

## Publisher's Note

**Give the kids some credit. Most students don't use rankings for the rankings.**

In this issue of *student**POLL*** we report the latest findings from our ongoing exploration of the role rankings play in students' college search and selection. Building on findings from the past studies, our goal was to extend our understanding of the role rankings sources such as US News, Niche, or BestColleges.com, play for students, with particular attention to the arc of the process, while confirming or problematizing trends identified in our recent surveys.

To this end, we conducted a study of traditional high school seniors who planned to attend a 4-year school full-time in fall 2024. Surveys were fielded in winter and spring of this year to enable us to examine not only differences relative to previous years, but also potential differences in the use of rankings sources at different points in the college search and selection process—at times when most students in typical years have recently made decisions about where to apply (February–March) and where to enroll (May–June). (All respondents in the spring study could name the school they will attend, or were most likely to attend, though it is possible that federal delays in FAFSA processing might later have shifted some of those students' matriculation decisions).

What did we find? Most students report considering some sources of rankings (around 6 in 10). While this appears to skew somewhat toward those with the greatest educational mobility, we found it striking that, for the most part, there are not many consistently substantial differences across sizable subgroups of traditional college-bound students.

Interestingly, the most important use of rankings sources is actually not the rankings. Few students consider rankings sources to identify an institution's particular rank (only one in ten even thought they could—and only a fraction of these actually got it right). Recent data confirm what we found in the 2023 *student**POLL*** on the same topic: When numerical rank does come into play, it is far more likely to gain significance as an indicator of a ranking range, or “neighborhood.” Even then, however, only two in ten at most did so in spring 2024.

This year's studies reveal a use of rankings sources that is more important than either of these: The reason respondents most frequently identified as most important was not to see schools' rankings at all, but to gather information about colleges and universities (cited by three in ten or more respondents).

## Publisher's Note (cont.)

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For the most part, those students consulting ranking sources do so across a range of decision points as they explore and hone in on their choices of where to apply and where to enroll. These sources might be used somewhat differently at different junctures, however. Findings hint that students making enrollment decisions might be more likely to consider rank/ranking neighborhoods than those making application decisions.

Finally, findings document a continued decline in the influence of US News as a rankings source, now being comparable to Niche in terms of use and influence across February–March and May–June fieldings.

So, let's give the kids some credit! Prospective students are by no means the passive consumers of any particular college rankings system, as is sometimes assumed. Rather, most are evidently seeing past the superficial horse race of rankings. A plurality aren't considering these sources at all. And at least half of those who do are instead using them, among others, to gather information to help make informed decisions about which colleges might be best for them.

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**Building on past studies, this issue of *studentPOLL* will answer **four** new questions:**

1. Who, among college-going prospective students, is or is not consulting rankings sources?
2. How are these sources being used?
3. At which stages are they being used?
4. Which rankings sources, if any, are prospective students using as they decide where to apply and where to enroll?

## Key Findings



**Information included in rankings sources is at least as important to students as the numerical rank assigned.**

**4 in 10** students did not use rankings

**3 in 10** consider supporting information on rankings sources as most important

**3 in 10** consider rank “neighborhood” or individual rank as most important

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**Nearly 3/4 of students are either not considering rankings sources or considering them at only one decision-making juncture.**

**3%** of students use rankings sources throughout the college selection process

## Key Findings (cont.)



High proportions of students use rankings sources in the early stages of exploring colleges and deciding where to apply.

51% did so in the winter

58% did so in the spring



The influence of US News continues to shrink relative to other rankings, with Niche cited as frequently as the most influential rankings source

In winter 2024, a statistically indistinguishable proportion of students consulted Niche and US News

