and varying degrees of ranked and unranked schools. In addition, it would be interesting to see if a gradual decline exists in the level of importance placed on rankings when reviewing students’ usage from top 50 schools to the second tier, third tier and all the way to the fourth tier colleges.

In the most recent edition of *America’s Best Colleges*, the editor included, for the first time, institutional responses from seniors on select questions on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). “Now in its third year, NSSE is a national effort to assess collegiate quality by collecting reliable, valid information directly from undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities about their engagement in good educational practices” (Bridges, Kuh, & Day, 2001, para. 4). Interestingly enough, NSSE has been highly publicized as a more accurate and reliable alternative to college rankings. According to Bridges, Kuh, and Day, the primary emphasis of this data is “on what is far more important to student learning-how students actually use the resources for learning
that their school provides. This is a much different and more accurate way to think about collegiate quality than what college rankings represent” (2001, para. 3).

It is rather ironic that NSSE results from selected questions now appear in *America’s Best Colleges*. While the most recent issue of this publication provides these statistics in a separate table and does not incorporate these elements into determining college rankings, it is uncertain how *US News* will utilize NSSE data in the future. However, if correlations were indeed made between these two data sources, it would once again be terribly interesting to repeat this research study with a primary focus on the relationship between college rankings and student outcomes.

Finally, a more comprehensive study of parents and family members’ use of rankings in the college selection process would be of interest. The Art and Science Group (1995) conducted a similar study in the mid-1990s. However, based on the findings from this research study, a great deal of change has occurred since 1995 in terms of the level of importance students place on rankings. Two different approaches could be taken for this research initiative. The first study could focus simply on parents’ use of rankings in newsmagazines in assisting their sons and daughters with the college search process. Another more rigorous approach would attempt to determine the level of parental influence, based on their use of rankings, on students’ college decision-making process. Similar to this study on students’ use of rankings, research on this topic using parents as participants would be of interest to college presidents, admissions personnel, and even development officers.

This study on students’ use of rankings in selecting an institution of choice is an attempt to provide a greater understanding of this phenomenon in American higher
education. Even though this research provided more information on this controversial topic, there is still more room for additional exploration of this subject. Perhaps this research initiative will serve as a springboard for future dialogue, exploration, and research on college rankings in newsmagazines.
LIST OF REFERENCES
References

Art & Science Group. (2002). StudentPOLL, 5(1)


APPENDIX
DIRECTIONS
Your responses will be read by an optical mark reader. Your careful observance of these few simple rules will be most appreciated.
• Use only black lead pencil (No. 2 is ideal).
• Make heavy black marks that fill the oval.
• Erase clearly any answer you wish to change.
• Make no stray markings of any kind.

EXAMPLE:
Will marks made with ballpoint or felt-tip marker be property read? Yes No

PLEASE PROVIDE YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY NO. (Mark here by putting a circle around the correct digit.)

669445

2000 STUDENT INFORMATION FORM

Please use #2 pencil.

8. What were your scores on the SAT I and/or ACT?
SAT VERBAL ______
SAT MATH ______
ACT Composite ______

9. Citizenship status:
U.S. citizen ______
Permanent resident (green card) ______
Neither ______

10. Have you had, or do you feel you will need, any special tutoring or remedial work in any of the following subjects? (Mark all that apply)
English ______
Reading ______
Mathematics ______
Science ______

11. Prior to this term, have you ever taken courses for credit at this institution? (Mark all that apply)
Yes ______
No ______

12. Since leaving high school, have you ever taken courses at any other institution? (Mark all that apply)
Yes, at a community/junior college. ______
Yes, at a 4-year college or university. ______
Yes, at some other postsecondary school (For example, technical, vocational, business) ______

13. Where do you plan to live during the fall term? (Mark one)
With my family or other relatives. ______
College dormitory. ______
Fraternity or sorority house ______
Other campus student housing ______
Other ______

14. Is this college your: (Mark one)
First choice ______
Second choice ______
Third choice ______

15. To how many colleges other than this one did you apply for admission this year? (Mark all that apply)
None ______
1 ______
2 ______
3 ______
4 ______
5 ______
6 ______
7-10 ______
11 or more ______

16. Do you have a disability? (Mark all that apply)
None ______
Hearing ______
Speech ______
Orthopedic ______
Learning disability ______
Health-related ______
Partially sighted or blind ______
Other ______

17. What is the highest academic degree you intend to obtain? (Mark one in each column)
Master's degree (M.A., M.S., etc.) ______
Ph.D. or Ed.D. ______
Professional degree (M.D., D.D.S., D.V.M., etc.) ______
LL.B. or J.D. (Law) ______
B.A. or B.S. ______
Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S., etc.) ______
Associate (A.A. or equivalent) ______
Vocational certificate ______
High school diploma ______
G.E.D. ______
No ______

18. Are your parents: (Mark one)
Both alive and living with each other? ______
Both alive, divorced or living apart? ______
One or both deceased? ______

