Decline of High School Class Rank
Which Institutions Are Affected the Most?

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ABSTRACT

The number of high school students submitting class rank to colleges and universities has declined since the early 1990s. Which types of institutions have been affected the most?

Using data from U.S. News Academic Insights, we looked at the last 10 ranking years (2003–2013). Highly ranked schools in the National Liberal Arts Colleges and National Universities categories (top 50 and top 100 in the 2013 Best Colleges rankings) saw a greater percentage point drop during 2003–2013 for first year students submitting high school class rank than all schools from one of the main ranking categories.

In the National Universities category, private institutions saw a greater percentage-point drop than public institutions between 2003 and 2013.

BACKGROUND

The debate around high school class rank within higher education is not new. Class rank was once a key component of the application process. Now, many college admissions officials cite that the significance of class rank has diminished, as class rank at different high schools can mean vastly different things. In 2006, the New York Times quoted William Shain, dean of undergraduate admissions at Vanderbilt University, on the lack of high schools submitting class rank: “You’re saying your grades don’t matter and that you won’t tell us what they mean, I think it’s an abdication of educational responsibility.”

According to the “2012 State of College Admission” report issued by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), in 1993, 42 percent of colleges said class rank was of considerable importance during the admissions decision. By 2011, only 19 percent gave the same response. Many colleges are moving toward a holistic approach to admissions and are less interested in class rank, instead focusing on extracurriculars, essays, and public service. Some colleges and universities, not deterred by the lack of submission of class rank, will impute values based on other criteria—typically standardized test scores and high school GPA. Even that practice, however, is going away.

High schools who have decided to stop reporting class rank say that it categorizes students in a detrimental way. A few decimal point differences in GPA may significantly affect class standing for a student. This separation could also hurt students when it comes to scholarship opportunities. Some believe that ranking students also has a negative impact on the school community—that students will view their peers as competitors, making them more competitive against each other.

1 Four main ranking categories include National Universities, National Liberal Arts Colleges, Regional Colleges, Regional Universities
ANALYSIS

We compiled data from U.S. News Academic Insights over the last 10 ranking years (2003–2013) to identify how the reporting decline of class rank has affected different types of schools. U.S. News placed schools into one of four main ranking categories: National Liberal Arts, National Universities, Regional Colleges, and Regional Universities. Four other sub-groups were created for the purposes of this analysis: the top 100 ranked National Universities, the top 50 ranked National Universities, the top 100 ranked National Liberal Arts Colleges, and top 50 ranked National Liberal Arts Colleges.

Submitting Class Rank

Every category saw a decline in high school students submitting class rank by at least 10 percentage points except the Regional Colleges group, which fell just over 5 percentage points. Since the 2010 Best Colleges rankings, the trend line for Regional Colleges is flat, while all others continued their decline.

Top-Ranked Institutions

Highly ranked schools saw an even greater decrease than the population at large from their respective categories. Whether looking at top-ranked National Universities or National Liberal Arts Colleges, each category saw more than a 14 percentage-point drop in students submitting high school class rank between 2003–2013.

Public vs. Private National Universities

The percentage of students submitting high school class rank within private National Universities has declined more than 18 percentage points from 2003–2013 compared with only 10 percentage points for public National Universities. The gap in trend lines between the two types of institutions is striking.

14 Date range correlates to the U.S. News & World Report Best Colleges ranking years.
A Closer Examination of the Top-Ranked Public and Private National Universities

The scatter charts below show all of the schools in the National University category. Each circle represents a school, where the size of the circle corresponds to its rank. In both cases, top-ranked institutions are predictably above the average in terms of the percentage of students in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class (y axis), but are below the average in terms of students submitting class rank (x axis). Lower ranked institutions, on the other hand, are often below the average in terms of students in the top 10 percent of their high school graduating class, while above the average for students who submitted high school class rank.

National Universities Private Institutions 2003–2013

Each circle represents an institution from the National Universities category. All private National Universities are highlighted. The size of the circle corresponds to the overall rank (circles that are smaller are ranked higher, meaning closer to No. 1). Two years, 2003 and 2013, are depicted to show how those institutions have moved over time.

Notice the significant movement of Private Institutions (highlighted). Most highly ranked institutions (smaller circles) are moving left (fewer students submitting high school class rank) and upwards (more reporting students in the top ten percent).
A Closer Examination of the Top-Ranked Public and Private National Universities – Continued

National Universities Public Institutions 2003–2013
Each circle represents an institution from the National Universities category. All public National Universities are highlighted. The size of the circle corresponds to the overall rank (circles that are smaller are ranked higher, meaning closer to No. 1). Two years, 2003 and 2013, are depicted to show how those institutions have moved over time.

Notice the general movement of Public Institutions (highlighted). Most are moving left (fewer students submitting high school class rank) but not as many are moving upwards (more reporting students in the top ten percent).
CONCLUSION

The number of students submitting their high school class rank has declined over the last 10 years. The decrease has affected National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges more than Regional Colleges and Universities. Private National Universities have seen a greater percentage-point decrease in students submitting high school class rank than public National Universities. Overall, the decline of high school students submitting high school class rank shows no sign of slowing down.
### APPENDIX – ADDITIONAL TABLES

#### Student Submitting Class Rank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage Point Change 2003–2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Universities</td>
<td>-13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Liberal Arts</td>
<td>-13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Colleges</td>
<td>-5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Universities</td>
<td>-11.7%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage Point Change 2003–2013</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 50 National Universities</td>
<td>-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 National Universities</td>
<td>-13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 50 Liberal Arts Universities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Liberal Arts Universities</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage Point Change 2003–2013</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private National Universities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public National Universities</td>
<td>-10.3%</td>
</tr>
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