

# Higher-ranked colleges don't necessarily provide a better educational experience

January 10 2018

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College rankings dominate the conversation regarding quality in postsecondary education, but new research from Binghamton University, State University of New York reveals that rankings have little to no

relationship to student engagement, an important indicator of collegiate quality.

John Zilvinskis, assistant professor of [student](#) affairs administration, along with Louis Rocconi at the University of Tennessee, examined data from over 80,000 students at 64 institutions that participated in the 2013 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an annual survey designed to assess the extent to which students engage in educationally purposeful activities that have been shown to support and promote [student success](#). They compared this data to each institution's 2013 score for three rankings schemes: Forbes' Top Colleges in the U.S., U.S. News & World Report National University Rankings, and Washington Monthly's National Universities Rankings. Overall, their findings demonstrated little to no relationship between institutional rank and [student engagement](#).

"Our results demonstrate that, contrary to conventional wisdom, higher-ranked institutions do not necessarily provide a superior educational experience." wrote the researchers. "In fact, educational quality, as indicated by engagement, seems to have little to do with institutional rank."

"Beyond a few isolated cases, [ranking](#) schemes are not related to overall student engagement, behaviors related to learning, collaboration and support," said Zilvinskis.

In fact, a modest but consistent finding across ranking schemes and class level was a negative relationship with student-faculty interaction, indicating that students at higher-ranked institutions reported fewer interactions with faculty.

"Consumers, prospective students and their families, should be wary of rankings," said Zilvinskis. "These measures are predicated mostly on the

academic profile of first-year, full-time students, but could do more to describe the experience of students while they are in [college](#)."

Instead of relying on institutional rankings to gauge the quality of the college experience, the researchers wrote that it would be more beneficial to students, parents, institutional leaders, and the media to focus on indicators that more accurately represent what students do during college.

Zilvinskis added: "Institutions can do a better job of communicating the [quality](#) of experience to customers, instead of citing their rank."

The paper, "Revisiting the Relationship between Institutional Rank and Student Engagement," was published in *The Review of Higher Education*.

**More information:** "Revisiting the Relationship between Institutional Rank and Student Engagement," [DOI: 10.1353/rhe.2018.2018.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2018.2018.0003)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: Higher-ranked colleges don't necessarily provide a better educational experience (2018, January 10) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-01-higher-ranked-colleges-dont-necessarily.html>

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