

BOV Rankings Deep Dive

July 17, 2023

W&M's philosophy

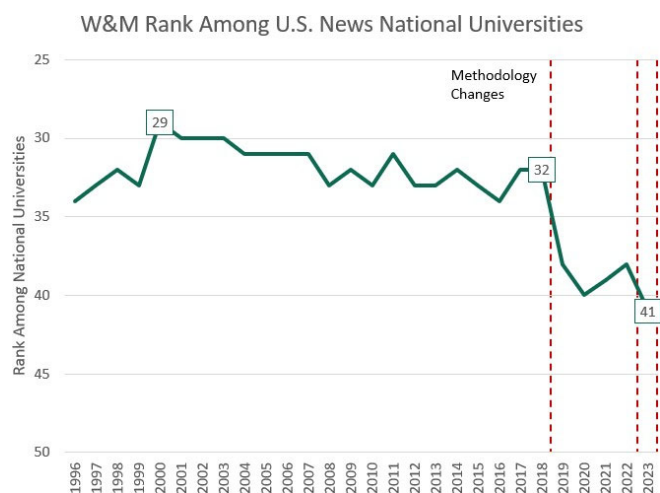
Rankings matter because people we care about – prospective students and alumni – care about them. For this reason, analysis of rankings formulas is a routine part of W&M leadership's work as we steward the university's reputation and scan our competitive environment. The healthiest way to engage rankings is this: invest in those that are aligned with our mission: providing the most personal, highest quality public education in the country, as affordably as possible.

The rankings environment has changed markedly in the past five years. So, the leadership team has prepared this deep dive for board discussion of potential paths forward. Observations below are based on staff's modeling of USNWR ranking formulas from 2019-2023. The time is ripe for Board engagement on this topic.

Where we are now

USNWR is the dominant college ranking system. It traditionally focused on inputs: reputation, wealth, selectivity. In recent years, USNWR lost market share to competing rankings that focus on outputs: graduation rates, social mobility, post-degree employment, student indebtedness, etc. In our strategic decision-making, W&M leadership prioritizes a mix of inputs and outputs aligned with W&M mission and values: selectivity, educational quality, social mobility, outcomes, alumni engagement.

USNWR formulas are now volatile in ways that may be adverse for W&M. Beyond the laudable emphasis on social mobility, their formulas run against key commitments of this university: selectivity, our small class size, our commitment to efficiency and constrained spending relative to elite peers. Moreover, because rankings are a lagging indicator, retroactively factored on what happened last year, actions in response to them take at least a year to gain traction – during which time the methodology may change, as we have seen.



How we got here

After decades of stable methodology, USNWR made significant changes in 2019 to catch up with the competition by emphasizing social mobility. Since 2019, USNWR's formula has devalued selectivity, reputation, and alumni engagement (categories in which W&M excelled) and elevated social mobility and institutional wealth (where W&M lags).

- 2019: Social mobility component introduced based on Pell recipient enrollment and graduation rates.
- 2023: Graduate Indebtedness component introduced as alumni giving and student selectivity components were reduced in the USNWR formula – *de-emphasizing W&M's greatest strengths in favor of a modest strength*. In 2023, W&M ranked 19th for alumni giving, 28th in student selectivity, and 37th in graduate indebtedness.

What's coming

- [USNWR has announced](#) methodology changes for the 2024 rankings, to be released in September:
 - Eliminating alumni giving, faculty with terminal degree, class size and HS class rank.

- Increasing weight on social mobility factors, “success in graduating students from different backgrounds,” and potentially financial resources (i.e., institutional wealth).
- Specifics are unknown. Bob Morse, USNWR’s chief data strategist, has commented without providing clarity. Among his comments: an expected increase in the financial resource component of rankings as an indicator of an institution’s ability to offer a variety of programs and services; increasing weight to a college's accessibility to more diverse students.

Discussion

Because W&M is deeply committed to improving our social mobility, we had already prioritized growth in our Pell population. Through 2023, that would have put in a stronger position with the USNWR formula. Recall that – consistent with W&M’s mission as a public institution – over the past three years we have systematically focused on increasing our pipeline of low-income students via investment in Admissions, growth in transfer students and Posse – and by supporting low-income students academically to ensure outcomes much higher than state and national averages.

Going forward, the USNWR formula will elevate very large, flagship public institutions in states where Pell enrollments are high as a percentage of the overall college-going population (e.g., California) and very wealthy, elite private institutions where institutional resources are high.

The path forward is hard to discern and we welcome consultation with the Board. Options include: *withdrawing from the rankings to make a splash (despite lacking good information); taking negative news in September when it comes; preparing our community by asserting what we believe matters, though it may not count to USNWR.*

¹ USNWR sums normalized values across its formula components, meaning the unit is standard deviations from the mean for all ranking components. The institution with the highest value is then set to 100 with all institutions’ respective sums divided by that highest value to yield a score of 0 to 99.