19%  
consulted  
Niche

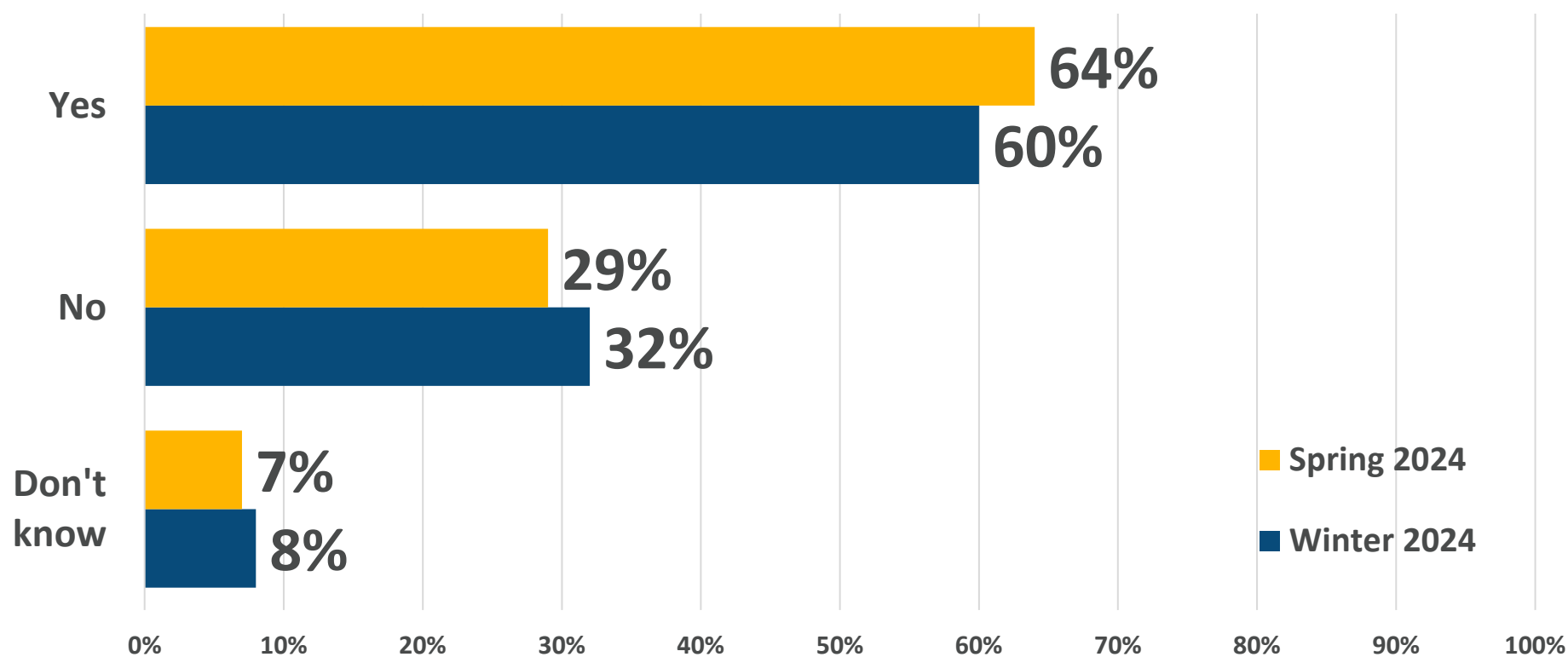


16%  
consulted  
US News

# Q1: Who considers rankings as they weigh their college options?

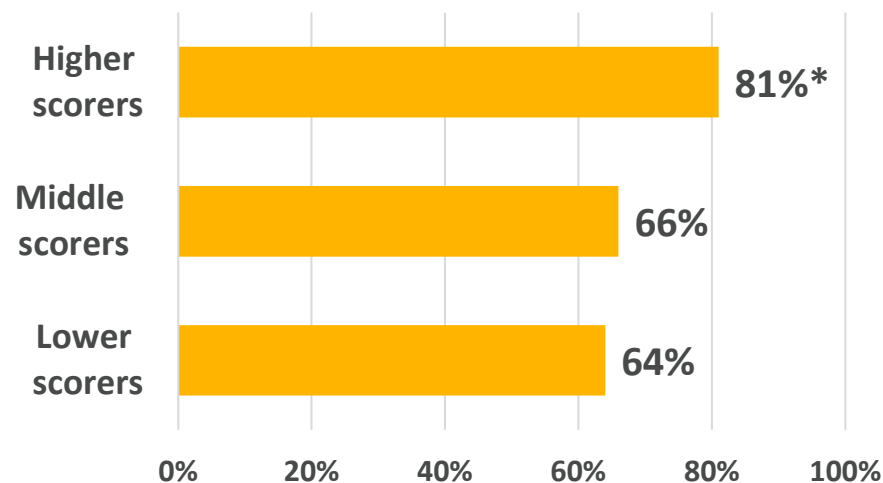
Consistent with findings from previous *studentPOLL* surveys of the past decade, we find that the majority of traditional prospective students for fall 2024 reported taking rankings into consideration as they identified and weighed their college options. Remarkably, it appears that the use of rankings sources has become common across populations, with consideration by any specific socio-demographic group not

