

An Interview With Robert Franek, Author of

THE PRINCETON REVIEW GUIDEBOOK
THE BEST 371 COLLEGES: 2010 EDITION
(Random House / Princeton Review Books, \$22.99, July 28, 2009)

1 What is The Princeton Review and how long have you been publishing this book?

"The Princeton Review (www.princetonreview.com) is an education services company with test preparation locations across the country and abroad, editorial offices in New York City and corporate headquarters in Framingham MA. It was founded in 1981 to help students prepare for the SAT. Our courses, books, and online resources help students research, apply to, get in to, and learn how to pay for college and graduate school. Of our more than 165 books published by Random House, our annual "Best Colleges" book is one of our most popular and unique because it's based on the largest and longest ongoing survey of students rating their colleges and reporting on their campus experiences at them. We have published our "Best Colleges" book annually since 1992. "The Best 371 Colleges: 2010 Edition" is the 18th edition of the book."

2 Why "371" colleges?

"'Best 350 Colleges' might sound catchier, but The Princeton Review doesn't start from a fixed number, then add or subtract schools to fit it. The number is based on how many schools meet our criteria for "best" and that magic number for this year is 371."

3 How do you choose the schools for the book?

"First, we choose schools based on their academics. On that end, we review data we that we gather annually from more than 1,500 schools, feedback we get from students attending the schools (their customers), and input from our staff who visit hundreds of colleges a year. We also value the opinions and suggestions of our 23-member National College Counselor Advisory Board, and independent college counselors. Second, any college we consider adding to the book must allow us to conduct surveys of its students. And last but not least: we work to have a wide representation of colleges in the book by region, size, character and type."

4 You don't have just one ranking list but 62 "top 20" lists. Why so many?

"We have 62 lists because we believe applicants and parents need a broad base of information about schools (beyond their academics) to find the school best for them. Ideally one should visit campuses to make that decision. But we know college visits can be costly -- I personally visit more than 50 schools a year -- so we survey students at the schools (about 325 per campus on average) on behalf of students who can't visit them. Actually, on some issues, our ranking lists report on matters that won't likely surface on a campus visit or in a campus viewbook. Examples? Our ranking lists on campus political leanings, race/class relations and gay community acceptance."

5 How were your rankings done?

"All of our ranking lists are based entirely on what students we surveyed at the schools – 122,000 of them for this edition -- reported to us about their campus experiences at them on our 80-question survey. We give each college a mathematical score -- similar to a GPA -- for its students' answers to each survey question. This score gives us a base to compare student opinions from college to college—apples to apples, as it were—and tally the lists. Most of our ranking lists are based on students' answers to one survey question, such as "How do you rate your campus food?" Some, such as our "Best Classroom Experiences" list -- are based on students' answers to more than one question.

6 *Which ranking lists categories do students follow the most? Do parents follow the most?*

Which ranking list categories do students follow the most?

"Students applying to colleges are most interested in our lists that reveal campus culture and quality of life. Schools are places you're going to spend four years of your life at, so naturally they're interested in colleges that made our best campus dorms, food, most beautiful campus lists. Next, they care about the student body – will they fit in? – so they check out our lists on campus political leanings, religiosity (or not), levels of race/class relations and gay community acceptance. Do they choose to attend a school just because it is on one of our lists? In most cases, probably but so they may well put a school on (or take it off) their "hit list" as a result of its ranking on one of our favorable or unfavorable lists. Students also care about accessibility of the profs and financial aid.

For students *in colleges* – many of who by the way validate the accuracy of our lists; they love it when their school lands on lists they care about. We have a "You Rate Us" question at the end of our online survey from which students can click to the area on our site where they can see their school's profile and rankings in the current edition of the book. Last year, more than 81% of the students completing our survey rated our info on their schools as "very" or "extremely" accurate, and 37% rated it "extremely" accurate."

What ranking lists do parents follow the most?

"Parents have always been interested in our financial aid lists. No surprise there. This year, given the tough economic times, and with both college costs and the need for financial aid higher than ever, I think our "Great Financial Aid" list will be the first one they turn to in our book. In fact the biggest concern parents we surveyed in 2009 had about their children's college applications is that their child will get into a first choice school but they won't have the funds to foot the bill. Another list parents care about – and which a college dad in fact inspired -- is our "Best Career Services" list which identifies colleges best at helping their students get jobs. Some parents also have interest in our "Top Party Schools" list -- which *USA Today* called "a public service" in an editorial some years ago, as well as our "Stone-cold Sober Schools" lists which former Vice President Dick Cheney praised the Brigham Young University students for being #1 on when he delivered the commencement speech there in 2007."

