

Washington State University

The 2023 U.S. News
& World Report
**Task Force
Findings:
Executive
Summary**

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Executive Summary

Objectives: WSU has a history of reviewing ranking results to understand the systems and ensure accuracy of WSU ranks. This report represents the 4th review since 2012. WSU declined in the U.S. News & World Report (*USNWR*) rankings over the past four years. This caused concern by various audiences. The objective of the Task Force was to investigate data pertaining to the *USNWR* Best College Ranking. The review is to help guide the approach to be taken by WSU to ensure accuracy of data submitted and invest in strategic areas related to metrics that matter to WSU success in the ranking process. The Task Force was charged with (a) conducting an examination of the rankings, (b) providing recommendations, and (c) engage in discussions with WSU leadership regarding the potential impact of input variables on future rankings. As a secondary charge, the Task Force was to collect information to help WSU with effective messaging to our audiences.

Methods: The Task Force engaged in three primary activities. First, a brief review of the literature surrounding the rankings was performed. Second, a data review and analysis of the WSU ranking data and *USNWR* data were conducted. Third, the Task Force engaged in conversations about the results and offered recommendations representing the diverse expertise and perspectives of the Task Force.

Results: *USNWR* rankings are to be used to help parents and students decide where to enroll to pursue their higher education. However, enrollment is more complex and not determined by a single metric, such as an institution's rank. *USNWR* rankings are complex, lack empirical support for the intended use, and are difficult to change quickly. Metric reporting is standardized, consistent with other reports such as IPEDS, yet metrics and how they are calculated are adjusted yearly by *USNWR*. WSU had more metric, score, and rank variability on key metrics compared to institutional peer groups (i.e., Strategic Plan, COACHE) in recent years. Some variability is due to (a) changes in how WSU calculates and reports metrics (e.g., faculty salaries), (b) data that is not available to report (e.g., high school rank), and (c) changes in institutional policies (e.g., not using SAT scores). Several WSU metrics that comprise an institutional score and rank had large negative change trends over several years, which is related to a decline in the WSU rank. This trend is seen in Figure 1 compared to the WSU Strategic Plan peer group. Table 1 shows where WSU ranked better and worse than peer groups on key metrics. It is difficult to predict how the 2024 ranking will change given additional *USNWR* metric and calculation adjustments.

Figure 1. National Rank by Strategic Plan Peer Group from 2019-2023

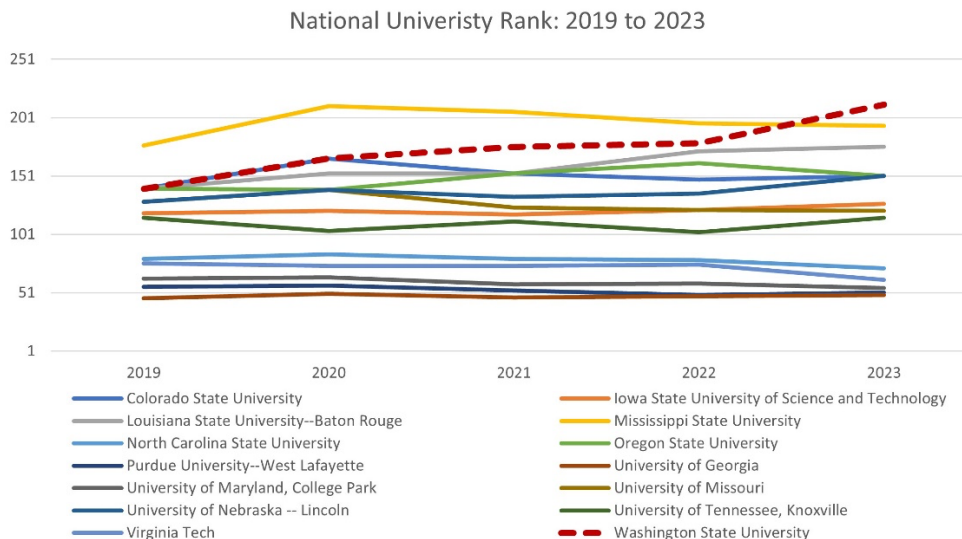


Table 1. *Metric Comparison across Comparison Groups*

Metric	UI	SPP	COACHE
% of faculty full-time			
% of full and part-time faculty with Ph.D. or terminal degree			W
% of graduates who took out federal loans			
Alumni giving	B		
Average federal indebtedness of graduates	B		
Class Size Index	W	B	
Faculty resources	W	W	W
Faculty salary	W	W	W
Financial resources			
Graduation rate performance	W	W	W
High School Class Standing	W	W	W
Peer Assessment	B		
Pell grant comparative graduation rate	W	B	B
Pell grant graduation rate	W	B	B
SAT/ACT		W	W
Student to faculty ratio		B	

Note: UI = University of Idaho, SPP = Strategic Plan Peers, COACHE = COACHE Peers; **W** = WSU had a worse rank, **B** = WSU had a better rank. Bold indicates trend across all three groups. Empty cells suggest a not substantial difference.

