

METHODOLOGY

Wall Street Journal / College Pulse U.S. College Rankings 2026

Best U.S. colleges for undergraduates

A unique perspective on higher education excellence



in association with

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Statista and the Wall Street Journal compiled the WSJ/ CP U.S. College Rankings 2026 with the support of College Pulse

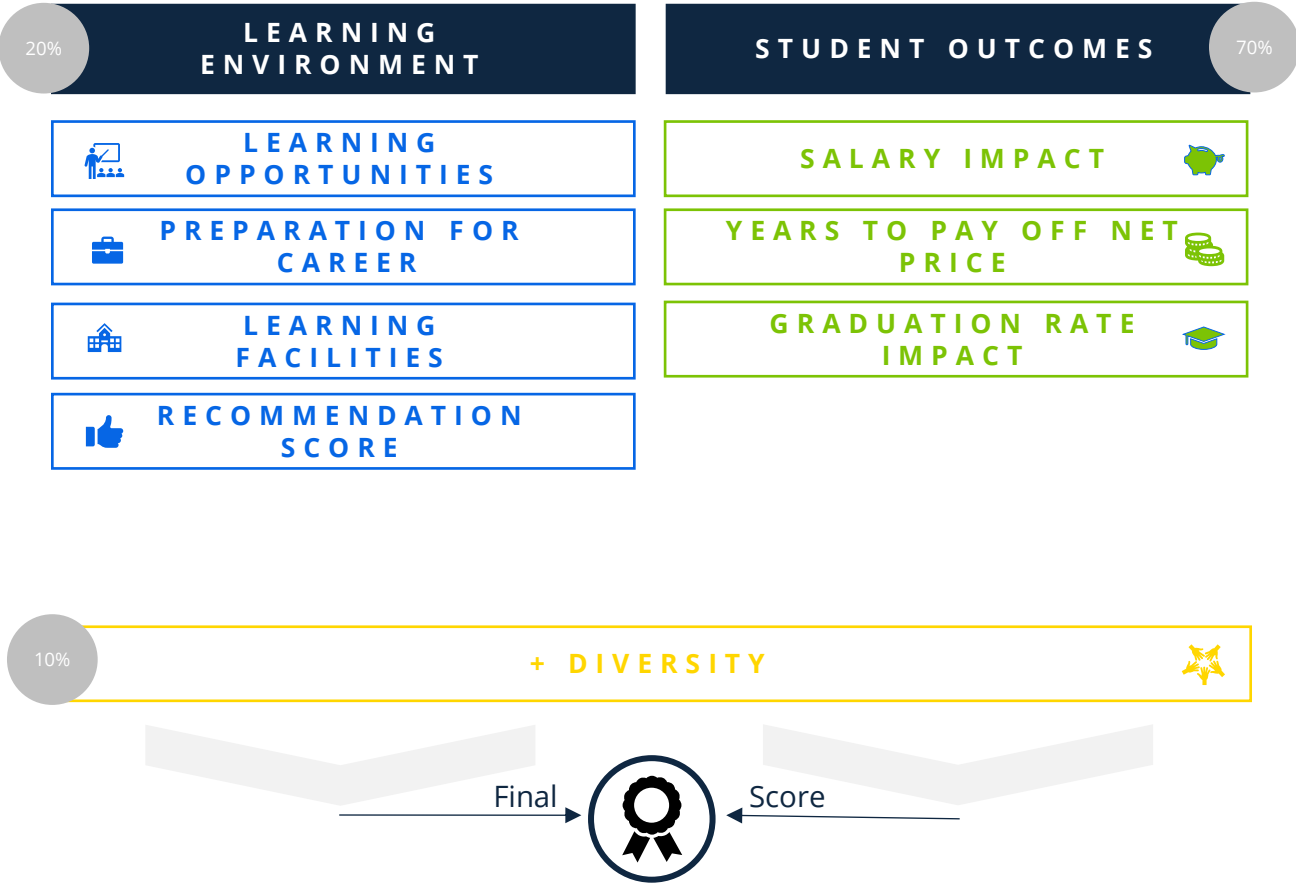
Summary

- The Best Colleges in the U.S. ranking evaluates undergraduate institutions based on the value they provide to their students. This value is assessed using multiple factors: the quality of the learning environment, the number of years required to pay off the net price, degree completion rates, the likelihood of higher salaries post-graduation, and diversity of college environment. The results are based on official data from the U.S. Department of Education and the Census Bureau, supplemented by a nationwide survey of undergraduate students and recent alumni who graduated within the past five years.
 - **More than 1,500 U.S. colleges met the eligibility criteria:** Title IV participation, offering four-year bachelor's degrees, being located in the 50 states or Washington, D.C., enrolling more than 750 undergraduate students, maintaining financial solvency, operating as a not-for-profit institution, and having publicly available data. Colleges that did not meet these criteria were excluded from the analysis. In addition, colleges were required to receive at least 50 valid survey responses across both years to be included in the final evaluation.
 - To inform this ranking, one of the largest independent surveys of verified college students in the U.S. was conducted through College Pulse. In total, **approximately 120,000 students and recent alumni were surveyed online between January and May of 2024 and 2025**. The data were weighted to match the demographic profile of each college. For continuity, last year's evaluations were incorporated, while excluding old responses from alumni who participated in both years to avoid duplication.
 - For student outcomes, **publicly available data** were analyzed to measure salary impact compared to similar colleges, graduation rates relative to peer institutions, and the estimated number of years required to pay off net fees for a four-year degree. These metrics allowed us to calculate the return on investment (ROI) for obtaining a degree at each college and to compare this ROI to that of similar institutions.
- ➔ Following this analysis, the *584 Best Colleges in the U.S.* were identified and awarded.

Please read the full methodology on [WSJ.com](https://www.wsj.com)

The U.S. College Ranking uses a large student and alumni survey as well as metrics to determine the best U.S. college for undergraduate students

Scoring Model



The **U.S. College Ranking 2026** is based on two primary pillars and diversity score used to determine the return on investment (ROI) that a college provides for its undergraduate students:

- Key performance indicators (KPIs) derived from IPEDS¹ and College Scorecard² data.
- A nationwide survey conducted with undergraduate students and recent alumni (no more than five years after graduation).

Salary impact is a measure to assess the boost a college gives its graduates' salaries over and above what you would expect them to earn, regardless of which college they attended.

