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

Office of Institutional Research  
September 26, 2007

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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, 2006. Given the circulation of this publication, the Office of Institutional Research analyzed *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking of USF from 2000 to 2008, according to the magazine's criteria and percentage weighting for national universities. The criteria are academic reputation (25%), faculty resources (20%), retention and graduation rates (20%) student selectivity (15%), financial resources (10%), alumni giving (5%), and graduation rate performance (5%). We looked at changes over time in the rating of each of these criteria for USF; compared USF's ranking in 2008 to the national universities ranked 1 to 130 and to those ranked 52 to 130 according to each of the criteria; and compared USF's ranking from 2000 to 2008 to that of the University of the Pacific (UOP). Among other reasons, UOP was chosen because it is in the same Carnegie classification as USF (Doctoral/Research), it was ranked in the third tier by the *Report* in 2000 as was USF, it was tied with USF for rank 111 in 2005, and it rose to 96 in the rankings in 2008 while USF slipped back to rank 131 in the third tier. The criteria that emerged as most salient for USF's ranking relative to UOP were student selectivity, graduation rates, and percentage of classes with less than 20 students. While USF has increased in selectivity during the past eight years, its graduation rate has stayed about the same, resulting in a pronounced drop in the difference between expected and actual graduation rates. At the same time, the percentage of classes with fewer than 20 students has steadily decreased at USF. In contrast, UOP has improved its graduation rate as it increased its selectivity, and increased the percentage of classes with fewer than 20 students.

## Background

For twenty years, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked the nation's colleges and universities by a number of 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. On September 10, 2007, for example, 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 rankings 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. Similarly, in a June 2007 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. On September 26, 2007, NAICU launched their Web site, which is expected to include information on nearly 600 independent schools, including USF.

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, 2006. 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 has been used to rank USF.

## The U.S. News & World Report Ranking of USF

U.S. News & World Report uses the following criteria and percentage weighting for national university ranking: academic reputation (25%), faculty resources (20%), retention and graduation rates (20%) student selectivity (15%), financial resources (10%), alumni giving (5%), and graduation rate performance (5%). Of these, only financial resources (defined as average expenditure per student) are not published in the U.S. News & World Report. Tables 1 and 2 show USF's ranking by U.S. News & World Report from 2000-2008.

**Table 1: U.S. News & World Report Ranking of USF, from 2000-2008.**

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>Ranking</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> tier	117 Place	111 Place	115 Place	112 Place	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier*

\* In 2008, USF was ranked 131<sup>st</sup>, thus being at the top of the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier

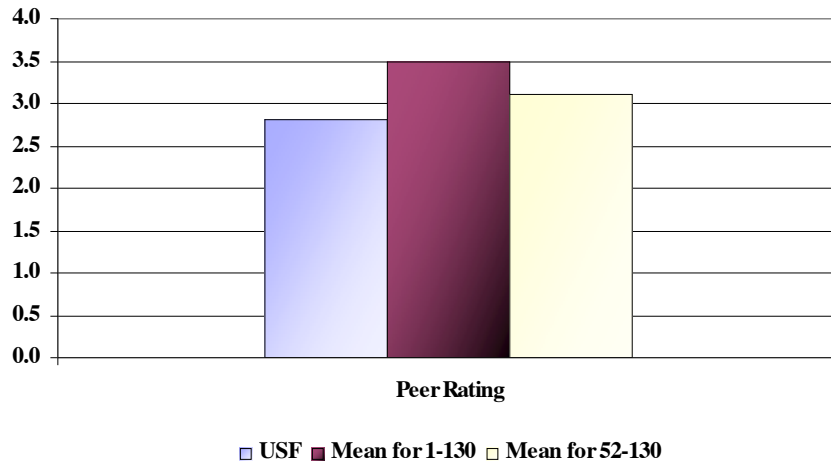
**Table 2: Overview of U.S. News & World Report Ranking of USF, by Criteria, from 2000-2008.**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>Peer rating</b>	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.8
<b>Alumni giving</b>	15%	16%	16%	16%	13%	12%	14%	15%	15%
<b>% of FT faculty</b>	59%	90%	90%	91%	91%	89%	89%	86%	86%
<b>% of classes of 50 or more</b>	3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%
<b>% of classes under 20</b>	54%	64%	61%	59%	63%	63%	51%	51%	46%
<b>Av. Freshman Retention</b>	84%	84%	84%	83%	83%	83%	84%	85%	85%
<b>Predicted graduation rate</b>	53%	52%	53%	54%	58%	60%	62%	62%	63%
<b>Actual graduation rate</b>	65%	66%	64%	64%	67%	66%	66%	67%	65%
<b>Difference predicted/actual</b>	12	14	11	10	9	6	4	5	2
<b>SAT/ACT score 25<sup>th</sup>-75<sup>th</sup> percentile</b>	1020-1200	1020-1220	1020-1220	1030-1240	1020-1220	1030-1240	1010-1240	1010-1240	1010-1240
<b>Freshmen in top 10% of HS class</b>	20%	22%	23%	20%	27%	23%	25%	17%	21%
<b>Acceptance rate</b>	77%	80%	80%	79%	82%	82%	74%	72%	72%

