Sobering statistics

Today the Princeton Review releases its new list of the nation's top 20 "party schools," an annual source of guffaws in workplaces and on college campuses across the USA. How embarrassing for the No. 1 school, a dubious honor that this year falls to Indiana University in Bloomington.

Princeton Review, which is best known for its academic tutoring, published the list despite a request from the American Medical Association to drop the annual rankings. Campus drinking is a serious health hazard made worse by glamorizing alcohol consumption, the AMA argues.

The AMA is right to focus attention on a serious problem. Excessive drinking by college students is a factor in 1,400 deaths and 600,000 assaults each year, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. But the doctors' group goes too far in suggesting that the rankings contribute to the problem.

To the contrary, the Princeton Review does a public service by tipping off student applicants and their parents to a downside of some highly reputable universities. More important, the list shames schools into cracking down on alcohol abuse.

Granted, the rankings are based on an unscientific survey of students — more than 100,000 responses from 345 colleges — about their schools' emphasis on partying vs. academics. Yet, over the years, the list has accurately pinpointed some problem schools and prompted remedial action.

The AMA's own campaign against campus drinking cites 10 schools that have carried out aggressive anti-alcohol-abuse campaigns. Six have made past top-party-school lists; many times for some. That's no coincidence.

After the University of Rhode Island was named the No. 1 party school from 1993 through 1995, the school adopted an alcohol ban, offered help for problem drinkers and established new social activities to discourage drinking. It's off this year's list.

No university wants to be shunned by talented students because of destructive behavior on campus. By forcing schools to face up to their problem, Princeton Review is doing them — and their students — a favor.