



# CAREER VISION

## “Top College” Rankings: The Best Way to Pick Your School?

“Best” lists are all around us – the best picture of the year; the top Netflix original series; the best surfing beaches in the world; the top companies to work for in 2026. So, it’s only natural for high school students to be drawn to “top college” rankings. After all, we all want the best for ourselves; it’s human nature.

### It’s All Relative

How will you choose your college? Maybe your plan is to choose from the schools you toured when tagging along on your older sibling’s campus visits. That may not be the best strategy, though. After all, the perfect college for you may be very different from the school your sister chose, considering you and she are two very different people.

Maybe you plan to go to the “best school” for your intended major, instead. Say, for example, you want to study mechanical engineering. Find out which schools have the leading programs and then start your college applications. It’s pretty simple, right? Well, maybe not!

As Edward Fiske, author of the best-selling *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, points out, “The question is not ‘*What’s the best college?*’ but ‘***What’s the best college for me?***’” And you won’t come across the answer to that question on any college ranking list!

Your goal in college search is to find schools that are a good fit for you – academically, socially, and emotionally – *while preparing you for a successful transition into the world of work*. Therefore, to find colleges that are a good fit, first you must know who you are, why you’re going to college, and what you’re looking for in a school.

- Start by exploring your interests, values, personality, and, most of all, your aptitudes, or natural talents.
- Next, determine what you’re looking for in a good-fit college (e.g., size and type of school, academic environment, majors offered, admissions requirements, cost, availability of financial aid, location, student body characteristics, student life, fit with your learning style, etc.). The [Qualities which Make a College Right for You \(Dr. Antonoff\)](#) worksheet can help you identify what’s most important to you in



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choosing a college that's a good fit. Be sure to talk with your parents so that everyone's on the same page when establishing the criteria you'll use to search for schools.

Ask your guidance counselor about tools and resources to find schools that meet your selection criteria (such as Xello, Naviance, [College Board](#), college guides, etc.).

## Good, Better, *Best*?

In addition to the resources listed above, you can check college rankings as a way to narrow your college search. You'll find all sorts of college ranking lists on the Internet. The most popular are those that address academics (e.g., top schools for environmental science) and college costs (e.g., best-value colleges). Other lists rank characteristics of the learning environment (e.g., research-intensive universities; most co-op learning opportunities). And, of course, there are rankings that address the make-up of the student population (e.g., most Peace Corps volunteers) and campus life (e.g., top party schools).

When researching school rankings, keep in mind that:

- College ranking information is useful *only* if you already know what you're looking for in a good-fit school.
- There's no such thing as the best school. On the contrary, many colleges are good fits for you.

Here's a list of the most popular websites and guides for college rankings. Do you want to know which one is "the best"? Well, that's a tough question to answer *because each entity uses different criteria to compile its rankings*. You need to decide what information is most important *to you* in your quest for good-fit colleges. Read the descriptions below to learn more:

- **U.S. News Best Colleges**

Perhaps the most well-known and highly publicized of the college lists, *The U.S. News & World Report* provides ranking for 1,800+ colleges. The rankings are calculated on [17 measures](#) including but not limited to:

- academic reputation (measured through peer assessment surveys),
- graduation and retention rates,
- graduation rate performance,



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- faculty resources,
  - student excellence,
  - financial resources,
  - graduate indebtedness,
  - alumni giving rate,
  - and the school's success at promoting social mobility by graduating students who received federal Pell Grants.
- **America's Top Colleges – Forbes**

Unlike many of the other organizations' ranking lists, *Forbes* focuses on output by measuring what students from 500 top schools are *getting out of college*. The student experience, student debt, academic success, graduate success, graduation rate, and alumni salaries are factored into the *Forbes* [ranking methodology](#).
  - **The Best 388 Colleges – Princeton Review**

The [ranking methodology](#) used in this guide is based on surveys of 160,000 students at 388 schools. Students answer survey questions about various aspects of their college experience, including academics/administration, student life, and fellow students. Survey results are compiled to generate 50 different ranking lists showing the top 25 schools in each category.
  - **College Lists & Rankings – CollegeXpress**

CollegeXpress offers hundreds of college lists in out-of-the-ordinary categories like: colleges graduating the most Rhodes Scholars, the 50 smallest colleges in the United States, and colleges on a quarter system. These lists are based on Steven Antonoff's book, *The College Finder*.

## Stacking it Up

In summary, college rankings can provide useful information in the college search process. However, you need to use the information wisely. Take time to understand the criteria used in the rankings. After all, "best" is relative. Just because a college ranks "Number 1" on a list doesn't mean it should be your top pick.