

## **College ratings are all the rage**

**Mary Jane Smetanka**, Star Tribune

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Did you know that Macalester College in St. Paul is one of AMERICA'S HOTTEST COLLEGES? That the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus is ninth on Rolling Stone's list of schools that rock? Or that St. Olaf College in Northfield is ranked 24th on Golf Digest's list of best schools for academically inclined female golfers?

It's back-to-school time, and the college ratings books and websites are running wild. Nearly 20 years after U.S. News & World Report's annual "America's Best Colleges" report debuted, everyone and his brother seems to have an opinion about colleges. A Google search on the Internet for "college rankings" yields more than 200,000 hits. Newsweek, the Princeton Review, Peterson's Guides, Washington Monthly, Forbes, Barron's Guide, the Students' Guide to Colleges, Rolling Stone and Golf Digest have all issued findings in various forms this month.

And don't forget the Campus Squirrel Listings Report, which asserts that "the quality of an institution of higher learning can often be determined by the size, health and behavior of the squirrel population on campus."

It's enough to make a college president's head spin.

"Within the last month, I've been informed of at least eight different lists in which we ranked in one place or another," said Macalester's Brian Rosenberg.

"It does seem to me it is proliferating at a somewhat alarming rate," Rosenberg said.

Macalester is the ratings darling among Minnesota schools. Last year, it was one of just seven schools to get a full story in the U.S. News survey. This year, Mac is singled out by Newsweek/Kaplan as the nation's hottest liberal arts college. It is ranked 25th among liberal arts colleges in U.S. News, 16th by Washington Monthly and is cited as one of the top 10 "most intellectual schools" by the Students' Guide. Princeton Review, which uses student surveys to compile controversial annual lists that include a list of top party schools, ranks Mac second on "gay community acceptance" and fourth among "most politically active."

The attention is a double-edged sword.

"Obviously when there's good news from the rankings you want to try to use that," Rosenberg said. "It gives you the sense that the work you're doing is being recognized. But at the same time, we try pretty hard not to take it too seriously."

He admits to being annoyed by some of the more subjective rankings that paint Macalester as a wacky relic of the '60s. "We have tended to end up on lists of the most radical, or the least spiritual, and that does a disservice to our students, who are a pretty diverse group," he said. "I'm glad we don't end up on the list of party schools."

Carleton College in Northfield has long had a national profile and this year ranks fifth among liberal arts colleges in the U.S. News survey. Like Macalester, it displays the news prominently on its website in a place where even a casual visitor can't miss it.

Carleton also promotes the fact that Golf Digest ranked the school 19th for women golfers who consider themselves students first. St. Olaf made that same list, and is not going to pass up the chance for a little marketing. The school plans to buy a full-page ad in the golf magazine.

"We trumpet these, like every college does," said Amy Gage, St. Olaf director of marketing and communications. "I was looking at Princeton [Review] today for quotes we can use in recruitment materials. They quote students ... kids want to hear authentic voices."

St. Olaf was 55th among liberal arts colleges in U.S. News and did well in the Princeton Review -- third for best campus food, fourth in quality of life and first in town-gown relations.

That can't hurt, said Michael Kyle, St. Olaf vice president and dean of enrollment. "Students pay attention to them; parents pay attention to them," he said. "But not one student has said to me, 'I chose St. Olaf over the 78th school [in U.S. News] because it was 23 places ahead.'"

But Rosenberg worries that rankings sometimes steer students toward schools for the wrong reasons. Instead of looking for a school that fits their interests, needs and abilities, some students now ask which school has a better ranking.

"I think those lists simplify a very complicated matching process into something that looks like an AP football ranking," he said. At least Macalester consistently ranks high on the lists it gets onto. Consider the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus, which according to U.S. News ranks 74th among "best national universities." In a respected Florida study, the "U" always ends up in the top five.

"You like them when you fare well and don't like them when you don't," said Linda Thrane, vice president for university relations. "The University of Minnesota has set a course to be one of the top three public research universities in the world."

So how does that goal mesh with the school's pathetic performance on the Campus Squirrel Listings Report, which gives the "U" a paltry rating of three out of five squirrel heads?

"I daresay we're number one in fat and happy Gophers," she said.  
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