In the final analysis, despite the many flaws of rankings such as those promulgated by *USNWR*, they are not going to disappear, nor is the anxiety associated with declines in rankings. WSU could position itself to improve metrics when such efforts are consistent with our institutional mission, goals, and values without sacrificing resources. We respectfully make the following recommendations.

Internal Procedures and Data Reporting

- 1) Support the Institutional Effectiveness Council steering committee to continue to monitor metrics, data reporting, and forecasting for rank changes related to how WSU data change from year to year (Rankings | Office of Strategy, Planning, and Analysis | Washington State University (wsu.edu)).
- 2) Continue data-informed conversations with the IEC to identify areas for enhancement with metrics in mind.
- 3) Track the *USNWR* changes to metrics assessing the benefits of education to students, including students from different socioeconomic backgrounds to understand this metric as it is implanted into the ranking system. This could be a strength of WSU.
- 4) Continue to monitor changes to *USNWR* metrics and evaluate if WSU systems and procedures need to change in how data are reported to adapt to changes. This past year, WSU had a change in how Faculty Salary was reported. This likely had a major

impact on the ranking. Understanding this before such changes occur allows WSU to communicate these concerns a priori to our audiences.

- 5) Understand the substantial differences between WSU and peer institutions on the metrics of Faculty Salary, Faculty Resources, and Graduation Rate Performance. WSU performed substantially worse on these across all three groups.

Student Support

Given some of the metrics that are weighted most heavily focus on student success, including retention and graduation rates, continuing to improve support for student advancements should be considered. Furthermore, doing so is consistent with WSU values.

- 1) Invest in programs targeting student retention. Improving WSU graduation rates and targeting student success over time should improve heavily weighted metrics on graduation rates. In fact, the graduations rate metric was the largest change in WSU metrics over the past five years.
- 2) Invest in programs targeting time-to-degree and degree completion. This would improve heavily weighted metrics and support students. Decreasing time-to-degree may also reduce student debt burdens.
- 3) Continue to enhance student support services from advising, housing, and dining to mental health.
- 4) Invest in supporting students in the campus environment with a vibrant campus life to encourage student engagement. Consider how daily operating procedures influence students' decisions to engage and persist at WSU. For example, post COVID, many front staff and faculty in college level offices work remotely part of the workweek, leaving students with uninviting and unwelcoming experience with closed doors and dark hallways in many buildings.

Faculty Retention and Resources

High quality faculty are essential to WSU's success in its reputation in research, teaching and outreach. Efforts should focus on recruiting and retaining high quality, productive faculty.

- 1) Continue to address the inequities in salaries for faculty across the system, and in salary gaps relative to peer institutions and the market.
- 2) Invest in research-active faculty. This may increase reputation scores. WSU faculty already produce at a high per capita rate, therefore retaining these faculty and recruiting new faculty in these research-intensive areas supports WSU's research mission while simultaneously increasing outputs.
- 3) Develop a systemwide plan to address decreasing faculty resources. This includes investing in aging infrastructure for research and teaching.

Marketing and Communication

- 1) Develop a marketing and communication plan about WSU that is strategically disseminated among potential raters in the peer assessment process, especially areas of the country where ratings have declined.

- 2) Develop a marketing and communication plan that spans 2-5 years that is dynamic to respond to higher education and WSU changes during that time, especially with changes on metrics.
- 3) Evaluate the current marketing plan to potential students and families and adjust if needed to account for *USNWR* rankings.
- 4) Engage in public relations activities to highlight faculty and student achievements.
- 5) Encourage media coverage and engage with influential educational journalists.
- 6) Add the links to Malcolm Gladwell's podcasts (Lord of the Rankings; The Dillard Project) on the WSU ranking website and possible to the Faculty Senate website to provide easy access to interesting examples and information from the two podcasts.

Understanding Use and Investment in the *USNWR* Ranks by WSU Constituents

The following recommendations would provide insight into the effort needed to address the issues associated with the *USNWR* ranks ranging from communication with different audiences to educational efforts for clear understanding of the purpose and use of *USNWR* ranks.

- 1) Understand the extent to which students and parents applying to WSU use *USNWR* rankings when deciding to apply and attend the university.
- 2) Understand the extent to which faculty and staff care about the *USNWR* rankings.
- 3) Determine if faculty and staff understand the *USNWR ranking's* intended purpose and use.
- 4) Understand if WSU stakeholders (e.g., donors, employers, alumni/ae) are aware and concerned about the WSU *USNWR rank*, and if they understand the intended purpose and use the *USNWR* ranks.