

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT COLLEGES THAT CHANGE LIVES-PART IV

In this last of a four-part series, we will take a look at five of the Southwestern and Western colleges that appear in Loren Pope's book, *Colleges That Change Lives*. We have previously reported on the schools in the Northeast, the South and the Midwest.

Austin College (TX)
Evergreen State College (WA)
Reed College (OR)
St. John's College (MN)
Southwestern University (TX)
Whitman College (WA)

Among these schools, Whitman College is ranked 42nd among national liberal arts colleges in *U.S. News* 2012 college guide, Reed ranks 57th, though the college administration has publicly expressed its opposition to the magazine's ranking formula. Austin ranks 64th while Southwestern ranks 71st. St. John's ranks 20th and Evergreen State ranks 31st among the regional universities located in the West and Southwest. Whitman ranks 31st among *Kiplinger's* Best Values in Private Liberal Arts Colleges, while Reed ranks 47th. Reed also ranks 18th among *Washington Monthly's* Top Liberal Arts Colleges.

The rankings can be considered somewhat suspect. Seventy five percent of a *U.S. News* ranking is based on factors that favor a well-endowed liberal arts school with a long history such as the peer assessment, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources and alumni giving. The *Kiplinger's* ranking gives more consideration to value, but it also considers a school's selectivity and median standardized test scores. *Washington Monthly's* rankings consider assistance to truly needy students, the percentages of graduates who enter public service through the Peace Corps or the military, work-study monies spent on community service jobs, graduates who pursue doctorates and faculty research expenditures.

Loren Pope asked his readers not to consider either of these factors in his book. These schools, he wrote, do not target admissions strictly around a transcript or test scores. However, the efforts of their faculty and administration towards student success, he stated, compared quite favorably to more selective schools of any size.

However, Pope did not fully consider annual tuition increases or student indebtedness; students and their families must be prepared for both. He did consider freshman retention rates and graduation rates, finding that schools that took more eclectic approaches to a liberal arts curriculum, Reed College (OR) being one example, had lower retention rates.

The first thing to look at for each school is freshman retention rates and graduation rates. However, we have to look at them differently than we would a large public university. With the exception of Evergreen State, each of these schools are small and private. However, each school



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has more freedom to design its academic program around the students it wants than a traditional state university is likely to have.

However, while a bright, mature student may find that their choice of school fits like a glove, it is reasonable to expect others to find out that they were wrong. Also, given that these schools are private schools, it is more likely that costs would be an issue and that in bad economic times students might choose to transfer to less expensive schools. A freshman retention rate of 85 percent and a six-year graduation rate of around two-thirds would be reasonable under both circumstances.

However, because these schools are small and private, as well as more tight-knit communities, the four-year graduation rate should be better than most state-supported universities. The school should have more of a vested interest in seeing that their students graduate on time. To date, only 18 flagship state universities have a four-year graduation rate of 60 percent or better, but there are also seven smaller state schools: James Madison University, Mary Washington University, Ramapo College of New Jersey, The College of William and Mary, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, SUNY-Geneseo, The College of New Jersey that have four-year graduation rates in excess of 60 percent.

The achievement of the smaller schools should be our benchmark, since they are more similar in size and liberal arts focus than the larger state schools. Below are the available freshman retention rates and graduation rates from the school’s latest Common Data Set.

School	Freshman Retention Rate	Four-Year Graduation Rate	Six-Year Graduation Rate	Four-Year Graduation Rate for Flagship State University in Same State
Austin	84%	75%	79%	University of Texas at Austin 53%
				Texas A&M University 46%

Evergreen State	71%	N/A	52%	University of Washington-Seattle 54%
Reed	90%	59%	79%	University of Oregon 44%
St. John's	77%	N/A	53%	University of New Mexico 13%
Southwestern	86%	62%	73%	University of Texas at Austin 53% Texas A&M University 46%
Whitman	95%	80%	85%	University of Washington-Seattle 54%

Three of these schools, Reed, Southwestern and Whitman, have very good freshmen retention rates and their four-year graduation rates are superior to those of the flagship university in their state. Austin College has a good freshman retention rate, though its graduation rates are more impressive

It can also be seen that two of these schools, Evergreen State and St. John's, have freshman retention rates below 80 percent. This suggests that the students who left the school might have found that it was too demanding or not the best fit for them. The four-year and six-year

graduation rates for students who attended Reed and Southwestern, when combined with their retention rates, suggest that some students took time off from college, or possibly thought that the school was too demanding or not the best fit. In addition, a school that loses more than 20 percent of its freshman class has to replace their losses with transfer students, who are more likely to graduate, in order to be more stable fiscally, or they have to admit a larger freshman class in the following year.

Next is to look at costs. Since these schools consider the same student as their flagship state schools, it is worthwhile to compare the indebtedness that their students would incur at the private school versus the leading public school in their home state. To make these comparisons, we will use the debt-to-credentials ratio, also known as the debt to degree ratio. Developed by Education Sector, a non-partisan, non-profit public policy organization based in Washington D.C., this ratio measures the average amount that a student must borrow in order to complete their degree, instead of the average indebtedness incurred by each student whether they graduated or not. The following contribute to a lower debt-to-degree ratio:

- Low base tuition and fee charges for all students
- Generous merit-based and/or need-based scholarship programs
- A high four-year graduation rate

School	2006-09 Debt-To-Degree Ratio	2006-09 Debt-To-Degree Ratio for Flagship State University in Same State	Difference
Austin	\$24,175	University of Texas-Austin \$15,252	\$8,923
		Texas A&M University \$12,654	\$11,521
Evergreen State	\$14,513	University of Washington-Seattle \$10,048	\$4,465



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Reed	\$13,847	University of Oregon \$18,536	(\$4,689)
St. John's	\$31,335	University of New Mexico \$14,095	\$17,240
Southwestern	\$29,518	University of Texas-Austin \$15,252 Texas A&M University \$12,654	\$14,266 \$16,864
Whitman	\$11,873	University of Washington-Seattle \$10,048	\$1,825

It can be seen here that Whitman College, the top-performing school, is also the best value aside from the University of Washington for students who come from in state. Oregonians, Texans, New Mexicans will also find Whitman a good value compared with their home state universities. Students who want a top liberal arts college in the West that might also be able to assist them financially should put Whitman on their lists. The school accepts nearly half of all applicants, though the SAT range of 1220 to 1440 is wider than for other Western schools such as Occidental, Pitzer and Scripps. However, Pope would tell prospective students not to be discouraged by such numbers; these schools look beyond them to admit a freshman class.