Chart 1: Percentage of students considering rankings in the college search process



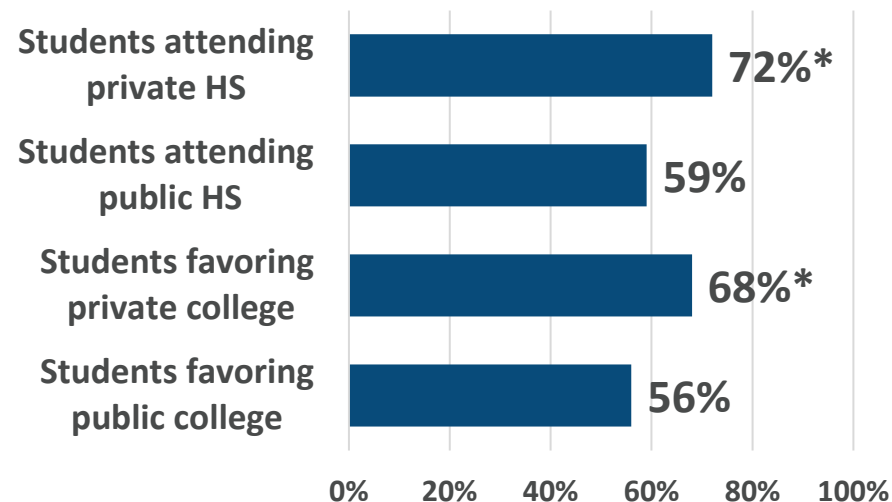
# Q1: Who considers rankings as they weigh their college options? (cont.)

**Chart 2: Likelihood of considering rankings by standardized test score (spring 2024 fielding)**



	ACT	SAT	Income
Higher	30+	1400+	\$150,00 +
Middle	22<30	1100<1400	\$60,000 < \$150,000
Lower	<22	<1100	< \$60,000

**Chart 3: Likelihood of considering rankings by higher educational mobility (winter 2024 fielding)**



Note: The asterisk denotes a statistically significant difference between comparison groups within each response.

For instance, while, as one might expect, spring 2024 respondents who scored 1400/30 or better on their SAT/ACT were more likely to report considering rankings than other students, this did not hold true among students at an earlier stage of college exploration in the winter fielding. Nor do we find any evidence that consideration of rankings varies consistently by income—the highest group vs. middle vs. lower income—or by racial/ethnic differences (AAPI/BIPOC vs. White). (Refer to Study Methodology at the end of the report to see subgroup information).

