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How Colleges and Students Differ: Liberal Arts Colleges & Research Universities

By Sally P. Springer, Marion R. Franck, Jon Reider — John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Institutional mission—the goals a college sets for itself—is key to understanding how colleges differ. An important distinction is between a liberal arts college and a research university. Most selective institutions fall into one of these two categories.

Liberal Arts Colleges

Undergraduate education is the primary, and often the only, mission of a liberal arts college. Union College, Macalester College, Davidson College, Reed College, and Claremont McKenna College are examples of selective liberal arts colleges. They award most of their degrees in the liberal arts disciplines, which include the social sciences and sciences as well as humanities and arts. This distinguishes them from colleges with programs that lead to more practical outcomes, such as engineering or business—although there are exceptions. Smith College and Swarthmore College, for example, offer engineering in addition to their regular liberal arts subjects. But these programs are small relative to the total number of degrees offered at those schools. Most liberal arts colleges enroll only undergraduates, but some have small graduate programs, primarily at the master's degree level. Almost 90 percent of the 220-plus liberal arts colleges in the United States are private.

I think you build self-confidence at a small college. You get the message you're special. - Parent of student at a small liberal arts college

Liberal arts colleges provide students with a sound foundation in core disciplines such as English, philosophy, history, psychology, music, physics, and mathematics. They also offer interdisciplinary programs that draw from several fields, like women's studies and philosophy of science. Liberal arts programs are not career-focused. They assume that a broad non-vocationally oriented education is excellent preparation for any later career choice. And their graduates bear this out by succeeding in all walks of life.

Enrollment at liberal arts colleges typically ranges from about 1,000 to 2,500 undergraduates. They usually have small classes taught exclusively by faculty members. Small classes generally mean more opportunities to write and to contribute to class discussion. Classes are often seminars rather than lectures, leading to greater student engagement.

Since many liberal arts colleges are located in small towns and in suburbs, student life tends to center on the college and its extracurricular activities. Obviously, a smaller school cannot offer as many courses in any subject as are offered at larger institutions, but undergraduates only take a dozen or so courses in their major anyway, so there are always enough courses to satisfy an eager learner. In addition, students get to know their teachers and classmates well and form close bonds. In turn, this develops the strong sense of community that is the identifying mark of a liberal arts college.

Many liberal arts colleges have athletic programs at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III level. The NCAA divides its member teams into three

categories, Division I, Division II, and Division III, in descending order of athletic competitiveness. With fewer students and a less intense level of competition than that found at Division I schools, at liberal arts colleges a higher percentage of their students can participate in varsity-level competition.

The same principle applies to other extracurricular activities. With fewer students vying for a newspaper job or a seat in the violin section of the orchestra, a greater percentage of students can get involved. But the scale of the activity may be smaller. The campus newspaper at a liberal arts college may come out just once a week, while a larger school is likely to have a daily (and bigger) paper. There may also be fewer organized activities to choose from at a liberal arts college compared to a larger school, but again, regardless of the absolute number, students always find many options for involvement at a liberal arts college. Students are also encouraged to start new activities if they want to. You'll keep bumping into your friends and acquaintances, even in diverse activities, because the community is small.

Research Universities

In contrast to liberal arts colleges, research universities have three connected missions: research, public service, and teaching undergraduate and graduate students. Research generates new knowledge, and public service means that knowledge is shared with society at large. All of the Ivy League schools, Duke University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Virginia are examples of selective research universities. An institution is classified as a research university based on the number of doctoral degrees it awards each year across a number of fields. About 260 institutions fall into this category: two-thirds are public, and one-third are private.

For our faculty, research intensity is higher, and they are expected to continue research throughout their entire career. It's harder to stay current at a small school. - Dean at a large research university

Faculty members at research universities are evaluated on the quality and quantity of their research as well as the quality of their teaching. At the strongest and best-known research universities, faculty members do research at the frontiers of their fields using well-equipped research laboratories and libraries. This does not mean that undergraduates are ignored at these schools, however. You are still important, but you are not the center of the enterprise, as you are in high school or at a liberal arts college. In fact, learning from professors who are active in research is a valuable opportunity for undergraduates, particularly those majoring in the sciences or social sciences where new research can rapidly change a field. It is exciting to learn from teachers who are doing research that will appear in tomorrow's headlines and next year's textbooks, and who can convey, firsthand, what discovery and scholarship are all about. Research universities offer many opportunities for undergraduates, not just graduate students, to become involved in faculty research projects, but you have to be energetic in seeking them out. Liberal arts colleges also offer many research opportunities, but their variety and scope will generally be more modest, particularly in the sciences.

