

Rankings, Reputation & Strategy: A Framework for the Future of William & Mary

University rankings have a significant impact on public perception, enrollment decisions, and institutional strategy. Over the past decade rankings have proliferated and differentiated, and the market share of individual publications has fallen. Yet among rankings publications, U.S. News & World Report (USNWR) remains the most influential for William & Mary’s national reputation and aspirations for preeminence.

Historically, William & Mary maintained a strong ranking with minimal effort. However, as competition intensifies, we must actively reinforce our position as a nationally preeminent public research university grounded in the liberal arts and sciences since 1693.

William & Mary’s professional schools have made strategic investments in resources and staffing — driving steady gains in their rankings over the last three years. In 2024 we undertook our first comprehensive, university-wide initiative. In October 2024, two working groups assessed William & Mary’s current ranking position — particularly in USNWR — and forecasted changes in criteria over the next five years. One group analyzed the USNWR methodology and institutional data, while the other examined societal trends that may shape future rankings. A report generated in 2025 synthesized their insights.

Understanding Our Position

Despite consistent improvement in our overall USNWR score, William & Mary’s rank has fallen — from the mid-30s to the mid-50s. This decline results from:

- **Rankings compression:** Small changes in scores produce substantial shifts in rank.
- **Increased competition:** Peer institutions are increasingly optimizing their strategies specifically to improve their performance in rankings.
- **Evolving ranking criteria:** USNWR now emphasizes social mobility, faculty research, and graduate earnings over traditional W&M strengths such as small class sizes and alumni giving.

Based on an analysis of our position relative to current metrics, certain strengths and opportunities for improvement were identified:

Current Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peer reputation• Graduation and retention rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Faculty research activity and impact• Academic spending per student
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Low student debt upon graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Post-graduation earnings (particularly for federal loan recipients)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standardized test scores	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graduation rate performance vs. USNWR projections

Our team developed an impressive analytical tool to model how changes in these factors could strategically improve our ranking and move us closer to national preeminence.

Navigating Future Rankings and Societal Uncertainty

Using Peter Atwater's *Confidence Map* framework, our team examined how evolving societal uncertainties may influence student preferences and rankings over the next five years. Rankings are likely to place greater emphasis on:

- **Immediate Return on Investment:** Applicants will prioritize institutions offering clear and tangible short-term financial outcomes, with transparent, reliable data on affordability and graduates' immediate financial success.
- **Sense of Stability and Belonging:** Students will increasingly favor institutions geographically, culturally, or socially close to home, seeking environments that provide familiarity, security, and community, especially in uncertain times.
- **Career Readiness across Disciplines:** Universities will need to clearly demonstrate how coursework, internships, and applied experiences within a liberal arts education translate directly into strong employment outcomes, supported by robust job placement data and employer partnerships.

Universities, including W&M, must proactively strengthen their value propositions in response to these shifts.

Conclusion: William & Mary's Strategic Alignment and Institutional Preeminence

Rankings are a vital component of William & Mary's strategy to strengthen our national preeminence. They enable us to attract exceptional students, faculty, and resources. By aligning operational decisions, resource investments, and institutional messaging with key ranking factors, we can strengthen our distinctive advantages across four core pillars: sustained student demand, academic excellence, research and innovation, and exceptional student outcomes. With a clear vision and compelling communication of our unique value, William & Mary can shape rather than merely react to the evolving landscape of higher education, reaffirming its role as a preeminent academic institution.