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An Analysis of the U.S. News & World Report Rating of SAU

The data in this report were collected and prepared by the Office of Institutional Research & Analytics, a component of the Division of Institutional Effectiveness & Strategic Planning, Research, Technology & Innovation. For additional information, please contact or visit the Institutional Research and Analytics website.

Prepared by:

Runell J. King, Ph.D.

Chief Research & Data Officer

Office of Institutional Research

(919)-516-4124

rking@st-aug.edu

Reviewed and Approved by: Terry T. Kidd, Ph.D. Unit Vice President

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Routed to: Office of the President: Dr. Christine Johnson McPhail, President

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Executive Summary

Although there is widespread criticism in Higher Education of *U.S. News & World Report's* annual college rankings, paired with the development of alternative sources of information about the nation's colleges and universities, the *Report* rankings have become a significant part of the selection process for many families with college-bound students. *U.S. News & World Report* had a total circulation of more than 2 million print and digital subscriptions and single copy sales for the six months ending on December 31, 2021. Given the circulation of this publication, the Office of Institutional Research analyzed *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking of SAU for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 academic years, according to the magazine's criteria and percentage weighting for national universities. The criteria are Outcomes (40%), Expert Opinion (20%), Financial Resources (10%), Student Excellence (7%), and Alumni Giving (3%). We looked at changes over time in the rating of each of these criteria for SAU; compared SAU's ranking in 2022 to other HBCU's 1 to 58 and to those ranked 59 to 77 according to each of the criteria. The criteria that emerged as most salient for SAU's ranking relative to all other criteria are HBCU Peer Assessment, % of Classes less than 20, and Alumni Giving. SAU increased by 1% on the peer assessment score. UOP were student selectivity, graduation rates, and percentage of classes with less than 20 students. At the same time, there has been no increase or decrease with regard to the percentage of classes less than 20. When comparing Alumni Giving between 2021-22 and 2022-23, SAU ranked at 16% as compared to N/A in the previous year.

Background

For thirty years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked the nation's colleges and universities by several criteria, including academic reputation, faculty resources, retention and graduation rates, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving, and graduation rate performance. In higher education circles, however, criticisms of the annual rankings of colleges and universities by *U.S. News & World Report* and other media agencies are widespread. The Presidents of 19 highly ranked liberal-arts colleges, including Amherst, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Vassar, Wellesley, and Williams, released a joint statement declaring they were concerned about the "inevitable biases" in the ranking's formulas used by *U.S. News & World Report*, and that these rankings contribute to an unfortunate "admissions frenzy." Due to these concerns, these college presidents agreed to publish institutional data, such as class sizes and graduation rates, on their colleges' Web sites instead of submitting the data exclusively to

U.S. News & World Report. The college President's also wrote, however, that rankings by media agencies such as *U.S. News & World Report* will not soon disappear despite numerous protests, and they urged other colleges to participate in a joint effort to determine how information about institutions of higher education might be improved. In a meeting of the Annapolis Group, which represents 124 liberal-arts colleges, various criticisms were lodged against the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, including the view that the rankings were based too heavily on measurements determined by institutional wealth. Following the meeting, the group announced that a majority of the 80 presidents who attended the event would not participate in the *U.S. News & World Report* annual rankings. The Annapolis Group agreed to develop a Web-based information system that would provide families with "easily accessible, comprehensive, and

quantifiable data” on participating colleges, and that it would work closely with the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) to develop a Web-based tool to provide prospective students and their families with better information.

Notwithstanding the criticisms of *U.S. News & World Report’s* annual college rankings, and the development of alternative sources of information about the nation’s institutions of higher education, the *Report* rankings have become a significant part of the selection process for many families with college-bound students. Indeed, *U.S. News & World Report* had a total circulation of 2,036,261 print and digital subscriptions and single copy sales for the six months ending on December 31, 2021. Given the widespread circulation of *U.S. News & World Report*, schools need to analyze what factors are used by the magazine to rank their schools and to decide what course of action to follow in light of those rankings. The following report will attempt to clarify the criteria used by *U.S. News & World Report*, flawed or not, that have been used to rank SAU.