The next set of tables (3-6) compares USF's rating for 2008 to the average ratings of the schools ranked 1-130 and the schools ranked 52-130 (the 50<sup>th</sup> place had a tie). These tables have been divided into four sections: peer ratings (Table 3, range 1-4), the differences between predicted and actual graduation rates (Table 4, range 1-3), SAT scores (Table 5, range 1000-1300) and all the remaining variables which are recorded as percentiles (Table 6).

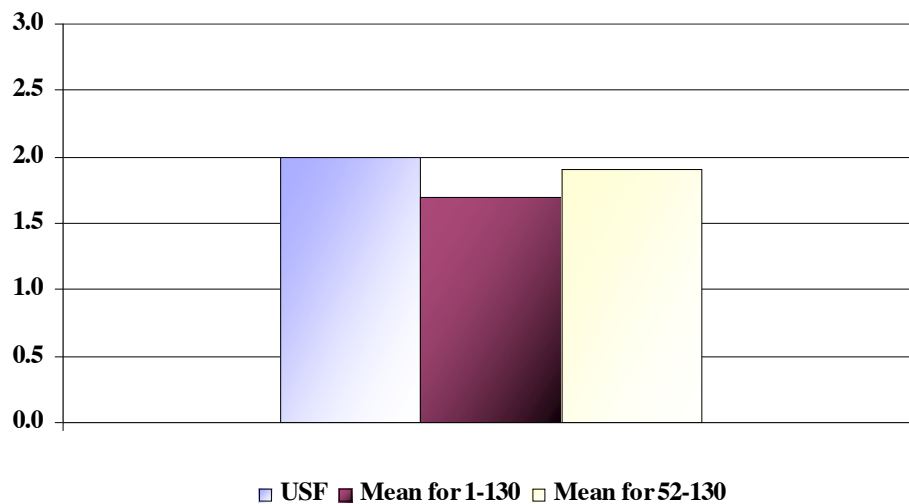
**Table 3: Comparison of USF's Peer Rating to the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-130 and Schools Ranked 52-130, 2008**

	<b>Peer Rating</b>
<b>USF</b>	2.8
<b>Mean for 1-130</b>	3.5
<b>Mean for 52-130</b>	3.1



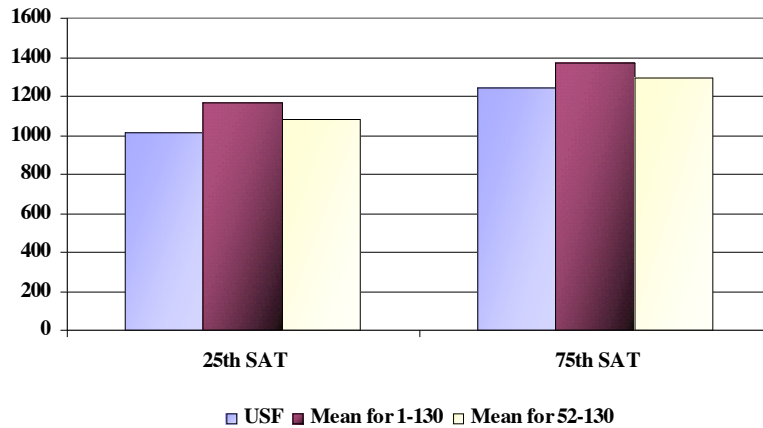
**Table 4: Comparison of USF's Rating of the Difference between Expected and Actual Graduation Rates and the Mean Rating of Ranks 1-130 and Ranks 52-130, 2008**

	<b>Difference between Expected and Actual Graduation Rate</b>
<b>USF</b>	2.0
<b>Mean for 1-130</b>	1.7
<b>Mean for 52-130</b>	1.9



