

Guidelines



When conducting the college search, there is simply no substitute for paying an in-person visit to a prospective school, one reason that the Admissions Office schedules several Visitation Days throughout the school year in addition to working with students interested in experiencing Hope through a personalized individual tour. Travis Goldwire '05 of the admissions staff is shown above leading a tour in November.

It's a rite of autumn in higher education.

Each year in August and September, the thousands of colleges and universities across the nation start anew. They shake off the relative calm of summer, welcome back (or newly greet) the faculty and students, and get about the work of learning and teaching. It's been that way in the United States for hundreds of years.

That's one rite in higher education, but it's not the only one. Also each fall, a new round of college guides hits the book shelves and magazine stands. They offer themselves as a resource to families faced with the college search but can present a bit of a challenge to the schools, which may variably be thrilled, relieved or horrified depending on how they fare. It's been that way in the United States for about 25 years, and given the ubiquity and endurance of the genre, both populations—students and schools—can benefit from understanding the benefits and limits.

"Rankings are an interesting phenomenon in the times in which we live," said President James Bultman '63. "Obviously, people are looking for accountability more than ever before."

"As an institution, some of the time we're going to feel elated that we're ranked where we are and feel good about what raters say about us," he said. "And I think other times we'll feel deflated and think that we're much better than they think we are. Such is the nature of evaluation."

"Rankings can be very helpful to families, although I don't think that people should take them hook line and sinker because the difference from any one rank to perhaps a much higher or much lower one is oftentimes quite microscopic," President Bultman said.

Traditionally, Hope has had much more cause to be pleased than troubled by its evaluation in college guide. For example:

* The 2008 *America's Best Colleges* guide published by *U.S. News and World Report* includes Hope among the nation's top 100 liberal arts colleges, and significantly also includes Hope in its listing of the top colleges and universities in the category of "Undergraduate research/Creative projects." The guide also lists Hope as an "A+ option for B students."

* The 2008 *Fiske Guide to Colleges* includes Hope as one of the country's "best and most interesting" colleges and universities, and notes that "Hope's academic and athletic programs continue to grow and prosper, helped out by an array of new facilities." The guide describes the college as an institution with traditional Christian roots and an emphasis on undergraduate research where, in the words of one student, "the quality of teaching is off the charts."

* The books *Colleges That Change Lives* and *Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully* both cite Hope as an institution that makes an important formative difference in its students' lives.

"Fortunately at Hope, we have been able to talk about most ratings because we generally have fared very well, as I think Hope should," President Bultman said. "Hope is a superb educational institution."

"The academic program is rigorous and

challenging, and students have to earn an education, they're not merely given a diploma. I like that," he said. "And we have other programs that are also noteworthy. In the area of student development we consistently win awards for student activity programming. Our chapel program is the envy of many throughout the country."

"And so Hope has a lot to commend it. There's so much to like about this institution that I would expect that we would do well in the ratings," he said.

Even while Hope fares well, nationwide in higher education there's some resistance to the practice of ranking schools, in particular to the *U.S. News* rankings, which debuted in the early 1980s and are arguably the most influential and best-known. The *U.S. News*

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rankings have become so significant that some institutions have taken to shaping their practices to affect the publication's evaluation specifically. At the same time, however, many in higher education are unhappy with the qualities that the *America's Best Colleges* guide measures—reported flaws in the publication's

methodology include the influence of wealth, fame and exclusivity in the schools' scores and relative lack of emphasis on what actually happens during a student's time on campus.

"I'm part of several national groups that have talked about these rankings in

the last year in particular," President Bultman said. "Many of my colleagues are loathe to participate."

Hope hasn't joined the resulting boycott. However, President Bultman is on the board of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU), which has developed its own template which in the educators' estimation emphasizes criteria that are more meaningful, such as data related to the campus experience itself and the results the institutions produce. (More about NAICU's "University and College Accountability Network," or UCAN, can be found at www.naicu.edu.)

In the end, though, President Bultman emphasizes that there's no substitute for direct investigation.

"What becomes most important is to keep in mind the limitations of rankings and do your own investigation of the institutions you're serious about," he said. "And the best way to do that is to be on-campus and talk with other people and college personnel about what they're trying to accomplish and how they can do it in ways that would be beneficial to the student's development and future."

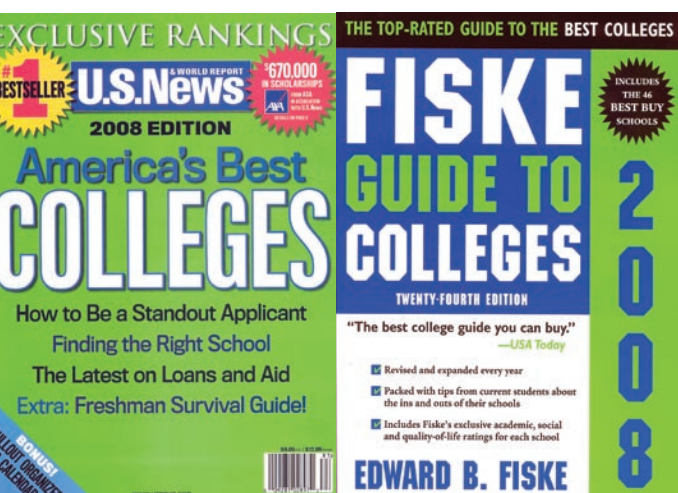
"The most important thing that a student or family can do in choosing a college for study is to visit and to find out for themselves how it feels to be in an institution with that ethos," he said. 📍

Tips for the College Search

College guides provide a starting point, but there is no substitute for investigating a potential college or university personally. Through the years the Admissions program has worked with literally tens of thousands of prospective students. Vice President Bill Vanderbilt '88 provides here a prime 11 questions that experience has shown that prospective students and their families may find helpful to ask when conducting theirs.

1. How can I visit and experience what it would be like to be a student?
2. What is the academic program like? Is it rigorous and challenging? Are there experiential learning opportunities such as internships and research?
3. What is the co-curricular program like? Is it designed in a way to enhance the academic program rather than detract from it?
4. I've heard your college is a Christian college. What does that mean?
5. What is the ethos of the place like – what does it feel like to be on campus?
6. What do students do for fun on your campus?
7. What are the people like at your institution?

8. Do they care about each other with an emphasis on building up the other members of the community?
8. What is the physical environment like? Are the facilities outstanding places in which to live and learn?
9. Is your education a liberal arts education or a vocational education? How does this play out in your academic programs?
10. What are the various ways to engage with faculty at your institution? Is this an important part of the learning experience?
11. Do you offer off-campus opportunities either internationally or domestically? What are some examples of these opportunities and how do they fit in to other coursework I need to complete?



Hope fares well in guides such as the *U.S. News America's Best Colleges* Guide and *Fiske Guide to Colleges*.

