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JOURNAL REPORTS: COLLEGE RANKINGS

The Colleges Where Students Feel Most Engaged

In the WSJ/THE College Rankings, schools with a religious affiliation are leaders in being both inspirational and challenging



Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, was ranked No. 1 for student engagement for the third straight year.

By *Melissa Korn*

Sept. 5, 2018 6:56 p.m. ET

One crucial aspect of a successful college experience is how students learn.

Engaged students sharpen their critical-thinking skills, figure out how to work in teams and translate abstract academic concepts into real-world understanding.

The engagement score in the Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings—measured mainly through roughly 189,000 survey responses over the past two years—monitors how challenged and inspired students feel inside and outside the classroom, as well as the breadth of courses their schools offer.



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Eight of the top 11 schools for engagement have a religious affiliation. Those institutions often include in their missions the education of the entire student —body, mind and soul—and put a premium on group projects,

mentoring and self-reflection.

JOURNAL REPORT

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Dordt College, located in Sioux Center, Iowa, and affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, topped the engagement ranking for the third straight year. The school, which tied for No. 365 in the overall ranking, holds monthly speaker series on topics like race and faith. And with nearly 90% of students living on campus, classroom conversations regularly bleed over into more informal settings.

Oklahoma Baptist University was the second-best school in terms of student engagement. “Students understand pretty quickly that it’s a

holistic experience here,” says Bruce Perkins, vice president for enrollment and student life. New first-year students participate in book discussions based on a summer reading assignment (this year, it was “Why College Matters to God”), and community-service projects are encouraged.

Each student must attend chapel 96 times and take two theology courses before graduation, which helps them ask how their studies relate to bigger-picture issues, Mr. Perkins says.

Cedarville University in Ohio, Texas Christian University and Harding University in Arkansas tied for the No. 3 spot.



TOP SCHOOLS
FOR ENGAGEMENT

The colleges with the highest scores for how engaged students feel they are with their professors, their peers and their education

1. Dordt College
2. Oklahoma Baptist University
3. Cedarville University
Harding University
Texas Christian University
6. Brigham Young University, Provo
Brown University
Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion
Lee University
Texas A&M University, College Station
University of Southern California

Source: Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Brown University is one of the few schools that scored high in student engagement, tied at No. 6, as well as in the top ranks overall, tied for No. 7. Provost Richard Locke attributes the school’s high mark for engagement to the fact that students don’t have specific courses they’re required to take. “You only have students in your class who want to be there,” he says, which changes the tenor of classroom conversations.

Brown also encourages hands-on learning through its Engaged Scholars Program, with courses on the anthropology of homelessness bringing students to social-service agencies, for example, or urban-studies students learning about the tactics of community organizers.

Many elite colleges flunked when it came to challenging and engaging students. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, No. 2 overall, landed at No. 304 on engagement. And the California Institute of Technology, No. 5 overall, ranked below 500 on that measure.

A Caltech spokeswoman says the school doesn’t comment on rankings.

MIT Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz says the low score “puzzles me,” noting that internal surveys of the senior class are generally positive.

An MIT design class made recommendations last spring on how to revamp the first-year experience, giving students more flexibility in what courses they take, the opportunity to explore other disciplines and intensive advising to navigate it all.

The goal, Dr. Waitz says, is for students to “have a bit more opportunity to be inspired and retain that love of learning and solving problems” that they have at arrival and

regain later in their academic careers.

He says the school is working to create more “opportunities for thinking about who you want to be in the world and what you want to be in the world.”

Ms. Korn is a reporter in The Wall Street Journal’s New York bureau. She can be reached at melissa.korn@wsj.com.

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