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Colleges struggle against the rankings habit

The Associated Press

U.S. News & World Report releases its annual college rankings Friday in the face of the loudest and best-organized criticism from educators the magazine has ever encountered.

But for all the complaints that the rankings warp college admissions and distract colleges from educating students, *U.S. News* still has the upper hand. Colleges are having a hard time quitting the magazine's annual beauty contest.

Sixty-two colleges have enlisted in an anti-rankings campaign led by education activist Lloyd Thacker. But a quick Web search shows even some of those schools haven't fulfilled a pledge to stop using their rankings to advertise themselves. And none of the highest-ranked schools have formally signed on.

Interviews by The Associated Press with top officials at about a dozen elite colleges confirm a fault line in the rankings debate that's more than coincidence: It irks educators everywhere to see colleges ranked like basketball teams. But it irks educators at the top-ranked colleges a lot less.

"The list isn't perfect but it isn't totally evil either," said David Oxtoby, the president of Pomona College in California, the No. 7 liberal arts college on last year's list. The popular rankings are a way for students and parents to get information, he said, and most know better than to take a college's specific placement too seriously.

The debate has been raging since the magazine began ranking colleges in the 1980s. But the focus this year is on Thacker, a longtime admissions counselor who has made it his mission to restore educational values to what he calls an over-commercialized college selection process. Thacker has been circulating a letter calling on colleges to boycott a portion of the rankings, to swear off using them for self-promotion, and to develop an alternative — something he also is pursuing.

He's received lots of attention and encouragement from the top schools. But so far no liberal arts colleges ranked higher than No. 30 on last year's list has signed the letter, nor have any of the top 100 universities.

Thacker and other rankings opponents acknowledge he'll eventually need to enlist the big names.

The fight against rankings "must be led by the beneficiaries," Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College in upstate New York, wrote in a recent letter to *U.S. News* and to fellow college presidents, saying he would sign on to the protest if schools like Harvard, Princeton and Williams do so first. "To end a corrupt and misleading game, the winners, not the losers, have to call it quits."

At some of the highest-ranked colleges, officials declined to comment. Some that did said they are sympathetic to Thacker's case (many already refrain from advertising their rankings, at least in their own publications). And some are cooperating, at least partially. Yale will host a major gathering next month for Thacker's effort to develop a rankings alternative. Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania, said he expects his university and its Ivy League peers will eventually work with Thacker in some form.

But they also say the rankings are a fact of life — and not an entirely bad one.

"In some respects, colleges and universities may have been too immune in the past to any kind of accountability for our practices, and students and families deserve to know as much as possible about the educational investment that they are about to make," said Robert Clagett, dean of admission at Middlebury College in Vermont, wrote in an e-mail.

Some schools say boycotting would cost them leverage over the magazine to improve the system. Others say the rankings and general admissions anxiety, while a concern, just aren't at the top of their agenda.

"I'm more concerned about students who aren't paying any attention to their college search than I am about students who are paying too much," said Stephen Farmer, director of admissions at the University of North Carolina.

Thacker calls his campaign "a test of character" for college presidents. He insists many are eager to sign on, but face pressure from their boards of trustees, whose members often come from the business world.

The ranking system is "numerical, it's a balance-sheet kind of bottom-line analysis that they're really familiar with," he said. Some universities, such as Baylor, have made rising in the *U.S. News* rankings an explicit goal; Arizona State has even made it a financial incentive in the president's contract.

Privately, some admissions deans who dislike the magazine's influence say the rankings have powerful supporters on campus. One dean of a prominent college said it's considered gauche to brag about the school's ranking, but nobody wants to tell parents and alumni they can't do so. Said another: "The biggest issue in the rankings isn't admissions, it's probably fundraising."

And it's the lower-ranked colleges that feel they have the most to lose.

"The schools pay a lot more attention to the rankings than most of them claim," said John Maguire, founder of a Massachusetts-based consulting firm that advises colleges. His research has found that rankings — while not the top reason — do play a significant role in determining which colleges students pick.

At trustee meetings, "when you jump up a couple points, everybody says 'Alleluia,'" he said. But at one client school that slipped from the second to the third quartile, "there was mass depression."

That pressure may explain why even some of the colleges listed as signers of Thacker's letter promising to quit using rankings to advertise themselves haven't done so.

Wesleyan College in Georgia still bragged this week on its website that Wesleyan "is consistently ranked as one of America's Best Colleges by *U.S. News & World Report*," and still had posted a 600-word release from last August touting its scores. Birmingham-Southern was still boasting that for 13 straight years it "has been ranked among the top National Liberal Arts Colleges in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*," among other accolades.

Other signees to Thacker's letter don't mention the magazine but still brag about rankings. "Top-ranked nationally by all widely regarded sources," says the website of Holy Cross in Massachusetts. "Ranked consistently in the top tier of the nation's liberal arts colleges," gushes the admissions website at Gettysburg College, whose president, Katherine Will, has been one of the more outspoken rankings critics.

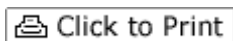
Brian Kelly, editor of *U.S. News*, says the protesters have it all wrong — the publicity from appearing in the rankings at all is good for their colleges. And he says the efforts by Thacker's group to develop an alternative system to get students information about colleges miss the point. There is already ample college data available. People come to *U.S. News* to make sense of it all.

"If you look at the way people buy cars, refrigerators, the health care plans we rank, or hospitals, consumers are hungry for hard data they can use," Kelly said. "But you can't just give people just lumps of data. You have to help them sort their way through it."

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