Research universities come in all sizes. They range from quite small (Cal Tech, for example, has fewer than 1,000 undergraduate students and about 1,200 graduate students) to medium (Harvard University has about 6,600 undergraduates and 10,000 graduate students) to very large (University of Texas, Austin, has about 37,000 undergraduates and 11,000 graduate

students). Most research universities have 15,000 or more students enrolled, graduate and undergraduate combined.

Classes at research universities, particularly introductory classes, may be quite large, although smaller discussion sections usually accompany large lecture classes. Research university faculty generally teach fewer classes per term because of their other responsibilities, and they may be less accessible to students than faculty at liberal arts colleges because of these additional responsibilities. How you feel about this will depend on how much contact you want with professors, and how active you will be in dealing with the relative anonymity of large classes. Students at research universities will also probably find themselves in discussion sections or perhaps even classes taught by graduate students serving as teaching assistants (TAs). Research universities vary greatly in how much they use TAs for undergraduate instruction. While often enthusiastic and committed teachers, TAs have less teaching experience than faculty, and they may be hard to find when you need letters of recommendation for a job or graduate school.

Research universities often have honors programs or other special opportunities for their most academically motivated and able students. To a degree, they are trying to replicate part of the experience of a small college. Good examples can be found at the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University, Arizona State University, and UCLA. These programs can be wonderful opportunities for highly qualified students to learn in smaller classes and receive the personal attention of a liberal arts college in a setting that also provides the advantages of a large research university.

What's in a Name?

Don't let the name of an institution mislead you. Bucknell University, for example, is a liberal arts college, while Dartmouth College is a medium-sized research university. You'll need to look deeper than its name to determine a school's mission. It also pays to watch out for similar names that can be easily confused. As examples, Trinity College and Wesleyan University are both in Connecticut, but Trinity University and Wesleyan College are in Texas and Ohio, respectively. The University of Miami is located in Florida, but Miami University is located in Ohio.

What Are Liberal Arts?

From the My College Guide 2011 edition <<http://mycollegeguide.org/articles/8/145/what-are-liberal-arts>>
By Julie Bogart

IT'S INEVITABLE. When you tell someone that you're planning to major in a subject like history or English, you get asked the dreaded question: "What are you going to do with that?"

You don't really need to have an answer. If you want to major in a liberal arts subject, go for it. The practical stuff, like getting a job, will work itself out. In fact, liberal arts graduates are well suited for today's job market.

Why? Because the state of the economy, technology and a broader global perspective have made liberal arts majors—and the wide range of skills that they impart—more essential than ever before.

"A liberal arts education is more important than ever because with the recent economic downturn, we witnessed the decline (and, in some cases, the elimination) of several important industries, leaving highly skilled employees out of work in careers where job growth is not expected," says Karen Abigail Williams, director of admission at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts in New York.

Employers are recognizing that while employees can be taught the technical skills of a job, the "people" and communication skills that liberal arts majors possess aren't as easy to find or teach.

What do colleges mean by "liberal arts"?

In its broadest of terms, it's an education that provides an overview of the arts, humanities (the study of the human condition), social sciences, mathematics and natural sciences. "Artes liberals are rooted in classical antiquity and refer to the general skills (=artes) a free person (=liberals) needed to contribute meaningfully to society," shared Concordia University associate professor, Dr. Michael Thomas. "Today, we intend for this to translate into life-long, self-motivated learners who can flourish in—even transform—the world."

Some of the more common majors include: anthropology, communication, English, history, language and linguistics, philosophy, political science, math, psychology and sociology. Unlike the colleges and universities that offer these majors, other schools are strictly liberal arts colleges—meaning that all of their majors are considered liberal arts.