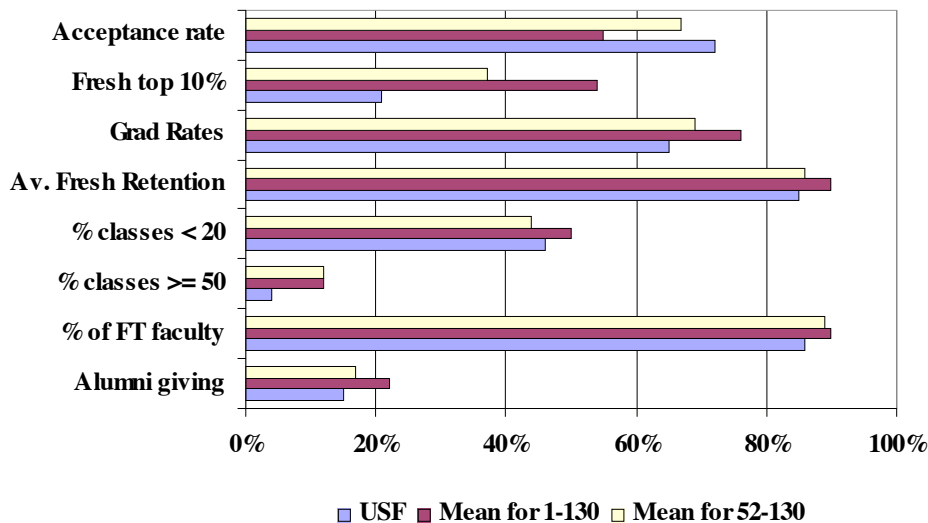
**Table 5: Comparison of USF's SAT Scores at the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> Percentile to the Mean SAT Scores of Schools Ranked 1-130 and Ranked 52-130, 2008**

	25th SAT	75th SAT
<b>USF</b>	1010	1240
<b>Mean for 1-130</b>	1167	1372
<b>Mean for 52-130</b>	1078	1290



**Table 6: Comparison of USF's Rating and the Mean Rating of Schools Ranked 1-130 and Ranked 52-130 on the following criteria: Alumni Giving, Percent of Full-Time Faculty, Classes with less than 20 or 50 or more Students, Average Freshman Retention, Graduation Rates, Top 10% in HS Class Rank, and Acceptance Rate**

	Alumni giving	% of FT faculty	% classes >= 50	% classes < 20	Av. Fresh Retention	Grad Rates	Top 10% HS	Acceptance Rate
<b>USF</b>	15%	86%	4%	46%	85%	65%	21%	72%
<b>Mean for 1-130</b>	22%	90%	12%	50%	90%	76%	54%	55%
<b>Mean for 52-130</b>	17%	89%	12%	44%	86%	69%	37%	67%



## Comparison of the University of San Francisco (USF) to the University of the Pacific (UOP)

USF is classified as a Doctoral/Research institution by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. There are 84 schools in this category. Eight, or 9.5 percent, of the 84 schools from that Carnegie Classification were ranked in the top 130 schools by *U.S. News & World Report*. The schools are American University, Pepperdine University, Samford University, Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, University of San Diego, University of the Pacific, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute

The following longitudinal analysis compares changes on the indicators reported in *U.S. News & World Report* between USF and UOP. UOP was chosen as a comparative school for the following reasons:

1. It is in the same Carnegie classification as USF (Doctoral/Research)
2. Both universities were rated as 3<sup>rd</sup> tier universities in 2000
3. Both universities were ranked 111 in 2005, but whereas USF's ranking dropped to 131 in 2008, UOP's rose to 96 in the same year
4. On several variables that are used by *U.S. News & World Report* for ranking, USF is rated equal or superior to UOP. Thus, these variables can be eliminated as having potential explanatory value as to why UOP is ranked higher than USF.

Table 7 shows the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking for USF and UOP over an eight-year time span. During this time, some aspects of the rating system have changed. Until 2003, the tiers were labeled 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup>, with ranks only assigned to first tier schools (the top 50). As of 2004, the first and second tiers were combined and ranks were assigned for the combined tier, followed by the third tier. Thus, as of 2004 there is no second tier.

**Table 7: Comparison by U.S. News & World Report of Ranking Between USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> tier	117 Place*	111 Place	115 Place	112 Place	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier**
<b>UOP</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier	3 <sup>rd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	2 <sup>nd</sup> Tier	107 Place*	111 Place	104 Place	98 Place	96 Place

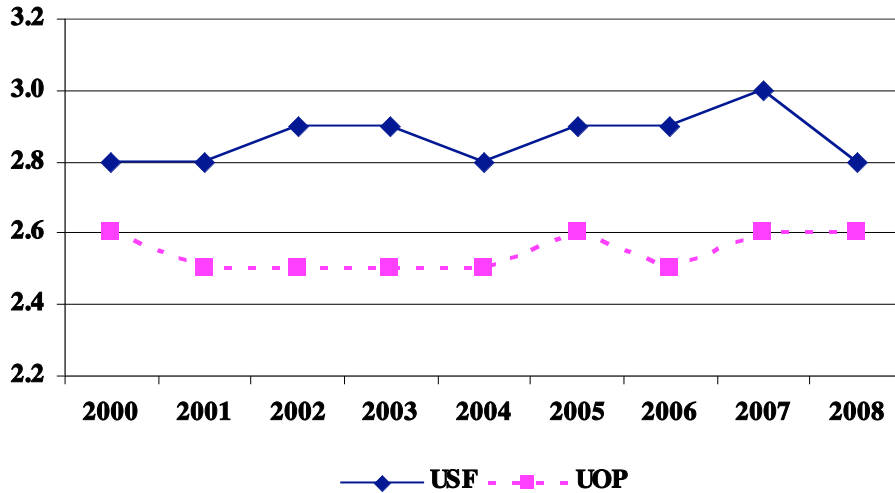
\* In 2004 the first and the second tier were combined and ranks were assigned.

