College Ranking Tables
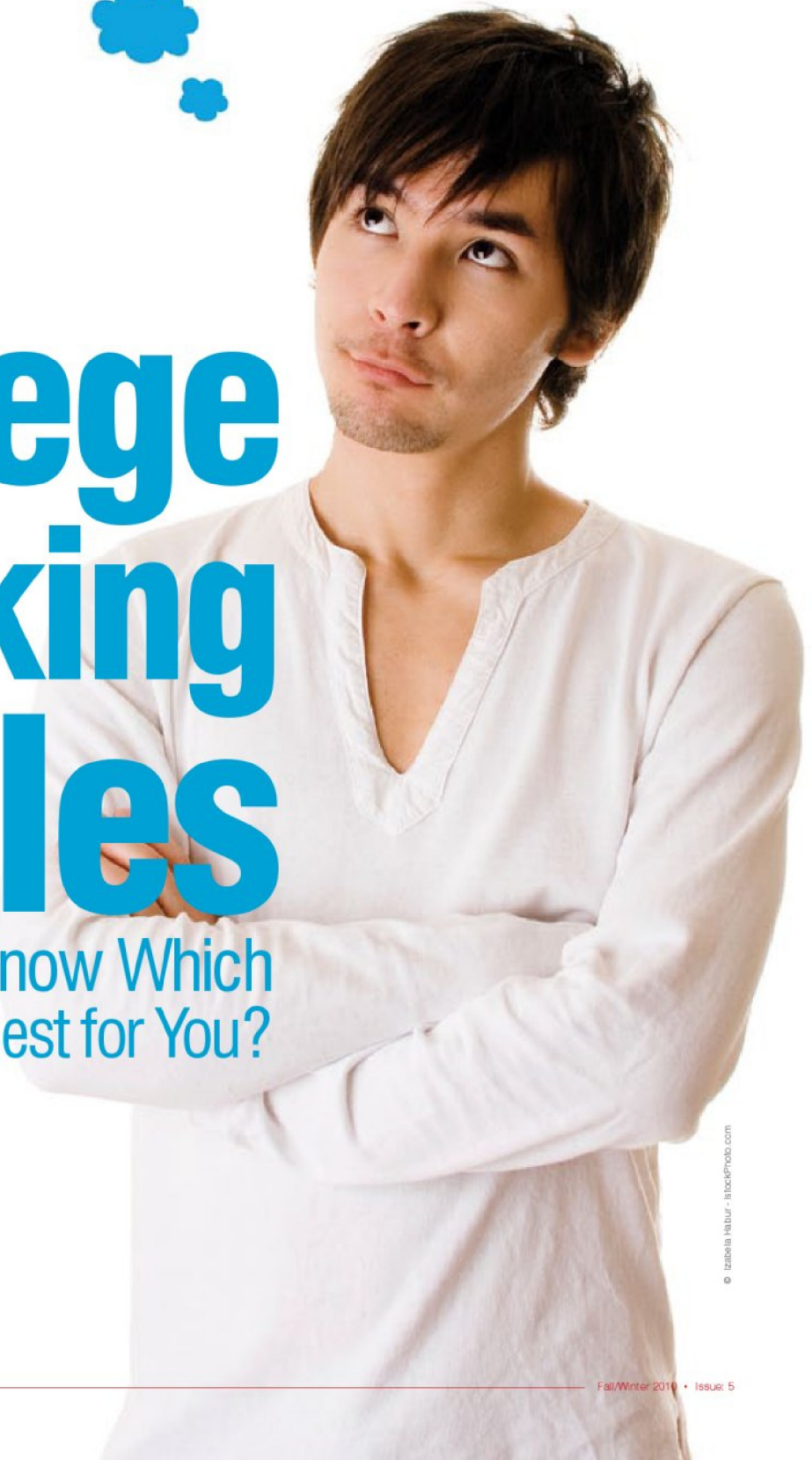
How do You Know Which College is the Best for You?

Various private organizations within the United States and globally generate annual or periodic college ranking tables. Those tables are supposed to provide readers with a list of the best and worst universities and colleges in the U.S.

In theory, a prospective student should be able to consult such ranking tables in order to decide which schools offer the best education in a particular area of study.

