

## Ranking Online Education Programs: A Conversation with U.S. News

### Open Questions from July 26, 2011 Webcast

#### Russ Poulin, WCET

While the program may be 80% available online students might flow back-and-forth between online and f2f. Eric said that they were to answer questions "specific to online students." How do you define that population (since it is changing)...or does the institution decide on their population to include?

Many blended programs keep records on the extent their students utilize online learning. How they report these data to U.S. News & World Report depends upon how they collect it.

For example, some blended programs ask students at each semester's enrollment whether they will be online or face-to-face for that term. These programs should have no special challenges reporting data about the size and characteristics of their online student populations.

Other programs record by which approach their students participate only on a course registration level, but not on an individual enrollment level. In order to estimate the sizes of their online student populations, the U.S. News surveys instruct these institutions that "one possible alternative" approach is to form best estimates. One approach proposed as a possibility in the questionnaire is that schools can estimate OBD student enrollment through course registration data (multiplying the total number of bachelor's degree students enrolled at your institution by the overall percentage of bachelor's degree students who registered for courses as "online students"). U.S. News will not publish these data labeled as an estimate.

For other questions that ask about the characteristics of online student populations instead of counts, truly blended programs can make determinations whether the figures for their entire student bodies are applicable to the subsets of their students who register for classes online. In contrast, if a blended program relies on course registration data to measure online enrollment but determines there are different characteristics between its online and face-to-face students, then it should skip statistical questions asking about their online student populations, except questions it can estimate despite these distinctions, like enrollment (based on the formula above) and tuition.

Furthermore, programs that do not by any means record the extent their students utilize online learning will not be able to provide any data about their sizes and characteristics of their online student populations, and will be limited to answering mostly non-statistical questions such as

those about degree requirements and course delivery. Programs that submit surveys but were unable to provide robust enough data for the rankings will still receive free listings in U.S. News's searchable online degree program directories.

### **Vicky Phillips-GetEducated**

Your bachelor survey asks for data on high school rank and SAT scores. Given most online bachelors are degree completion for students 30+ who hold associate degrees, how relevant is high school rank and SAT to the online degree student population?

Indeed, online bachelor's degree far more than campus-based programs, cater to people who are years removed from graduating high school. Therefore, U.S. News survey questions about the high school ranks and SAT scores of online bachelor's degree students are highly unlikely to play any role in ranking of online bachelor degree programs. Online degree programs that do not provide data on rank and SAT scores will be eligible [for inclusion in the U.S. News online bachelor degree rankings, and will not be explicitly penalized for leaving those questions blank.](#)

Questions about rank and SATs were asked for a couple of reasons. First, based on what we know now, some online bachelor's degree programs enroll a sizable number of recent high school graduates, as well as first-time first-year freshmen, and therefore U.S. News deemed it of value for prospective students to collect these data. Secondly, some online bachelor's degree programs may attempt to distinguish themselves from their competitors by instituting a selective student admissions process, and the questions in the survey allow them to report this. Some programs say that use the same admission standards as their selective bricks and mortar program.

### **Rebecca Barber – University of Phoenix**

And if not, are there alternative questions we SHOULD be asking about adult learners.

We are not sure what is meant by questions or data that are directly about adult learners. We believe that some of the questions on the survey are important factors for adult learners. Examples include questions about student indebtedness, retention, and graduation, and post-graduate employment questions asked in the graduate level surveys. They were designed to address some of the main issues associated with adult learning. No doubt there are also different or additional ways to evaluate adult learning programs, and U.S. News will refine the online degree survey instruments for future years based in part on feedback received from higher educational institutions.

## **Jennifer Stephens Helm - American Public University System**

When will you release your methodology for ranking the participating institutions?

At this point there is not a methodology, as was explained on the webcast. In an ideal world, the prior year's ranking methodology and ranking variables for online education could be included with the surveys, as is practiced with U.S. News Best Graduate and Best Colleges surveys. Unfortunately, due to the inaugural nature of these online surveys, no methodological plan can be established until U.S. News assesses the robustness of the submitted data. When there eventually is a plan it will be disclosed at the appropriate time. In future years, U.S. News hopes to be able to be more specific at an earlier stage of the survey process about its online degree ranking methodologies (at least what was used the previous year) and which data points were used in the rankings.

## **Charles Newman**

Instead of just having a "ranking" based upon some overall consideration of all weighted factors, why don't you simply provide an interactive table where users can rank schools factor by factor? That is the way such investor databases as Morningstar do it and it is much better.

The point about providing tools for prospective students to interactively review schools is well founded. Currently, U.S. News is working toward adding features to its Best Colleges websites that would empower users to sort undergraduate programs based on their own pre-selected criteria. Whether something like this will one day apply to the online education rankings has not been decided, but presumably with the passage in time there will be greater sophistication of all U.S. News education websites that promote fuller, more specialized engagement with their users. The ability of U.S. News to achieve this level of online interactivity in regards to online program will be to great degree dependent on the robustness of the data reported by each online degree program. It's too early to tell whether there is enough data on online education to support such a system.

