

Michigan State University's  
**Media Sandbox Challenge**  
**2015**

**An Analysis of College Rankings and What  
Influences Them**



media sandbox

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## **Abstract**

This research paper addresses the bias found within the national list making procedures, both official and pedestrian. Initially comparing four of Michigan State University's Media Sandbox programs (Cinematic Arts, Game Design, Advertising and Journalism) to the four top ranked programs within that field, this paper finds far more similarities than differences between the nationally ranked program and its MSU counterpart. This research then proceeds to address the bias in general list making procedure. Not only are the lists subjective and predictable, they are also difficult to change. These lists are especially biased when regarding creative majors. The registrar's office at MSU stated that standard policy is to simply redirect the list makers to a website (<http://www.reg.msu.edu/RoInfo/EnrTermEndRpts.asp>) that lists enrollment statistics and GPA. These static and basic statistics do not properly convey the learning experience provided to the student, especially when found within a creative environment.

*Keywords: National college rankings, MSU media sandbox programs, bias*

## **An Analysis of College Rankings and What Influences Them: Discovering Bias Within National Rankings**

College rankings have the power to determine which schools will be held in the highest regard by prospective new students. These rankings can be found online, published by either reputable or non-reputable sources, or even transferred simply by word of mouth. However, it is rare that a student attempts to fact check these rankings, or that they have the tools to do so properly. It is important to be high in these lists to win the attention of those potential students. When looking into these rankings, our research yielded the disheartening realization that Michigan State University's creative programs were not listed as high as they deserve.

After researching extensively into MSU's rankings in Media Sandbox fields—Cinematic Arts, Advertising, Game Design, and Journalism—the research told us not only where MSU resided in the rankings, but also what put those highest-ranked schools into their respective spots. “An excellent film school will produce graduates who have developed an inherent understanding of what must be done, the creativity to produce unique projects and the ability to successfully implement their ideas” (The 10 Best ...). In theory, schools that are at the top of rankings should embody this idea. Instead, we found the most influential factors to be academic reputation and prestige, the variety and quality of the programs offered, the up to date equipment and labs, the staff quality, location, and famous alumni.

One school we found that topped lists often was the University of Southern California. The university has a “... strong reputation for providing a top education, especially in film and television production” (Cahill). It also has the Michelle and Kevin Douglas IMAX Theatre and Immersive Lab, and alumni such as James Gray and Kevin Feige. All of this demonstrates the different influences on rankings. USC has

the academic prestige, resources and alumni to attract students. It also helps that this university is located in Los Angeles, which puts students in the center of filmmaking action.

In regards to MSU and the cinematic arts, the lists are barren. This was surprising, since MSU's Cinematic Arts branch of the Media and Information major boasts one of the nation's oldest departments, with fully equipped audio and video studios and state-of-the-art editing and field production equipment. This means that MSU is more comparable to colleges like USC than list makers are giving them credit for.

This pattern was found throughout the other three programs as well. After comparing the MSU Advertising major to University of Texas in Austin, our Game Design program to University of Southern California, and our Journalism program to Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, an obvious pattern started to form. These schools, while excellent, were not dramatically better than those offered through MSU. These programs are simply better known.

For example, one of University of Texas' claims to fame is that it proudly hosts the illustrious and illusive advertising major. On many advertising lists, schools without an actual advertising major ranked higher than MSU. Another example is that the University of Michigan placed at the top of these lists simply because they had marketing and design programs, even though they do not have an actual advertising program. MSU should be higher on these lists because it has a well-developed, comprehensive advertising program for both management and creative tracks. People are not aware that MSU has an advertising major, despite the fact it established a department of advertising in 1958. When compared side by side with the University of Texas, the immersive course loads of these departments are similar.

Although it's challenging to rank creative programs at colleges, that doesn't prevent people from trying. And those are what potential students are finding. For rankings, people often go to the Princeton Review and Education Portal to try and find unbiased ranking. When those yield unsatisfying results, students will then turn to Google. This in turn leads them to websites such as [collegeatlas.org](http://collegeatlas.org) and [hackcollege.com](http://hackcollege.com). These are the rankings that MSU must influence to get higher on lists of best colleges.

However, an objective and accurate ranking taking into account every possible college within the United States is nearly impossible. General favoritism is placed toward the more prestigious and the private schools. Keeping this in mind, how does an elite school benefit the student? While the name looks good on a resume, the school's reputation does not necessarily correlate with a strong program in every discipline, especially those in the majors we have explored.

The four programs looked into all hold some form of creative expression. A problem that our research unearthed was that when contacted by national list-makers, our Office of the Registrar simply redirects these list-makers to a large table of complicated statistics. This is a serious problem because the list makers are searching for the best program with the best graduates. So after being directed to a page of hundreds of statistics, these list makers default to their second choice: the website.

We believe the reason MSU is not being acknowledged as often as it should because of a lack of prominence online. If a college or university wants to attract students, it must be easily found via search engines such as Google, as well as have informative and creative websites so its programs are recognized by list-makers.

When dealing with the creative majors, showcasing and publicizing student work is incredibly important when it comes to getting recognized by national list-makers. One easy way to judge a program is by its graduates. University of

Southern California is considered one of the best colleges when it comes to Cinematic Arts because its student work is well-known. If MSU had an effective way to showcase student work, and make it more accessible to the public and potential students, MSU would rise in the rankings.

MSU must become a better and bigger Internet presence by advertising and publishing student content and accomplishments as much as possible to get the word out about MSU's creative programs.

## Research

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