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September 29, 2016

Mr. Brian Kelly  
Editor and Chief Content Officer  
U.S. News & World Report  
1050 Thomas Jefferson St, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20007

Dear Mr. Kelly:

I am writing to raise several issues associated with the methodologies and rationale the *U.S. News & World Report* uses for its college rankings. As our nation's high school students begin applying to college, many will look to your rankings to help inform major decisions about their future. I am sure considerable work goes into the challenge of making your rankings as fair and helpful to students as possible, so that students have information to help them choose the institutions that are right for them. That said, I am concerned that your current ranking system fails to factor in the extent to which colleges and universities admit low-income students. Overlooking low-income student access deprives applicants of critical data and creates perverse incentives for schools to create barriers to entry for high-achieving, low-income students.

While your current rankings reward schools for how many students they graduate, they do not adequately account for the socioeconomic status of the students they educate. College completion rates are important, but without an exclusive metric on low-income student access, such as the percentage of enrolled Pell-grant recipients, they may still mask broader inequities. While the schools in your top 25 have impressive graduation rates, their median Pell recipient enrollment rate is just over 14 percent, compared to a national average of 39 percent. Without giving greater emphasis to Pell enrollment rates, our most well-resourced, highest-rated schools have less incentive to admit low-income students who often require more resources to be successful. This also means that schools that do enroll high rates of Pell students, but struggle to graduate them, will not see their efforts adequately accounted for in your rankings.

The current rankings also reward schools for how exclusive they are, but not how inclusive they are. By factoring in acceptance rates, the rankings may incentivize schools to cap enrollments instead of expanding slots to enroll more qualified low-income students. The rankings also effectively penalize schools who try to innovate with new admissions criteria, such as making SAT and ACT scores optional for admissions. Many schools have found that grades are an equally powerful predictor of college success compared to test scores. Some schools, like the University of Delaware, are making test scores an optional part of applications. Others, like Hampshire College, eliminated them all together. For their efforts, Hampshire College was excluded from your rankings and the University of Delaware would have the weight of their test scores reduced if more than a quarter of their students did not submit test scores. Considering

Hampshire's enrollment of low-income students increased after doing away with test scores, it is troubling that schools trying to improve their low-income student accessibility are not credited for their efforts or even penalized according to your rankings. College rankings should never be at odds with student access.

The rankings also reward schools for their alumni's generosity and how well they pay their faculty, but do not measure how well they make college affordable for low-income students. These rankings have contributed to the much-discussed "college arms race," where schools have invested in merit aid and amenities to attract students with the highest test scores in order to boost their standing in the rankings. According to a report by New America, some schools have risen in your rankings by pouring their resources into merit aid for students with the highest test scores, who often come from families that can well afford to pay for college. As a result, need-based aid has been neglected by these schools, leaving well-qualified, low-income students behind as schools work to rise in the rankings. Schools must make difficult choices with limited resources, yet too often investment in low-income students is at odds with increasing their position in these rankings. To reduce this conflict, the rankings should include affordability metrics, such as the net price for low-income students. Such changes would likely cause schools to shift their priorities to efforts that would improve outcomes for low-income students.

Beyond the rankings, an even easier fix that could increase access and not obscure affordability would be to more accurately and accessibly list data on the true cost of attendance for universities. While many of the top schools on your list have shockingly high "sticker prices," many also offer deep tuition discounts for low-income students. However, the rankings prominently display only the high sticker prices. Students that do want to know the real cost must navigate a maze of links only to find financial aid information hidden behind a pay wall. These barriers may mislead and harm low-income students, who will see only tuition prices well over \$40,000 per year and unfortunately conclude they cannot afford to attend a college that costs two to three times their families' annual income. Removing the sticker price and providing free access to the financial aid data would open up more possibilities for low-income students.

I look forward to your thoughtful consideration of the issues raised in this letter and respectfully request that you consider making changes to your future rankings. I am eager to review your response and would welcome a meeting to discuss your college ranking system.

Sincerely,



Christopher A. Coons  
U.S. Senator