The *U.S. News & World Report* Ranking of SAU

U.S. News & World Report uses the following criteria and percentage weighting for national university ranking: Outcomes (40%), Expert Opinion (20%), Financial Resources (10%), Student Excellence (7%), and Alumni Giving (3%). Table 1 shows SAU’s ranking by *U.S. News & World Report* from 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Table 1.

SAU’s *U.S. News & World Report* Summary Comparison

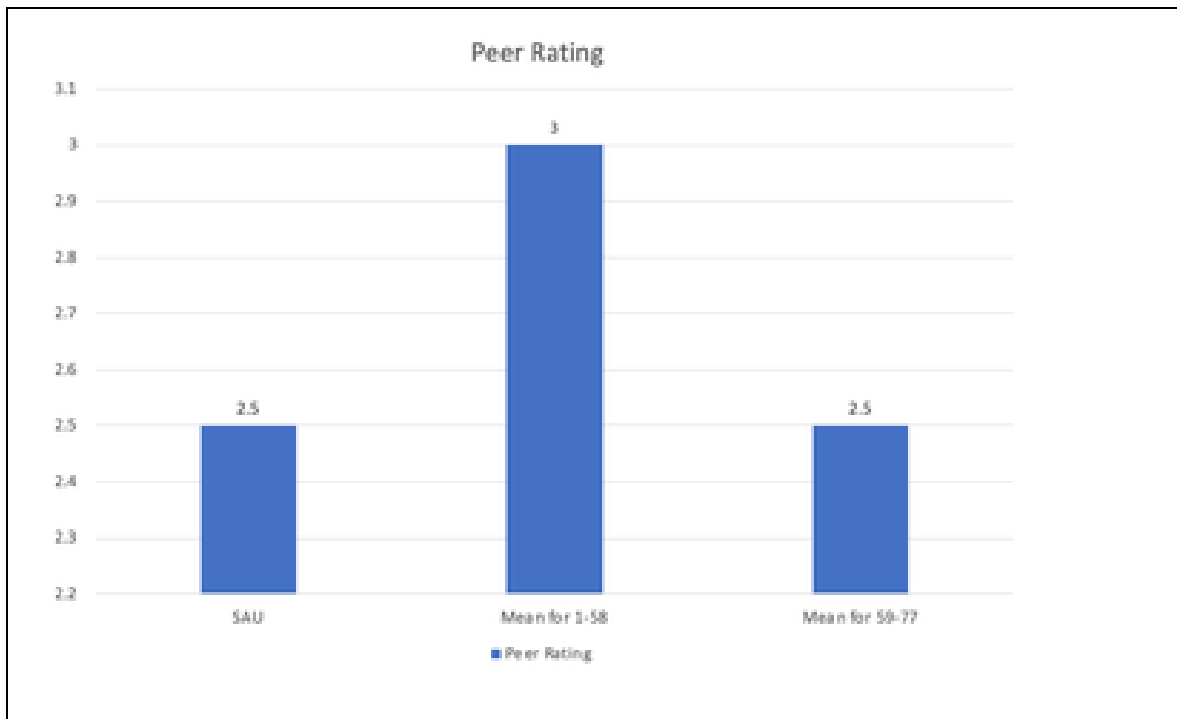
Categories	2021-2022	2022-2023
Overall Score (0-100)	Bottom 25%	Bottom 25%
HBCU Peer Assessment (1-5)	2.4	2.5
Avg. First-Year Retention	54%	52%
Average 6yr graduation rate	24%	21%
% of Classes Less Than 20	76%	76%
% of Classes Less Than 50	0.20%	0.20%
Student Faculty Ratio	12:1	12:1
SAT/ACT 75th Percentile	780-940	780-940
FY Stu. Top 25% of HS Class	N/A	N/A
Alumni Giving	N/A	16%
Acceptance rate	67%	N/A

The next set of tables (2-4) compares SAU’s rating for 2022-23 to the average ratings of the schools ranked 1-58 and the schools ranked 58-77 (bottom 25%). These tables have been divided into three sections: peer ratings (Table 2), average first-year retention (Table 3), and graduation rates (Table 4).

Table 2.

