Best Colleges

9 WAYS TO WOW ADMISSIONS

THE INSIDE SCOOP ON Financial Aid

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO Four Fabulous Years!
A Focus on Student

Some colleges and universities are much more determined than others to provide freshmen and all undergrads with the best possible educational experience, recognizing that certain enriched offerings, from learning communities and internships to study abroad and senior capstone projects, are linked to student success. Here, U.S. News highlights schools with outstanding examples of eight programs that education experts, including staff members of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, agree are key.

College presidents, chief academic officers and deans of admissions were invited in the spring of 2014 to nominate up to 10 institutions with stellar examples of each, from a list of all bachelor's-granting regionally accredited colleges. Schools that were named the most times in each area are listed in alphabetical order.

First-Year Experience

Orientation can go only so far in making freshmen feel connected. Many schools now build into the curriculum first-year seminars or other academic programs that bring small groups of students together with faculty or staff on a regular basis.

Alverno College (WI)
Appalachian State University (NC)*
Butler University (IN)
Columbia University (NY)
Elon University (NC)
Evergreen State College (WA)*
Indiana U.-Purdue U.-Indianapolis*
Ohio State University-Columbus*
Stanford University (CA)
Univ. of Maryland-College Park*
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*
U. of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*
Univ. of South Carolina*
University of Virginia*
Wagner College (NY)

Learning Communities

In these communities, students typically take two or more linked courses as a group and get to know one another and their professors well. Some learning communities are also residential.

Elon University (NC)
Evergreen State College (WA)*
Indiana U.-Purdue U.-Indianapolis*
Ohio State University-Columbus*
Syracuse University (NY)
Univ. of Maryland-College Park*
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*
Univ. of Missouri*
Univ. of South Carolina*
Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison*
Wagner College (NY)
Yale University (CT)

Service Learning

Required (or for-credit) volunteer work in the community is an instructional strategy in these programs. What's learned in the field bolsters what happens in class, and vice versa.

Berea College (KY)
Brown University (RI)
Butler University (IN)
College of the Ozarks (MO)
Duke University (NC)
Elon University (NC)
Georgetown University (DC)
James Madison University (VA)*
John Carroll University (OH)
Loyola University Maryland
Michigan State University*
Northeastern University (MA)
Portland State University (OR)*
Stanford University (CA)
Tulane University (LA)
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*
U. of North Carolina-Chapel Hill*
University of Pennsylvania

Internships

Schools nominated in this category require or encourage students to apply what they're learning in the classroom to work in the real world through closely supervised internships or practicums, or through cooperative education, in which one period of study typically alternates with one of work.

Belmont University (TN)
Berea College (KY)
Butler University (IN)
Cornell University (NY)
Drexel University (PA)
Elon University (NC)
Georgia Institute of Technology*
Northeastern University (MA)
Purdue Univ.-West Lafayette (IN)*
Rochester Inst. of Technology (NY)
University of Cincinnati*
Univ. of Southern California
Wagner College (NY)

Senior Capstone

Whether they're called a senior capstone or go by some other name, these culminating experiences ask students nearing the end of their college years to create a project that integrates and synthesizes what they've learned. The project might be a thesis, a performance or an exhibit of artwork.

Brown University (RI)
Carleton College (MN)
College of Wooster (OH)
Elon University (NC)
Kalamazoo College (MI)
Northeastern University (MA)
Portland State University (OR)*
Princeton University (NJ)
Stanford University (CA)
Yale University (CT)
Study Abroad

Programs at these schools involve substantial academic work abroad for credit—a year, a semester or an intensive experience equal to a course—and considerable interaction with the local culture.

American University (DC)
Arcadia University (PA)
Beloit College (WI)
Boston University
Butler University (IN)
Carleton College (MN)
Centre College (KY)
College of St. Benedict (MN)
Dartmouth College (NH)
Dickinson College (PA)
Elon University (NC)
Goucher College (MD)
Kalamazoo College (MI)
Lee University (TN)
Lewis & Clark College (OR)
Macalester College (MN)
Michigan State University*
Middlebury College (VT)
New York University
Northeastern University (MA)
Oberlin College (OH)
Stanford University (CA)
St. John's University (MN)
St. Olaf College (MN)
Syracuse University (NY)
University of Chicago
University of Evansville (IN)
Univ. of Minnesota-Twin Cities*
University of Texas–Austin*
Webster University (MO)

Undergraduate Research/Creative Projects

Independently or in small teams, and mentored by a faculty member, students do intensive and self-directed research or creative work that results in an original scholarly paper or product that can be formally presented on or off campus.

