

The University of Texas System Rankings in *U.S. News & World Report's "America's Best Colleges 2008"*

I. Introduction

National rankings interest many people who use them as a proxy of quality for higher education institutions. Because of the public attention they receive, these publications cannot be ignored. According to a recent analysis¹, college rankings have become increasingly important. The percentage of entering students indicating "rankings in national magazines" were very important in choosing a college increased from 11% to 16% over the last decade. These percentages are even higher for public universities with medium to high selectivity, around 24% in the most recent survey. Because there is no perfectly objective or comprehensive ranking system, public policy makers should use such rankings with great caution.

Beginning in 1983, *USNWR* has examined a broad cross-section of institutions, using a combination of statistical and reputation surveys to collect data, looking at the overall undergraduate college experience each fall and at graduate programs each spring. To improve its methodology and college rankings, *U.S. News & World Report* made several changes to the 2008 edition. Institutions that do not use the SAT/ACT in the admission decision for first-time, degree-seeking applicants are now included in the unranked group. The percentage of the student body receiving Pell Grants, an indicator of low income students attending college, was added to the predicted graduation rate formula. Finally, the comprehensive colleges-bachelor's rankings category was changed to baccalaureate colleges.

The overall measures and weightings which emphasize the undergraduate experience, however, have remained relatively unchanged. Peer assessment has a 25% weighting. Retention rates are weighted 20% for national universities and 25% for master's universities. Faculty resources (including class size, faculty salaries, student-faculty ratio, proportion of faculty who are full time, and the proportion with the highest degree in their field) are weighted 20%. Other components of the rankings include student selectivity (15%), financial resources (10%), graduation rates (5%), and alumni giving (5%).

Overall, the *U.S. News & World Report (USNWR)* listings of top schools do not change radically from year to year. To sustain its position, let alone move up in the rankings, an institution must continue to invest in undergraduate improvement to increase retention, graduation rates, and selectivity; hire larger numbers of faculty to reduce student-faculty ratios and the number of large classes; and increase alumni giving. A recent study found that "none of the universities under investigation realized a significant change in the *USNWR* rating."² Moreover, even where performance has improved, e.g., reducing the student-faculty ratio or increasing graduation rates, "these changes in performance outcomes were not offset by comparable changes in the ratings."³

Small, selective, private schools tend to rise to the top of the undergraduate rankings. Conversely, in graduate education and research, larger institutions with more comprehensive portfolios of academic programs, larger numbers of faculty, and more research funding tend to rise to the top of the lists.

¹ A study of the CIRP Freshmen Survey. *College Rankings & College Choice: How important are college rankings in student's college choice process?* Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, August 2007.

² See Denise S. Gater, *Review of Measures Used in U.S. News & World Report's "America's Best Colleges,"* Occasional Paper from The Lombardi Program on Measuring Institutional Performance, TheCenter, University of Florida, summer 2002. An example this year is the critique of changes in the law school ranking methodology by Carl Bialik in *The Wall Street Journal*, "Small Change by U. S. News Leads to New Controversy in Rankings," (*The Wall Street Journal online*, April 7, 2005). Despite the change in methodology, the position of UT Austin's Law School did not change.

³ Bruce Keith, "Organizational Contexts and University Performance Outcomes: The Limited Role of Purposive Action in the Management of Institutional Status," *Research in Higher Education*, Vol. 42. No. 5 (2001) p. 505.

For these reasons, critics of the *USNWR* abound. As the Lombardi Center 2004 report on top research universities points out, "commercial publications continue to issue poorly designed and highly misleading rankings with great success... critiques, even though devastatingly accurate, have had minimal impact on the popularity of the rankings and indeed probably have contributed to the proliferation of competing versions."⁴ At the same time, very few institutions refuse to participate because it is one of the most frequently cited of the ranking systems and failure to provide institutional information to the *USNWR* surveyors may lead to use by *USNWR* of unreliable data, not verified by the institution, in the rankings. The USNWR reports that about 92% of institutions returned their rankings survey for the 2008 edition.⁵

II. *U.S. News & World Report, "America's Best Colleges 2008:" UT System Summary*

This summary focuses on the August 2007 publication of "America's Best Colleges 2008."⁶ Most of the University of Texas System academic institutions remained in the same tier as the previous year except UT Tyler, which moved from the top tier for Regional Master's Universities to the third tier, and UT Brownsville, which was included in the unranked group this year because SAT and ACT test scores are not used in the admission decision.