Comparison of SAU’s Peer Rating to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	Peer Rating (Expert Opinion)
SAU	2.5
Mean for 1-58	3.0
Mean for 59-77	2.5



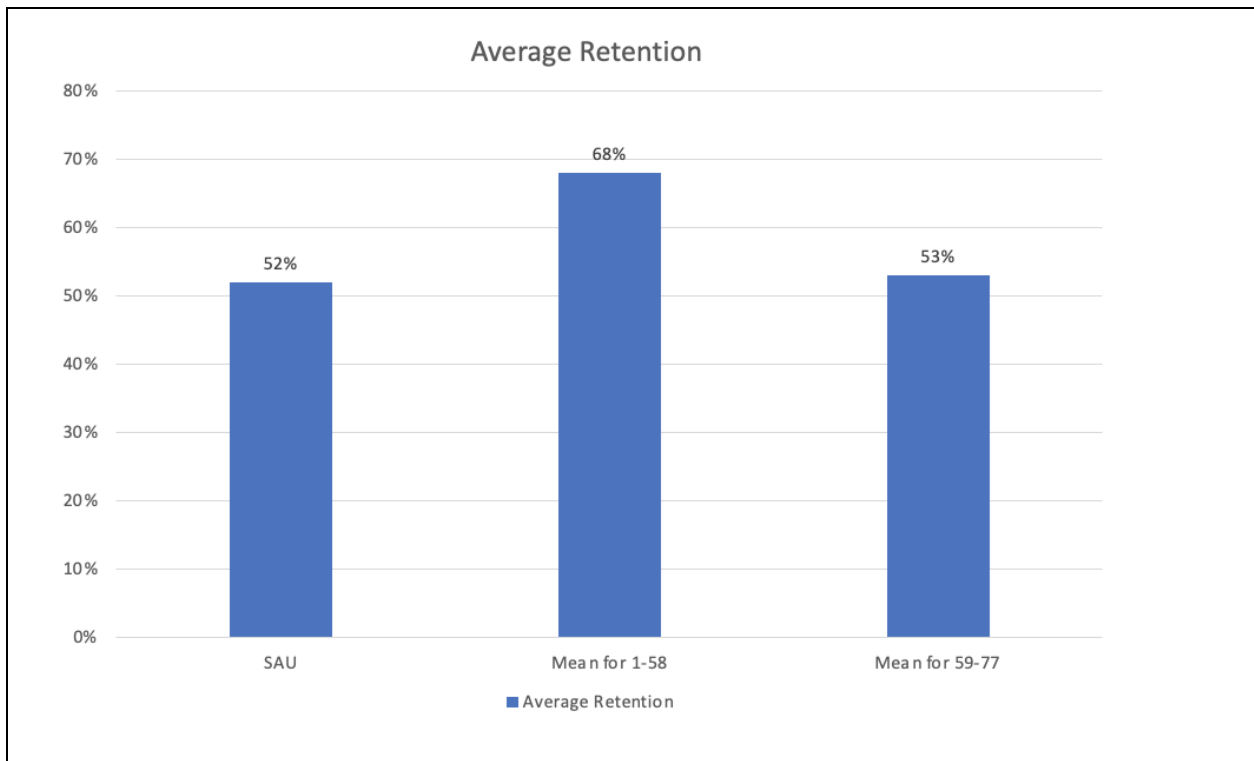
U.S. News & World Report provides an overall peer assessment score (expert opinion) to all participating Universities. This is a measure of how a school is regarded by top administrators at other institutions and accounts for qualitative attributes of schools that may not be fully captured by the other ranking factors. A school's expert opinion score is determined by the average of ratings on academic quality it received by presidents, provosts, and deans of admissions – or officials

in equivalent positions – at institutions submitting a peer assessment survey administered by U.S. News. SAU received a score of 2.5, which is (.5%) percent below the universities ranked 1-58, and equivalent to schools ranked in the bottom 25% (59-77).

Table 3.

