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Regional Differences In Higher Education: Where Is The Best Place To Go To College?



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Recently, [Forbes released](#) its list of the top 660 undergraduate colleges in the United States. At the top of the list is Stanford University, located in Northern California, followed by Williams College in Massachusetts. While each of these schools is an exemplary institution of higher education, it is also noteworthy that their states, as a whole, seem to provide better options for college than many other states. Out of the 660 schools ranked, California has the second most

schools represented with 55, and Massachusetts is tied for fifth with 27 (New York has the most with 63). Also, California has the third most schools in the top 50 (six) and Massachusetts tied New York for first with seven. Furthermore, the average ranking score of each school within the two states is very high. Each school is judged on a number of different variables. It is then assigned a score between 1 and 100, with 100 being the highest possible score. California has the eighth highest average score of any state at 54.82. Massachusetts' average score is the second highest of any state at 66.74. That these two schools average such a high score and are so well represented in the rankings speaks to the high level of higher education that is provided in each state.



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However, only looking at the number of schools represented or the average score of each state has its flaws. For instance, Ohio (31) and Texas (27) are fourth and fifth, respectively, in total schools appearing on the list of 660 schools. Yet, both are tied with the most schools in the bottom 50, with 6 each. Also, the average ranking score of Ohio and Texas are 35th and 36th, respectively. Conversely, the highest ranked school, in terms of average score, is New Hampshire, with an average of 66.85. However, only three schools from New Hampshire are ranked. Due to this low number of observations, New Hampshire's average score is not enough to say it offers better quality education than, say, Pennsylvania, which has the ninth highest average score (54.58) and 41 schools represented on the list. Clearly, when using data from the *Forbes* list of 660 schools, it is difficult to rank one state against another in terms of higher education.

While it is difficult to use *Forbes'* rankings to evaluate quality of education on a state by state basis, it is easier to use the data to get a representation of how specific regions perform in regard to higher education. Clumping nearby states together allows for a larger sample size, which puts more weight behind the statistics describing groups of states. Specifically, states were broken up into four separate regions: Northeast, West, Midwest and South. When using this technique, it became quite evident that quality of education differs greatly by region.

The Northeast

States included: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont

Total schools on the *Forbes* list: 174

Schools in the Top Third: (83)

Schools in the Bottom Third: (34)

Average Score: 57.02

Headlined by schools such as MIT, Williams College, Princeton University, other prestigious Ivy Leaguers, liberal arts schools, and the United States Military Academy, the Northeast is the premier region of higher education in the United States. Nearly half of the top 50 schools in the country are located in this region, including seven of the top ten. The Northeast is also home to some of the oldest colleges in the country, such as Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. Its average score of 57.02 is higher than any other region in the country has the second most schools represented on the list with 174. The Northeast also has the highest median score of any region at 54.59. All of this implies that the Northeast is home to some of the best colleges and universities in the United States.

The West

States Included: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

Total schools on the *Forbes* list: 117

Schools in the Top Third: (41)

Schools in the Bottom Third: (28)

Average Score: 50.71

Although they have the fewest schools on the list, the West is home to some great institutions of higher education. California has several schools in the top 50, including top ranked Stanford. Also, Washington and Oregon are home to some great schools as well, such as Whitman College and the University of Puget Sound. The region as a whole is well represented at the top of the *Forbes* list, as is evident by the fact that the majority of their schools are in the upper half of the rankings. Their average score is 50.71, is the second highest out of any region. And, although their average score is lower, they are practically on par with the northeast region when it comes to the premier selection of colleges. Despite being

located on the opposite side of the country, the Pacific states are educationally on the same level as the Northeast.

The Midwest

States Included: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin

Total schools on the *Forbes* list: 166

Schools in the Top Third: (44)

Schools in the Bottom Third: (63)

Average Score: 45.73

The top schools in the Midwest are largely comprised of liberal arts schools and prominent, private institutions, with the University of Michigan being the top ranked public school. The Midwest is also home to many large state schools such as Ohio State, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Indiana University-Bloomington. The best performing state in the Midwest is Indiana, which has 19 schools on the list and ranks 14th overall with an average score of 51.25. The lowest performing state is South Dakota, which only has three schools on the list and ranks 44th overall with an average score of 39.19. Out of the four regions, it has the third highest average score of 45.73, indicating that while there are many excellent schools in the Midwest, there are also a number of below average schools that bring their average down.

The South

States Included: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington DC, West Virginia

Total schools on the *Forbes* list: 203

Schools in the Top Third: (52)

Schools in the Bottom Third: (95)

Average Score: 44.24

Despite boasting schools like Georgetown, Davidson, and Duke, the South has the lowest average score of all regions, at 44.70. Their average score is a significant drop off from the Northeast and West regions, and is even slightly lower than the Midwest's average of 47.52. The reason for this is most likely a result of the South having the most schools in the bottom third of the list (95). However, there are many plusses to going to school in the South. The University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, and the schools mentioned above are all ranked inside the top 50. Outside of the top 50, schools like Emory, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Florida all have strong academic reputations. Further, for sports fans, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) perennially lay claim to some of the best sports programs in the country.

While there are good schools in each region of the United States, some regions are home to far more than others. On average, colleges and universities in the Northeast and Western parts of the country are better than schools located anywhere else. Obviously, students will only graduate from one school, so it is more important to consider what individual school they should attend, rather than a certain region as a whole. And, there are obviously exceptions to the rule. For example, there are individual schools in the South that have higher scores than some schools in the Northeast. Still, if one has an idea of where they want to live during college, it is beneficial to know what options are available in the area. Also, since many students end up working near where they go to school, it is useful to know what kind of education they can receive near their desired, post-graduate, destination. For these reasons, it is important to consider regional differences in higher education.

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