Butler University (IN)
California Institute of Technology
Calvin College (MI)
Carleton College (MN)
Carnegie Mellon University (PA)

College of Wooster (OH)
Creighton University (NE)
Dartmouth College (NH)
Duke University (NC)
Elon University (NC)
Furman University (SC)
Grinnell College (IA)
Harvard University (MA)
Hope College (MI)
James Madison University (VA)*
Johns Hopkins University (MD)
Massachusetts Inst. of Technology
Oberlin College (OH)
Ohio State University–Columbus*
Princeton University (NJ)
Rice University (TX)
Stanford University (CA)
Trinity University (TX)
Truman State University (MO)*
University of California–Berkeley*
Univ. of California–Los Angeles*
Univ. of Maryland–Baltimore County*
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor*
U. of North Carolina–Chapel Hill*
University of Washington*
Williams College (MA)
Yale University (CT)

Writing in the Disciplines

These colleges typically make writing a priority at all levels of instruction and across the curriculum. Students are encouraged to produce and refine various forms of writing for a range of audiences in different disciplines.

Brown University (RI)
Carnegie Mellon University (PA)*
Clemson University (SC)*
Cornell University (NY)
Duke University (NC)
George Mason University (VA)*
Hamilton College (NY)
Harvard University (MA)
Princeton University (NJ)
University of California–Davis*
Washington State University*

* Denotes additional programs for students with specific interests.
YOUR GOAL:
Four Fabulous Years

AS YOU SEARCH FOR A GOOD FIT, LOOK FOR PROGRAMS THAT AIM TO ENGAGE AND BOND STUDENTS

By CHRISTOPHER J. GEARON

Consider this shocking stat as you shop for a college: Fully one-third of freshmen don’t return for sophomore year. And only 61 percent of undergraduates get a degree within six years.

So your guidance counselor isn’t kidding when she says your job is to find the right college, one that’s a great fit for you. Not your parents, not your friends – you. But you also might want to check out what each of your
Service learning

A University of Maryland–Baltimore County summer education practicum includes service experience in a local school. Students also meet to discuss what they’re learning; below, they hear from psych major Monique Brewer.
schools of interest is doing to make itself “sticky.” The goal “is to get students connected,” says Martha McCaughey, a sociology professor and faculty coordinator of the required first-year seminar at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. The semesterlong discussion-based class pairs small groups of freshmen with faculty members teaching a topic they are passionate about.

“It boosted my excitement to learn more,” says Eguono Akpoduduo, a 2014 graduate in psychology from Raleigh who picked a course that explored the science, psychology and philosophy of consciousness from among 100-plus topics. The seminar format emphasizes communication and writing skills and introduces students to research tools and methods they’ll need to be successful scholars. ASU’s first-year retention rate is 88 percent.

The reasons students drop out or transfer run the gamut, of course – from family issues and money problems to loneliness and academic struggles. Some can’t be overcome. But research has made it pretty clear that creating bonds “both academically and socially” is key to success in college, says Alexander McCormick, director of the annual National Survey

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335,000 freshmen and seniors at 568 schools, designed to find out if students are getting the learning experiences that research shows matter, revealed that freshmen who participated in at least one high-impact practice were more satisfied with their college experience and more likely to say they’d choose the same school again. Better yet, “experience at least two,” McCormick says, one when you’re a freshman and one in your major.

Retention and graduation rates certainly merit comparison. Columbia University, the University of Chicago and Yale University can
all boast that 99 percent of their first-year students come back, and all but a few of them graduate. But the rates at many places run much lower. "More than half our students aren’t ready for college and only half our students graduate within six years," says Ken O’Donnell, senior director of student engagement and academic initiatives and partnerships for the California State University System, where retention rates range from 92 percent at California Polytechnic State University–San Luis Obispo to 71 percent at Cal State–Bakersfield. The 23-school system is raising its investment in high-impact practices by 40 percent this school year, to $12 million.

If schools on your shortlist have a low freshman retention or graduation rate, it’s smart to ask the admissions office why. And ask for details about programs aimed at bringing the rates up. Many schools can say they’ve added these practices, but “the quality varies a lot,” cautions Debra Humphreys, vice president for policy and public engagement at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The homesickness and rocky adjustment to college-level work many freshmen face can be eased by “first-year experiences” like the seminars at ASU and others that regularly mix small groups of students and faculty to engage in critical inquiry, writing and collaborative learning. Some institutions, including Ohio State, Syracuse University in New York, Elon University in North Carolina and Vanderbilt in Tennessee, emphasize “learning communities” for freshmen (older students, too), in which groups of students who share an interest take two or more linked classes together and get to know one another and their professors well. The idea: to keep the discussions going after class ends.