Comparison of SAU’s Average First-Year Retention as compared to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	Average First-Year Retention
SAU	52%
Mean for 1-58	68%
Mean for 59-77	53%



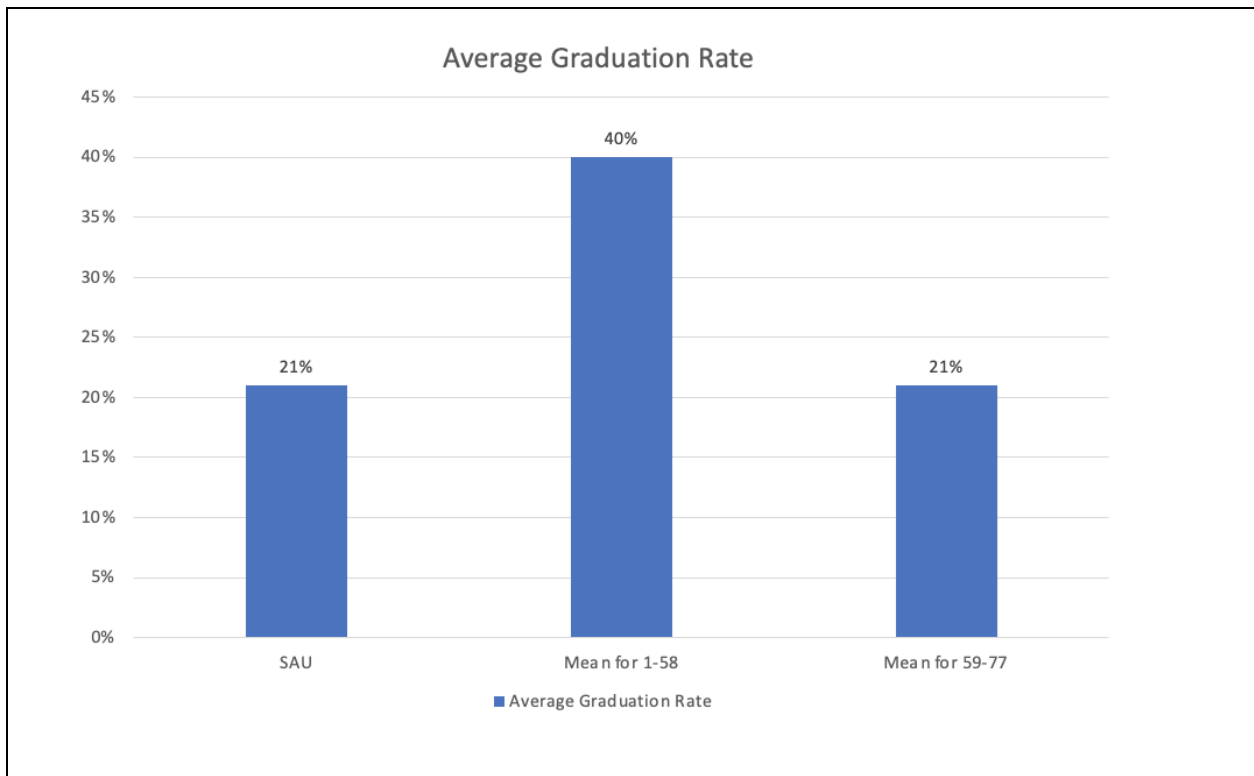
The first-year student retention rate average is the average proportion of the first-year classes entering from Fall 2017 through Fall 2020 who returned the following Fall. A higher average first-year retention rate scores better than a lower average retention rate in the ranking model because students staying enrolled demonstrates a school's continued appeal.

The three historic years of retention-rate data were consistently sourced from the U.S. Department of Education's [National Center for Education Statistics](#), because they had the same reporting standards as those in U.S. News' survey. The fall 2020 data was from the spring and summer 2022 U.S. News' statistical survey. SAU netted an overall first-year retention rate of 52%, as compared to an average of 68% against schools ranked 1-58. SAU ranked 1% lower than the average of all schools ranked in the bottom 25% (59-77).

Table 4.

