



2007

U.S. News Rankings

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, Richard F., "U.S. News Rankings" (2007). *Remarks and Messages*. Paper 5.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wilson_news/5

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Message to the Campus Community

June 27, 2007

I am writing to provide you with some perspective on recent news stories that have appeared in major publications like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *New York Times* and *USA Today*, concerning a discussion of the *U.S. News* rankings held at the summer meeting of the Annapolis Group. Illinois Wesleyan is one of the 123 members of this key group of national liberal arts colleges and universities, and Provost Cunningham and I attended the meeting.

The *U.S. News* rankings have been a hotly debated subject here at Illinois Wesleyan and at campuses across the nation for many years. These rankings are compiled in part from the Common Data Set of information colleges and universities provide to the U.S. Department of Education. The data cover a wide variety of information, from graduation rates and class sizes to alumni giving and student selectivity. There is also a reputational survey component that presidents, provosts and deans of admission are asked to complete. The reputational component is the most controversial part of the rankings and accounts for 25 percent of the total ranking score. In that portion of the survey, presidents, provosts and admissions directors are each asked to rate more than 200 liberal arts institutions on a scale of 1 to 5 in terms of quality.

Following an extended discussion, the Annapolis Group presidents were asked whether or not our institutions would continue responding to the reputational portion of the *U.S. News* survey. Although not a formal vote, which is not a practice of the Annapolis Group, there was a near unanimous response by the presidents that they would not fill out the reputation portion of the survey in the future. I voted with the majority. There are several reasons for this position, but the two that received the most attention are:

- No evidence has ever been produced to demonstrate that the rankings have any relationship to the quality of the undergraduate experience at institutions. Assessing an undergraduate experience is multi-dimensional, and efforts to reduce this complex matter to a single number are a disservice to everyone.
- There are very few presidents, provosts or admissions directors who feel they know enough about other institutions to rank them. Lacking an intimate knowledge of the impact that an institution has on its students, we resort to proxies like size of endowment or selectivity of the entering class to infer quality. There are serious flaws with this approach.

The presidents also were asked if we intended to respond to the data portion of the survey. The poll on this question was mixed, and I voted to supply the data. My thought is that I would treat a request for data from *U.S. News* in the same way that I treat requests from other organizations, i.e., are the data readily available or can we collect it relatively easily and how important is the survey request to the University.

We also intend to cooperate with several national organizations that are working on a standard set of data that every institution would provide to prospective students on their websites and in

publications. The National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities made an announcement this morning concerning a data template that is being tested this summer (website: <http://chronicle.com/news/index.php?id=2571?=&atnb>). My overriding objective is to provide prospective students with accurate and useful information about Illinois Wesleyan in order to help them make good decisions about the best college or university to attend.