7 *You've also got ranking lists on topics no one else reports on. What inspired The Princeton Review to include them in the book?*

"Yes we do, and we're proud to be an annually updated source of this information. Students and organizations for that matter have thanked us for collecting opinion on and tallying our ranking lists on campus race/class relations, gay community acceptance, political leanings and religiosity. What inspired us? These lists have been in the book for 17 years and all of our ranking list ideas come out of professional and personal understanding that applicants need way more than academic statistics to judge whether a college will be a good fit for them. Some of these matters just aren't discernable from a campus viewbook, or its website, or even on a campus tour. "

8 *What information do you have in the book or on your website for people worried about how to pay for college in these tough economic times?*

"We gathered a wealth of data on this issue this year, and have five financial aid-related resources in the book no other college guide has:

1/ Our unique Financial Aid ratings for all 371 schools. Our scores from 60 to 99 are measures of how generous the schools are with their aid and they are based on data we collected in the 2008-09 academic year. We also have Financial Aid ratings on our web profiles of schools. We tallied these scores for 623 colleges in all.

2/ Our list of "100 Best Value Colleges for 2009" that we first reported in January 2009 in USA Today - with whom we partnered on this project. The list is new in the book and it identifies 50 public and 50 private colleges we named as best values based on statistics we gathered in 2008-09 on more than 30 data points covering academics, cost, and financial aid. The list is also posted at www.bestvaluecolleges.usatoday.com and on our website site.

3/ A "Great Financial Aid" ranking list that names the top 20 schools in the book at which students we surveyed were happiest with their financial aid. We also report an opposite list, "Students Dissatisfied With Financial Aid."

4/ An Honor Roll saluting 15 schools that got our highest possible Financial Aid rating: 99 (This list is new in the book).

5/ An Honor Roll saluting 12 schools we profile in the book that are tuition free.

Students and parents will also find our Princeton Review book, "Paying for College Without Going Broke" a great resource. Authored by Kalman Chany and with a foreword by Bill Clinton, it is a guide to getting the most possible financial aid. It's annually updated and published each October. "

9 *How did you determine the Financial Aid rating and the list of 100 Best Value Colleges in the book?*

"We tallied the Financial Aid ratings based on data from our surveys of administrators at hundreds of schools in 2008-09 and our surveys of student aid recipients attending the schools. School data included three factors: the percentage of their students determined to have need who received aid, the percentage of need met, and the percentage of students whose aid was fully met. The rating also factored in data from our surveys of students attending the schools about their satisfaction with their aid awards.

Our 100 Best Value Colleges list was based on statistics we gathered in 2008-09 on more than 30 factors covering academics, costs, and financial aid."

10 *What is new in the book this year?*

"We have two new ranking list categories:

"Easiest Campus to Get Around": #1 is Claremont McKenna College near LA

"Most Popular Study Abroad Programs": #1 is Colby College in Waterville ME.

We added six schools to the book:

Angelo State University (San Angelo TX)

Green Mountain College (Poultney VT)

Marywood University (Scranton PA)

Stonehill College (Easton MA)
University of Charleston (Charleston WV)
University of Rochester (NY)

Also new: our Financial Aid Honor Roll recognizes 13 schools that received a 99 score in our Financial Aid rating category. Our ratings are scores we give to all schools in the book on a scale of 60 to 99 in various categories.

We are also very excited about our Green Rating that we introduced last year, and our Green Honor Roll list. The Green rating is a score that measures how environmentally friendly and responsible a college is. We tally the ratings using data we obtain from the schools on their environmental practices and politics. We look at several issues including their uses of energy, their food service and recycling programs, and their course offerings in environmental studies.

Another list that we added to the book two years ago: "Best Career Services" was inspired by a college dad who asked us for a ranking that would identify schools that might be best at helping his son get a job. #1 on this list this year: University of Florida."

11 You also have a Green rating in the book – is this a hot topic on college campuses and how did you come up with this rating?

"The 'green' movement on college campuses is growing tremendously among students and administrators alike, and it is far more than an Earth Day recycling project. This year we saw a 30% increase in the number of colleges participating in our Green Rating survey. Nearly 700 institutions (697 vs. 534 last year) supplied us with the data we requested to tally their scores. Many have shown extraordinary commitments to environmental issues and to the environment in their practices and programs. We are pleased to play a role in helping students who care deeply about these issues identify, get into, and study at these schools.

We are also seeing a rising interest among students in attending colleges that practice, teach and support environmentally responsible choices. Among almost 16,000 college applicants and parents of applicants we surveyed this year for our annual "College Hopes & Worries Survey," 66% of respondents overall (and 68% of students vs. 59% of parents) said they would value having information about a college's commitment to the environment – a 4% increase from last year's respondents. Among that cohort, 24% of respondents said such information would "very much" impact their decision to apply to or attend the school.

