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A View from Melrose

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College rankings

In the last few months, Linfield College has received accolades from many directions, especially in the magazines and books that strive to evaluate the quality of American colleges and universities. As we've been praised in major periodicals including *The Atlantic*, *The Princeton Review* and *The Washington Post*, alumni, friends and colleagues across the country have sent me their congratulations. And I've been grateful.

But I've also felt a little sheepish. For one thing, Linfield College didn't transform itself overnight and thereby move up in the esteem of professional journalists.

Yes, *U. S. News & World Reports* did raise our position by 13 places. But I believe that such rankings are foolhardy at best. Invariably the criteria are limited or flawed, and the fact is that most colleges are qualitatively different from each other — not better, not worse, just different. When I talk to a prospective student, I emphasize the culture and character of our college. I certainly describe academic excellence and quality, but the measure of a college goes far beyond the superficial criteria employed by reporters and their editors, whose salaries depend on the annual college rankings issue.

To be sure, external recognition is very important to our college and our alumni. Reputation matters. We spent the better part of last year learning more about our identity and then creating a series of messages that would express it. We believe in the power of our small college, and we are proud to talk about it.

But at Linfield we have always emphasized integrity, substance and fairness. We have never been a place where economic class or luxurious trappings or outside approval were all-important. We are excellent; we are not elitist. We prepare students to become leaders, but our graduates understand that the most critical qualification for leadership is the desire to serve. That is demonstrated again and again by our alumni, most recently perhaps by Cathy Carnahan '73, the national middle school principal of the year.

And so, when a professional colleague calls or emails to congratulate me on our latest rating by a national magazine, I give thanks and smile — but not because I deserve credit, or because I believe in college ranking systems. Rather, I am grateful and proud to be a member of the Linfield community, where we know who we are and why we are here: to strive for excellence in all things, and to transform the lives of our students. 🍷

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– Thomas L. Hellie
President