\*\* In 2008, USF was ranked 131<sup>st</sup>, thus being at the top of the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier

Whereas many variables of *U.S. News & World Report* are comprised of subcategories, two variables, academic reputation and alumni giving, have no subcategories. In both of these variables, which together account for 30% of the rating, USF consistently was rated higher than UOP by *U.S. News & World Report*. Thus, these variables do not play a role in the higher ranking of UOP. (See Tables 8 and 9).

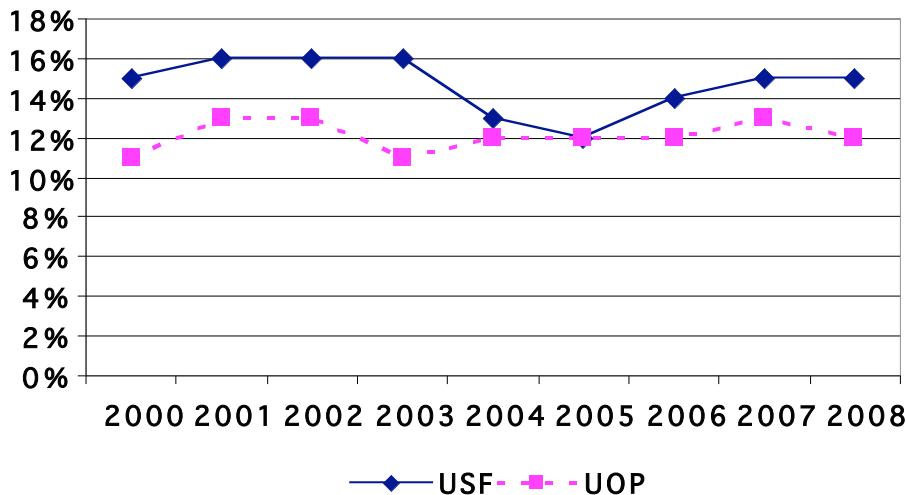
**Table 8: Comparison of Peer Rating between USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.8
<b>UOP</b>	2.6	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.6



**Table 9: Comparison of Alumni Giving between USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	15%	16%	16%	16%	13%	12%	14%	15%	15%
<b>UOP</b>	11%	13%	13%	11%	12%	12%	12%	13%	12%



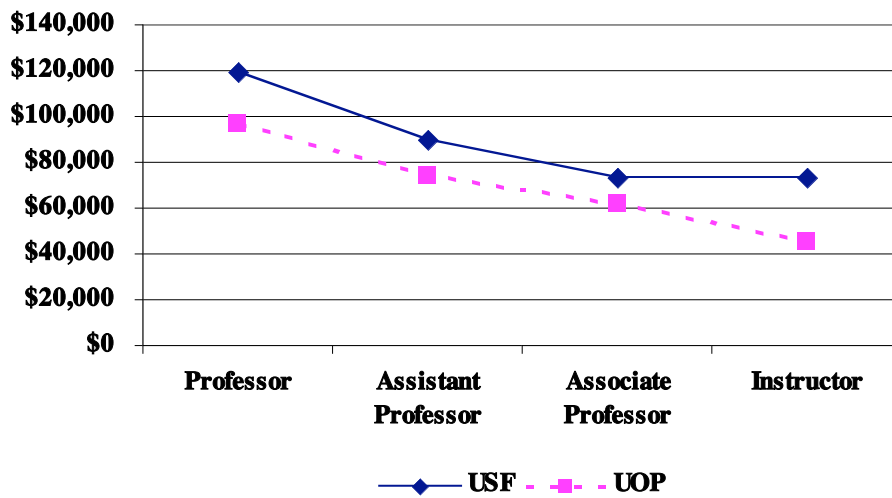
One area that is heavily weighted is faculty resources. This area is comprised of six areas: faculty compensation (35%), percent of faculty with terminal degrees (15%), percent of full-time faculty (5%), student faculty ratio (5%), class size below 20 (30%) and class size above 50 (10%). Although comparisons of faculty compensation, the highest degree earned, and the student



teacher ratio are not published in *U.S. News & World Report*, data for these variables are found elsewhere. For example, Table 10 shows that the average salary for every faculty rank at USF is higher than that of UOP. Thus, salary differences do not explain USF's lower ranking relative to UOP. For the salary information, which is not provided by *U.S. News & World Report*, 2006 salaries reported by AAUP to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* were used.

