



Stuart Nachbar
322 Windsor Court
Ewing, NJ 08638
609-406-0062
stuart@educatedquest.com
www.educatedquest.com

PENN STATE WINS THE EDUCATED QUEST EFFICACY BOWL

St. Mary's College of Maryland Impresses

Journalist Malcolm Gladwell, author of four New York Times bestsellers: *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (2000), *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), and *What the Dog Saw: And Other Adventures* (2009), wrote a very interesting piece about college rankings called [The Order of Things](#). In it, among many points, he briefly discussed the subject of efficacy.

Efficacy, in the case of college rankings means the difference between a college's predicted six-year graduation rate, which, Gladwell says, is based on the socio-economic characteristics of a freshman class as well as their high school grades and standardized test scores, and its actual graduation rate. While the difference is numerical, it also represents the importance of the school's efforts, whether they be in the classroom or at student affairs, that help entering freshmen towards graduation.

Gladwell says that *U.S. News'* highest ranked research universities, all private institutions such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, have very high predicted graduation rates and slightly higher actual graduation rates. The difference for Harvard, *U.S. News'* top-rated research university for 2012 is only three points. The predicted graduation rate for students entering Harvard in 2004 was 94 percent; the actual six-year graduation rate was 97 percent. This shows that a) Harvard admitted some very bright students and b) that the university had fairly little impact on graduating them.

Had Harvard's efficacy been zero one could argue that the students could have just as easily signed their name and taken a diploma before they set foot in a classroom. However, you have to get all the way down to the 97th ranked school, the University of California-Riverside, to find an institution where the predicted graduation rate and the actual graduation rate were exactly the same.

Given this information, it was interesting to find out what the efficacy was for each of the public universities visited by EducatedQuest during 2011, as well as St. Mary's College of Maryland. *U.S. News* does not publish this information for the three regional schools we visited: James Madison University, SUNY-Geneseo and The College of New Jersey, nor could we find it on the school's Common Data Sets. It is also interesting to compare the *U.S. News* ranking for the school to the school's efficacy; it provides further proof that the *U.S. News* cumulative rankings tell little about what a particular school may do for the students it admits.

Looking at the table on the next page, it would appear that Penn State-University has, by good measure, the highest level of efficacy of the schools for which we were able to find data. In fact, Penn State's plus-14 was the highest of any Top 50 research university in the *U.S. News* rankings. UNC-Chapel Hill, which was the highest ranked school we have visited, tied for second with the University of Virginia (among the public flagships) behind Penn State. Its plus-5 was also better than any private university in the *U.S. News* Top 50 with the exception of Yeshiva University (NY).



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Reaching outside the *U.S. News* Top 50, UConn and Virginia Tech had higher levels of efficacy than UNC-Chapel Hill.

St. Mary's College of Maryland, our lone national liberal arts school, had an efficacy rating that was not only higher than six of the large schools visited by Educated Quest; the rating was higher than *every Top 50 National Liberal Arts College*, public or private, in *U.S. News* rankings. Interestingly enough, the three National Liberal Arts schools that a) ranked higher than St. Mary's and b) had greater efficacy were Bard College (#51 and +10), Reed College (#57 and +13) and Berea College (#71 and +16) that are known to take other factors besides grades and standardized test scores into account in their admissions process. Bard and Reed are also known for having eclectic as well as liberal student bodies while Berea is a work college where all admitted students must demonstrate financial need and work towards a portion of the costs of their education.

School Name	U.S. News Ranking 2012	Predicted 6-year Graduation Rate, Students entering Fall, 2004	Actual 6-year Graduation Rate, Students entering Fall, 2004	Difference aka Efficacy
Penn State-University Park	45	71%	85%	+14
University of Connecticut	58	72%	81%	+9
St. Mary's College of Maryland	90 (National Liberal Arts Colleges)	69%	77%	+8
Virginia Tech	71	73%	80%	+7
UNC-Chapel Hill	29	85%	90%	+5
University of Delaware	75	73%	77%	+4
Rutgers University-New Brunswick	68	74%	77%	+3
University of Maryland-College Park	55	80%	81%	+1
Binghamton University	90	77%	78%	+1

What are some reasons why one school might have a higher level of efficacy than another? Investments in student services might be one reason. Penn State and UConn are quite aggressive in this arena, as is St. Mary's, a very small school with less than 2,000 students. UNC-Chapel Hill and Virginia Tech also have many traditions that are passed on through student-



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alumni interactions. UConn, which is in a small state with no professional sports franchises, is also the state’s athletic brand. Students and alumni have more opportunities to connect there than at other large schools.

Interestingly four of the top five schools are large “sports schools” that have been quite successful in either football or basketball. St. Mary’s is best known as a sailing power, but sailing is not a major spectator sport.

It’s not possible to say that having a dominant sports team encourages the non-players towards graduation, but it does make students feel prouder about their school. Every college graduate wants to feel proud of their school, but graduates of schools with strong athletic programs are more likely to be proud of their school after they graduate. Curious, we went back into *U.S. News* to find alumni giving rates for each school and ranked them in order to present a contrast with efficacy. St. Mary’s has the highest giving rate, followed by the sports schools.

School Name	Efficacy	Alumni Giving Rate
St. Mary’s College of Maryland	+8	29%
UNC-Chapel Hill	+5	22%
Penn State-University Park	+14	21%
University of Connecticut	+9	17%
Virginia Tech	+7	15%
University of Delaware	+4	10%
Rutgers University-New Brunswick	+3	10%
University of Maryland-College Park	+1	10%
Binghamton University	+1	8%

St. Mary’s high alumni giving rate and high efficacy show that there may be more to a top-performing school than academic and sports. A good support structure builds success, fond memories and loyalty, too.