...
20. What is your best estimate of your parents' total income last year? Consider income from all sources before taxes. (Mark one)

- [ ] Less than $5,000
- [ ] $5,000 to $9,999
- [ ] $10,000 to $14,999
- [ ] $15,000 to $19,999
- [ ] $20,000 to $24,999
- [ ] $25,000 to $29,999
- [ ] $30,000 or more

21. Current religious preference:

- [ ] Baptist
- [ ] Catholic
- [ ] Church of Jesus Christ (Mormon)
- [ ] Eastern Orthodox
- [ ] Eastern Orthodox
- [ ] Lutheran
- [ ] Methodist
- [ ] Presbyterian
- [ ] Roman Catholic
- [ ] Seventh Day Adventist
- [ ] United Church of Christ
- [ ] Other Christian
- [ ] Other Religion
- [ ] None

22. For the activities below, indicate which ones you did during the past year. If you engaged in an activity more than once, mark (x). (Mark one for each item)

- [ ] Attended a religious service
- [ ] Was bored in class
- [ ] Participated in organized demonstrations
- [ ] Toured another student's home
- [ ] Studied with other students
- [ ] Was a guest in a friend's home
- [ ] Smoked cigarettes
- [ ] Drank beer
- [ ] Used alcohol or drugs
- [ ] Felt overwhelmed by all I had to do
- [ ] Felt depressed
- [ ] Performed volunteer work
- [ ] Played a musical instrument
- [ ] Asked a teacher for advice
- [ ] Overlooked and missed class
- [ ] Discussed political issues
- [ ] Voted in a student election
- [ ] Socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group
- [ ] Came late to class
- [ ] Attended a public recital or concert
- [ ] Visited an art gallery or museum
- [ ] Discussed religion
- [ ] Communicated via e-mail
- [ ] Used the Internet for research or homework
- [ ] Participated in Internet chat rooms
- [ ] Other Internet use
- [ ] Performed community service

23. How many Advanced Placement courses or exams did you take in high school? (Mark one in each row)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP Courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Exams</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your parents? (Mark one in each column)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar school or less</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postsecondary school other than college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25. Are you: (Mark all that apply)

- [ ] White/Caucasian
- [ ] African American/Black
- [ ] American Indian
- [ ] Asian American/Asian
- [Mexican American/Chicano
- [ ] Puerto Rican
- [ ] Other Latino
- [ ] Other

26. In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following in the reasons? (Mark one for each possible reason)

- [ ] My parents wanted me to go...
- [ ] I could not find a job...
- [ ] Wanted to get away from home...
- [ ] To be able to get a better job...
- [ ] To gain a general education...
- [ ] There was nothing better to do...
- [ ] To make a more informed decision...
- [ ] To improve my reading and study skills...
- [ ] To learn more about things that interest me...
- [ ] To prepare myself for graduate or professional school...
- [ ] A mentor/role model encouraged me to go...
- [ ] To get training for a specific career...

27. Rate yourself on each of the following traits and compare them to the average person your age. We want the most accurate estimate of how you see yourself. (Mark one in each row)

- [ ] Academic ability...
- [ ] Artistic ability...
- [ ] Computer skills...
- [ ] Creativity...
- [ ] Drive to achieve...
- [ ] Emotional health...
- [ ] Initiative...
- [ ] Leadership ability...
- [ ] Mathematical ability...
- [ ] Physical health...
- [ ] Popularity...
- [ ] Public speaking ability...
- [ ] Self-confidence...
- [ ] Self-confidence...
- [ ] Self-understanding...
- [ ] Spirituality...
- [ ] Understanding of others...
- [ ] Writing ability...
28. Mark only three responses, one in each column.

- Your mother's occupation
- Your father's occupation
- Your probable career occupation

NOTE: If your father or mother is deceased, please indicate his or her last occupation.

Accountant or actuary
Actor or entertainer
Architect or urban planner
Artist
Business (clerical)
Business executive (management, administrator...)
Business owner or proprietor
Business salesperson or buyer
Clergy (minister, priest)
Clergy (other religious)
Clinical psychologist
College administrator/assistant
College teacher
Computer programmer or analyst
Conservatorist or forest
Dentist (including orthodontist)
Dietitian or home economist
Engineer
Farmer or rancher
Foreign service worker (including diplomatic)
Housekeeper (full-time)
Interior decorator (including designer)
Lab technician or technologist
Law enforcement officer
Lawyer (attorney) or judge
Military service (career)
Scientific researcher
Social welfare or recreation worker
Therapist (physical, occupational speech)
Teacher or administrator (elementary)
Teacher or administrator (secondary)
Veterinarian
Writer or journalist
Skilled trades
Other
Undecided
Laborer (unskilled)
Semi-skilled worker
Other occupation
Unemployed

29. Mark one in each row:

- Agree Strongly
- Agree Somewhat
- Agree
- Disagree Somewhat
- Disagree Strongly

There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals
Abortion should be legal
The death penalty should be abolished
If two people really like each other, it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time
Marijuana should be legalized
It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships
Employers should be allowed to require drug testing of employees or job applicants
The federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns
Racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America
Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in our society
Wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than the poor pay
Colleges should prohibit racial/sexist speech on campus
Same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished
The activities of married women are best confined to the home and family
People have a right to know about the personal lives of public figures

30. During your last year in high school, how much time did you spend during a typical week doing the following activities?

