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Caltech Hurdles Past Ivy Giants to No. 1 Spot in *U.S. News* College Rankings

By LEO REISBERG

The California Institute of Technology took the No. 1 spot in this year's rankings of research universities by *U.S. News & World Report*, leaping eight notches over such perennial powerhouses as Harvard, Princeton, and Yale Universities.

This year, the magazine changed the way that it ranks research institutions, so certain factors, such as standardized-test scores, per-student spending, and student-faculty ratios, were weighted differently. As a result, the rankings of several universities with strong science and engineering programs were boosted.

Swarthmore College was named the best liberal-arts institution, bumping Amherst College to second place. The two colleges routinely take turns occupying the top two positions in liberal arts. Swarthmore was also ranked the best value among liberal-arts colleges, while the University of Missouri at Columbia was chosen the best value among universities nationally.

The *U.S. News* rankings are often criticized by college administrators, including at least one from this year's top research university. Critics note that the magazine frequently changes its evaluation methodology, which causes fluctuations even when the colleges themselves do not undergo substantial changes. And educators have for years decried the rankings for giving a false sense of precision to the subtle art of finding the best college for an individual student.

But institutions are quick to boast when they do well, because the annual guide is popular with many college applicants. Ninety-three per cent of the colleges that were sent the surveys on which the rankings are based filled them out and returned them to *U.S. News*.

"I don't think the rankings are terribly meaningful, but they are useful," said David L. Goodstein, vice-provost of Caltech. "It's like winning the Rose

DC19990046 E2

characteristics, but it's a nice thing to have. I don't doubt we'll use it in advertising to attract students and impress donors."

Throughout the 1990s, the top national university has always been either Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, and last year, all three tied for No. 1. This year, Harvard fell to No. 2, and Princeton and Yale tied for No. 4. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology squeezed into the third spot. Stanford University -- the only other institution ever to be ranked No. 1 by *U.S. News*, which happened three times in the 1980s -- was ranked No. 6 this year; Duke and the Johns Hopkins Universities and the University of Pennsylvania tied for No. 7, and Columbia University came in at No. 10.

Caltech has been in the top 10 for the 13 consecutive years that the rankings have been published, but this is the first year it was No. 1. Staff members at *U.S. News* who worked on the rankings said that Caltech's jump to the top spot was largely attributable to methodological changes.

"We think it's fair to acknowledge there was a technical change, and some schools moved up in the rankings because of that. Caltech's movement into first place reflected that change," said Amy E. Graham, director of data research for *U.S. News*.

The magazine bases its college rankings on academic reputation, graduation and retention rates, alumni giving, and student selectivity, among other factors. This year, criteria such as per-student spending, SAT scores, and student-faculty ratio "ended up mattering more" than in the past, and Caltech topped those categories, Ms. Graham said.

The magazine will arrive at newsstands and bookstores Monday, and the full guide, *America's Best Colleges*, will be available Tuesday. The rankings are also to be posted today on the World-Wide Web at

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/corank.htm>