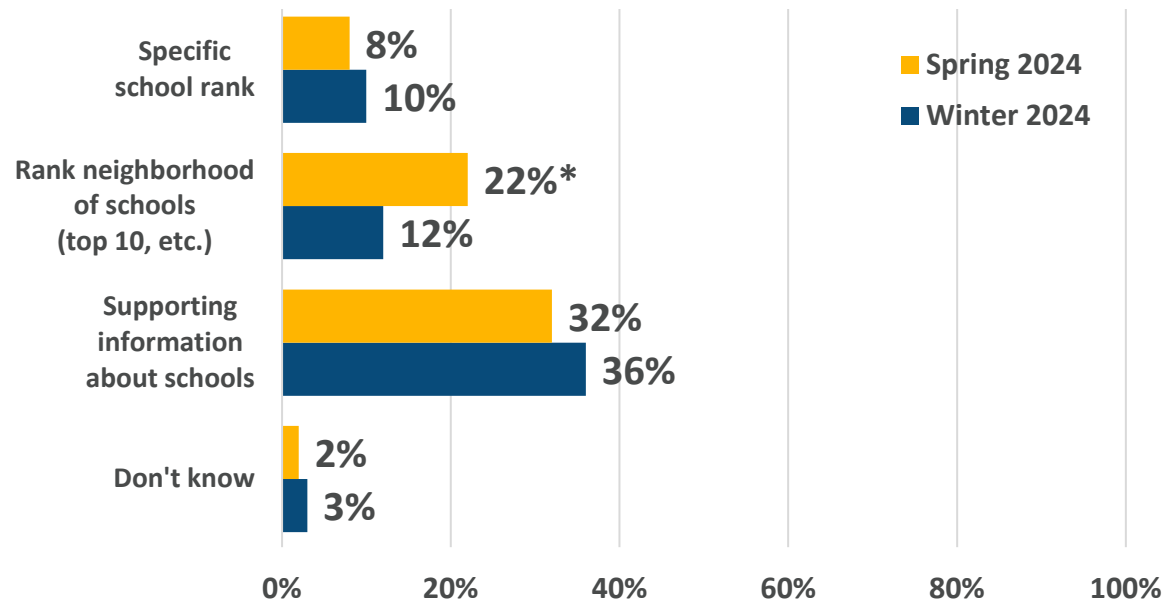
However, if we look more broadly across various markers of cultural capital we do find that the likelihood of rankings-source consideration appears to skew somewhat toward those students with higher educational mobility, although, again, not with the consistency one might expect: In the winter fielding, students attending private high schools were more likely to use the rankings than those attending publics, those favoring a private college more than those looking at publics in their own state.

## Q2: How are prospective students using rankings sources as a part of their college search?

Putting aside the students who do not report considering rankings – as many as 4 out of 10 – those who do use various rankings sources look to them for a number of reasons. And that is decidedly not simply to identify a specific numerical rank value assigned to an institution they may be considering, or even a range in which it can be found. Indeed, whichever rankings sources they use, students are just as, or even more, interested in information that these sources provide about relevant schools. Interestingly, with no clear patterns discernable across socio-demographic groups. More than 3 in 10 respondents consulted rankings primarily to glean information about the schools they were considering, whereas specific rank values were the primary focus of only about 1 in 10 respondents across winter and spring fieldings.

Even when numerical rankings appear to become somewhat more prominent in college selection, it's not primarily due to its individual rank number, but to where the institution falls in broad ranges, or neighborhoods and this latter is relevant among no more than about 2 in 10 respondents.

**Chart 4: What was most important to student when considering rankings sources?**



To the limited extent that numerical ranking does come into play, it appears disproportionately to affect students closer to making an enrollment decision. Respondents in the spring fielding were far more likely than winter respondents to indicate that knowing the rank neighborhood was the most information they gleaned from the rankings (the 2 in 10 above vs. 1 in 10). They were also more likely to report that they had considered institutions' ranking to validate a choice they had already made by checking how it was ranked (32% vs. 23%).

*Note: The asterisk denotes a statistically significant difference between winter and spring fielding within each response.*



