

The 2024 Best Colleges in the U.S.: Princeton, MIT and Yale Take Top Spots

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What makes a college like Princeton great?

There are the facilities and the faculties, the coursework and the camaraderie, the skills and experiences and knowledge that prepare students for their lives and their careers. No doubt these are important. But in addition, our ranking puts even greater emphasis on two practical and measurable questions about each school: How much will the college improve its students' chances of graduating on time? And how much will it improve the salaries they earn after receiving their diplomas?

In our WSJ/College Pulse 2024 Best Colleges in the U.S. ranking, Princeton scored highly for both graduates' salaries and graduation rates. Its students and recent graduates also praised its teaching facilities in a broad survey we conducted.

That's not much of a surprise. Princeton has been in the upper echelon of best-college lists for a long time. But looking, as we do, at the value a school provides to its students highlights other institutions that don't have Princeton's reputation or its wealth but do great things for their students nonetheless.

The University of Florida and the New Jersey Institute of Technology are the highest-ranking public schools—both cracked the top 20 overall, at No. 15 and No. 19, respectively. And Babson College, Lehigh University and the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology sit at Nos. 10, 14 and 17.

And some schools with longstanding reputations don't fare as well when we look at their student outcomes under our new methodology. Brown University and Johns Hopkins University, two of our top 10 for 2022, perform less outstandingly, at Nos. 67 and 99 respectively.

Based on our estimates, it takes Princeton graduates less than a year's worth of the median salary boost their degree provides to pay off the full cost of attendance, due to their high earnings and the relatively low net price of attendance, which reflects the total cost, after taking into account any grants and scholarships, for students who receive federal financial aid. The university also has the highest graduation rate of any school in the ranking.

The Ivy League university heads a top five in the ranking that is packed with household names: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at No. 2, then Yale University, Stanford University and Columbia University.

John Raulston Graham, a senior from Nashville majoring in architecture, says Princeton works hard to connect students with its network of alumni, which he credits for students' bright career prospects. "There's a real kinship about having gone to Princeton," he says.

Princeton's curriculum is flexible, with few requirements, allowing students to explore a range of academic interests. But classes are "extremely rigorous," says Vincent Nguyen, a junior majoring in math, who is also interested in political science.

Hands-on experience

Other familiar names near the top of this year's ranking include the University of Pennsylvania at No. 7—one of five Ivy League schools in the top 10 overall. Penn edged out Princeton as the college with the biggest impact on graduates' salaries.

No. 10 Babson College aims to set its students up for success in the business world. Babson has business courses built into its core curriculum as well as a general emphasis on entrepreneurship. Freshmen are required to take a yearlong course called Foundations of Management and Entrepreneurship, where they launch and run a

business venture with classmates. For sophomore Kaitlyn Pristawa, that experience set the college apart from other schools she considered.

“You actually run a real business. People actually pay you for the products,” Pristawa says. “It teaches you about every aspect of business and makes you prepared for your future.”

Several small liberal-arts colleges, including Amherst College, Claremont McKenna College and Swarthmore College, also performed well in the ranking. The schools, which each have fewer than 2,000 undergraduate students, placed eighth, ninth and 11th, respectively.

Jay Brenman, whose daughter graduated from Amherst earlier this year, says he was impressed when he discovered the outsize number of Amherst graduates who also graduate from top law schools and medical schools. “Some of those numbers are wild,” he says.

