

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The Biggest Surprises in College Rankings

BY MELISSA KORN

Some of the most exclusive institutions in the nation came out on top in The Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings—schools that produce chief executives and employ Nobel laureates.

But a few schools unexpectedly came up short, while others may raise their profiles with their placement on this list.

Among the biggest surprises: Why didn't Princeton University, that stalwart holding tight to the No. 1 spot in the U.S. News & World Report ranking of national universities for the past six years, make our top five? And why didn't the University of Chicago, known world-wide as an intellectual powerhouse, even crack our top 10?

Though both schools scored top marks on student outcomes—with near-perfect graduation and loan-repayment rates, and enviable graduate salaries—they fall short on engagement measures. Neither makes the top 600 when it comes to how students feel about the way they learned. That was a factor in Princeton landing at No. 8 on the WSJ/THE overall list and the University of Chicago at No. 13, tied with its neighbor, Northwestern University.

Bob Durkee, vice president and secretary at Princeton, calls the low engagement score “a puzzle.” He says faculty teach all courses, though teaching assistants may lead discussion sections and lab breakouts. With small freshman seminars and a required senior thesis, “there's a lot of one-on-one engagement with faculty,” he says.

University of Chicago spokesman Jeremy



The University of Southern California finished 15th overall, with strong scores in all of the ranking's four main pillars.

Photo Courtesy of the University of Southern California

Manier says he encourages prospective students to “look beyond rankings to the university's academic program, culture and opportunities for individual development.” He says the school's own work shows its students are “enthusiastic” about faculty interaction, intellectual engagement and academic rigor.

MIXED RESULTS

Another surprise is the University of California at Irvine, which landed in a tie for 152nd in the WSJ/THE overall ranking. While the school came in tied at No. 8 in our environment ranking, boasting very diverse students and faculty, its financial resources are limited as a state school and graduate salaries are middling.

Spokeswoman Cathy Lawhon says the school considers itself in the top half of University of California schools and is ranked by others as a “best-value college.” She also points out that its loan-repayment rates look better than might be expected considering students' backgrounds.

Ms. Lawhon adds that the school is seeking new revenue streams. “In the meantime,” she says, “we pride ourselves on

doing a lot with what we have,” including a flurry of faculty hiring to improve student-faculty ratios.

Meanwhile, Northeastern University, whose co-op programs give it a reputation as a gateway to a solid career, ended up at a respectable but not eye-popping No. 71 in the overall WSJ/THE ranking. Though the school has highly engaged students (just outside the top 50), it landed in a tie at No. 77 on outcomes, due to a solid but not stellar 82% six-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students and moderate graduate earnings. It also tied for 155th on resources.

Spokeswoman Renata Nyul says the WSJ/THE methodology, which includes consideration of instructional spending on a per-student basis, “promotes inefficiency at a time when students and their families are looking for higher education to provide maximum value for the money.”

PLEASANT SURPRISES

Then there were the schools that did better than they typically fare in other rankings. For instance, the University of Southern California's lofty No. 15 position, based

on strong scores in all four of the criteria for the overall ranking.

President C. L. Max Nikias credits a \$6 billion fundraising campaign that helped funnel money into financial aid and academic resources, as well as an enormous and engaged alumni network that helps graduates land solid jobs. “Now we’re beginning to get the recognition we deserve,” he says of the school’s position in the WSJ/THE ranking. He says USC has worked hard to diversify its student body and provide support for those students to graduate and pursue meaningful careers.

Purdue University’s main campus in West Lafayette, Ind., tied for No. 37 overall, on par with the University of California, Berkeley and just behind the elite Middlebury College in Vermont. It was tied with Berkeley as the fourth-best public institution, ahead of highly regarded names including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (No. 48 overall), the Georgia Institute of Technology (tied for No. 51) and the University of Virginia (tied for No. 56).

Purdue was third among public schools in terms of resources, which covers per-student finances, faculty-student ratios and research output by faculty. Purdue President Mitch Daniels cites years of “careful stewardship” of the school’s finances, including incentivizing administrative cost cuts while investing in classroom programs and protecting a triple-A credit rating.

The school also revised tenure guidelines last spring, more heavily weighting student mentorship alongside research output in promotion decisions, and revamped a number of classes to center on team-based projects, both of which could boost future engagement scores.

WALL STREET JOURNAL/TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION COLLEGE RANKINGS

#1	Stanford University	92/100
#2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	91.3/100
#3	Columbia University	90.9/100
#4	University of Pennsylvania	90.8/100
#5	Yale University	90.4/100
#6	Harvard University	90.3/100
#7	Duke University	90/100
#8	Princeton University	89.6/100
#9	Cornell University	89.1/100
#10	California Institute of Technology	89/100
#11	John Hopkins University	88.7/100
#11	Washington University of St. Louis	88.7/100
#13	University of Chicago	88.4/100
#13	Northwestern University	88.4/100
#15	University of Southern California	88.3/100
#16	Dartmouth College	88.1/100
#17	Emory University	87.9/100
#18	Rice University	87.2/100
#19	Carnegie Mellon University	87.1/100
#20	Brown University	87/100
#21	Vanderbilt University	86.7/100
#22	Williams College	84.5/100
#23	Amherst College	84.5/100
#24	University of Michigan-Ann Arbor	83.8/100
#25	University of Notre Dame	83.6/100
#26	University of California, Los Angeles	81.9/100
#27	Tufts University	81.7/100
#28	Pomona College	81.5/100
#29	Georgetown University	81.3/100
#30	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	81.1/100
#30	Wellesley College	81.1/100
#32	Case Western Reserve University	80.8/100
#33	New York University	80.6/100
#34	Swarthmore College	79.8/100
#35	Smith College	79.4/100
#36	Middlebury College	78.5/100
#37	University of California, Berkeley	78.2/100
#37	Carleton College	78.2/100
#37	Haverford College	78.2/100
#37	University of Miami	78.2/100
#37	Purdue University West Lafayette	78.2/100
#42	Boston University	77.6/100
#43	University of California, Davis	77.5/100
#44	Bowdoin College	77.4/100
#45	Wesleyan University	77.3/100
#46	Claremont McKenna College	76.2/100
#47	Bryn Mawr College	75.7/100
#48	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	75.6/100
#49	University of California, San Diego	75.4/100
#50	Lehigh University	74.9/100