Unfortunately, things are not so simple. Each organization uses a range of diverse statistical measures to generate its respective tables, some of which may produce rankings that are entirely irrelevant to a student's academic interests.

Canadian students who are looking to apply to American colleges and universities should therefore be wary of the differing statistical methodologies used to generate ranking tables.

Some of the factors considered in generating a ranking list include (but are not restricted to) class sizes, range of degree options, specificity of degree options, opportunities for internships, scholarships and bursaries, peer review publications and research output, existence of technical degrees (such as law, medicine and business administration), financial success of alumni, and student, alumni and professor surveys.

The list below is composed of some of the most popular college rankings. Here you will find a number of ranking systems along with a brief description of the measures that each system uses to distinguish between top-performing colleges.

U.S. News America's Best Colleges

(annual ranking) ranks national universities, liberal arts colleges, business programs and engineering programs. U.S. News uses a variety of indicators that are supposed to "capture academic quality," the organization says. According to U.S. News, those indicators fall into the following seven categories: assessment by administrators at peer institutions, retention of students, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving, and "graduation rate performance," which refers to the difference between the proportion of students who are expected to graduate and the proportion of students who actually do.

U.S. News feels that its ranking tables tell students and parents how well an "institution does its job of educating students."

However, U.S. News admits that "many factors other than those we measure will figure in your decision, including the feel of campus life, activities, sports, academic offerings, location, cost, and availability of financial aid." None of those items are included in the U.S. News rankings.

In 2009, US News ranked Harvard University as the number one university. For more information on the U.S. News rankings, visit their website at http://colleges.usnews. rankingsandreviews.com/college

The Washington Monthly's "College Rankings"

produced a controversial, though comprehensive, report in 2005 (published in 2006) entitled "Is our students learning?" That report offered American university and college rankings based upon how well the college had performed as an engine for social mobility. The surveyors researched whether colleges helped poor student get rich and educated or whether they just helped rich students stay rich and get even more educated. Washington Monthly's ranking also considered the degree to which colleges fostered scientific and humanistic research that aimed at improving society through the promotion of an ethic of public service. Washington Monthly reported that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) emerged as the number one college in the United States based on those measures. http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0609.collegechart.html

Forbes magazine online

(Forbes.com) published a list of "America's Best Colleges" in 2008. In association with the Centre for College Affordability and Productivity, Forbes used an Alumni Who's Who in America, student evaluations at www.ratemyprofessors.com, four-year graduation rates, enrolment-adjusted numbers of students and faculty who had received nationally competitive awards, and four-year accumulated student debt as its indicators. Forbes also separated colleges into top "overall," "public" and "private" schools.

The college that topped Forbes's "overall" listing was Princeton University, which also topped its

"private" school category. The college that topped Forbes's "public" listing was the United States Military Academy. http://bestcollegerankings.org/popular-rankings/forbes-college-rankings/

The Times Higher Education, a

British publication that reports on higher education news, in association with Quacquarelli Symonds, publish the THES - QS World University Rankings—a listing of 500 universities from around the world. The list included many more non-American universities (especially British schools) in its upper tier of top colleges and universities. The THES - QS ranking uses a "peer review" system that incorporates the views of more than 3000 scholars and academics working in various research fields. In 2008, the Times Higher ranked Harvard as its number one university. At the end of this year, Quacquarelli Symonds will be reviewing its measures and methodology for future rankings. http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?typeCode=243

The École des Mines de Paris

(located in Paris, France) also ranks world universities. Its system is based on the success of its alumni, where "success" is interpreted as having achieved a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) position in Fortune Global 500's leading international businesses. That ranking system put Tokyo University in the number one position for 2009. http://www.ensmp.fr/Actualites/PR/EMP-ranking.html#7

Students and parents should use these ranking tables with caution. They can be useful tools as they can help students identify colleges and universities that they would not have otherwise thought to consider. However, determining which college or university will be best suited for any particular student includes considering a wide range of factors.

Each of the rankings discussed above does not, and cannot, incorporate the personal needs of any one student. Thus, rankings are best understood as subjective tools rather than absolute guides. ◾