**Table 10: Comparison of Faculty Salary between USF and UOP, 2006**

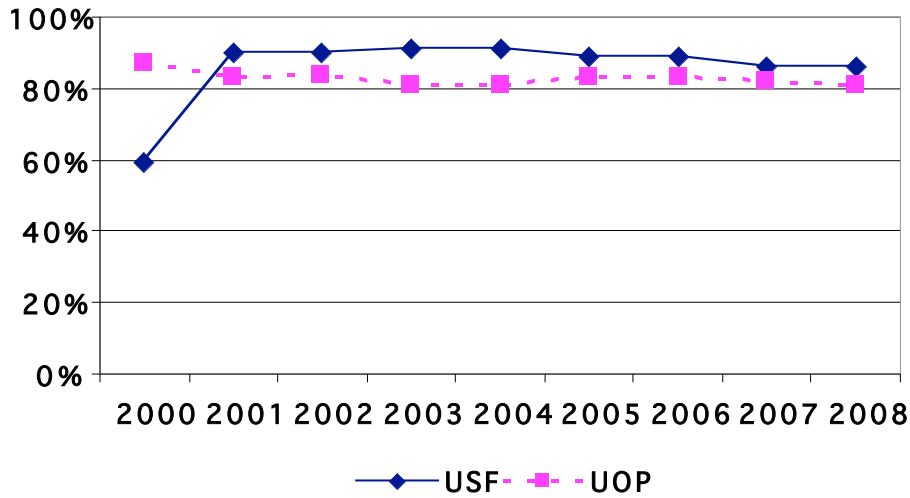
	<b>Professor</b>	<b>Associate Professor</b>	<b>Assistant Professor</b>	<b>Instructor</b>
<b>USF</b>	\$118,900	\$89,900	\$72,700	\$73,000
<b>UOP</b>	\$96,700	\$73,800	\$62,100	\$45,000



Another area that can be ruled out as having potential explanatory value regarding the difference in ranking between USF and UOP is the percent of full-time faculty. Although UOP had a higher percent of full-time faculty in 2000 this changed in 2001. Since 2001, the percentage of full-time faculty at USF has been higher than UOP (see Table 11). Thus, the higher ranking of UOP cannot be attributed to a higher percent of full-time faculty.

**Table 11: Comparison of Percent of Full Time Faculty between USF and UOP**

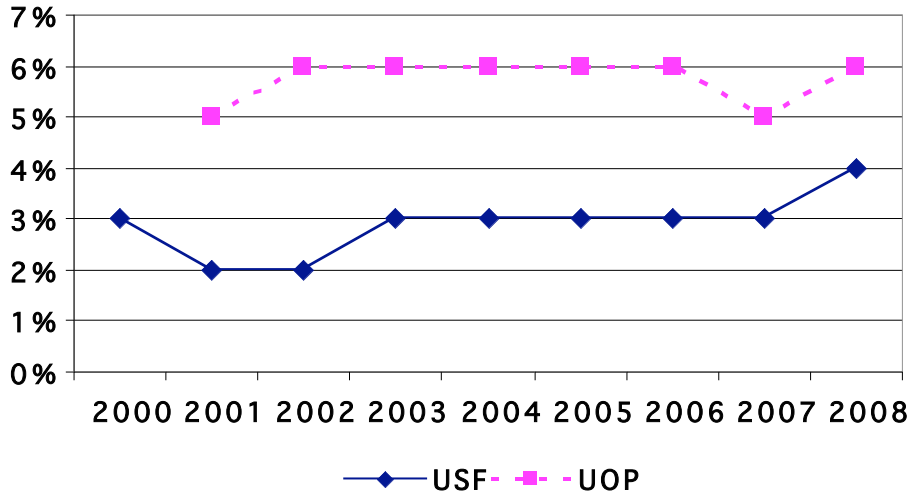
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	59%	90%	90%	91%	91%	89%	89%	86%	86%
<b>UOP</b>	87%	83%	84%	81%	81%	83%	83%	82%	81%



Other areas within the category of faculty resources are class size, either above 50 (10% of weight within category), which is viewed negatively, or below 20 (30% of weight within category), which is viewed positively. A comparison of the difference between USF and UOP clearly shows that USF has fewer classes of 50 or more students than does UOP (see Table 12). Thus, this factor can be ruled out as well in explaining USF’s lower ranking relative to UOP.

