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

The Princeton Review is an education services company headquartered in Framingham, MA with offices all over the country and abroad. Our company was founded in 1981 to help students prepare for the SAT. Now we are known for our test-prep courses for scores of tests, plus our books, website, tutoring and online programs. Over the years we have helped millions of students research, apply to, get in to, and pay for college and graduate school. The Princeton Review also owns the Penn Foster Education Group, a global leader in online career and vocational education headquartered in Scranton, PA.

We've published our annual "Best Colleges" book since 1992. The Best 376 Colleges is our 20th edition. One of more than 150 Princeton Review books published by Random House, this title is one of our most popular. What makes it different from all other college guides is that it's based on our college student survey which is the largest and longest ongoing survey of its kind: we ask college students to rate their schools and report on their experiences at them. We surveyed 122,000 students for this edition of the book. No other college guide has this much campus and student feedback about schools.

Why "376" colleges?

"Best 375 Colleges" might sound catchier. But The Princeton Review doesn't start from a catchy number, then add or subtract schools to fit it. The number is based on how many schools annually meet our criteria for "best."

How do you pick the colleges for the book?

First, we choose schools based on our analysis of their academics. We review data that we annually collect from about 2,000 schools via an administrator survey that has more than 80 questions. We also get reports from our staff across the country who visit hundreds of colleges a year, plus our 28-member National College Counselor Advisory Board (you'll find their names and affiliations listed in the book), and independent college counselors who give us valuable opinions and suggestions about schools for the book.

Second, we look at what students we've surveyed candidly tell us about their campus experiences. That matters a lot to us, as it would to applicants visiting a school and those that can't get to the campus for a visit. Any college we consider adding to the book must allow us to conduct surveys of its students.

Third, we work to keep a wide representation of colleges in the book by region, size, character and type. Only about 15% of the nation's 4-year colleges are in it.
Which college is best overall?

We don't think one school is best overall. We don't believe hierarchical ranking lists are useful, especially those that rank schools only for their academics. In fact, we think they are counterproductive, as every school under the #1 school must be considered "lesser" academically, down the line, and that's just not so.

All 376 schools in this book are academically outstanding: they all offer a great education. But they differ widely—as do the academically outstanding students who attend them. It's not hard to find an academically great school in this country. What's hard is finding the academically outstanding school that will be a best-fit school for you.

What are your ranking lists based on?

Our multiple rankings lists are based entirely on data we gather in our student surveys. We report 62 ranking lists—each naming the top 20 colleges (of the 376 in the book) in a specific category. We think our lists—along with other info in the book's college profiles—offer applicants and parents a broader base of input to find and successfully apply to the schools best for them than one hierarchical list based on one aspect of the college.

What does your student survey cover?

Our survey has about 80 questions in four sections. We ask students about: 1) their school's academics/administration, 2) life at their college, 3) their fellow students, and 4) themselves. For most of the questions, they answer by selecting one of five choices on a grid. The five choices range from "Excellent" to "Awful" or "Extremely" to "Not at All" or they might be in percentages, from "0-20%" to "81 – 100%." 

How do you use this data to tally the lists?

We give each college a mathematical score for its students' answers to each survey question. This score (similar to a GPA) 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. Several of our lists report on topics generally not researched by other ranking organizations or reported in college guidebooks. Among them are our lists reporting on campus political leanings, race/class relations, and LGBT-community acceptance.

What's new in this year's edition of the book?

We added six schools to this edition: Five are in the U.S.A.: Champlain College (Burlington, VT), Christopher Newport University (Newport News, VA), Portland State University (Portland, OR), Roanoke College (Salem, VA), and the University of Houston (Houston, TX). One is in Ireland - National University of Ireland, Maynooth (Co. Kildare, IRE). This is the first time we have included a school outside North America in the book. We have had two Canadian colleges in it for many years: McGill University (Montreal) and the University of Toronto.