Our Green rating is a measure of how environmentally friendly, responsible, and committed a college is. We tally it based on data we gather on everything from energy use, recycling, food, buildings, and transportation to academic offerings (availability of environmental studies degrees and courses) and action plans and goals concerning greenhouse gas emission reductions. "

12 What do college administrators and students think of your rankings? Your press kit mentions notables who have cited your rankings from Bill Clinton to Dick Cheney to former Secty. of Education Margaret Spellings. What did they say about them?

"Colleges that are in the book are generally very pleased we chose them for it and they reference it in their publications, news releases, and websites. Many university presidents and other administrators have expressed gratification about their school's making various ranking lists – because the rankings serve as barometers of how their students – their customers – regard them. Administrators who criticize our rankings are nearly always those at schools that are on unfavorable lists (despite the fact that they're on the lists entirely as a result of what their own students have reported to us about their campus experiences). In some cases, they say there is no merit in our survey. Others have even been

quoted by reporters saying we "make this all up" or we "survey students in bars and at football games" – all of which is entirely untrue.

Former President Bill Clinton mentioned our rankings at speech in Chicago at DePaul University in August 2000 where he saluted the school for being #1 on our Princeton Review "Happiest Students" list. We are also gratified that he wrote the foreword to our book, *Paying for College without Going Broke*.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, speaking at the Brigham Young University commencement in April 2007, praised the school and students for their #1 ranking on our Princeton Review "Stone-Cold Sober Schools" list.

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, in a July 2005 interview in *Time* magazine, said that she was checking our Princeton Review rankings because she had a daughter applying to college that year.

This year, Dr. Phil McGraw, in a "Dr. Phil" program that aired July 7, 2009 about a trouble teen interested in pursuing college, concluded the show saying he had arranged for the teen "to work with Robert Franek, a college advisor and added "Now this is a man that knows a lot about this. He's vice president and publisher at The Princeton Review and author of *The Best 368 Colleges*."

Our rankings have also been the subject of: quiz questions on national shows (National Public Radio's *"Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me,"* and *"Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"*), syndicated comic strips (Doonesbury® and Tank McNamara®), editorial cartoons (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel), and newspaper editorials (a USA Today editorial writer called our reporting of some of our ranking lists "a public service"). "

12 *What's the most important advice you give to students applying to colleges this year and to their parents?*

"We asked this question of last year's applicants and parents who completed our 2009 College Hopes and Worries Survey <<http://www.princetonreview.com/college-hopes-worries-2009.aspx>> (nearly 16,000 people in all), and you know what their most common advice was? Two words: "START EARLY." We saw that over and over in their comments. (See our compendia of student advice at <http://www.princetonreview.com/advice-from-students.aspx> and of parent advice at <http://www.princetonreview.com/advice-from-parents.aspx>).

One parent wrote, "I wouldn't wish the last few weeks we've had on anyone." In addition to "Start Early," we offer this advice for students and for parents:

For students: Three things:

1/ Work hard to get good grades and good test scores. They are important both for getting in to colleges and getting financial aid from them. Take as many AP courses as you can. They have a double pay off. Admissions officers like to see you've taken challenging courses, plus high scores on AP exams can earn college credits, thus saving on tuition (it's possible to earn enough AP credits to cut a full semester off college).

2/ When winnowing your hit list of colleges, don't make the mistake of picking schools only by their academic reputations. People get caught up with academic rankings of colleges. Get information about the campus culture, the student body, the town, the majors offered.

3/ Never cross a school off your list because of its sticker price. More than 70% of students get financial aid (some of which is grants you don't have to pay back) and with aid it can cost less to go to a private or expensive school than a public or inexpensive one.

For parents: Two things.

1/ Relax. There are hundreds of great colleges out there and the majority of students get into their first or second choice college. The college search and application process is very stressful and requires a lot of homework: be as supportive as you can of your child, and when it comes to dealing with the schools, let your child make the calls and write the letters, etc.

2/ If you are hoping to get financial aid, learn all you can about the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) well before you begin filling it out, ideally months before. It's a form all aid applicants must submit and your /your child's answers on it are used to determine a KEY data point called your "EFC" (Estimated Family Contribution. Read "contribution" to mean "pay" out of the family coffer. This form has more than 150 questions and it's so complicated that a U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, "It takes a Ph.D. to figure it out." Mistakes on it can cost you tens of thousands in possible aid. Also be sure to get up-to-date information about the FAFSA, as the form changes every year. Our annual book, "Paying for College Without Going Broke" explains it line-by-line, and has advice on completing it to get the most aid possible. Former President Bill Clinton wrote the foreword to the book. "

14 Where can people find information about The Princeton Review and this book?

"Thanks for asking, and for having me on. We invite everyone to visit our free site www.PrincetonReview.com and we wish them all the best of luck in their college applications!"