**Living and learning together**

Many of these schools stretch the concept into “living-learning communities,” so that classmates who study together live together, too, and those conversations can carry over into the dorm. The University of Maryland offers 25 to 30 such residential options, for example, focused around themes ranging from social change to globalization and women in engineering; about half of the 4,000 freshmen join one. Members live on the same floor or in the same dorm for their first two years. The communities provide themed experiences (the global issues community might take a field trip to the World Bank or an embassy in nearby Washington, D.C., for example, or hold a session on international internships), and students take a class related to the theme each semester.

“We bonded almost immediately,” says Beena Raghavendran, a Maryland Honors College senior from Mason, Ohio, double-majoring in journalism and government and politics. She chose the “Design, Cultures and Creativity” community, an interdisciplinary program focused on exploring the digital world and emerging technologies. Maryland boasts nearly a 95 percent retention rate, while 97 percent of those in the Honors College return.

Building community service into the coursework is another method a whole range of schools, including Brown University in Rhode Island, the University of Michigan and James Madison University in Virginia, are using to engage students. A sociology class might operate a food pantry, for example; an architecture class might design a green community center. By supplementing material covered in class with a team effort to actually solve problems in the community, service-learning courses help make “what’s happening in the textbooks come alive,” says Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College in New York City, a liberal arts school considered a leader in the practice.

The class discussion, in turn, adds meaning to the fieldwork. University of Maryland–Baltimore County senior Monique Brewer is a psychology and education major who took a service-learning practicum over the summer that involved assisting at a local elementary school with enrichment activities in reading and other subjects. The meetings of practicum members, she notes, offered them all the chance to “actively reflect on their service” and better “guide their own learning.”

Wagner College tees up service learning from the get-go, combining it with first-year learning communities. Students choose a community and take courses that combine two seemingly disparate topics, such as introductory environmental biology and introductory economics, and consider them in an integrated manner – focusing on environmental sustainability, for example. The service component for that class gets students interacting with families and local officials and chemical company representatives in an area impacted by high cancer rates, researching how to improve community health, developing policy papers and taking ideas to members of Congress.

“I fell in love with the community and fell in love with teaching English and Spanish,” says Kellie Griffith, a 2014
Wagner grad from Long Island who spent time working in the Port Richmond community near campus. As part of her first-year learning community combining courses in Spanish and philosophy, she studied contemporary moral ethics and wrestled with immigration issues in class, then saw firsthand how existing policies affect the lives of area immigrants by volunteering at an immigrant advocacy center.

Academic frustration can certainly derail the best-laid plans, so many schools are greatly strengthening their advisory systems and revamping remedial education. It’s become common for faculty members teaching first-year seminars to also take on advisory duties for students in the class, for example. At Arizona State, eAdvisor, an online system, maps the route to a degree and sends out an alert if a student loses his or her way. Challenging core classes times a week instead of three,” says Tom Sugar, senior vice president of Complete College America, which advocates corequisite remediation as one way to boost college completion and close attainment gaps. Another innovation: Summer bridge programs that include four to six weeks of intensive coursework and tutoring, and give incoming students the added boost of a comfort level with dorm life and some friendships.

Beyond the first year

Practices that benefit older students, both because they make the educational experience more interesting and because they burnish the bona fides needed to land a job, include study abroad, the opportunity to conduct undergraduate research, an internship program and a capstone program that asks students to integrate and apply what they’ve learned in a culminating project. It was “a stressful process at times, but 100 percent worth it,” says Zoë Zwegat, a 2014 grad of the College of Wooster in anthropology, of her project: a 100-plus page thesis on historical Japanese woodblock prints and their impact on gender roles and national identity.

The Ohio college requires all students to seal their undergrad careers with Independent Study at Wooster, which carries through all of senior year and includes weekly advising sessions with a faculty mentor. President Grant Cornwell thinks the program has a lot to do with the fact that more than 90 percent of Wooster grads get a job or go on for more education within six months of graduation. Clemson University in South Carolina, Portland State University in Oregon and Princeton University in New Jersey are a few other schools with capstone programs.

For many students, of course, it’s a budget crisis that throws them off track. Cord Speck, who just completed his bachelor’s in exercise science at Georgia State, thought last summer that he might not make it, since money was tight. But then the school gave him $2,000, which “helped out big time.” Georgia State had been dropping 1,000-plus students for nonpayment each semester, including many seniors. “We realized that in many cases the balances they owed were less than $300,” says Vice Provost Timothy Renick. “They just needed a helping hand to cover the gap.”

In 2011, officials began calling students minutes after they’d been dropped from a class to let them know that the gap in funding had been covered. Last year, the school awarded 2,600 Panther Retention Grants averaging about $900 each. And some 700 students collected a diploma who otherwise would have missed graduation.