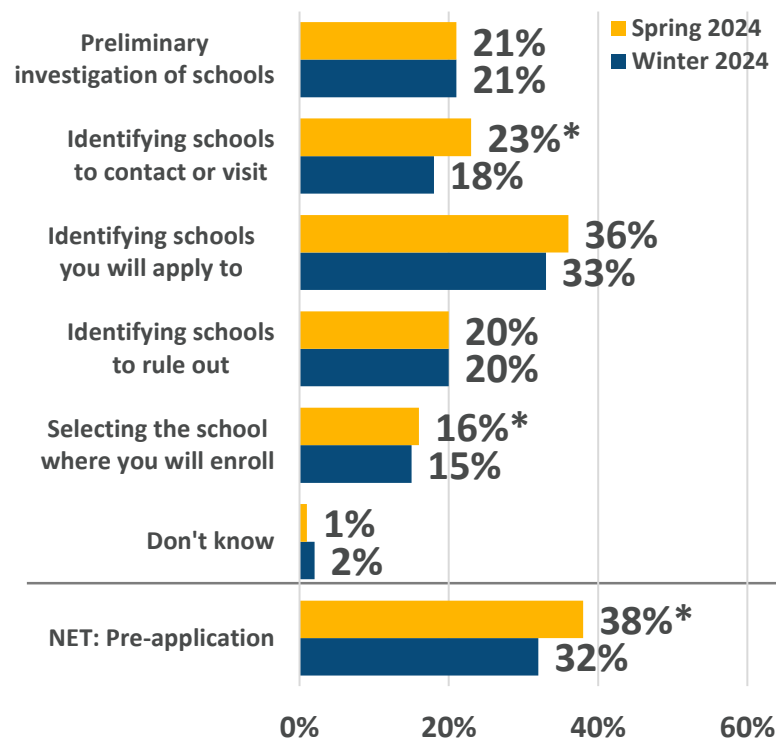
### Q3: At which stages in the college-selection process are rankings sources being used?

Among students who report using rankings sources, that usage takes place at different stages of the college selection process, with at least a third in pre-application investigation, more than a third at the point of application, and another substantial proportion closer to the time of the enrollment decision. For the vast majority of students, though, rankings sources do not appear to play a significant role throughout the whole process.

We asked respondents to identify when they were using rankings sources as they tried to determine which colleges and universities they wanted to: investigate preliminarily; follow-up with (contact or visit); apply to; rule out; and enroll in. Students appear to be using rankings sources only at various selected points in the process. Across winter and spring fieldings, **only 3% of respondents consulted rankings sources in all five decision points** tested, another 2-3% at four points, and 9-10% at three. By contrast, 33-36% indicated that they consulted rankings sources at only one of these junctures, and 36-40% did not report considering rankings at all.

Here again, there are few patterns across subgroups, but we do find some interesting differences. In the winter fielding those students with lower educational mobility (based on income, ACT/SAT score, non-first generation) tended to be less likely to report having consulted ranking during preliminary investigation of schools. This was not observed for winter fielding. For instance, less affluent students were significantly less likely to do so than those in high income ranges (13% vs. 27% & 23% for highest and middle incomes). BIPOC respondents were significantly more likely than white students to use rankings sources to select the school where they would enroll (20% vs. 13% in spring, 18% vs. 12% in winter fieldings).

**Chart 5: Stages of the college search process when students consider rankings**



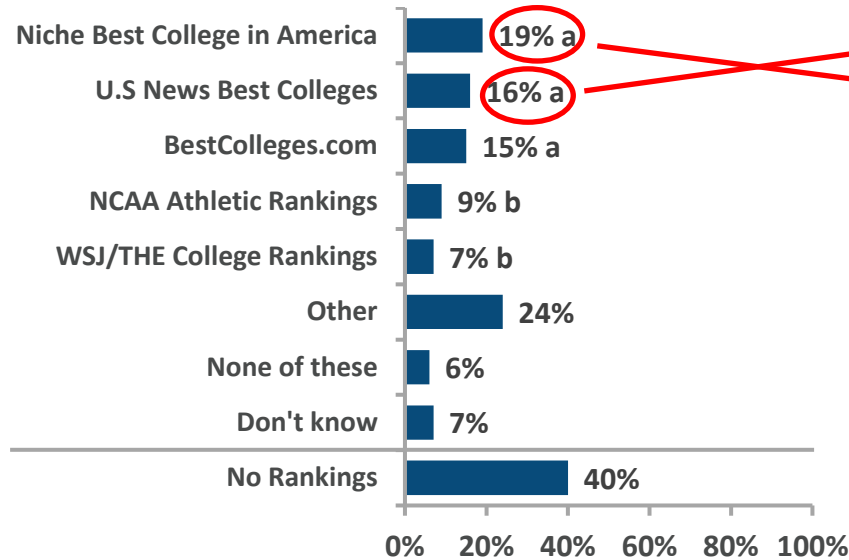
Notes: 1) The asterisk denotes a statistically significant difference between winter and spring fielding within each response. 2) Multiple responses accepted.