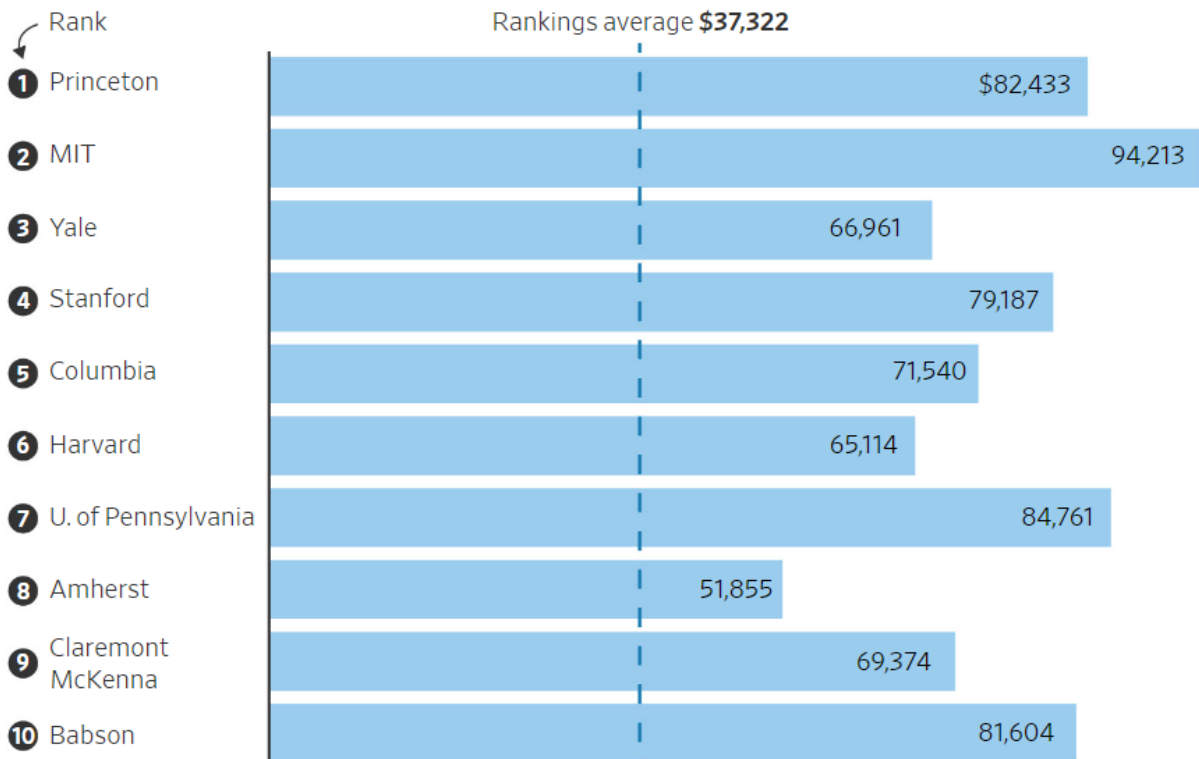
A different approach

Some college-ranking methodologies tend to have the effect of splitting universities into the haves and the have-nots by evaluating the resources a college has at its disposal. Working with data scientists at Statista, the new WSJ/College Pulse ranking uses the most recent available data to put colleges on a more level playing field, with a focus on comparing the outcomes of each school’s graduates to what those students were likely to achieve no matter where they went to school.

That’s at the heart of the improvements we’ve made to the methodology behind the rankings The Wall Street Journal started publishing in 2016.

In effect, colleges aren’t just rewarded for their raw performance in traditional metrics; rather, they’re also evaluated against a benchmark that shows how the schools improve the trajectories of their students’ careers. As a result, this year’s ranking surfaced some hidden gems.

Earnings above a high-school graduate's yearly salary for top-ranked colleges overall



Note: Graduate earnings over and above high-school graduates in the same state
Sources: Department of Education's College Scorecard; American Community Survey

Among those schools are the University of La Verne and Florida International University. At La Verne, more than half of first-time, full-time students receive Pell Grants—federal grants, of up to \$7,395 for the current school year, earmarked for students who have exceptional financial need. That's a higher proportion than 95% of the schools in our ranking. The small, Southern California college's graduation score, which accounts for how likely it is that the students it takes in would graduate from any school, helped the college rank 33rd overall.

“I felt like the professors were able to focus on all their students,” says Catalina Valera, who graduated from La Verne this year—the first college graduate in her family. “They helped me get [job] interviews, and I had an adviser that would send me things like internship opportunities that he knew were in my interest.”

The school also regularly hosted workshops related to résumé building, financial literacy and postgraduation life, says Valera, who aims to work in government and most-recently interned with California State Sen. Rosilicie Ochoa Bogh. “I’ve gotten so many opportunities that I’ve never heard my friends [at other colleges] get offered by their professors and advisers. My experience was more hands-on.”

Florida International fits a similar mold: Nearly half of the students at FIU receive Pell Grants, and the relatively high salaries earned by graduates illustrate how the school excels at setting students on a path toward well-paid jobs after commencement.

In classes at FIU “we would actually apply what we learned to real skills and real networking,” says Madeline Barnett, an FIU student set to graduate this December. She credits those immersive class experiences as one reason she feels prepared for life after commencement. “All of us are basically in the real world in the industry working already.”

FIU’s provost, Elizabeth Béjar, emphasizes that the university has worked closely with employers in recent years to ensure that the skills most sought after are the ones being taught through FIU’s curriculum and the “micro credentialing” programs offered to students and alumni, which focus on professional skills and competencies.

