

# What's a "top college"?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

August 26, 2010

Maybe it's because I need easily digestible print reading for my train commute. Maybe it's my inevitable post-20s loss of hipster cred. Whatever the reason, I seem to be reading a lot less of the humor writing at [McSweeney's Internet Tendency](#) and a lot more of Joel Stein's *Time* column.

I don't often agree with Stein's take on the world, but I enjoy his breezy prose and his punchlines, equal parts smart-aleck and goofball. He took some heat for a [July column](#) that came off as xenophobic, but it's [this week's entry](#) that has me irked. Stein is defending elitism, specifically the Ivy-to-power-elite track that dominates the resumés of most big-time journalists and the people they cover. He begins:

I went to  
a better college than you did. That does not make me a better person than you. It does, however, make me smarter, more knowledgeable, more curious and more ambitious. So, in a lot of ways, better.

He's being funny, of course, in an I-actually-mean-this-but-want-to-play-it-as-a-joke kind of way. He goes on to criticize the "cancer" of anti-elitism and the culture's affection for inclusive mediocrity. Yeah, yeah. We all saw [The Incredibles](#), which at least was more entertaining than Stein at his best, to say nothing of Stein here.

The whole piece is irritating, but I'll focus on "I went to a better college than you did." That's probably true—I liked Wheaton well

enough, but [unlike some chapel speakers](#), I'm not eager to argue that it's superior to Stanford, Stein's alma mater. But Stein is assuming a lot in that statement, namely that the concept of a "better college" is built around solid evidence and consensus.

He takes this for granted, anticipating many objections to his argument but not this one: our American system of understanding which schools are the best is based largely on two mutually reinforcing factors—the opinions of the elites who go to these schools and the rankings put out by *U.S. News & World Report*.

*U.S. News's*

main considerations include the assessments of peer administrators, the proportion of applicants accepted, per-student spending and alumni giving rate. If you think this sounds like an easily manipulated formula for self-perpetuating elitism, education expert Kevin Carey [agrees](#).

While Carey and others were writing their white papers, the *Washington Monthly* began in 2006 publishing an alternative set of annual college rankings—a great example of hybrid advocacy/service journalism. Here are the magazine's [three criteria](#):

- community service: participation in ROTC, alumni in the Peace Corps, work-study money channeled toward service projects
- research: production of research in the sciences and humanities
- social mobility: the matriculation and graduation of lower-income students

In short, schools are ranked as to how well they promote the common good. The fact that this sounds radical is part of the problem.

[WaMo's new rankings are out](#), and Stanford ranks [fourth among national universities](#)—but it's the only school to crack each publication's [top five](#).

Yes, Stein went to a great school by any standard; but there are multiple standards with very different aims and results. It's a shame that for many, "top school" is an uncritical euphemism for "school that

trades in carefully preserved elitism.” Good for the *Washington Monthly* for working to correct this.