A. Best National Universities: 258 schools were included in this group; those ranked 1 through 124, including ties, were rank ordered on measures related to the undergraduate experience; the rest were grouped in tiers 3 (ranks 131 to 187) through 4 (ranks 196 to 258) and listed alphabetically. The top 20 positions included only private universities. The top-ranked public universities were the UC-Berkeley (21), the University of Virginia (23), and UCLA and the University of Michigan (tied at 25).

UT Austin

With an overall score of 58 and a peer rating of 4.1, UT Austin ranked 13 among public universities and increased its rank among national universities from 47 to 44. UT Austin improved its ratings in several areas: average freshman retention rate; the graduation rate; the proportion of classes with less than 20 students; the SAT scores for the 25th and 75th percentile; the proportion of freshman in the top 10% of their high school class; the acceptance rate; and the average alumni giving rate (see Table 1 for rating details and comparisons). Other national universities with a similar ranking included Rensselaer Polytechnic Inst. (NY), UC-Irvine, and UC-Santa Barbara. Other public and private schools with similar peer ratings included Washington University in St. Louis and University of Wisconsin. (Texas A&M-College Station was ranked 62, in a tie with one other university, Worcester Polytechnic Inst. (MA)).

UT Austin ranked 40 among 50 national universities listed as "great schools at great prices." UT Austin's study abroad program was also included among "programs to look for."

UT Austin's engineering program ranked 9 among the best undergraduate engineering programs in the country. Among engineering specialties, five of UT Austin's engineering programs ranked in the top ten: civil (6), environmental/environmental health (6, tied with John Hopkins University), chemical (9), computer (8, tied with Cornell University), and aerospace/aeronautical/astronomical (9).

Its undergraduate business programs have also maintained their high ranking: best program (7, tied with Carnegie Mellon University (PA)); accounting (1); management (5); management information systems (3); and marketing (2).

⁴ *The Top American Research Universities*, 2004, pp. 7-8.

⁵ USNWR, *America's Best Colleges 2007*, p. 78.

⁶ http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php

UT Dallas

UT Dallas remained in the third tier (national universities ranked 131 to 187) and received a peer assessment score of 2.7. UTD improved its rating in the percent of classes of 50 students or more; the SAT scores for the 25th percentile; and the percent of faculty who are full-time. It is noteworthy that UTD's 75th percentile SAT scores continue to be higher than any other third-tier institution and higher even than many of those in the lower half of the top 124 national universities. Schools with similar peer ratings were Oklahoma State University, Texas Tech University, University of Cincinnati, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

UT Arlington

UT Arlington remained in the fourth tier with a peer rank of 2.5, the same score as the previous year. UTA improved its ratings in several areas: the graduation rate; an increase in the percent of classes with less than 20 students; a decrease in the percent of classes with 50 or more students; higher SAT/ACT scores in the 25th and 75th percentiles; the percent of freshmen in the top 10% of their high school class; and the acceptance rate. Schools with similar peer assessment scores included Indiana State University, New Mexico State University, Northern Arizona University, University of Central Florida, University of Massachusetts-Boston, University of Missouri-St. Louis, and University of Nevada-Las Vegas.

UT El Paso

UT El Paso remained in the fourth tier with a peer assessment score of 2.3. There was a slight increase in graduation rates, but most other ratings remained relatively unchanged. Schools with similar peer ratings included Texas Woman's University, University of Arkansas, University of Hartford (CT), University of Memphis, University of North Texas, and University of Toledo.

B. Regional Master's Universities: West

557 universities and colleges are in the group of regional master's universities, ranked within four geographic regions. Texas is included in the West region, which includes 123 schools.

UT San Antonio

UT San Antonio remained in the third tier of the master's universities (west) in this year's rankings and had a peer rating of 3.1. UTSA improved its rating in several areas including: peer assessment score; the SAT scores for the 75th percentile; the acceptance rate; and the average alumni giving rate. A school with similar peer ratings is California State University–Northridge.

UT Tyler

UT Tyler returned to the third tier of master's universities (west) in this year's rankings and had a peer rating of 2.7. UT Tyler improved its ratings in two areas: student/faculty ratios and the percent of full-time faculty. Other universities with similar peer ratings include California State University-San Marcos, Montana State University-Billings, Southern Oregon University, and Texas A&M International University.