“We really want FIU to be a career laboratory,” Béjar says. The school has industry advisory boards within every college, she adds.

Other colleges with heavy STEM or business focuses, like the Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, the New Jersey Institute of Technology and the Illinois Institution of Technology, ranked 23rd, also fared well.

Another kind of surprise

The flip side of these colleges rising to the top is that some universities ended up well below their typical ranking positions on this year’s list.

Brown is the lowest-ranking Ivy League institution, coming in at No. 67 despite a national reputation that would suggest a loftier slot. Brown's overall rank was especially hurt by relatively low salary figures considering the profile of its graduates. Its average net price, \$26,308, is also higher than those of many of its more highly ranked Ivy peers.

Brown fared well when its students were asked whether they would recommend the school to a friend or choose it again for themselves if given the chance. But students were less kind when asked specifically about learning opportunities. Brown declined to comment.

Johns Hopkins at 99th, New York University at 166th and Tufts University at 287th also rank lower than their reputations and previous rankings might suggest.

"We take access to a Tufts education and our students' educational and career outcomes and placements very seriously," a spokesman for the university said. "We're always looking for ways to improve and will examine the underlying data and methodologies used by the Journal to address any important areas where we can be even better."

A spokesman for NYU said this ranking presents an "incomplete and misleading picture" that doesn't fully account for the school's recently enhanced financial-aid packages. "Ranking universities is a pretty dubious exercise to begin with, but it's particularly futile to compare one year's outcomes to the next when there's been a major shift in methodology," he says.

Johns Hopkins declined to comment.

The University of Pennsylvania edged out Princeton as the college with the biggest impact on graduates' salaries. Hannah Beier for The Wall Street Journal

Student input

Beyond the measurement of outputs, the WSJ/College Pulse ranking also factors in student experiences. The Journal and College Pulse, a college-focused survey and research company, surveyed more than 60,000 students and recent graduates earlier this year. The survey captured a range of perspectives on student life, including students' perception of learning opportunities, career preparation, dining halls and sports facilities, and the students' thoughts on diversity.

Every college included in the ranking received a minimum of 50 survey responses, with the majority receiving more than 100. Survey responses on the learning environment account for 20% of a school's overall score and placement in the ranking.

Another 10% of the overall scores was determined by the diversity of the student body and the faculty at each institution. The University of Houston-Downtown and Kentucky's Berea College scored the highest within this category, which combines metrics about the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of students and faculty with the experiences of students on campus via the survey. Stanford, ranked fourth overall, had the highest diversity score of any school in the top 20.

The ranking rewards schools for having diverse student bodies, regardless of how they achieve that diversity. The Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that colleges can no longer consider race in admissions, forcing many universities to reconsider policies long used to diversify their campuses.

As with any college ranking, what the WSJ/College Pulse methodology rewards may not be what's most important for any individual applicant. As students and families consider where to invest their tuition dollars, there are many elements of the decision that can't be boiled down to analyzable data on a grand scale: a school's values, the sense of belonging one may get while walking on campus, and the distance from family and friends are chief among them.

This ranking views colleges as a springboard for the career and life that come afterward, and it analyzes them through that lens. But as with any big decision, the best college in this list may not be the best for everyone.

“Everybody has a different college experience,” says Barnett, the FIU student. “There are lots of things that kids experience in college that can’t be measured by numerical data or metrics.”

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Rank ↑↓	School Name ↑↓	Type ↑↓	State ↑↓	Score ↑↓
1	Princeton University	Private	NJ	91.6
2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Private	MA	90.4
3	Yale University	Private	CT	90.3
4	Stanford University	Private	CA	90.1
5	Columbia University	Private	NY	89.7
6	Harvard University	Private	MA	89.5
7	University of Pennsylvania	Private	PA	89.4
8	Amherst College	Private	MA	88.4
9	Claremont McKenna College	Private	CA	88
10	Babson College	Private	MA	87.9
11	Swarthmore College	Private	PA	85.9
12	Georgetown University	Private	DC	84.6
13	Vanderbilt University	Private	TN	84.3
14	Lehigh University	Private	PA	84.3
15	University of Florida	Public	FL	84.2
16	Duke University	Private	NC	84.1
17	Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology	Private	IN	84
18	California Institute of Technology	Private	CA	83.8
19	New Jersey Institute of Technology	Public	NJ	83.5
20	Brigham Young University	Private	UT	83.4