We also added a new ranking list category, "Best Health Services," which, to our knowledge, is the first list of its kind. It reports the 20 colleges at which students most highly rated their school's health center facilities and services.
Of course, all of the school data in the book is updated. We reach out directly to our contacts at the colleges to collect that info and we update all statistics in our school profiles every year. We also give every college the opportunity to review, fact check and report to us any incorrect information in their profile before our book goes to press.

**Do you have information in the book for people concerned about how to pay for college?**

We know college costs are major issues for families in these tough economic times: among the 12,000 college applicants and parents of applicants we surveyed this year for our 2011 "College Hopes & Worries Survey," 86% said financial aid would be "very necessary" to foot their college bills.

We have six financial aid resources in the book that no other college guide has:

1. Financial Aid Rating scores for all 376 schools. Our scores measure how generous the schools are with their aid and how satisfied the aid recipients are with that aid on a scale of 60 to 99. They are based primarily on data we collected in 2010-11.

2. Our "100 Best Value Colleges for 2011" list. It identifies 50 public and 50 private colleges we named as best values in February 2011 with USA TODAY (with whom we have teamed up in reporting this annual list for three years). We compiled the list using statistics we gathered in 2010-11 covering more than 30 data points about academics, cost, and financial aid. The list is also posted on our site and USA Today's Site in an interactive feature.

3. Our "Great Financial Aid" ranking list. It names the top 20 schools in the book at which students we surveyed were happiest with their financial aid. We also have a "Financial Aid Not So Great" list that reveals the schools at which students were least satisfied with their financial aid.


5. A Tuition-Free Schools Honor Roll. It salutes nine schools in the book that are tuition free.

6. Advice: A special section titled "26 Tips for Getting Scholarships, Grants, and Financial Aid and Paying Less for College" is authored by Kalman A. Chany, an expert on college funding widely sourced by national media. He is also author of our annual Princeton Review book, *Paying for College Without Going Broke*. With a foreword by Bill Clinton, it is a great guide to getting the most possible financial aid. Published each October, it’s the only annually updated book with line-by-line advice on completing the forthcoming school year's FAFSA (the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form all aid applicants must complete).

**Which ranking list categories do students follow the most?**

Students applying to colleges are most interested in our lists that report on campus amenities, services, and student body/campus culture. Schools are places they'll spend four years of their life (hopefully), so naturally they're interested in our lists "Best Campus Food," "Dorms Like Palaces," "Best Athletic Facilities," "Great College Town," etc. Next, they care about the student body – will they fit in? – so they check our sets of lists on campus political leanings ("Most Liberal /Most Conservative Students"), religion ("Most / Least Religious Students"), race/class relations ("Lots of /Little Race/Class Interaction") and LGBT acceptance ("LGBT-Friendly/Unfriendly").
**What ranking lists do parents follow the most?**

Parents have always been interested in our "Great Financial Aid" list. No surprise there. The biggest concern parents we surveyed in early 2011 had about their children's college applications was that their child would get into his/her first choice school but they wouldn't have the funds to foot the bill. With both college costs and the need for financial aid higher than ever, our "Great Financial Aid" list -- along with the Financial Aid Rating scores we tally for all 376 schools -- may be what parents find most useful in the book.

Another list parents care about is our "Best Career Services" list which identifies colleges best at helping their students get jobs. Very important given the average education loan debt of college grads these days. As expensive as college can be, however, a college degree is worth the investment according to employment and income statistics.

**What is the difference between the college rankings and the college ratings in your book?**

That's a great question as people often confuse rankings (which are lists) with ratings (which are scores).

Our Princeton Review college rankings are lists of schools in 62 categories (in rank order: 1 to 20) based entirely on our surveys of students attending the schools in our annual "Best Colleges" book. The survey asks students to rate their own schools on dozens of topics and report on their campus experiences at them. Our ranking lists include "Professors Get High Marks," "Best Campus Food," and "Major Frat and Sorority Scene."

