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## Thomas Sowell



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### Is Prestige Worth It?

Elite schools don't necessarily deliver the product you pay for.

By Thomas Sowell

**T**he obsession of many high-school students and their parents about getting into a prestige college or university is part of the social scene of our time. So is the experience of parents going deep into hock to finance sending a son or daughter off to Ivy U. or the flagship campus of the state-university system.

Sometimes both the student and the parent end up with big debts from financing a degree from some prestige institution. Yet these are the kinds of institutions that many have their hearts set on.

Media hype adds to the pressure to go where the prestige is. A key role is often played by the various annual rankings of colleges and universities, especially the rankings by *U.S. News & World Report*. These rankings typically measure all sorts of inputs — but not outputs.

The official academic accrediting agencies do the same thing. They measure how much money is spent on this or that, how many professors have tenure and other kinds of inputs. What they don't measure is the output — what kind of education the students end up with.

A new think tank in Washington is trying to shift the emphasis from inputs to outputs. The Center for College Affordability and Productivity is headed by Professor Richard Vedder, who gives the *U.S. News* rankings a grade of D. Measuring the inputs, he says, is “roughly equivalent to evaluating a chef based on the ingredients he or she uses.”

His approach is to “review the meal”— that is, the outcome of the education itself.

The CCAP study uses several measures of educational output, including the proportion of a college's graduates who win awards like the Rhodes Scholarships or who end up listed in *Who's Who in America*, as well as the ratings that students give the professors who teach them.

Professor Vedder admits that these are “imperfect” measures of a college's educational output, but at least they are measures of output instead of input.

Some academic institutions come out at or near the top by either input or output criteria but there were some large changes in rankings as well.

Among national universities, the top three are the same — but in different order: Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, according to Professor Vedder's think tank; Princeton, Harvard, and Yale in the *U.S. News*

rankings.

Among the liberal arts colleges, however, there were some big changes. Although Williams and Amherst were the top two in both rankings, Washington & Lee moved up from 15th to 6th when ranked by Professor Vedder's group and Barnard climbed from 30th to 8th.

Whitman College, ranked 37th by *U.S. News* on the basis of the college's inputs, jumped to 9th when evaluated on its output by Vedder and company. Wabash College jumped from 52nd to 10th. West Point rose from 22nd to 7th.

One of my own favorite measures of output— the percentage of a college's graduates who go on to get Ph.D.s — was not used by either set of evaluations.

Small colleges dominate the top ten in sending their alumni on to get doctorates. Grinnell College, which was not among the top ten on either the *U.S. News* list or on Professor Vedder's list, sends a higher percentage of its graduates on to get Ph.D.s than does either Harvard or Yale.

No given criterion tells the whole story. In fact, the whole idea of ranking colleges and universities is open to question.

To someone who is making a decision where to apply, what matters is what is the best institution for that particular individual, which may not be best — or even advisable — for that applicant's brother or sister.

*Choosing the Right College* is by far the best of the college guides, partly because it does not give rankings, but more because it goes into the many factors that matter — and which matter differently for different people.

What Professor Vedder's study does is provide yet another reason for parents and students not to obsess over big-name schools or their rankings — or to go deep into hock over them.

— *Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution.*

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