**Didn't consider rankings at all**

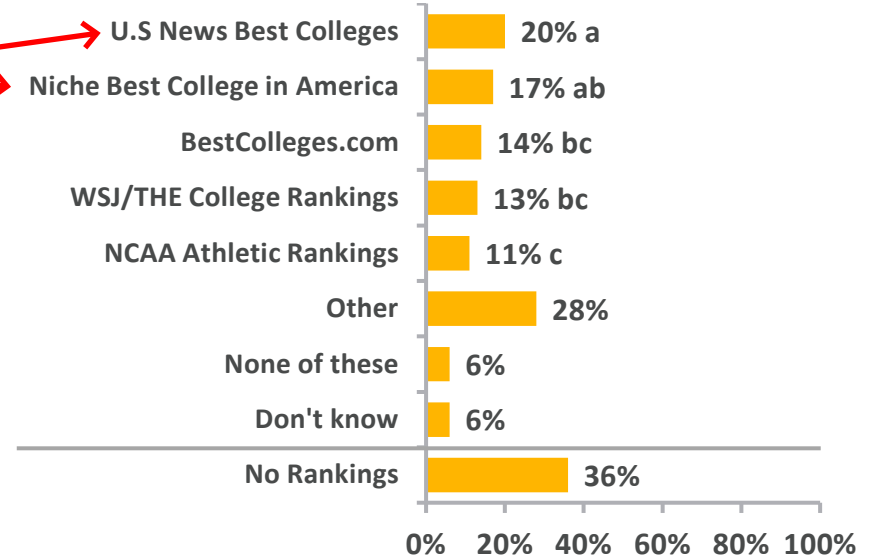
- **Spring 2024: 36%**
- **Winter 2024: 40%**

# Q4: Which sources are college-going prospective students using as they decide where to apply and where to enroll?

**Chart 6: Most consulted rankings sources (winter 2024)**



**Chart 7: Most consulted rankings sources (spring 2024)**



Notes: 1) Percentages that share a letter are statistically similar within that fielding period. 2) Multiple responses accepted. 3) The "Other" category includes Forbes America's Top Colleges, Princeton Review Best Colleges, College Raptor's Best Colleges, Money's Best Colleges, Washington Monthly's Best Colleges, Fiske Guide to Colleges, QS World University Rankings, and any others not cited here or in the chart above.

Finally, consistent with a trend we've been seeing for more than a decade, prospective students collectively consult a wide range of rankings sources. No single source is consulted by more than 20% of the traditional college-bound high school seniors in our most recent studies, nor is there a clear winner in terms of usage among these students. While up to a fifth of prospective students still consult US News at some point in their college search/selection, it appears that the prominence of that publication continues to wane. It definitively lost its once-uncontested market lead in this year's cycle. We found that there were no significant differences between the frequencies with which respondents identified Niche and US News as the **most consulted** rankings source. US News was cited across both fieldings as the **most influential** rankings source by only a small proportion of respondents (from less than 1 in 10 in the winter to slightly more than 1 in 10 in the spring).

## Conclusion

It's easy to punch holes in the methodology of any ranking organization that claims to know that one institution is in some broad sense "better" for undergraduates than another. In fact, we would argue that that's not simply a question of what factors to consider and how much weight to give them. Rather, the very idea that it's possible to come up with any useful definition of "better" for students is impossible. Over 30 years of research tell us that what's better for one student is often worse for another.

