



THE EDUCATION CONSERVANCY

BEYOND RANKING: Building a System Prototype

On September 25, 2007, Yale University hosted an invitational conference sponsored by the Education Conservancy, “Beyond Ranking: Responding to the Call for Useful Information.” More than 100 participants, including college presidents, admission deans, faculty members, institutional researchers, technology experts, and high school counselors met to discuss the prospect of collectively serving the college selection needs of students and families. The meeting was spurred by widespread dissatisfaction among various constituencies about the forms, usage, and impact of information currently available to the public for comparing and selecting prospective colleges.

Participants strongly affirmed that the public interest requires education leaders to cooperate in developing a robust, nuanced, and educationally sound web-based system of information, guidance, and interactive tools – one that puts the educational needs of students center stage and restores educational integrity to college admissions. Key operational components of such a system include: colleges speaking collectively with authoritative advice for students; colleges publicly articulating authentic differences among institutions; and students and families exercising greater control of a process that is meant to serve students. Following the meeting, several institutions committed funding to help the Education Conservancy build a prototype of this system. Leaders from NAICU and NASULGC, each of which is developing a college information system for accountability purposes, pledged to cooperate in this enterprise. We are now actively seeking sufficient funding and participation from colleges and foundations.

The web-based prototype is currently envisioned as comprehensive, free, widely accessible, and non-commercial. It will function as an educational tool for prospective college students and their families, as well high school counselors, as they consider, compare, and select particular colleges. It will harness the willingness and expertise of the academy and other stakeholders in facilitating a student-directed, thoughtful, and educationally sound college selection process. The site will include several unique features, including:

- **Relevant college information drawn from new and existing data describing inputs, student experiences, and outcomes.** Institutions will be encouraged to submit all available data and to develop additional data as the range of possibilities is stretched and modified by the involvement of a greater number and variety of colleges and universities.
- **Student-friendly, interactive guidance tools based on best practices in college counseling.** This component will lead students through a set of diagnostic exercises and questions, helping students appreciate how selecting a college is different from purchasing a product, understand their own educational preferences, receive advice from current college students, and discover what college qualities may or may not matter to them.
- **A student/college matching system that can link potential college applicants to a group of suitable colleges.** Based on student-generated priorities, groups of suitable colleges will be suggested, students will be linked to multiple additional resources (including the suggested colleges), and information addressing a wide range of educationally important questions will be offered.

Our aim is to establish common education values as core precepts, and place students’ individual educational needs at the center of the college search and admissions process. As the Beyond Ranking meeting participants observed, partnerships will be necessary for this project to succeed. The anticipated budget for building the system prototype is \$400,000. Given the enthusiasm the project has garnered, the public hunger for relevant and reliable information, and the precious opportunity to capitalize on colleges’ willingness to cooperate in this venture, the Education Conservancy hopes to launch the prototype design by January 2009.