Comparison of SAU’s Graduation Rates as compared to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	Average Graduation Rate
SAU	21%
Mean for 1-58	40%
Mean for 59-77	21%



The graduation rate average is the percentage of entering first-year students who graduated within a six-year period, averaged over the classes entering from fall 2012 through fall 2015. For

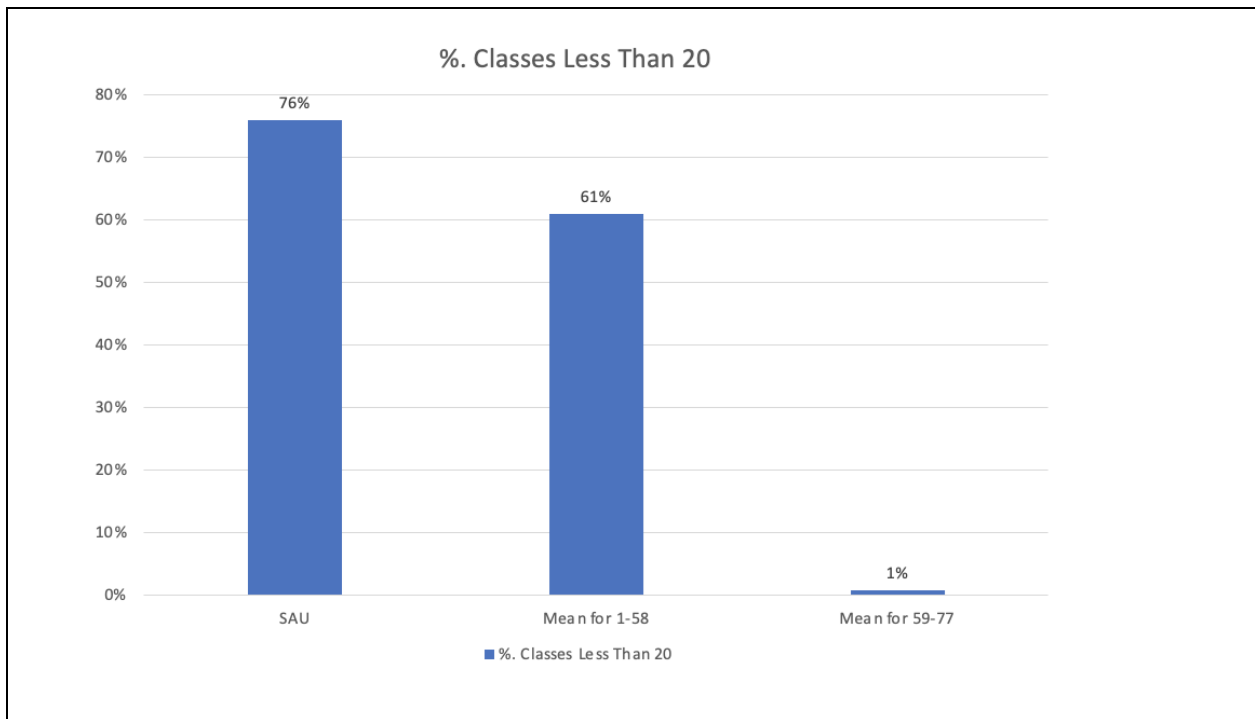
standardized comparisons, this excludes students who transferred to the school after their first year. A higher average graduation rate scores better than a lower graduation rate in the ranking because completion is integral for students to get the most value in their careers from their education.

Fall 2012 through Fall 2014 data were consistently sourced from NCES because U.S. News' instructions aligned with those of the U.S. Department of Education. The Fall 2015 data were reported by schools in 2022 on the U.S. News statistical survey and are also used in the graduation rate performance indicator. SAU's graduation rate is 21%, as compared to 40% against schools ranked 1-58. SAU's average is equivalent to the mean for schools ranked in the bottom 25% (59-77).

Table 5.

Comparison of % Classes Less Than 20 as compared to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	% Classes Less Than 20
SAU	76%
Mean for 1-58	61%
Mean for 59-77	0.71%



