

AMERICA'S BEST MASTER'S UNIVERSITIES AND BACCALAUREATE COLLEGES

By Erin Dillon

In 1852, four French Marianist missionaries arrived by stagecoach in San Antonio, Texas, and founded a school called the St. Mary's Institute, hoping to “re-generate the people” through education. The school, now St. Mary's University, has been steadfastly serving the citizens of San Antonio ever since: 69 percent of St. Mary's students are Latino, 53 percent receive Pell Grants, and many are the first in their family to attend college. Unlike most colleges with similar demographics, which often struggle with student retention, St. Mary's graduates nearly 60 percent of its students. Graduates of its School of Science, Engineering and Technology boast a 50 percent acceptance rate when applying to medical or dental school, whereas the average acceptance rate of all students applying to medical and dental school is 35 percent. And St. Mary's ranks sixth nationally in generating Mexican American applicants to medical school—supplying the same number as Stanford University, an elite insti-

tution with an undergraduate student body almost three times as big.

And yet, there's a good chance you've never heard of St. Mary's if you're not from Texas or aren't focused on the world of Catholic higher ed. Despite all that it does well, St. Mary's has several things working against it when it comes to shining nationally. For one thing, the school is designated by the nonprofit Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a “master's university,” a classification encompassing schools that offer a range of undergraduate and some master's-level programs, but few doctoral degrees. That obliges any organization that ranks schools based on Carnegie's widely followed classification scheme—as do *U.S. News* and the *Washington Monthly*—to evaluate master's universities in a separate category, which makes it unclear how the best of them compete with national universities and liberal arts colleges.

OVERALL SCORE: Overall score represents the combined score of our three metrics—social mobility, research, and service—where the highest is 100 and the lowest is zero. Each metric is weighted equally.

SOCIAL MOBILITY: The first column shows the percentage of students receiving Pell Grants. The second shows the predicted rate of graduation, based on incoming SAT scores and Pell Grant percentages, versus the actual rate of graduation. The third shows the difference between the actual graduation rate and the predicted graduation rate—a measure of how well the school performs as an engine of social mobility (see “A Note on Methodology,” p. 86)—arrived at by subtracting the latter from the former. (The higher the number, the better; negative numbers indicate subpar performance.) Rank follows in parentheses.

RESEARCH: The first column shows the number of dollars (in thousands) in total research expenditures. Rank follows in parentheses. The second shows the school’s ranking in the number of bachelor’s recipients who go on to receive PhDs, relative to school size.

SERVICE: The first column ranks the school by the number of alumni who go on to serve in the Peace Corps, relative to school size. The second column ranks the school by percentage of students who serve in ROTC. The third gives the percentage of funds in federal work-study money that goes to community service (versus non-community service); rank follows in parentheses. The fourth column shows the school’s rank on a combined measure of the number of students participating in community service and the total number of service hours performed, both relative to school size. The fifth column shows the school’s rank on a combined measure of the number of staff supporting community service, relative to the total number of staff; the number of academic courses that incorporate service, relative to school size; and whether the institution provides scholarships for community service.



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U.S. News makes drawing comparisons even more difficult by breaking up its ranking of master's universities into four separate regional groupings: North, South, West, and Midwest. The magazine gives the same treatment to "baccalaureate colleges," a Carnegie classification for schools that focus on undergraduate education but offer fewer than half of their degrees in the liberal arts. How does the best baccalaureate college in the South stack up against the second best in the West? *U.S. News* won't tell you.

So when we decided to rank master's and baccalaureate institutions for the first time this year, we avoided *U.S. News's* regional categories. We also, of course, evaluated the schools based on our own criteria (service, social mobility, and research) rather than those of *U.S. News* (fame, exclusivity, and money). Not surprisingly, there are some big differences between the results.

To find St. Mary's in last year's *U.S. News* rankings, for instance, you need to turn to its western division of master's universities, where St. Mary's comes in at fifteenth place. In our rankings, St. Mary's is the number one master's university in the country, a testament to its outstanding commitment to serving low-income students and its stellar record of fostering community service. Similarly, three historically black master's universities in our top fifty—Alcorn State, Grambling State, and North Carolina Central universities—languish in the third and fourth tiers of the *U.S. News* rankings. The same happens to a dozen baccalaureate colleges in our top fifty—schools like Benedict College and Unity College that do admirable work but get buried by *U.S. News*.

But even our rankings leave us with a nagging question: How do our top-ranked master's and baccalaureate institutions compare to the best national universities and liberal arts colleges? As a thought experiment, we ran a few numbers, and here's what we found: If we bypassed the Carnegie classification scheme, St. Mary's would rank number eight among liberal arts colleges, beating out elite institutions like Wesleyan University, Wellesley College, and Pomona College. In the specific category of social mobility, it would rank ninth among liberal arts colleges. And because it excels in the percentage of its students participating in community service and in the total number of hours they serve, it would rank second in the service category among national universities, and fourth among liberal arts colleges.

Other little-known master's and baccalaureate institutions would also stand out if we placed them alongside big-name schools. Five others would end up in the top thirty among liberal arts colleges, including Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, and Claflin University, a historically black college in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Bard College at Simon's Rock, our top-rated baccalaureate college, would rank thirteenth among national universities in the percentage of students going on to get their PhD, beating out schools like Johns Hopkins and Columbia. The Cooper Union in New York City would also rank in the top fifteen among national universities on that measure. The University of Portland would be number three in Peace Corps participation.

Institutions like St. Mary's and our other top-ranked master's and baccalaureate institutions don't spend a lot of time and money chasing after fame and glory. They're too busy serving their students and communities well. In doing so, they have a lot to teach academia about giving back to the country. ^{WM}

Erin Dillon is a senior policy analyst at Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, D.C. She compiled the data for this year's college rankings.