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## Views

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### Academic Performance and the BCS

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Nothing captures our national enthusiasm for sports more than rankings.

We love them, consume them, argue about them, reject them, and embrace them. The industry of sports ranking keeps many print publication alive, and serves to inform tailgate celebrations throughout the college sports season with the illusion of substantive, scientific calibration of our sports enthusiasm. Among the many rankings, we of course have the BCS system that generates a list of what are presumably the best football teams in America, using methodologies praised by those whose teams score high and attacked by those whose teams fail to make the cut.

Those of us who inhabit the core of the university's academic environment share the enthusiasm for measuring and evaluating the quality of our institutions, although we have less enthusiasm for the endless ranked lists that appear in popular publications.

While some dote on the *U.S. News* rankings, which like their BCS counterpart rely on hugely unreliable opinion surveys, we, however, prefer our own system for evaluating the *Top American Research Universities* that recognizes the importance of successful performance among highly competitive institutions without requiring a simple top to bottom ranking that often distorts more than it informs.

For over ten years, [The Center for Measuring University Performance](#), now located at Arizona State University, has produced an annual report on the *Top American Research Universities* that uses objective data on nine measures to put universities into categories according to their performance.

We measure research, of course, by the amount of research expenditures of each university in two categories: Total Research that includes all sources, and Federal Research that includes the peer reviewed research activities sponsored by the Federal government. In addition we collect information on Endowment, Annual Giving, National Academy Membership, Faculty Awards, Doctoral degrees awarded, Postdoctoral Fellowships supported, and average SAT scores of entering students. For a full discussion of all these measures, see the most recent edition of [The Top American Research Universities](#) (2010) available online.

Our interest in intercollegiate athletics is long-standing as college sports form such a significant element in so many prominent and successful research universities, and we published a discussion of that phenomenon some years ago in [The Sports Imperative in America's Research Universities](#) (2003) available online.

Given the recent attention to conferences and possible conference realignments, as well as national media attention to the academic quality of the universities in each conference, we thought it might be interesting to use our data to construct an index to the academic distinction of the universities in the six major BCS conferences. In our annual report, we group universities into clusters based on their performance among the top 25 or the second 25 on our measures.

A university that is in the top 25 on all nine of our measures, scores a 9 while a university that is in the second category falling between 26 and 50 in national rank would earn a 4.5. Some institutions fall into the top 25 on some measures and the second 25 on others. If they have six measures in the top 25 and three measures in the second 25, we would assign them an academic distinction score of 6 plus 1.5 or 7.5.

By combining these indexes of academic performance for the members of the conferences, we can produce a reliable indicator of the

combined academic distinction of the institutions in each of the six BCS conferences.

It will come as no real surprise to those who watch our academic landscape to discover that the Big 10 leads the field with an academic distinction index of 55, followed closely by the Pac-12 with 48. The ACC falls some distance behind with an index of 28.5 and the SEC a significant distance away at 14, followed closely by the Big-Twelve and the Big East at 12.

As a reference, we also constructed an index for the Ivy League, to put all this into perspective. This premier academic conference would fall into second place, after the Big-10 and before the Pac-12.

Although the decisions about conference alignments and realignments turn primarily on issues of television, audiences, institutional athletic comparability, and of course money, the quality of an institution's athletic conference is one of the elements that helps universities create and sustain a reputation for high quality, much prized by prospective students and alumni.

As these data show, high powered academics and high powered athletics coexist in many first rank institutions. However, we also conclude that having a first rate athletic program is no guarantee of high-powered academics but that many first-rate research universities have no difficulty sustaining outstanding athletic programs.

The following table provides the summary data for each conference. (*Note: This article has been updated to correct an error.*)

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ACADEMIC INDEX FOR THE SIX BCS CONFERENCES AND THE IVY LEAGUE			
Conference / Institution	Index	Number of measures in Top 25	Number of Measures in top 26-50
<b>Big Ten Conference</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>40</b>
Indiana University - Bloomington		0	3
Michigan State University		0	6
Northwestern University		4	5
Ohio State University - Columbus		4	4
Pennsylvania State University - University Park		3	4
Purdue University - West Lafayette		1	5
University of Illinois - Urbana-Champaign		3	4
University of Iowa		0	5
University of Michigan - Ann Arbor		7	1
University of Minnesota - Twin Cities		6	2
University of Wisconsin - Madison		7	1
<b>Pacific-12 Conference</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>20</b>
Arizona State University		1	2
Oregon State University		0	0
Stanford University		9	0
University of Arizona		1	6
University of California - Berkeley		7	1
University of California - Los Angeles		7	1
University of Colorado - Boulder		1	3
University of Oregon		0	0
University of Southern California		5	4
University of Utah		0	2
University of Washington - Seattle		7	1
Washington State University - Pullman		0	0
<b>Atlantic Coast Conference</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>25</b>
Boston College		0	1
Clemson University		0	0
Duke University		7	1
Florida State University		0	0
Georgia Institute of Technology		1	6
North Carolina State University		0	2
University of Maryland - College Park		1	4
University of Miami		0	1
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill		5	3
University of Virginia		2	5
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University		0	2
Wake Forest University		0	0
<b>Southeastern Conference</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>
Auburn University		0	0

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Osborn University		0	0
Louisiana State University - Baton Rouge		0	0
Mississippi State University		0	0
University of Alabama - Tuscaloosa		0	0
University of Arkansas - Fayetteville		0	0
University of Florida		4	3
University of Georgia		0	2
University of Kentucky		0	1
University of Mississippi - Oxford		0	0
University of South Carolina - Columbia		0	1
University of Tennessee - Knoxville		0	1
Vanderbilt University		4	4
<b>Big Twelve Conference</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>
Baylor University		0	0
Iowa State University		0	0
Kansas State University		0	0
Oklahoma State University - Stillwater		0	0
Texas A&M University		3	4
Texas Tech University		0	0
University of Kansas - Lawrence		0	0
University of Missouri - Columbia		0	0
University of Nebraska - Lincoln		0	0
University of Oklahoma - Norman		0	1
University of Texas - Austin		6	1
<b>Big East Conference</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>
DePaul University		0	0
Georgetown University		0	2
Marquette University		0	0
Providence College		0	0
Rutgers the State University of NJ - New Brunswick		1	2
Seton Hall University		0	0
St. John's University (NY)		0	0
Syracuse University		0	0
University of Cincinnati - Cincinnati		0	2
University of Connecticut - Storrs		0	0
University of Louisville		0	0
University of Notre Dame		2	1
University of Pittsburgh - Pittsburgh		4	3
University of South Florida		0	0
Villanova University		0	0
West Virginia University		0	0
<b>Ivy Group</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>12</b>
Brown University		1	2
Cornell University		4	5
Columbia University		9	0
Dartmouth College		2	1
Harvard University		8	1
Princeton University		5	1
University of Pennsylvania		9	0
Yale University		7	2