**Table 12: Comparison of Class Size over 50 between USF and UOP**

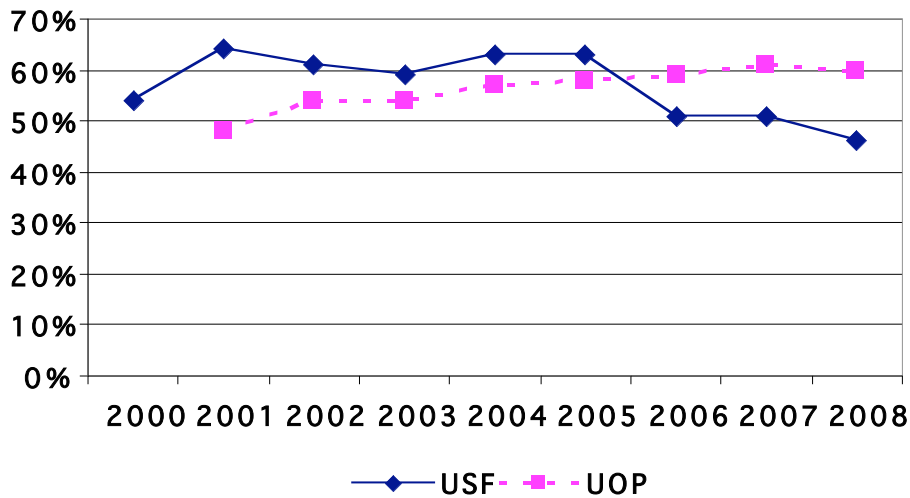
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	3%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%
<b>UOP</b>	N/A	5%	6%	6%	6%	6%	6%	5%	6%



Thirty percent of the category labeled by *U.S. News & World Report* as “Faculty Resources” focuses on the percentage of classes that have a class size less than 20. It is in this area that we see a major difference between UOP and USF. Whereas UOP has increased in the percentage of classes below 20, USF has consistently decreased in the percentage of classes in this category, currently falling below the lowest point of UOP.

**Table 13: Comparison of Class Size below 20 between USF and UOP**

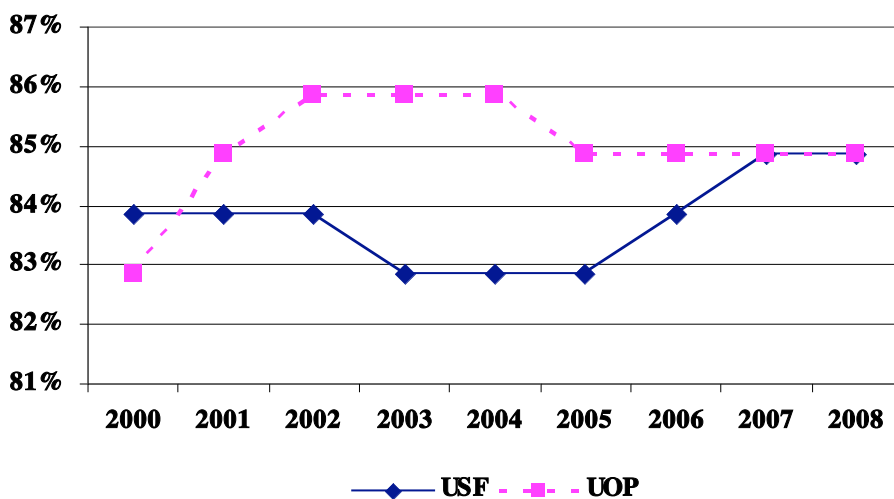
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	54%	64%	61%	59%	63%	63%	51%	51%	46%
<b>UOP</b>	N/A	48%	54%	54%	57%	58%	59%	61%	60%



The next section focuses on graduation rates and retention, which account for 20% of the total rating by *U.S. News & World Report*. This area is comprised of two categories: freshman retention (20%) and graduation rates (80%). As can be seen from Table 14, whereas UOP had higher retention rates than USF from 2000 to 2006, this is not true for 2007 and 2008, years when the freshman retention rates were equal.

**Table 14: Comparison of Freshman Retention Rates between UOP and USF**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
<b>USF</b>	84%	84%	84%	83%	83%	83%	84%	85%	85%
<b>UOP</b>	83%	85%	86%	86%	86%	85%	85%	85%	85%

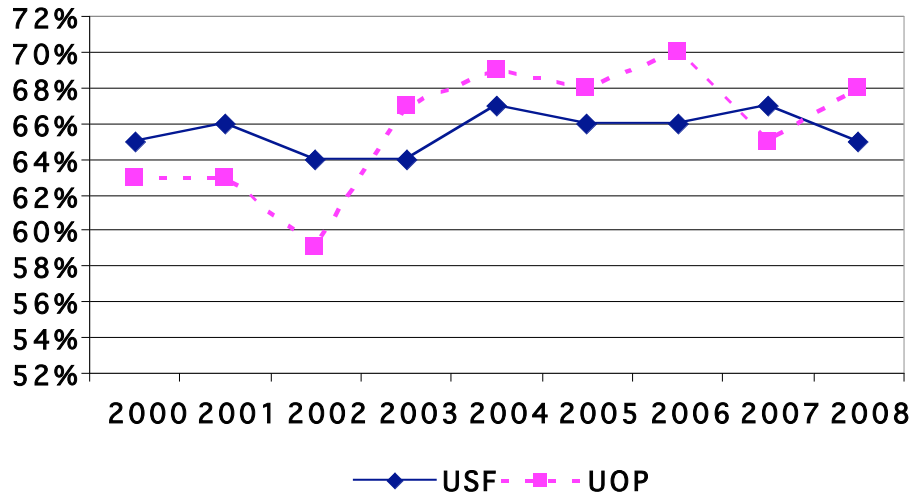


In contrast to retention rates, when comparing six-year graduation rates (80% of the retention/graduation category), the same pattern as with class size emerges. UOP had a graduation rate

