



# By the Numbers

## Focus on the Facts

Office of Institutional  
Research  
University of Wisconsin—La Crosse

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### Does it Mean Anything? How U.S. News Ranks Universities

The third week of August finds many higher education campuses abuzz with anticipation, eagerly awaiting the release of U.S. News & World Report’s annual Best Colleges issue. With as much attention as the rankings receive, many who might use the rankings may not have a clear understanding of how they’re compiled.

US News groups schools into categories usually based on **Carnegie Classification**. Through the 2006-07 rankings, the University of Wisconsin—La Crosse (UWL) was classified as a **Masters I** institution. Due to an update to the Carnegie Classifications effective this year, UWL will be considered a **Master’s L** institution. This change is unlikely to alter our US News peer group, however, as US News usually groups all Master’s institutions by region (North, South, Midwest, & West) for their rankings.

The rankings are based on data collected by US News from a variety of surveys and sources in “15 areas related to academic excellence”. US News participates in the **Common Data Set Initiative**, which means many of their survey items are drawn from a common core of questions used by many of the larger publishers. The Common Data Set saves colleges

and universities time by allowing them to answer one set of questions on a given topic, rather than slightly different variations from each publisher. This consistency also means that consumers—students and parents—will find similar information about each college even if they look at different publisher rankings. Data not provided by institutions via survey response are either computed from other sources, such as the US Department of Education, or statistically imputed.

US News assigns each indicator a weight determined by their editors. Weights reflect which of the various indicators US News feels provide the best measure of the quality of a school. Rankings are based on the total weighted score for each institution.

The top weighted factors in the US News rankings, and their sources, are listed on the next page. Understanding how each factor is weighted explains why some institutions rank higher than others in any given year and also why US News provides a ranking for Public institutions separate from the full rankings.

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#### U.S. News & World Report 2006-07 Top Public Midwestern Masters Universities

1. Truman State University (Missouri)
2. University of Northern Iowa
3. University of Wisconsin—La Crosse
4. University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire
5. University of Michigan—Dearborn

All of this year’s top 5 Public Midwestern Masters Universities, except the University of Michigan—Dearborn, have been in the top 5 for the last 3 years.

### Editor’s Note

This issue focuses on the U.S. News and World Report ranking of colleges and universities, which is arguably the most well known of the various publisher released rankings. It is not, however, the only

ranking of schools. The Princeton Review conducts several annual surveys used to rate and rank colleges and programs—including their annual “Party School” rankings—and Thompson Peterson’s

annual survey provides data for the College Search feature on Yahoo.com.

#### Teri Thill

Editor & Director of Institutional Research

### Some Annual Surveys UW-L Completes

#### Common Data Set

<http://www.commondataset.org>  
(While not a publisher survey, the Common Data Set Initiative provides a base set of questions used by many of the larger publisher surveys.)

#### U.S. News & World Report

[http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex\\_brief.php](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/rankindex_brief.php)

#### Princeton Review

<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/research/rankings/rankings.asp>

#### Thompson Peterson's Undergraduate & Graduate

<http://www.petersons.com/>

Additional information on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is available on the Carnegie Foundation website:

<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/>

Much of the data used in survey responses, including a complete copy of UW-L's Common Data Set, is available on the University Data website:

<http://www.uwlax.edu/provost/universitydata/universitydata.htm>

## Does it Mean Anything? US News Rankings (cont.)

### Factors included in US News Rankings, including their weights and sources

1. **Academic Reputation (25%).** Determined by the Academic Reputation Survey completed by the President/Chancellor, Provost, and Dean of Admissions at peer institutions. Each individual is asked to rate peer schools' academic programs on a scale from 1 (marginal) to 5 (distinguished). The survey is administered by Synovate and had a 58% response rate for the 2006-07 rankings.
2. **6-year Graduation Rate (16%).** The Department of Education requires institutions to report on the percent of students who start at their institution and complete their degree within 150% of expected time. For most baccalaureate institutions, 4 years is the expected time to degree completion and 6 years is 150% of expected time.
3. **Average Educational Expenditures per Student (10%).** Educational expenses are reported to the Department of Education annually; US News uses the same data supplied to the Department of Education and available in the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems (IPEDS).
4. **Incoming First-Time, First-Degree Seeking Student ACT/SAT Scores (7.5%).** First-time, first-degree seeking students are what are considered "traditional" undergraduate students. This group includes only students who have enrolled in college credit courses for the first time with the intent to complete a degree-granting program. High school students participating in post-secondary options and students who transfer from a prior institution are not included in this group.
5. **Average Faculty Salary (7%).** Average faculty pay, plus benefits, during the two previous academic years, adjusted for regional differences in the cost of living (using indexes from the consulting firm Runzheimer International).

Opinions on the usefulness of the rankings vary. For many looking for a simple way to compare institutions, the rankings provide a quick and easy reference. Critics claim the rankings simplify the value of higher education too much by focusing on inputs, such as funding sources and student test scores, when the real focus ought to be on how much and how well students are learning. Of the top 5 factors by weight, the only output measure is graduation rate. While other "outcome" measures—such as 1st-to-2nd year retention rate (4%) and a value added measure that compares actual graduation rates to the graduation rates predicted based on various input measures (5%)—are included in the total ranking, they are dwarfed by the effect of academic reputation and financial resources.

Sources: U.S. News & World Report ranking methodology website: [http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/about/07rank\\_brief.php](http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/rankings/about/07rank_brief.php)

V.M. Conley & G. Fink. "Using National Data Sets in Institutional Research", Association for Institutional Research Foundations Institute.