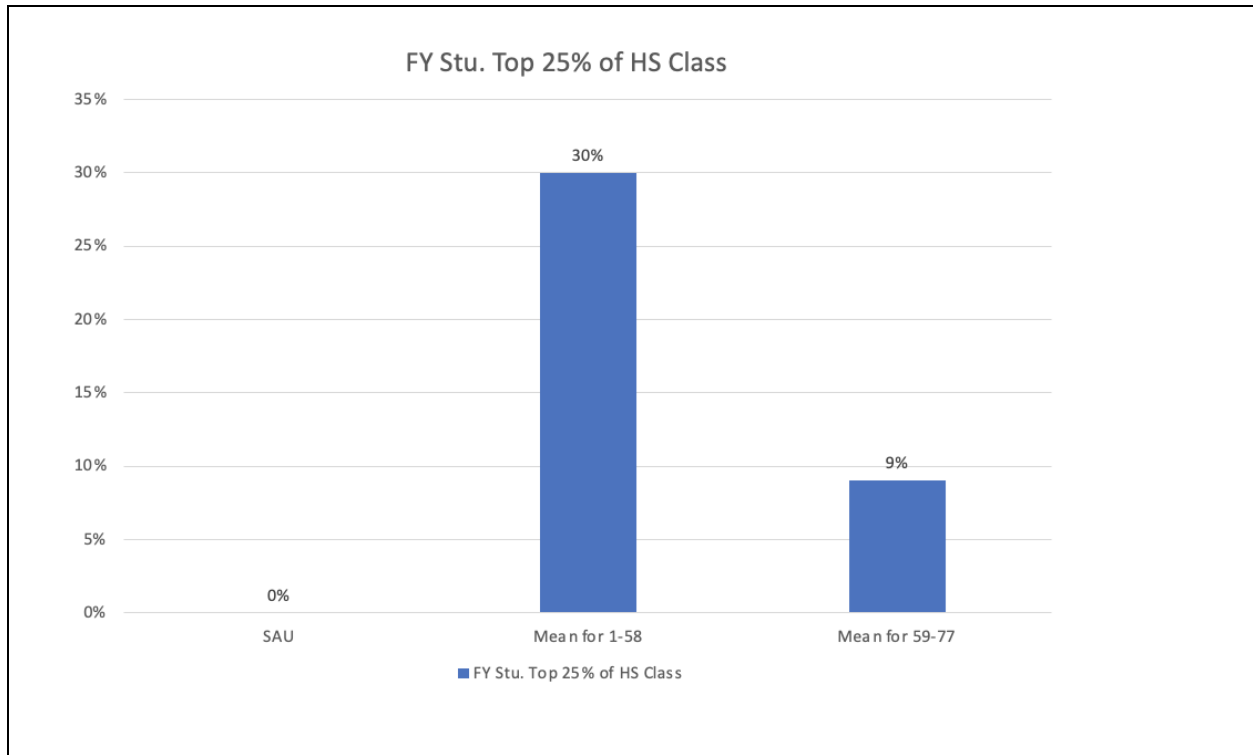
Class size assesses the ability of students to engage with their instructors in class. It used data schools reported to U.S. News that aligned with the 2021-2022 [Common Data Set](#) instructions for reporting class size. Schools receive the most credit in this index for their proportions of undergraduate classes with fewer than 20 students. Classes with 20 to 29 students score second highest, 30 to 39 students third highest, and 40 to 49 students fourth highest. Classes that have 50 or more students receive no credit. U.S. News has not disclosed to any schools the weights assigned to different intervals within the index.

The newest edition only used fall 2021 class size data schools reported to U.S. News. Last year, the indicator used a two-year average of scores to de-emphasize the impact of COVID-19 on class size during fall 2020, when many schools had temporarily adopted distance learning for classes traditionally taught face-to-face. The current methodology reverts back to how the indicator was done pre-pandemic when only the most recent year of class size data was used. SAU’s percentage of classes with less than 20 students is 76%, which is 15% higher than the schools ranked 1-58 (61%). When comparing SAU against schools ranked in the bottom 25%, SAU exceeded above schools ranked 59-77 by 75%.

Table 6.

Comparison of FY Stu. Top 25% of HS Class as compared to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	FY Stu. Top 25% of HS Class
SAU	N/A%
Mean for 1-58	30%
Mean for 59-77	9%