UT Pan American

UT Pan American remained in the fourth tier with a peer assessment score of 2.4. The campus continues to improve its rating in the average freshman retention rate and the graduation rate. Peers with similar rankings include California State University-Dominguez Hills, Midwestern State University (TX), Northeastern State University (OK), Southern Utah University, and UT Permian Basin.

UT Permian Basin

UT Permian Basin remained in the fourth tier this year and its peer assessment score increased from 2.2 to 2.4. There was improvement in several areas: the graduation rate; an increase in the percent of classes under 20; a slight decrease in the percent of class of 50 or more students; and the 25th percentile of SAT/ACT test scores. Schools with similar peer ratings include California State University-Dominguez Hills, Midwestern State University (TX), Northeastern State University (OK), Southern Utah University and UT Pan American.

UT Brownsville/Texas Southmost College

UT Brownsville's peer assessment score increased from 2.2 to 2.5, but the institution was unranked this year because of missing SAT/ACT data. UTB showed improvement in the rankings for average freshman retention rate and the percent of freshmen in the top 25% of their high school class. Other unranked schools in Texas include Texas Southern University and Texas Wesleyan University.

C. Analysis

The *USNWR* ranking system for undergraduate institutions is biased toward small, highly selective institutions with significant per capita financial resources and largely full-time student bodies. Public institutions, particularly large ones, do not fair as well in the rankings. The highest ranked schools are ones that are relatively small, can be very selective in the students who are admitted, attract the nation's best students, can offer small classes, and have the financial resources (a combination of high tuition income, large endowments, alumni support, and federal and state income) to spend a significantly higher amount per student and pay faculty above-average salaries.

Even with these biases, the rankings of UT System universities increased in the following areas:

- UT Austin improved its overall ranking from 47 to 44 among all national universities.
- Peer assessment scores increased at UT Brownsville, UT Permian Basin, and UT San Antonio.
- Retention rates increased at UT Austin, UT Brownsville, and UT Pan American.
- Graduation rates increased at UT Arlington, UT Austin, UT El Paso, UT Pan American, and UT Permian Basin.
- The percent of full-time faculty increased at UT Dallas and UT Tyler.

Table 1
UT System in the USNWR Rankings: America's Best Colleges 2007 and 2008 Editions

	2008 Edition	2007 Edition	Improved	Declined	Unchanged
National Doctoral					
UT Austin					
Tier	Top 1-124	Top 1-124			
Rank overall**	44	47	*		
Rank public	13	13			*
Overall score	58	59		*	
Peer assessment score (5.0)	4.1	4.1			*
Average freshman retention rate	93%	92%	*		
grad rate: predicted	73%	72%		---- N/A ----	
grad rate: actual	77%	75%	*		
% of classes under 20	35%	34%	*		
% of classes of 50 or more	23%	22%		*	
Student/faculty ratio	18/1	18/1			*
% of faculty who are full time	97%	97%			*
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	1120-1370	1110-1360	*		
Freshmen in top 10% of HS class	70%	68%	*		
Acceptance rate	49%	51%	*		
Average alumni giving rate	15%	12%	*		

**In 2008, tied with 3 universities: Rensselaer Polytechnic Inst. (NY), UC-Irvine, UC-Santa Barbara; in 2007, ranked with Penn State, UC-Davis, UC-Santa Barbara, Univ. of Florida.

UT Dallas

Tier	3	3			
Rank overall	131-187	127-182			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.7	2.8		*	
Average freshman retention rate	82%	82%			*
grad rate: predicted	65%	69%		---- N/A ----	
grad rate: actual	55%	56%		*	
% of classes under 20	28%	28%			*
% of classes of 50 or more	28%	31%	*		
Student/faculty ratio	19/1	N/A		---- N/A ----	
% of faculty who are full time	87%	85%	*		
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	1140-1360	1120-1370	*		
Freshmen in top 10% of HS class	41%	41%			*
Acceptance rate	51%	51%			*
Average alumni giving rate	2%	2%			*