Michael Kerchner, associate professor of psychology at Washington College in Maryland, explains that his school is a college of the liberal arts. "What this means to the faculty—and the students as well — is that no matter what course or what department or discipline a course may reside [in], the focus is cross- or interdisciplinary. This requires that our students have an appreciation for how multiple disciplines may contribute to fuller understanding of many complex problems, such as...international conflicts."

"A liberal arts education gives students an opportunity to explore a variety of academic disciplines rather than following a specific rubric of courses that train them for a career," says Cindy Peterson, director of admissions at Piedmont College in Georgia. "Employers today are seeking qualified graduates who have a broad base of knowledge, whose undergraduate experience has granted them the critical thinking skills, and an understanding and appreciation of diversity, ethical issues and service to others."

What do liberal arts majors learn?

A better question would be: What won't you learn? One of the benefits of a liberal arts education is the chance to explore multiple areas of interest. You'll also acquire the skills you'll need for lifelong learning—like research, writing and communication.

Says Victoria McGillin, vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at Linfield College in Oregon, "Our [liberal arts majors] learn to read materials closely, meaningfully analyze problems, apply systematic approaches to the resolution of those problems and communicate solutions to others."

David Kogler, associate director of admission at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, gives the following example of this: "Instead of learning only about business at a business school, a liberal arts degree will teach you about business as well as the history, politics and other areas that influence and shape the world of business."

Bob Murray, dean of enrollment management at Illinois Wesleyan University, believes that a liberal arts education is more critical today than ever before. "A liberal arts education develops both the left and right side of the brain. Effective problem solving requires strong analytical and creative processes. Developing critical thinking skills and being able to comprehend various subjects and perspectives adds to the ability of liberal arts graduates to successfully connect the dots between multiple disciplines. Students benefit from being in small, interactive classes with highly qualified faculty who teach them to discriminate and constructively challenge what they read, see and hear. Learning and experiencing global perspectives enhances their ability to communicate with the highly diverse communities we live in."

So, it's not only what you learn that's valuable, but also the higher order thinking and communication skills you develop, like learning how to adapt to different situations, that will ultimately lead to your success.

What kinds of jobs do liberal arts majors get?

Because the liberal arts cover such a broad spectrum of subjects, there's no one set career path.

"Our majors find themselves attracted to a wide range of professional careers, such as public service, military service, medicine, national security or law," says Kerchner.

If you're worried about competing against those with more "practical" or narrowly defined degrees, such as business or engineering, don't be. "Liberal arts majors are as competitive as any other student entering the job market," assures Williams.

Peter Osgood, director of admission at Harvey Mudd College (CA) says that one reason for this is that liberal arts disciplines require the student to think about, write about, and to understand a broad range of topics from many perspectives. "They have to come to some generalizations and realizations about the material they are studying, rather than simply learning how to do a specific task," says Osgood. "Since technology moves society along at a faster and faster pace, the more 'practical' education is more likely to become obsolete sooner. Liberal arts disciplines better prepare the student for change."

As Osgood explains, 40 years ago few could not have anticipated a world in which the Internet existed or that one could use a portable device to call a friend, text or tweet (terms that did not exist). "The only place to watch a movie was in a cinema, not a cell phone," he says. "Now that my own children are in high school, they can't imagine what innovations will occur by the time they hit the middle of life. Rather than having my children focus their

learning on something transitory, like how to use certain kinds of computer languages or communications strategies that may become obsolete, I am convinced that they will have longer, more productive careers by understanding people and adapting the technical skills to that knowledge."

"Liberal arts graduates regularly obtain positions in a multitude of settings, many of which do not seem — at first glance — to be connected to their majors," explains Maria J. de la Camara, dean of Benedictine University's College of Liberal Arts. "A number of well known CEOs majored in liberal arts fields and became leaders of major corporations."

How does a liberal arts degree fare against more specialized degrees?

According to Williams, liberal arts majors are "more likely" than their counterparts to have at least one year of professional experience through an internship, or to travel abroad at least once during their enrollment, because the nature of the major leads students to pursue opportunities in their areas of interest while continuing their studies.