Our Princeton Review college ratings are scores on a scale of 60 to 99 that we tally for schools in up to eight categories that appear on college profiles on its site and college guidebooks. The ratings are based primarily on institutional data we collect from the schools' administrators. Our rating categories include Academics, Admissions Selectivity, Financial Aid, Fire Safety and Green.

**Is "Green" a hot topic on college campuses?**

Yes, the green movement is growing substantially on college campuses, both among administrators and students. This year 768 colleges (compared to 703 last year and 534 three years ago) supplied us with the data we requested to tally their Green Rating scores. Many of them have shown exemplary and extraordinary commitments to environmental issues and to the environment in their practices and programs.

We also are seeing a rising interest among students in attending colleges that practice, teach, and support environmentally responsible choices. Among the 8,000+ college applicants we surveyed this year for our 2011 "College Hopes & Worries Survey," 69% said having information about a college's commitment to the environment would affect their decision to apply to or attend a college.

**What is the Green Rating based on?**

Our Green Rating is a measure of how environmentally friendly, responsible, and committed a college is. We developed it in 2008 with input from ecoAmerica, a non-profit environmental agency, and a board of advisors working in higher education and environmental/sustainability programs. 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.
Do your rankings draw interest beyond the annual publication of the book?

Former President Bill Clinton mentioned our rankings in a 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.

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®), newspaper editorials (a USA TODAY editorial writer called our reporting of some of our ranking lists "a public service"), and mentions in programs from NBC's "Saturday Night Live" to Comedy Central's "The Daily Show."

What's advice do you have for students applying to colleges this year, and for their parents?

We asked this question of last year's applicants and parents (nearly 12,000 people in all) who completed our 2011 "College Hopes and Worries Survey."

Their most common advice? Two words: "START EARLY." We saw this over and over in their comments. One parent noted," I wouldn't wish the last few weeks we've had on anyone." Another said, "Start the whole process a year earlier than you think you need to." One of our favorite tips from a student this year was, "Take a deep breath and let your parents help. They may actually know something."

We echo that wise advice. And with best wishes to this year's applicants and their savvy (if anxious) parents, we offer these additional tips:

For students:
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. Admissions officers like to see you've taken challenging courses, plus high scores on AP exams can earn college credits, thus saving on tuition.

2. When winnowing your hit list of colleges, don't make the mistake of picking schools only by their academic reputations. 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 and with aid it can cost less to go to a private or expensive school than a public or inexpensive one.
For parents:
1. Relax. There are hundreds of great colleges out there and the majority of students get into their first or second choice college. 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. The FAFSA is a form all aid applicants must submit and your /your child's answers on it are used to determine your "EFC" (Estimated Family Contribution) – that's what the colleges will expect you "pay" out of the family coffer. Our annual book, *Paying For College Without Going Broke*, has detailed information on this and is the only annual guide that gives people line-by-line advice specifically on completing the upcoming year's FAFSA form.

**About Author Robert Franek**

Robert Franek, 39, is author of *The Best 376 Colleges* and Senior VP/Publishing at The Princeton Review where he oversees the Company's guidebook publishing program -- a line of about 150 titles from best-selling test-prep guides to college, graduate school, career-related and reference books. As the Company’s chief expert on higher education issues, he directs The Princeton Review annual surveys of college, business school, and law school students upon which the well-known Princeton Review rankings are based. As lead author of the company's annual "Best Colleges" guide, he visits more than 50 colleges a year and has been a lecturer and panelist on college admissions for audiences of educators, parents and students.

Robert has been sourced on college, graduate school, and career topics by a wide range of media from *Time* to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and from USA TODAY to the Wall Street Journal. He has appeared on ABC "Good Morning America," CBS "The Early Show," and NBC "Today" as well as several CNN and FOX programs, National Public Radio and network radio shows.

Prior to joining The Princeton Review in 1999, Robert served as a college admissions administrator at Wagner College (Staten Island, NY) for six years. He earned his B.A. at Drew University in Political Science and History. An avid history buff, he conducts historical walking tours of New York City for Sweet City Tours, a company he founded. He lives in Manhattan.

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**The Best 376 Colleges**

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