	2008 Edition	2007 Edition	Improved	Declined	Unchanged
National Doctoral					
UT Arlington					
Tier	4	4			
Rank overall	196-258	189-248			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.5	2.5			*
Average freshman retention rate	68%	70%		*	
grad rate: predicted	52%	51%		---- N/A ----	
grad rate: actual	42%	40%	*		
% of classes under 20	29%	28%	*		
% of classes of 50 or more	24%	25%	*		
Student/faculty ratio	21/1	N/A		---- N/A ----	
% of faculty who are full time	88%	88%			*
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	960-1190	940-1160	*		
Freshmen in top 10% of HS class	22%	20%	*		
Acceptance rate	77%	79%	*		
Average alumni giving rate	3%	3%			*
UT El Paso					
Tier	4	4			
Rank overall	196-258	189-248			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.3	2.4		*	
Average freshman retention rate	68%	69%		*	
grad rate: predicted	29%	30%		---- N/A ----	
grad rate: actual	29%	28%	*		
% of classes under 20	30%	31%		*	
% of classes of 50 or more	13%	13%			*
Student/faculty ratio	20/1	N/A		---- N/A ----	
% of faculty who are full time	83%	84%		*	
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	907*	800-1030		---- N/A ----	
Freshmen in top 10% of HS class	17%	17%			*
Acceptance rate	99%	99%			*
Average alumni giving rate	7%	7%			*

*SAT/ACT data were not submitted in form requested by U.S. News.

	2008 Edition	2007 Edition	Improved	Declined	Unchanged
Regional Master's Universities - West					
UT Tyler					
Tier	3	Top 1-63			
Rank overall**	62-84	51			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.7	2.8		*	
Average freshman retention rate	58%	58%			*
Average grad rate	46%	48%		*	
% of classes under 20	33%	42%		*	
% of classes of 50 or more	14%	13%		*	
Student/faculty ratio	16/1	17/1	*		
% of faculty who are full time	83%	82%	*		
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	950-1150	970-1180			*
Freshmen in top 25% of HS class	N/A	42%		---- N/A ----	
Acceptance rate	76%	75%		*	
Average alumni giving rate	3%	4%		*	
**In 2007, tied with California Baptist Univ., Cal State - Stanislaus, Eastern Washington U., Oral Roberts U., San Francisco State U.					
UT San Antonio					
Tier	3	3			
Rank overall	62-84	64-91			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	3.1	3.0	*		
Average freshman retention rate	57%	57%			*
Average grad rate	28%	28%			*
% of classes under 20	25%	25%			*
% of classes of 50 or more	24%	23%		*	
Student/faculty ratio	24/1	23/1		*	
% of faculty who are full time	90%	92%		*	
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	910-1140	910-1130	*		
Freshmen in top 25% of HS class	34%	35%		*	
Acceptance rate	91%	99%	*		
Average alumni giving rate	3%	2%	*		
UT Brownsville					
Tier	unranked	4			
Rank overall	unranked	95-123			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.5	2.2	*		
Average freshman retention rate	69%	67%	*		
Average grad rate	18%	35%		*	
% of classes under 20	51%	51%			*
% of classes of 50 or more	7%	7%			*
Student/faculty ratio	20/1	18/1		*	
% of faculty who are full time	74%	77%		*	
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	N/A	N/A		---- N/A ----	
Freshmen in top 25% of HS class	25%	19%	*		
Acceptance rate	100%	100%			*
Average alumni giving rate	1%	2%		*	

	2008 Edition	2007 Edition	Improved	Declined	Unchanged
Regional Master's Universities - West					
UT Pan American					
Tier	4	4			
Rank overall	88-116	95-123			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.4	2.4			*
Average freshman retention rate	69%	67%	*		
Average grad rate	29%	27%	*		
% of classes under 20	19%	19%			*
% of classes of 50 or more	19%	15%		*	
Student/faculty ratio	25/1	21/1		*	
% of faculty who are full time	93%	94%		*	
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	16-21	16-21			*
Freshmen in top 25% of HS class	44%	48%		*	
Acceptance rate	68%	N/A		---- N/A ----	
Average alumni giving rate	1%	1%			*
UT Permian Basin					
Tier	4	4			
Rank overall	88-116	95-123			
Peer assessment score (5.0)	2.4	2.2	*		
Average freshman retention rate	62%	63%		*	
Average grad rate	31%	30%	*		
% of classes under 20	48%	45%	*		
% of classes of 50 or more	8%	9%	*		
Student/faculty ratio	18/1	18/1			*
% of faculty who are full time	77%	82%		*	
SAT/ACT 25th-75th percentile	900-1070	860-1080	*		
Freshmen in top 25% of HS class	50%	50%			*
Acceptance rate	90%	86%		*	
Average alumni giving rate	3%	3%			*

Note: 2008 edition is based primarily on fall 2006 data and 2007 edition is based primarily on fall 2005 data.

N/A = Not Available/Applicable