"This professional exposure and global awareness may actually make liberal arts majors more competitive than students who simply completed a series of prescribed courses without taking the opportunity to explore their interests beyond the classroom," adds Williams.

William Brown, Jr., vice president of enrollment at Lebanon Valley College, believes liberal arts majors are among the most "work-ready" graduates. "At most liberal arts colleges, students will receive a balance between professional preparation and broad intellectual growth. Students start their working career with solid pre-professional preparation in their field, as well as experience across a wide curriculum. Specific skills that most liberal arts grads 'take to work' include critical thinking and the ability to communicate effectively verbally, as well as in writing."

Cynthia Favre, career counselor at Gustavus Adolphus College (MN), concedes that marketing a liberal arts degree is more challenging than some other educational programs. "The good news is that liberal arts candidates are well prepared to do this," she says. "The very...skills they develop through their college experience are those needed for successful engagement with the job search process."

"The national research advises us that while liberal arts students may be slightly slower in securing the first job, they advance and are retained at a higher rate than those more narrowly educated," says McGillin.

Kogler explains the reason for this: "Since most people change professions in their lifetime...it's smart to be adaptable. Studies in the liberal arts...give students greater flexibility, more skills, and better marketability."

Liberal arts majors may also be more creative, says Williams, which will help them in the job market. "[They] generally take creative, unconventional approaches to solving problems, and they are more likely to be employed in positions where they have a creative or intellectual connection to the work. These skills are transferable to any industry."

How do you know if a liberal arts major is right for you?

If you feel passionately about a subject, such as psychology or economics, your choice of major may be clear (as long as you don't let fears of "impracticality" get in your way). But if you're unsure or undecided, a liberal arts major is a good choice because it won't limit you to a prescribed subject or career.

"High school students don't typically have enough resources or experience to determine what their lifelong career interest will be," says Kogler. "By attending a liberal arts college, you

have permission to explore, reflect and ask what your passion is. Once you've determined your passion, choosing a major and finding a career will be much easier."

"The four years you spend at college are among the most formative in your life, and in many respects, they may be the final chance that you have to both broaden your experiences and to delve deeply into a topic that excites you," says Kerchner. "Challenge yourself in as many ways as you can."

"A successful career requires that you continually develop your skills and understanding, often in areas that aren't your specialty," says Brad Andrews, vice president for enrollment and student life at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wis. "Liberal arts study provides both general and career-specific knowledge, along with tools that help you learn more effectively, create new ideas, and readily adapt to change throughout your life."

"Talk to as many teachers, employers, and guidance counselors as you can," says Brown. "Then meet with some college representatives (admission staff). These conversations will help bring you to an understanding of the possibilities for you."

So the next time someone asks you what you plan to do with a major in the liberal arts, go ahead and tell them the truth: Anything and everything.

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What is a Liberal Arts College?

Liberal Arts School Review <<http://www.liberalartscollegereview.com/articles/1>>

A liberal arts college is a four-year higher-learning institution, usually found in the United States. These colleges emphasize a broad undergraduate education. This means that students often take a number of classes which may not directly relate to the student's career goals. By taking a wide variety of classes, students at liberal arts colleges aim to receive a well-rounded education. While there are professional training programs available at some of these colleges, specialized programs are usually not emphasized.

Understanding The Philosophy Of A Liberal Arts Education

To better understand what a liberal arts college is, you have to understand the meaning of the word liberal when used to describe education and you also need to understand the history of liberal study. The word liberal in the term liberal college is derived from the Latin word *liberalis*. When the word *liberalis* is used to describe something, it is referring to something that is appropriate for free men.

Historically, liberal arts studies consisted of both trivium and quadrivium subjects. The trivium liberal arts studies included grammar, logic and rhetoric. The quadrivium liberal arts studies included music, astronomy, arithmetic and geometry.

During the early part of the history of the United States, Americans became interested in developing institutions of higher learning dedicated to liberal arts studies. The first liberal arts colleges were established in New England more than 300 years ago as a result of this increased desire for formal education.