Hours per week:

Studying/homework
Socializing with friends
Talking with teachers outside of class
Exercise or sports
Partying
Working (for pay)
Volunteer work
Student clubs/groups
Watching TV
Housework/childcare duties
Reading for pleasure
Playing video/computer games
Prayer/meditation

31. Do you have any concern about your ability to finance your college education? (Mark one)

- None (I am confident that I will have sufficient funds)
- Some (but I probably will have enough funds)
- Major (not sure I will have enough funds to complete college)

32. How would you characterize your political views? (Mark one)

- Far left
- Liberal
- Middle-of-the-road
- Conservative
- Far right

33. Are you presently married? Yes No

34. Did your high school require community service for graduation? Yes No

35. Below are some reasons that might have influenced your decision to attend this particular college. How important was each reason in your decision to come here? (Mark one answer for each possible reason)

- My parents wanted me to come here
- My teacher advised me
- This college has a very good academic reputation
- This college has a good reputation for its social activities
- I was offered financial aid
- This college offers special educational programs
- This college has low tuition
- High school counselor advised me
- Private college counselor advised me
- I wanted to live near home
- I was accepted by first choice
- This college's graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools
- This college's graduates get good jobs
- I was attracted by the religious affiliation/orientation of the college
- I wanted to go to a school about the size of this college
- Not accepted anywhere else
- Rankings in national magazines
- Information from a website
- I was admitted through an Early Action or Early Decision program
- My friends are attending
- I was offered a merit scholarship
- I was offered a need-based scholarship
- Very Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Important
36. Below is a list of different undergraduate major fields grouped into general categories. Mark only one to indicate your probable field of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARTS AND HUMANITIES</th>
<th>PHYSICAL SCIENCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art, fine and applied</td>
<td>Astronomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English (language and literature)</td>
<td>Atmospheric Science (incl. Meteorology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Earth Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Marine Science (incl. Oceanography)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language and Literature (except English)</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Other Physical Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Other Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theater or Drama</td>
<td>Therapy (occupational, physical, speech)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theology or Religion</td>
<td>Other Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE</td>
<td>SCIENCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
<td>Biotechnology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biophysics</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botany</td>
<td>Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Science</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine (Life) Science</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microbiology</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacteriology</td>
<td>Electrical or Electronic Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoology</td>
<td>Industrial Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Biological Science</td>
<td>Information Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUSINESS</td>
<td>Industry/Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>International Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Admin (general)</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Business</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Political Science (govt., international relations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretarial Studies</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Social Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>TECHNICAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Education</td>
<td>Building Trades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>Data Processing or Computer Programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music or Art Education</td>
<td>Drafting or Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Aeronautics or Astronautical Engineering</td>
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<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Asteronomy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Astronomy</td>
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<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Astrophysics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Atmospheric Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Biogeography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Biophysical Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Biotechnology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Biology (general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Biochemistry or Biophysics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Botany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Chemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Communications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education or Recreation</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Education</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37. Please indicate the importance to you personally of each of the following (Mark one for each item):

- Very Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Become a scientist</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become an academician</td>
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<td>Become a community leader</td>
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<td>Become involved in programs to clean up the environment</td>
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<td>Develop a meaningful philosophy of life</td>
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<td>Participating in a community action program</td>
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<td>Helping to promote racial understanding</td>
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VITA

Michele McManus Howard, a native of Lancaster, South Carolina, earned her Bachelor of Science in Mathematics Education and her Master of Education in Student Personnel Services from the University of South Carolina. During her undergraduate career at South Carolina, Michele was actively involved in student orientation programs and residence hall government. It was this involvement that lead her to pursue a career in higher education.

Beginning in 1986, Michele has worked in college administration at a number of campuses. Her work in new student programs has been a common thread of her career and the main emphasis of her work since she has been responsible for orientation programs at four college campuses. In addition, Michele has been actively involved in the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) where she served as a board member for eight years and as the National Executive Secretary/Treasurer from 1991-1995. In 1997, she was the recipient of the NODA President’s Award, the highest recognition from this professional association.

Michele also served as a founding member of the Board of Directors for the National Society of Collegiate Scholars and is a Lead Facilitator for the LeaderShape Institute. She is currently the Associate Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and the Dean of Students at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. She resides in Fort Mill, South Carolina with her husband Micheal.

Michele began her doctoral pursuits in Leadership Studies with an emphasis in Higher Education in 1994. She received her Ed.D in December 2002.