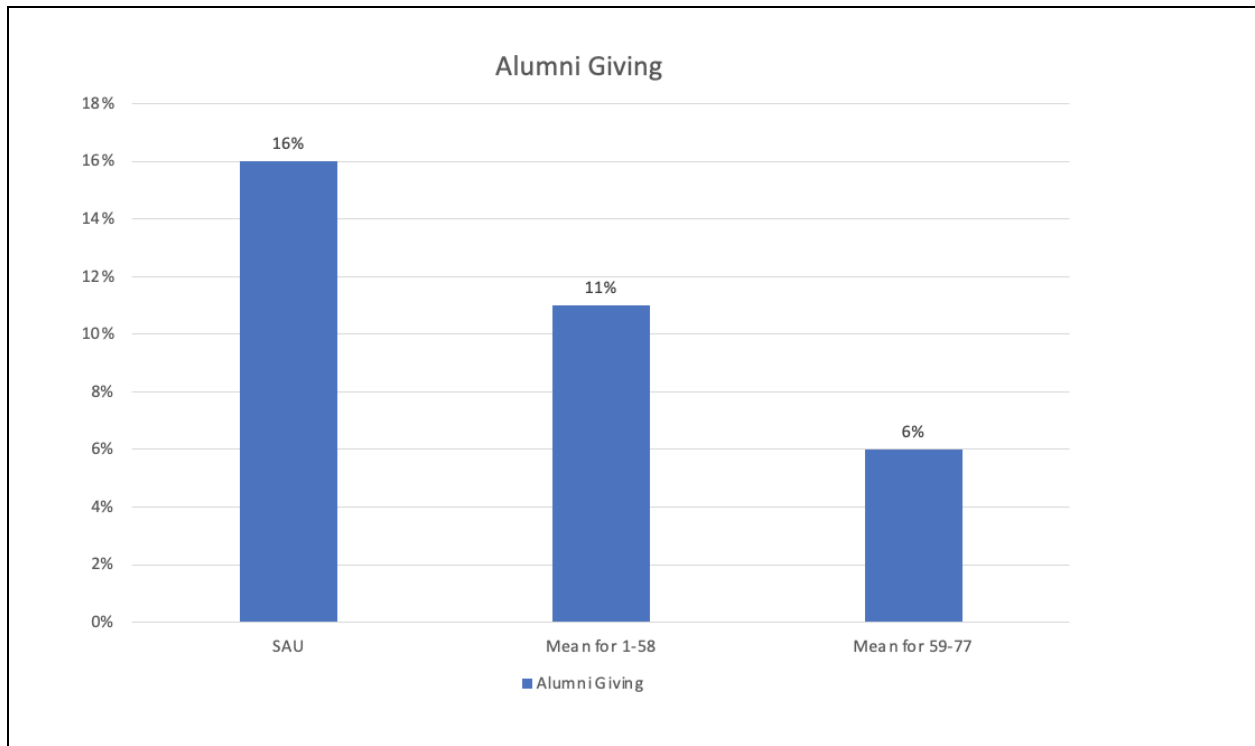
High school class standing is the proportion of students enrolled for the academic year beginning in fall 2021 who graduated in the top 10% (for National Universities and National Liberal Arts Colleges) or top 25% (for Regional Universities and Regional Colleges) of their high school class, aligned with the 2021-2022 [Common Data Set](#) instructions for reporting high school class standing. A higher proportion of students from either the top 10% or top 25% of their high school class scores is better than lower proportions in the rankings because students who earned high grades in high school can be well-suited to handle challenging college coursework.

Colleges reporting high school class standing based on less than 20% of their entering classes had their previous year's data used if reported on more than 20% of entering students; otherwise, their scores were discounted before being used in the rankings. Values reported on less than 10% without the previous year's data were not used in the rankings at all, in which case the schools received an assigned value for ranking purposes. Unfortunately, SAU did not submit data for this category, which adversely impacted the school's rankings. However, based on historical data and archival records, SAU has historically attracted students who are not in the top 25% of their high school graduating class or with SAT or ACT scores commensurate to high academic achievement. While COVID-19 provided a two-year reprieve on submission of scores, incoming freshman class performance metrics, were below the national average. This has stark implications towards student retention, academic performance, and completion.

Table 7.

Comparison of Alumni Giving as compared to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-58 and ranks 59-77.

	Alumni Giving
SAU	16%
Mean for 1-58	11%
Mean for 59-77	6%



The alumni giving rate average is the nonweighted mean percentage of undergraduate alumni of record who donated money to the college or university. The percentage of alumni giving represents how satisfied students are with the school. Higher average alumni giving rate scores are better than a lower rate in the ranking model.

Following guidelines of reporting to the [Voluntary Support of Education Survey](#), alumni of record are former full- or part-time students who received an undergraduate degree and for whom the college or university has a current address. Alumni who earned only a graduate degree are excluded.