Years to pay off net price combines the average net price of attending the college, and the value added to the average graduate's salary attributable to attending the college.

Graduation rate impact measures performance of a college in its ability to ensure students complete their degree, over and above what would have been expected of the students regardless of which college they attended.

The **Diversity** score is combining diversity metrics based on official government data.

In one of the largest surveys¹ ever over ~120,000 undergraduate students and recent undergraduate alumni were reached

Survey



4

(1) Between January and May 2024 and 2025, students and alumni were invited to participate through: Open calls via The Wall Street Journal and Statista (2024)The College Pulse online panel (2024, 2025)A Call to Action distributed by participating colleges (2024, 2025)
(2) Participants were verified by College Pulse—students via undergraduate email and alumni via email and LinkedIn.
(3) Colleges unreachable by email were additionally contacted by mail or phone to ensure equal participation opportunities.
(4) To avoid duplication, responses from alumni who took part in both years were excluded, with only new 2025 responses included in the evaluation.

The survey instrument was compiled of 50+ questions covering topics like career preparation and learning opportunities as well as campus life

Survey Questionnaire

The survey questions were separated into seven topic sections to evaluate the colleges. Sample questions were:

Learning Opportunities

- How frequently, if ever, do you receive detailed and helpful feedback on your work?
- How satisfied are you with the quality of teaching and feedback you receive?
- How satisfied are you with the extent to which the faculty cares about developing you as a person?
- ...

Preparation for Career

- How frequently, if ever, do you have opportunities to meet people who might be helpful to know in your future career?
- How satisfied are you with the career advice and support provided?
- ...

Campus facilities

- How satisfied are you with the opportunities and facilities provided relating to the arts (e.g., music, drama, visual arts)?
- How satisfied are you with the affordability of on-campus housing?
- How satisfied are you with the quality of food on campus?
- ...

Learning Facilities

- How satisfied are you with the classrooms and teaching facilities?
- ...

Recommendation Score

- How satisfied are you with the value for money your college provides?
- ...

Community and social life

- How satisfied are you with the community within the college?

Disclaimer / Imprint

The rankings are comprised exclusively of U.S. colleges that meet the eligibility criteria described in this document. A mention in the ranking is a positive recognition based on student survey and publicly available data sources at the time of analysis.

The ranking is the result of an elaborate process which, due to the interval of data-collection and analysis, is a reflection of the latest dataset as of August 4, 2025. As such, the results of this ranking should not be used as the sole source of information for future deliberations. The information provided in this ranking should be considered in conjunction with other available information about colleges. The quality of colleges that are not included in the rankings is not disputed.

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