lower than USF from 2000 to 2002, but had a higher graduation rate from 2003 to 2008, with the exception of 2007.

**Table 15: Comparison of Six-Year Graduation Rates between USF and UOP**

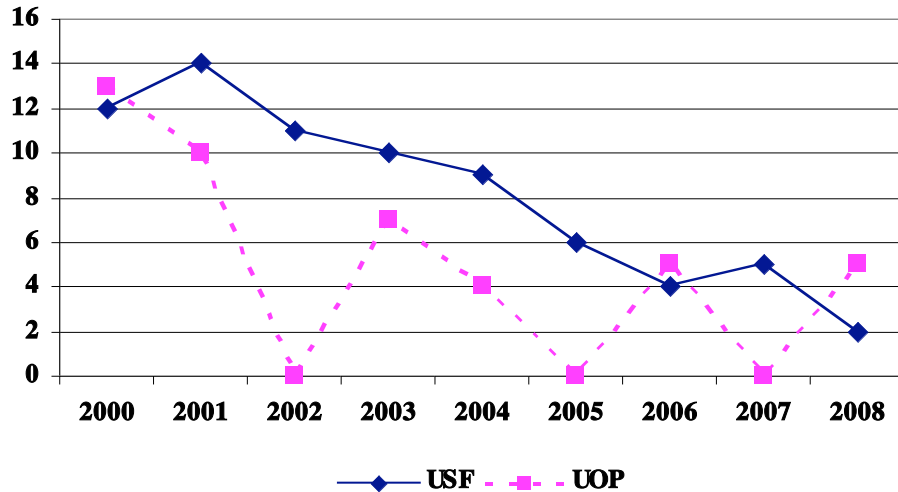
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
USF	65%	66%	64%	64%	67%	66%	66%	67%	65%
UOP	63%	63%	59%	67%	69%	68%	70%	65%	68%



One category that is different from but related to graduation rates is the value added score. The value added score, which accounts for 5% of the total rating, is defined as the difference between expected and actual graduation rates. From 2000 to 2003, USF had a two-digit value-added score; however, since 2004 the value added score has been dropping, and reached a nine-year low this year of only two points.

**Table 16: Comparison of Difference Between Predicted and Actual Graduation Rates for USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
USF	12	14	11	10	9	6	4	5	2
UOP	13	10	0	7	4	0	5	0	5



As can be seen from the graph, the value added score for UOP has fluctuated considerably, but in 2008, it was four points higher than USF. In 2002, 2005 and 2007, UOP had no difference between its expected and actual graduation rates. In each case, this zero difference lasted only one year, and rebounded at least 5 points in the following year.

The last category to consider is selectivity. This category accounts for 15% of the total rating and is comprised of three subcategories: SAT scores (50%), High School class ranking (40%) and acceptance rate (10%). UOP is currently more selective than USF in all three categories, as shown by Tables 17-19.

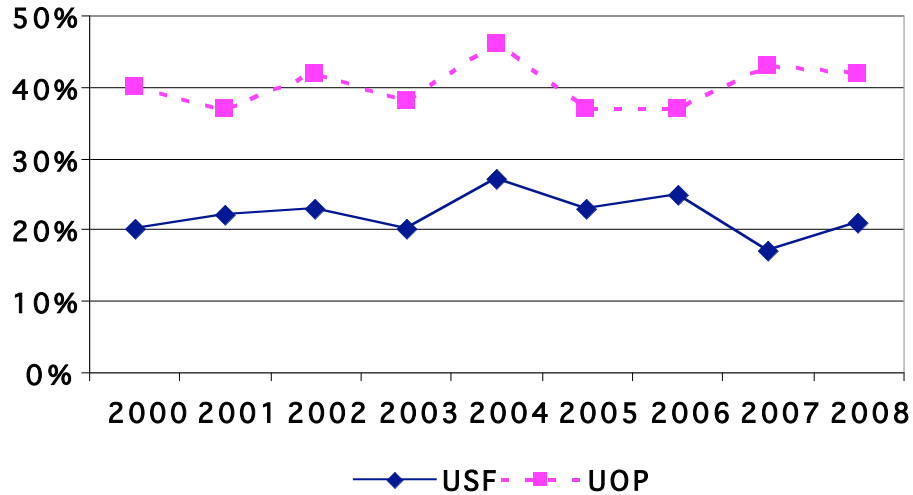
**Table 17: Comparison of SAT Scores for USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
USF	1020-1200	1020-1220	1020-1220	1030-1240	1020-1220	1030-1040	1010-1240	1010-1240	1010-1240
UOP	960-1220	980-1220	1010-1230	1010-1230	1050-1260	1050-1278	1060-1280	1080-1300	1040-1290

