

Five universities that really are up-and-comers

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Many in higher education love to pick on the U.S. News rankings franchise— because it's the dominant collegiate ranking, and because ordinal rankings seem somewhat arbitrary and are difficult to defend.



George Mason University has enjoyed a rapid ascent through the ranks of research universities. One reason: puppies. (Linda Davidson/The Washington Post - THE WASHINGTON POST)

Yet, a U.S. News ranking provided part of the inspiration for a story in Wednesday's Post about the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. For each of the last few years, U.S. News has listed the suburban campus among the nation's top institutions for undergraduate teaching. The list is based on a survey of university presidents, provosts and admission deans, asking them to name schools they consider leaders in collegiate learning.

What struck me about the ranking was the way UMBC stood out on the list. Here's the rest of the top 10: Dartmouth, Princeton, Yale, Brown, Stanford, Berkeley, Notre Dame, Miami University and the College of William and Mary. All are actual Ivies, "Public Ivies" or Ivy-caliber institutions.

UMBC is a decidedly different sort of school.

For one thing, it's not the flagship. That distinction, in Maryland, goes to the University of Maryland in College Park. It's not hundreds of years old, either; UMBC opened in 1966. For the first half of its young life, UMBC existed as a minimally selective commuter school. In a very brief span, the university has ascended to the ranks of national universities, with serious research ambitions and ranked doctoral programs.

UMBC is part of higher education's younger generation, so to speak, a cohort of universities that came into their own in the second half of the 20th century and only recently joined the ranks of "national" (as opposed to regional) universities.

Higher education is a relatively static world: the vast majority of top-tier universities existed before the 20th century, built large endowments and, in the case of public institutions, have long enjoyed a status as state flagships.

UMBC and its peers are a sort of new breed: young, fast-growing schools that are swiftly ascending into the top rank. Why have they prospered? Partly as a matter of simple growth:

there are far too many students in Maryland, California, Florida and most other states to fit in the historic flagships. But it's more than that. Faculty at these schools say they've benefitted from a rare opportunity to build a university in the modern era, with modern priorities and contemporary sensibilities. (Although UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski notes the success of his school's classics department, hardly a cutting-edge pursuit.)

"What we're working to do at UMBC is to take the best of what we know about liberal arts colleges, and the best of what we know about research universities, and put it together," Hrabowski said.

Here is a brief dossier on UMBC and four other institutions with similar trajectories:

UMBC: Established in 1966 as part of the University System of Maryland. Evolved from commuter school to residential research university — a sort of second flagship behind U-Md. in College Park. SAT averages rose 300 points in 25 years to 1206 (actually 400 points; I'm subtracting 100 to compensate for recentering.) Joined the elite "Research I" list in the past two decades; now listed as a "high research activity" school, technically the second-highest Carnegie category. Annual research funding tops \$80 million. Ranked 157th among national universities by U.S. News.

Binghamton University: Founded in 1946 as a two-year college. Evolved into one of four "university centers" and an unofficial flagship of the flagship-less SUNY system. Ranked 90th among national universities by U.S. News. Joined the Research I camp over the past 20 years, and now listed as a second-tier "high research" school. Considered a "Public Ivy." SATs average in the 1200s.

George Mason University: Founded as a freestanding institution in 1972, after serving as an anonymous branch campus of the University of Virginia. Ranked 138th among national universities by U.S. News. Rated as a "high research activity" university by Carnegie, with a \$107 million research budget and 33,000 students. Recognized, along with UMBC, as an up-and-comer by U.S. News, and cited for strong minority completion rates. Moreover, the school has enormous influence over development and culture in Northern Virginia.

University of California, Santa Cruz: Founded in 1965 as an outpost for the liberal arts within the UC system — a sort of public Swarthmore. Evolved into a Research I university over the past 20 years. Now categorized as a "very high research activity" school. Ranked 72nd among national universities by U.S. News, with elite admission stats. Beat out Berkeley and Stanford to house the Grateful Dead archives, befitting its status as the unofficial torchbearer of the old Berkeley ethos. What other campus could have spawned the band Camper Van Beethoven?

University of South Florida: Founded in 1956 as a modestly ambitious state university. Evolved into sprawling Research I status over the past 20 years and now considered one of 63 top-tier "very high research" institution, as well as the eighth-largest U.S. university. Ranked 181st among national universities by U.S. News. Like GMU, USF is known less for selectivity and more for the sheer, impressive scale of its research and scholarship.

Now, a parting quiz. Hrabowski at UMBC offered us a math problem to illustrate the sort of critical thinking his faculty attempts to inspire in their students. He says it's a sixth-grade math problem. See if you can figure it out.

There are 29 students in Mr. H's class. Twenty have dogs. Fifteen have cats. How many have both a dog and a cat?

Fonte: The Washington Post, Washington, 22 Mar. 2012, Internacional, On-line.