## **Russ Adkins**

Some community colleges/state colleges now offer bachelor's degrees. Are they being surveyed?

No. A criterion for a program to be in U.S. News's online bachelor's degree universe is that it is regionally accredited and is a predominately a bachelor's degree granting school. Community colleges that only offer associate's degrees along with small bachelor's programs are excluded. This is subject to change in future years.

## **Rebecca Barber - UoP**

Will the questions around faculty training and course development favor any particular methodology?

Survey questions inevitably favor certain types of methodological approaches over others. But U.S. News cannot yet specify how, or to what extent, faculty training and course development will be used to determine the online degree program rankings, let alone fully document what type of methodological approach these questions would be favoring.

Faculty training is being measured by questions in the surveys that ask schools to provide the training and experience, online and traditional, possessed by the universe of all faculty members who served as instructors in their programs' online degree courses during the specified time periods.

The questions about course development tend to be non-quantitative due to the nature of the topic, and therefore are tricky to apply toward rankings. However, many educators that U.S. News contacted to research ideas for its surveys stressed the importance of student engagement in online degree programs. Therefore, pending the robustness of data it receives, U.S. News will do its best to incorporate course development and course delivery into the rankings.

### **Denise Nadasen**

Which office is the survey request sent to?

This depended on the institution. In cases where U.S. News could draw appropriate contacts from its Best Colleges and Best Graduate Schools Universities, or from its 2010 "distance learning" universities (which are no longer being used), these same contacts also received the online degree surveys. Otherwise, data collectors and other researchers at U.S. News attempted to locate fresh contacts by looking at schools' websites, typically collecting the contact information of people in leadership from departments related to the disciplines being surveyed. Also, in some cases, schools emailed U.S. News specifying who at their institution should be contacted. To ensure that the most appropriate people receive the correct surveys in future years, each survey asks respondents to designate who at their schools should receive them the following year. If you want to know who U.S. News sent the survey to email [ebrooks@usnews.com](mailto:ebrooks@usnews.com)

### **jsener**

While USNWR makes their methodology explicit, isn't it true that the "scientific formula" for determining the criteria behind each standard is proprietary and thus not transparent?

We believe our current rankings are transparent since we publish the weights used for each factor in the rankings and in virtually all cases we publish the data from the variable used in the rankings and the results can to a large degree be duplicated and have been duplicated by many higher ed researchers. We aren't claiming our rankings meet "social science" standards. We plan to use the same standard of transparency for the online rankings. Our formula(S) are not proprietary-we have published them at higher ed meetings.

**Liz**

When will the graduate survey be due?

August 24, 2011 is the deadline. Schools can request extensions for this first deadline and U.S. News will grant them.

**Charles Newman**

Will you be gathering your information from the Program level or the University level? Often, at the University level they do not have complete, timely or accurate information that the Program level does.

The graduate level surveys collect data from the program level. The bachelor's level surveys collect data on the program level as well, defined as all online bachelor's degree students. Data is not at the university level. We do understand some schools for this first time out may not be used to collecting and reporting program level data.

**Ashford University**

So, if a college serves primarily a working adult market and it does not respond to the high school type questions, will this lower its ranking?

Indeed, online bachelor's degree far more than campus-based programs cater to people who are years removed from graduating high school. Therefore, U.S. News survey questions about the high school ranks and SAT scores of online bachelor's degree students are highly unlikely to play any role in ranking of online bachelor degree programs. Online degree programs that do not provide data on rank and SAT scores and say they scores are not used in admission will be eligible for inclusion in the U.S. News online bachelor degree rankings, and will not be explicitly penalized for leaving those questions blank or because they don't use test scores in admission decisions.

Questions about rank and SATs were asked for a couple of reasons. First, based on what we know now, some online bachelor's degree programs enroll a sizable number of recent high school graduates, as well as first-time first-year freshmen, and therefore U.S. News deemed it

of value for prospective students to collect these data. Secondly, some online bachelor's degree programs may attempt to distinguish themselves from their competitors by instituting a selective student admissions process and the questions in the survey allows them to report this. Some programs say that use the same admission standards as their selective bricks and mortar program and that is also important for students to know.

Example of an indicator?

Indicators will depend on response rates. (A single example of an indicator that we might consider using in the rankings is the percentage of a school's library that is digitized.)

**jsener**

And a description of how the quality of that indicator is determined.

(This question is not clear). The surveys and their questions that could potentially be used as indicators were designed with input from multiple leaders in online education programs among diverse programs, as well as from research of industry and academic literature on benchmarks used to evaluate online program quality.

**Liz**

Organizations such as SLOAN-C have developed ways to recognize quality online programs. Will input from groups like SLOAN-C be factored into these rankings?

Research from organizations like SLOAN-C was used to develop the survey questions and measurement concepts and will no doubt influence how and to what extent data from these questions can best be used for determining rankings. At present time we will not directly use SLOAN data in the rankings, but SLOAN has developed a system of recognition which maybe taken into account.