Rankings are a reality in the marketplace, though. Our new findings confirm that, across prospective student demographics and across decision points, rankings sources remain a part of the conversation around college search and selection. However, it's clear that the impact of numbers assigned by particular rankings systems, US News specifically, do not merit the level of attention they have historically received. Paying inordinate attention to any particular rankings system can be misleading, if not downright dangerous. The sources consulted by students as they weigh their college choices are varied—at least one is now cited as often; others are close—and their value to prospective students lies more in the information they provide about an institution than what they purport to say about the institution's stature by assigning a particular numerical rank. Remember: A college or university's specific rank is most important to only 1 in 10 students, its broader ranking neighborhood

to 2 in 10, and supporting information about the institution to more than 3 in 10, while 4 in 10 don't consider rankings sources at all.

It is difficult to say with any authority how these findings may translate for any individual institution. At the margins, and particularly for some institutions, numerical rankings and specific rankings sources may have more or less importance in student choice, as every college or university has its own strengths and challenges, and each must contend with idiosyncrasies particular to its markets and competitors. But even in situations where numerical rankings do matter, experience shows that there's almost always something an institution can do to increase its appeal than moving up a few rungs on the rankings would.

Our takeaway is that, rather than focus on the rankings, institutions serious about improving their market position should instead focus on developing an authentic and compelling market distinction by evolving the substance of the student experience in ways that show demonstrable promise to change students' decisions in its favor.

Data suggest that most prospective students are, for the most part, avoiding the lure of the rankings numbers game. Colleges and universities in America would do well to do the same.

## Study Methodology

The findings in this issue of *student**POLL*** are based on survey research fielded at two points in time: February–March and May–June 2024. The survey was completed by 4,030 domestic high school seniors; 1,579 of whom intended at the point of data collection to attend a 4-year institution as a full-time student in fall 2024.

Across winter and spring fieldings respondents were 57% white and, respectively, 62% and 61% female. Responses are weighted by income, race, region, and gender so that findings represent the larger domestic college-going population. The overall margin of error was plus or minus 2.5%.

The study is designed to provide a broad perspective on the market challenges facing institutions. Findings, therefore, do not reflect the circumstances, challenges, and opportunities of any individual institution, which tend to be highly idiosyncratic. Rather, they are intended to contribute to the national conversation around access to higher education, inform policy makers, and prompt each individual institution to consider what its own particular situation might be with regard to this *student**POLL*** topic and how it can determine its own best solutions.

*Footnote: For the purpose of assessing differences across student populations, our analysis divided students into the following racial/ethnic groups. Students self-identified as: “Asian” included Asian or Asian American and Indian, Indian American, Indo-American, or Asian Indian; “Black” included Black, African American, African, or Caribbean; “Hispanic” included Hispanic, Latino/Latina/ Latinx, or Mexican American; “White” included White, Caucasian, or European; and “Multi-racial/Other” included American Indian or Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern, Arab American, North African, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and those who identified with multiple groups. For broad racial subgroup populations, AAPI refers to Asian American and Pacific Islander, and BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.*

## About *studentPOLL*

The publication by Art & Science Group, LLC, *studentPOLL*, presents the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of high school students and their parents. Published for the benefit of college and university senior leaders and enrollment officers, as well as secondary school college counselors, *studentPOLL* seeks to provide insights and understanding that will result in better communication and service to college-bound students across the nation.

First published in 1995 by Art & Science Group, *studentPOLL* has become a trusted and widely cited source of reliable data and insights on many critical questions concerning college choice. *studentPOLL* findings and analysis are provided free on the [Art & Science Group website](#).

## About Art & Science Group

Art & Science Group offers market-informed institutional strategy to higher education, independent schools and the non-profit sector. Since our founding in 1994, we have provided our clients with strategic market research and recommendations, built on a foundation of both creative thinking and empirical rigor — art and science. We work in a variety of arenas, leveraging a foundation of market data, analysis and inventive ideas, to guide and advance our institution's strategic interests and critical investments. Our firm is dedicated to helping each institution position itself in ways that positively affect the decisions of its key constituents — whether to apply, matriculate, give and so on — in an institution's favor. We provide a customized and collaborative approach for each client, with recommendations rooted in sophisticated research and thorough analysis. Our experienced consultants and researchers produce the highest quality findings and recommendations on the