Rank ↑↓	School Name ↑↓	Type ↑↓	State ↑↓	Score ↑↓
21	Dartmouth College	Private	NH	83.4
22	University of Southern California	Private	CA	83.4
23	Illinois Institute of Technology	Private	IL	83.3
24	Cornell University	Private	NY	82.7
25	Northwestern University	Private	IL	82.6
26	Washington University in St. Louis	Private	MO	82.1
27	Lake Forest College	Private	IL	81.9
28	University of Michigan - Ann Arbor	Public	MI	81.6
29	Florida International University	Public	FL	81.3
30	Davidson College	Private	NC	81.2
31	Williams College	Private	MA	81.2
32	University of Notre Dame	Private	IN	81.1
33	University of La Verne	Private	CA	80.9
34	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Private	NY	80.4
35	University of Illinois Urbana - Champaign	Public	IL	80.3
36	Stevens Institute of Technology	Private	NJ	80.1
37	The University of Chicago	Private	IL	80
38	Texas A & M University - College Station	Public	TX	79.9
39	Georgia Institute of Technology - Main Campus	Public	GA	79.7
40	Colgate University	Private	NY	79.6

Rank ↑↓	School Name ↑↓	Type ↑↓	State ↑↓	Score ↑↓
41	Haverford College	Private	PA	79.4
42	Emory University	Private	GA	79.4
43	The University of Utah	Public	UT	79.3
44	Washington & Lee University	Private	VA	79.2
45	Boston College	Private	MA	79.2
46	University of Connecticut	Public	CT	79.2
47	Baruch College	Public	NY	79.2
48	Thomas Jefferson University	Private	PA	78.9
49	Pomona College	Private	CA	78.8
50	Colby College	Private	ME	78.7
51	University of California - Berkeley	Public	CA	78.5
52	University of Detroit Mercy	Private	MI	78.5
53	California State University - Northridge	Public	CA	78.5
54	Drexel University	Private	PA	78.4
55	University of Illinois - Chicago	Public	IL	78.3
56	Marquette University	Private	WI	78.3
57	Michigan State University	Public	MI	78.2
58	The George Washington University	Private	DC	78.1
59	University of California - Merced	Public	CA	78
60	College of the Holy Cross	Private	MA	78

Rank ↑↓	School Name ↑↓	Type ↑↓	State ↑↓	Score ↑↓
61	Worcester Polytechnic Institute	Private	MA	77.8
62	Villanova University	Private	PA	77.6
63	Michigan Technological University	Public	MI	77.6
64	Rice University	Private	TX	77.5
65	California State Polytechnic University - Pomona	Public	CA	77.4
66	Iona University	Private	NY	77.3
67	Brown University	Private	RI	77.2
68	Albion College	Private	MI	77.1
69	Missouri University of Science & Technology	Public	MO	77
70	Carnegie Mellon University	Private	PA	76.9
71	California State University - Sacramento	Public	CA	76.9
72	Arizona State University	Public	AZ	76.9
73	Wesleyan University	Private	CT	76.9
74	University of California - Los Angeles	Public	CA	76.7
75	Santa Clara University	Private	CA	76.6
76	Virginia Tech	Public	VA	76.6
77	University of Dayton	Private	OH	76.5
78	Fresno Pacific University	Private	CA	76.4
79	University of Wisconsin - Madison	Public	WI	76.4
80	California State University - Fresno	Public	CA	76.3

Rank ↑↓	School Name ↑↓	Type ↑↓	State ↑↓	Score ↑↓
81	Clemson University	Public	SC	75.9
82	Binghamton University State University of New York	Public	NY	75.8
83	The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Public	NC	75.7
84	University of Virginia - Main Campus	Public	VA	75.7
85	Wake Forest University	Private	NC	75.5
86	University of Delaware	Public	DE	75.4
87	California State University - Los Angeles	Public	CA	75.4
88	Hamilton College	Private	NY	75.3
89	Bowdoin College	Private	ME	75.2
90	University of Miami	Private	FL	75.2
91	Siena College	Private	NY	75.2
92	DePauw University	Private	IN	75.1
93	University of Washington - Tacoma	Public	WA	75.1
94	University of California - Davis	Public	CA	75
95	George Mason University	Public	VA	75
96	Ohio Northern University	Private	OH	74.9
97	Drake University	Private	IA	74.9
98	Wofford College	Private	SC	74.9
99	Johns Hopkins University	Private	MD	74.9
100	Pepperdine University	Private	CA	74.8