**Russ Poulin, WCET**

Bob mentioned that they have indicators of quality. What would one be?

All possible indicators depend on the robustness of data collected. Another example of a likely indicator is the following: among full-time engineering instructional faculty that taught online engineer classes, the percentage of them who were elected members of the National Academy of Engineering.

**Al Lind**

Do you plan to incorporate a peer review component to your evaluation? If so how will it be weighted?

There will not be a specific peer assessment component that rates the reputation of online bachelor's degree or online grad degrees for the first rankings. Specific peer/reputation review of online programs may be added to the rankings after the first year.

**Vicky Phillips-GetEducated**

Without a public or employer perception component how can you deal with the "quality" issue of employability of a graduate from a newer online school like Phoenix VS. an old established school like Penn State?

The surveys ask programs to report their online students' post graduate employment rates which based on our research, will likely only be reported by a few programs. Surveying public or employer perceptions would have been too significant an undertaking this year, although U.S. News will not rule out administering some form of reputational surveys at some time in the future, but not for the first rankings.

**jsener**

So this indicator will disfavor students who serve more stopouts and swirlers.

We think measuring graduation and retention rates for online programs is important. The public is interested in which online degree programs have higher retention and graduation rates than others as way of differentiating them.

**Cheri Simpson, UPCEA**

Will your study indicate international enrollments versus domestic enrollments for each online program or institution?

Both the bachelor's and graduate level surveys ask this question. The bachelor's survey also asks about the countries from which the international students are from.

**Denise Nadasen**

Will data and/or analyses be available for participating institutions to use for their own planning?

There is a possibility that in the future U.S. News will make survey level data--what schools reported directly to U.S. News, not what is on the website, and/or unpublished analyses obtainable by participating institutions. There is not a plan right now to make that level of data available after the first rankings. However, there will be a significant amount of data and ranking indicators on the website that will do some degree help meet this request.

**Jseiner – submitted via email:**

- 1) The leading research in the field of student engagement, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), fastidiously avoids rankings based on their research findings precisely because doing so distorts perception and reality. How will USNWR's proposed use of engagement rankings avoid creating distorted perceptions, and what steps will USNWR take to minimize the distortion (e.g., making the value judgments and the measurement scales behind the rankings transparent)?

U.S. News is not measuring student engagement directly, i.e. getting views from students from any online program for these online rankings.

U.S. News has not determined whether it will calculate stand-alone “engagement rankings” or scores (Note: we did not say student engagement). If such such scores are calculated, they will not be based on students’ views or input. But some kind of measures of engagement will at least some way factor into the overall rankings and a composite engagement score is certainly realistic.

The bachelor’s survey asks schools to report which self-assessment survey instruments, including NSSSE, that schools administer to their online students, as well as whether these schools make the results of these exams public. We cannot measure the level of student engagement through the exams, but by asking these questions we can judge the degree the school focuses on using surveys as way of improving their existing levels of engagement.

All the surveys ask additional questions about engagement as they relate to course delivery. Making value judgments regarding engagement is possible when there is relative consensus among leaders of different online programs about certain course delivery approaches that promote engagement. Regardless, when a methodology has been determined U.S. News will disclose it at the appropriate time, including how an engagement score relates to it.



- 2) Will USNWR make their ranking criteria explicit, visible, and transparent, including the value judgments and calibration scales behind each criterion? (Currently USNWR makes their methodology criteria explicit, for instance for their undergraduate rankings, but the "scientific formula" for determining the ultimate rankings is proprietary and thus not transparent.)

We believe our current rankings are transparent since we publish the weights used for each factor in the rankings and in virtually all cases we publish the data from the variable used in the rankings and the results can to a large degree be duplicated and have been duplicated by many higher ed researchers. We aren't claiming our rankings meet "social science" standards. We plan to use the same standard of transparency for the online rankings. Our formulas(S) are not proprietary-we have published it at higher ed meetings.

- 3) Will USNWR consider making a ranking system which allows consumers to make their own rankings, as is happening for example with the long-established "Places Rated" system, which is starting to allow consumers to create their own Places rankings based on criteria they get to choose? Or go even farther and develop a more sophisticated version would allow consumers to give various weights to different criteria, or even customize the criteria themselves when appropriate? (also see the related question from Dr. Charles Newman, I believe was his name).

The point about providing tools for prospective students to interactively review schools is well founded. Currently, U.S. News is working toward adding features to its Best Colleges websites that would empower users to sort undergraduate programs based on their own pre-selected criteria. Whether something like this will one day apply to the online education rankings has not been decided, but presumably with the passage in time there will be greater sophistication of all U.S. News education websites that promote fuller, more specialized engagement with their users. The ability of U.S. News to achieve this level of online interactivity in regards to online program will be to great degree dependent on the robustness of the data reported by each online degree program. It's too early to tell whether there is enough data on online education.