The liberal arts colleges that were founded at this time served the educational needs of those who would become the nations future leaders and businessmen. The goal of these institutions was to provide their students with a well-rounded education in addition to personal development.

Today's liberal arts colleges offer educational programs to people from all different backgrounds and just recently these institutions have been established in countries other than America. You can now also find liberal arts colleges in countries such as Canada, Russia and Germany.

A Liberal Arts Education versus a University Education

Oftentimes people wonder which is better a liberal arts college or a university? The answer to this question depends on a person's specific personal needs, educational needs and career goals. Liberal arts colleges and universities are very different educational entities and it is important to understand the differences between the two.

One of the most notable differences between a liberal arts college and a university is the size. Liberal arts colleges maintain a smaller student population with the goal of achieving a lower student-to-teacher ratio and creating a more intimate sense of community. This allows the college faculty to take an active role in the education of every individual student and allows the student body to form close-knit relationships. Because of this, liberal arts colleges may offer a more personalized learning experience for their students. In addition to a more personal educational experience, the smaller size of a liberal arts college can also provide a

sense of security to students who like to see familiar faces rather than masses of people they don't recognize.

Another difference between liberal arts colleges and universities is their approach to studies. Liberal arts colleges normally require their students to take a wide variety of courses even courses that are unrelated to their majors and their career goals. This gives students exposure to a variety of liberal arts studies and not just the study of their particular major. The reasons for this have to do with the philosophy of a liberal arts education.

Most liberal arts colleges do not believe that the purpose of a college education is that of job training. Instead, a college education should make a student a more well-rounded person and scholar. These schools believe that career-specific training should primarily be obtained in grad school, through internships or in the workplace, and not during a student's four-year college education. Because of this, liberal arts colleges are able to provide their students with an education that offers more breadth than the educations offered at big universities.

That being said, liberal arts colleges and universities both have their pros and their cons. To make an informed choice when it comes to choosing which type of college to attend, it is important to understand the pros and cons of each type of learning institution.

Liberal Arts Considerations

Liberal arts colleges are definitely unique and often differ greatly from large universities. Here is an overview of the considerations when evaluating liberal arts colleges.

Liberal Arts College Pros

- A smaller class environment allows for greater student/teacher interaction and a more individualized learning experience.
- The wide variety of course requirements of liberal arts colleges provides students with a broader base of knowledge to draw from.
- Most liberal arts colleges are located in small towns or cities. Many students and parents feel this allows liberal arts colleges to provide a safer environment than the big-city colleges can offer.
- Some believe that liberal arts colleges are better at teaching students how to think for themselves instead of just accepting everything they are told. A liberal arts college teaches its students that complex problems may not have simple answers, that there are alternative viewpoints that may be valid, that information must be synthesized in order to make informed decisions, how to solve problems creatively and how to use resources selectively.

The explanation for this is clearly defined in an article written by Thomas E. Cronin, originally published in the Seattle Times and recently featured on the website of the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. Cronin states, the liberal-arts tradition is an educational philosophy more than a body of knowledge and is as much concerned with the process of learning as it is with content. Thus, this approach views learning as a verb rather than a noun, as an ongoing process of questioning, searching, probing, exploring. Since they are arts, the liberal arts aim at active engagement rather than passive reception, at understanding rather than the memorizing of neatly packaged facts, figures and equations.

This is part of the reason why so many liberal arts colleges encourage thesis writing.

- Because liberal arts colleges tend to be smaller, they commonly offer a more personal relationship between the students and the faculty and staff. While students often need to seek out assistance from the faculty at larger universities, the faculties at smaller liberal arts colleges tend to be more involved with each student's individual education.
- Classes at liberal arts colleges are almost always taught by college professors. Many universities have graduate programs that use teaching assistants who often hold class for university professors. Since it is rare to see a liberal arts college with a graduate program, it is also rare to see a teacher's aide teaching a class.
- Because liberal arts colleges have smaller student bodies, these college students learn how to integrate themselves into a diverse society. In a university, the vastness of the student body makes it easy to find people you would normally fit in with. At a liberal arts college, you learn how to relate to those you might not normally associate with.