Undergraduate alumni donors are alumni with undergraduate degrees from an institution who made one or more gifts for either current operations or capital expenses during the specified academic year.

The alumni giving rate is calculated by dividing the number of alumni donors during a given academic year by the number of alumni of record for that same year. The two most recent years of alumni giving rates available are averaged (added together and divided by two) and used in the rankings. For the 2022-2023 edition, the two separately calculated alumni giving rates that were averaged were for giving in the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years. SAU's mean alumni giving is 16%, which is 5% higher than schools ranked 1-58, and 10% higher than schools ranked in the bottom 25% (59-77).

U.S. News & World Report: Conclusion & Implications

Whereas many variables of *U.S. News & World Report* are comprised of subcategories, three variables, *expert opinion (peer assessment)*, *financial resources*, and *alumni giving*, have no subcategories. Together, these variables account for 33% of the rating. SAU scored a 2.5 on the peer assessment model, which is 20% of the overall weight of the survey, which provides insight related to the overall ranking of SAU. Additionally, SAU scored 19 out of 100 on the assessment of financial resources, which adversely impacted the rankings due to the category weight being 10% of the overall survey. However, SAU scored exceptionally well as compared to other HBCUs when analyzing the alumni giving rate. Accounting for 3% of the overall survey, SAU netted 16% alumni giving rate, which is favorable for the university.

Areas of Refinement

One area that is heavily weighted in the U.S. News & World Report is the faculty resources section. This area is comprised of 7 subcategories: *faculty compensation rank*, *% of faculty who are full-time*, *full-time*, and *part-time faculty with terminal degrees*, *class size index*, *classes with fewer than 20 students*, *classes with 50 or more students*, and *student-faculty ratio*. SAU received a 43 out of 100 for the faculty resources rank assessment, which is consistent with the mean of schools ranked in the bottom 25%. Thus, the final assessment score for faculty resources can explain SAU's low ranking relative to this specific section. Additionally, as compared to schools ranked 1-58, SAU's full-time and part-time faculty with terminal degrees is exceptionally lower, ranking at 57%. This indicates that almost half of the full-time and part-time faculty at SAU does not hold a terminal degree, which adversely impacts SAU's ranking and by consequence instructional quality to our students. This must be addressed.

Another area that can be justified as having potential explanatory value regarding the difference in ranking between SAU and schools ranked 1-58 is the percentage of full-time faculty at SAU. As compared to the mean average of schools ranked 1-58, SAU's full-time faculty ranked at 78.4%, which is consistent with schools ranked in the bottom 25%. Other areas within the category of faculty resources are class size, either above 50, which is viewed negatively, or below 20, which is viewed positively. SAU has no classes with more than 50 students, and 75.5% of all SAU's classes have 20 or fewer students, which is favorable in the rankings.

As can be seen from the tables listed above, SAU ranked higher than schools ranked 1-58 in 2 areas: % of classes less than 20 and alumni giving. Assuming that SAU is concerned about its ranking by the U.S. News World Report, these key factors--student selectivity, graduation rates, retention rates, social mobility rank, student excellence rank, financial resources rank, and peer assessment score--should all be addressed. These factors also appear in many other portrayals of SAU in professional and public sources. For example, the NAICU, NCES, and IPEDS include all the aforementioned factors.

The below table illustrates areas that SAU requires additional attention to in the effort to increase rankings in all public data sources. These areas either lacked appropriate data or no data was provided from the unit/division.

U.S. News Data Point (Not Submitted)	Unit Responsible
% of First-Year Students classified as First Generation	Enrollment Management
% of all students classified as First Generation	Enrollment Management
#of men/women (in-state/out-of-state)	Enrollment Management
HS Standing and GPA (Fall 2021)	Enrollment Management
ACT/SAT Data	Enrollment Management
Graduate & Career Data	Student Affairs
Housing & Residential Life	Student Affairs
Facilities	Business and Fiscal Affairs (at the time)
Regulations & Policies	Office of the President
Student Employment/Internships	Student Affairs
Programs/Services for Students with ADHD and ASD	Student Affairs
Student Activities	Student Affairs
Financial Resources	Business & Fiscal Affairs