As can be seen from the Table 17, both universities increased in their selectivity; however, whereas USF’s increase was primarily at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile for SAT scores, the general trend of the SAT scores for UOP is an increase both at the 25<sup>th</sup> and the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile.

**Table 18: Comparison of Students in the Top 10% of Their Class Rank for USF and UOP**

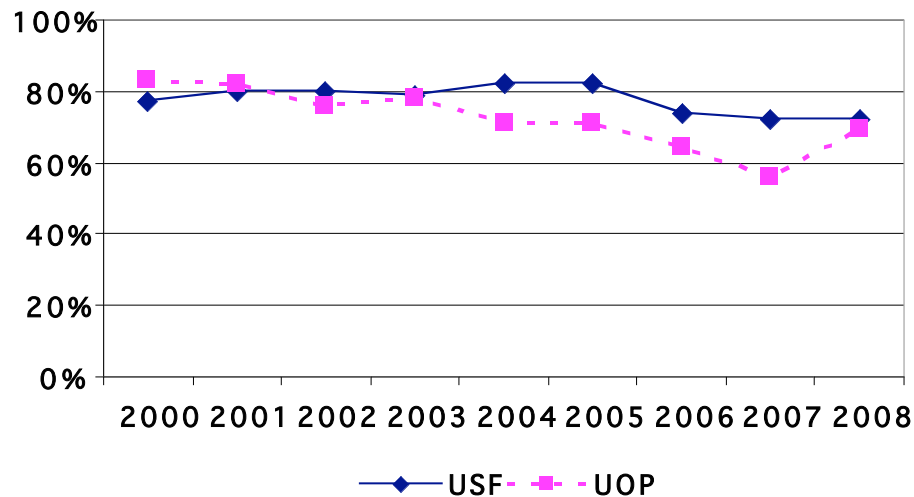
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
USF	20%	22%	23%	20%	27%	23%	25%	17%	21%
UOP	40%	37%	42%	38%	46%	37%	37%	43%	42%



As Table 18 shows, UOP admits approximately twice as many students ranked in the top 10% of their High School class as does USF.

**Table 19: Comparison of Acceptance Rate for USF and UOP**

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
USF	77%	80%	80%	79%	82%	82%	74%	72%	72%
UOP	83%	82%	76%	78%	71%	71%	64%	56%	69%



As can be seen in Table 19, both universities have increased in selectivity in terms of their acceptance rate, with UOP showing a more pronounced trend towards lower acceptance rates than USF.

Based on the comparison above, the following patterns emerge: while USF has increased in selectivity during the past eight years, its graduation rate has stayed about the same, resulting in a pronounced drop in the difference between expected and actual graduation rates. At the same time, the percentage of classes with fewer than 20 students has steadily decreased at USF. In contrast, UOP has also increased its graduation rate, and increased the percentage of classes with fewer than 20 students, as it increased its selectivity.

There is one more factor to consider that is not detailed in *U.S. News & World Report*, but that accounts for 10 percent of the magazine's ranking: financial resources. *U.S. News & World Report* defines this variable as the average expenditure per student, including for instruction, research, student services, and related educational expenditures. *U.S. News & World Report* does not provide information about financial resources by individual school other than to say it uses this factor for 10 percent of the ranking. A detailed analysis of this factor is, therefore, beyond the scope of this report. It is illustrative, however, to note that *AGBbenchmarkingservice*, a higher education data gathering organization that draws upon government IPEDS data, found that in 2005–2006, UOP spent \$42,191 per FTE student on overall educational expenses, whereas USF spent \$25,138 per FTE student on overall educational expenses. In future analyses, we will explore this variable more fully.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

As can be seen from the comparison of USF and UOP, three key areas where UOP is higher ranked than USF are student selectivity, graduation rates, and class size less than 20. One important trend at UOP that can be observed when comparing Tables 15 and 19 is that as UOP became more selective, its graduation rates increased as well. This trend runs parallel to the increasingly higher ranking of UOP in comparison to USF.

Assuming that USF is concerned about its ranking by *U.S. News & World Report*, these key factors—student selectivity, graduation rates, and class size—should continue to be addressed. These factors also appear in many other portrayals of USF in professional and public sources. For example, the recently launched Web site by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) includes all three factors.