Liberal Arts College Considerations

- Some students find the class choices offered by liberal arts colleges to be limited. This is largely due in part to the fact that specialized courses are not offered.
- Because liberal arts colleges tend to be quite small, it can be harder for a student to find a group of people to fit in with. However, it is important to note that this drawback can actually be a benefit in disguise. Due to the limited size of the student body, a student learns to integrate into society rather than segregate from it.
- Universities often have better funding than liberal arts colleges. Because of this, they often have better equipment and newer facilities. This is largely due to the fact that universities tend to have more endowments than liberal arts colleges have since universities have a significantly greater number of students and a greater number of alumni. Another reason for this fact is that universities tend to receive more grants than liberal arts colleges largely due to the fact that universities often participate in a higher number of research projects.
- Universities tend to put a great emphasis on research. A large part of university funding comes in the form of grants. In order to receive a grant, the school must qualify for it and must stand out from the other universities applying for the grant. Because of this, it is not uncommon to see university professors heading major research projects or publishing acclaimed literature. This results in university professors being better known than the professors at liberal arts colleges.
- If a student wants to pursue a technical career path, a university offers classes more tailored to the student's specific career needs. Since liberal arts colleges do not focus on career-related classes as heavily as universities do, students who do not want to study subjects unrelated to their career goals may prefer the curriculum of a university.

What You Need To Know About Liberal Arts Colleges

When considering a liberal arts college, there are some things that are important to know. It is critical that you learn how much you should expect to spend in tuition, as well as other important liberal arts college statistics.

Average Tuition Costs

The cost of attending a liberal arts college depends on which college a student wishes to enroll in. The top-ranked liberal arts colleges tend to charge annual tuitions in the range of \$30,000 to \$35,000 per year.

It is important to note that just because a school has listed an annual tuition of thirty thousand dollars, it does not mean that it is the actual tuition a student will pay. The percentage of students receiving financial aid ranges from college to college, but most liberal

arts colleges have anywhere from thirty to sixty percent of their students receiving some form of financial aid, with the average financial aid grant being approximately \$4,000.¹ There are a number of financial assistance programs available to college students and many liberal arts colleges charge what is called a discounted tuition, meaning certain students may be given a tuition discount to bring down the expense of the tuition.

Liberal Arts College Statistics

The statistics regarding liberal arts colleges are quite impressive. When you consider that only three percent of college grads come from liberal arts colleges, the fact that eight percent of the nations wealthiest CEOs and nineteen percent of United States presidents graduated from liberal arts colleges supports the notion that liberal arts colleges take education and a personal success seriously.

Here are some more interesting liberal arts college statistics:

- Between the years 1960 and 1998, twenty-three percent of the Pulitzer Prize winners in drama were graduates of liberal arts colleges.³
- In a recent two-year period, students from liberal arts colleges made up 20 percent of Phi Beta Kappa inductions.³
- The percentage of liberal arts college graduates who go on to obtain a Ph.D. is almost twice as high as the percentage of university graduates who do so.³
- Famous people like Roy E. Disney, Kris Kristofferson, Kristin Forbes, Mark Hopkins, Charles Webb, Dan Brown, David Linde, Madeleine Albright, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Diane Sawyer, Chevy Chase, Woodrow Wilson, Joss Whedon, Kerri Green, Lisa Kudrow, Stacy London and Meryl Streep all attended a liberal arts college.⁵

In Conclusion

Now that you have knowledge of what a liberal arts college is and a general understanding of what makes a liberal arts college so different from a university, it is easier to decide whether or not a liberal arts college would meet your needs. A liberal arts education has so much to offer and if the atmosphere of this type of institution meets the personal needs of a college student, it can make for a wonderful educational experience that will lead to a lifetime of success.

1. Information obtained by comparing the percentage of students receiving financial aid at a number of liberal arts colleges and the average financial aid grant at each of those colleges.
2. From *Distinctively American: The Liberal Arts College* by Eugene M. Lang
3. Information obtained from CollegeNews.org
4. Based on interview with Greg Prince in University Business Magazines January 2004 issue.
5. Information obtained from alumni lists of some of the top liberal arts colleges.