

New: Up-and-Coming Schools

These colleges may not be at the top of the rankings (yet), but they're tops for innovation

College rankings tend not to vary much from one year to the next. In many ways, there's virtue in such consistency. But how to identify colleges and universities that have recently made striking improvements or innovations—schools everyone should be watching?

This spring, for the first time, *U.S. News* asked the experts who respond to its annual peer assessment survey to identify schools that fit this profile. The 70 that received the most nominations range from household names like the University of Southern California to Grand Valley State in Allendale, Mich., and Salve Regina, a 2,000-student Catholic university in Newport, R.I.

For prospective applicants, we believe the schools on this list offer the reassurance that whatever their historical reputation (or lack of it), they're firmly focused on improving the job they're doing today—at least in the judgment of their peers.

Two midsize schools, Elon University in North Carolina and Belmont University in Tennessee, were cited most. Both appear regularly in one of our most useful resources for college applicants, our list of A-plus schools for B students (story, Page 12). In all, 38 of the 70 up-and-coming schools are on this year's A-plus list.

It's striking how clearly our up-and-coming schools are looking to the future. Elon has a strong reputation for student engagement, but it wants to do more; its president, Leo Lambert, recently brought in 20 business executives, most of them CEOs, to explore how the university could remain cutting-edge. Their leading recommendation:

Think globally. This builds on one of Elon's strengths; 73 percent of its students already study abroad, and the school once again has a foreign language requirement after a 35-year hiatus. "We very much believe in the preparation of Elon students as global citizens," says Lambert.

George Mason University in Virginia drew the most nominations among National Universities.



Pitzer College in Claremont, Calif., stresses social and environmental responsibility. “Students are converting our lawns into drought-tolerant gardens,” says President Laura Skandera Trombley. All colleges talk about going green these days, but this spring Pitzer won gold LEED certification for three new mixed-use residence halls that include art studios and a music practice room. And Pitzer has long been in the forefront of another trend: It requires neither the ACT nor the SAT for admission. Pitzer remains a very competitive school: “For this past year, we were looking for 225 students for our incoming class, and we received over 4,000 applications,” Trombley says.

Jobs for all. A very different school, the University of Maryland–Baltimore County, has overcome the limitations of its suburban campus and a high proportion of first-generation college students by forging partnerships to capitalize on job opportunities in the Baltimore–Washington corridor, where local businesses compete for talent with government and the military. “What I say to parents is, ‘Do you want to ensure that when your student graduates, he or she doesn’t have to come home?’” says UMBC’s president, Freeman Hrabowski. “They all resonate!” he says with a hearty laugh. It’s a line that would resonate with most parents these days.

It didn’t escape our notice that several of the schools on our list, including UMBC, were making national news while our survey was being conducted. That’s because their basketball teams were playing in the NCAA men’s tournament. Our leading liberal arts college, Davidson, in North Carolina, probably didn’t need the extra publicity to score so highly—in 2007, it became one of the first liberal arts colleges to eliminate loans from its financial aid packages—but its president, Thomas Ross, says Davidson’s remarkable NCAA run (it lost to Kansas in the regional finals) was good for the school. “We’ve had a lot of exposure, some of it from basketball,” he says. “That may have put us onto people’s radar screens.” Davidson’s other recent innovations include a summer research initiative that puts students with faculty members on specific projects. “It’s resulted in the students’ having opportunities both to be published and to do presentations at national meetings,” says Ross.

Finally, one college that made our list has taken a bold step to show everyone it considers itself a school on the move. As we were compiling our rankings, Villa Julie College in Stevenson, Md., announced that it had changed its name. Founded in 1947 as a one-year school for medical secretaries, it sees its strengths today in career-focused liberal arts education and accelerated adult and master’s degree programs. Villa Julie’s new name: Stevenson University. ●

SCHOOLS TO WATCH

Here is a selection of 70 colleges and universities identified by top college officials in spring 2008 as schools that have recently made the most promising and innovative changes in academics, faculty, students, campus, or facilities. They are ranked against other schools within the categories we use for our regular rankings (Pages 88–119).

National Universities

1. George Mason Univ. (VA)*
2. Clemson University (SC)*
3. U. of Southern California
4. Arizona State University*
5. Univ. of Md.–Baltimore County*
6. Drexel University (PA)
7. Portland State Univ. (OR)*
7. Univ. of Central Florida*
9. Azusa Pacific Univ. (CA)
9. Univ. of Calif.–Riverside*
9. Univ. of N.C.–Charlotte*
9. Univ. of San Diego (CA)
9. Univ. of S.C.–Columbia*
14. Ball State Univ. (IN)*
14. Indiana Univ.–Purdue Univ.–Indianapolis*
14. Northeastern Univ. (MA)
14. Ohio State U.–Columbus*
14. Univ. of California–Irvine*
14. Univ. of California–San Diego*
14. University of South Florida*

Liberal Arts Colleges

1. Davidson College (NC)
2. Ursinus College (PA)
3. Furman University (SC)
3. Pitzer College (CA)
5. Berry College (GA)
5. Univ. of N.C.–Asheville*
7. Berea College (KY)
7. Christopher Newport University (VA)*
9. Agnes Scott College (GA)
9. Cornell College (IA)
9. Franklin & Marshall College (PA)
9. Univ. of Richmond (VA)
9. Wofford College (SC)
14. Allegheny College (PA)
14. Calvin College (MI)
14. Kalamazoo College (MI)
14. Univ. of Puget Sound (WA)

Universities–Master’s

NORTH

1. Quinnipiac University (CT)
2. Wagner College (NY)
3. College of New Jersey*
4. Marist College (NY)
4. Univ. of Scranton (PA)
6. Salve Regina Univ. (RI)
7. Bentley College (MA)
7. Loyola College in Maryland
7. SUNY College of Arts and Sciences–Geneseo (NY)*

SOUTH

1. Elon University (NC)
2. Belmont University (TN)
3. Appalachian State U. (NC)*
4. Kennesaw State U. (GA)*
5. James Madison Univ. (VA)*
5. Union University (TN)
5. Univ. of N.C.–Wilmington*
8. College of Charleston (SC)*
8. Xavier Univ. of Louisiana

MIDWEST

1. Alverno College (WI)
1. Grand Valley State U. (MI)*
3. Valparaiso University (IN)
4. Baldwin–Wallace College (OH)
4. Butler University (IN)
4. Creighton University (NE)
4. Xavier University (OH)

WEST

1. Abilene Christian U. (TX)
1. Chapman University (CA)
3. Pacific Lutheran U. (WA)

Baccalaureate Colleges

NORTH

1. Stevenson University (MD)

SOUTH

1. High Point University (NC)
2. Anderson University (SC)
2. LaGrange College (GA)

MIDWEST

1. Adrian College (MI)

* Public