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These days, more stock given to college rankings

By Brian Kladko

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The Nov. 28, 1983, issue of U.S. News and World Report contained the kind of national and global happenings that in hindsight seem almost quaint: the economic threat posed by Japan, the "strange peace" in Grenada following the U.S. invasion, and what gains (or losses) AT&T stockholders could expect from the monopoly's court-ordered breakup. But that week's cover story had what news professionals call "legs" -- an ability to stand the test the time.

"Rating the Colleges -- Exclusive National Survey," the headline proclaimed.

The rankings that year were comparatively primitive to later iterations of the U.S. News college survey. It was based only on a survey of 662 college presidents, and **Stanford University** topped the list, followed by **Harvard University** at No. 2 and the **Massachusetts Institute of Technology** at No. 10. In the separate category of liberal arts colleges, **Amherst College** was rated No. 1, with **Williams College** tied for second and **Wellesley College** sixth.

With that shot across the bow, U.S. News -- and the imitators who followed -- started shaking up the notoriously stodgy world of higher education.

The rankings, which have become more sophisticated over time, enabled students and their parents to compare schools with a quantitative clarity never before possible, introducing a new kind of accountability and shifting the balance of power. As outside publications sought to define the universities, the universities had to work harder to define themselves.

The rankings have become, in a way, the educational equivalent of a stock price -- the boiling down of many factors, both real and perceived, into a single, perhaps overly simplified, number. And just as companies do what they can to raise their stock prices, universities labor to raise their rankings.

"The nature of the institution and the way it thinks of itself is significantly different from what it was in the early '80s," said Mark Putnam, the director of planning and research at **Northeastern University**, which has made rising in the rankings a rallying cry for the past decade under outgoing president Richard Freeland. "It conceives of itself much more now in a marketplace, with market pressures."

Freeland didn't achieve his goal of moving Northeastern into the top 100, though its climb to No. 115 from No. 162 over the past decade is one of the more dramatic in the

country. Without those ratings, the school's improvement in such areas as student retention and class sizes might have gone unnoticed.

Even colleges that outwardly attach far less significance to the rankings don't hesitate to tout them when it's in their interest. Although Wellesley's admissions director said rankings "have reduced higher education to a commodity," the college's Web site notes more than once that U.S. News rated it the fourth best liberal arts college seven out of the last nine years.

"It's public recognition, for what it's worth," said Jennifer Desjarlais, dean of admissions. "I understand why we put it out there. It's in the media. It's hard to ignore it."

That publicity, however, can cut both ways.

If a school moves down a few notches in the rankings, trustees "will be asking the president questions that could lead to his or her resignation," said Jack Maguire, chairman of **Maguire Associates Inc.**, a higher-education consulting firm in Concord. "The top schools will say rankings mean nothing, but I know for a fact that that's not true, because of all the pressures they have to deal with from constituencies -- trustees, who are businessmen, who look at these rankings the way they look at the stock market."

Some colleges have tinkered with their admission strategy to boost their rankings, putting more focus on applicants' SAT scores or wait-listing more students to keep its acceptance rate as low as possible, Maguire said. They also put more effort into cultivating their image with other institutions, which is often a factor in rankings.

"Between January and March, you get floods of things in your mailbox from schools, telling you about all the wonderful things they did in the past year so that you'll remember their names when you answer the ranking survey," said Sandra King, vice president for marketing, communication and public affairs at **Bentley College**.