BARD COLLEGE

Founded in 1860, in New York’s Hudson River Valley, Bard College is a liberal arts school that has consistently reinvented itself. Founded as St. Stephens College to prepare men for the seminary, the school became a secular undergraduate division of Columbia University, then all-male, in 1928. Six years later, the College was renamed Bard College, to honor St. Stephens founder, John Bard. In 1944, Bard went co-ed and ended its association with Columbia. Bard also become a haven for scholars who had managed to flee from war-torn European nations during and after World War II.

Today, while it is primarily a 2,000 undergraduate college, Bard also operates an Early College (Simon’s Rock in Great Barrington, Massachusetts; four Early College high schools (in Manhattan, Queens, New Orleans, Newark, NJ, Cleveland, OH); two music schools (the Conservatory in New York State and the Longy School in Cambridge, MA) as well as several undergraduate and graduate programs abroad. Bard also operates a degree-granting program for inmates in New York State prisons that became a story on 60 Minutes. Bard’s president, Leon Botstein, a highly-accomplished classical musician, was the youngest college president in the United States when he was appointed in 1975 at the age of 28. Forty years later, he is the longest-serving college president working at the same school.

Bard loses just over ten percent of a freshman class each year and has a higher attrition rate than other selective liberal arts colleges. The four-year graduation rate for the class that entered in 2009 was 60 percent, according to College Results Online. For the classes that entered between 2003 and 2008 the four-year graduation rate was between 65 and 70 percent. This is a concern because a Bard education, while quite rigorous, is also very expensive.

Bard is cross-shopped most often against the other selective liberal arts colleges in and near the Hudson River Valley, including Sarah Lawrence, Vassar and Skidmore as well as NYU that also have higher graduation rates. So do Oberlin and Kenyon, which applicants cross-shop for music and writing, respectively. There are also schools that “rank lower” than Bard such as Allegheny College (PA), the College of Wooster (OH) and Muhlenberg College (PA) that have better four-year graduation rates than Bard.

A test-optional school, Bard invites students to apply through the Common Application, with a “Why Bard?” supplement or through a demanding written Entrance Exam. Applicant through the Entrance Exam is not only independent of test scores; it is independent of high school grades as well. Nonetheless, the exam demands excellence. A student would likely need four years of excellence in each college-prep subject (English, Math, Sciences, Social Studies, Language) to perform well on it.

Bard is an extremely selective college. Less than 30 percent of the students who applied to join the incoming freshman class were offered admission. During the previous year, 35 percent were invited in; the College chose none of the candidates that were waitlisted. The SAT range for the middle 50 percent of admitted students, for those who submitted scores, was between 1170 and 1390 (out of 1600), exceptionally broad
compared with other selective colleges. The ACT Composite range was between 26 and 31, with a median of 27.

Bard offers an Immediate Decision Day, an alternative to Early Action that is non-binding. Students who choose this option attend two seminars on campus on the Friday and Saturday before Thanksgiving and also interview with the admissions office. In 2014, Bard accepted 76 percent of the students who applied through this route, according to the College’s admissions Web site. The College also offers Early Decision who those who are more certain about the school.

Bard is one of the few selective liberal arts colleges where demonstrated intellect matters more than grades and test scores. The College gives students more opportunities to demonstrate their critical thinking skills than most. And, unlike most other selective liberal arts colleges, nearly half of Bard degrees are in the Humanities, according to College Results Online. Students interested in math or science must also demonstrate excellence in writing. But those who are interested in the Humanities or Social Sciences cannot afford to ignore Mathematics or the sciences.

**Costs**

At around $64,000 for direct charges (tuition and fees, room and board) Bard is very expensive. Admissions decisions are made on a “need-aware” basis towards the bottom of the pool for qualified candidates. On average Bard met 92 percent of need for the freshmen who entered in 2012, according to Big Future, the College Board’s search site. The average need-based award was just over $40,000, generous for a small private school. However, Bard met the full need for only a third of the first-year class. But it appears that the College will cover the Total Cost of Attendance (Tuition and Fees, Room and Board, indirect charges such as books, transportation and supplies) for its neediest students. Family finances should not discourage students from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds from applying to Bard.

The average indebtedness for Bard students who took out loans was approximately $25,700, according to the Project on Student Debt. More than half of the class (53 percent) graduated with no debt at all. Of those who had to borrow, just under a fifth took out a loan from a source other than the Federal Government. This suggests that the College actually tries very hard to assist its needier students, or that the school successfully attracts students who have the means to come without assistance.

Bard awards no merit-based scholarship aid. But the College administers a Trustee Leadership Scholarship that combines leadership development with student-directed community services projects for a stipend, though not academic credit.

Bard appears to be a school where demonstrated interest will affect the aid decision more than it will at other colleges. Bard offers more opportunities to demonstrate interest during the admissions process while not tying award decisions so heavily to the numbers. The financial aid demographics suggest that it helps to apply as early as possible if you are serious about coming to Bard. It also helps to show demonstrated interest through an interview.
Curriculum

Bard is not similar to any liberal arts school, through elements of the school's curriculum are present in other colleges. Other schools have similar first-year required courses, immersion classes, approval processes to be admitted to a major, senior capstone projects as well as on-campus and off-campus study and leadership development programs, but *none do all of them* like Bard.

Incoming freshmen take a three-week immersion course called Languages and Thinking that provides rigorous exercises in writing combined with critical thinking. They then take a year-long Freshman Seminar, the annual theme chosen by the faculty. While the theme might change each year, the common core reading materials include works by noted authors and scholars such as Nietzsche, Freud, Faulkner, and Arendt. While first-year seminars, small-group multi-disciplinary classes, are recent offerings at many colleges, Bard has had them as a part of its curriculum since 1953. Freshmen return early for the Spring semester for Citizen Science, a three-week program that uses a single topic to help students understand the impact of science and mathematics on everyday life. Bard also requires a ‘5’ on Advanced Placement exams in order for a student to begin their education in a higher-level class.

Second-semester sophomores go through an approval process known as Moderation to be formally admitted to each major or minor, which is called a concentration at Bard. Admission to a major also means admission to the Upper College for the last two years. Each student appears before a Moderation Board comprised of three faculty members to present an academic reflection paper, a course and career plan for the remaining two years, including a mandatory senior project and a sample of work. Bard faculty will actually take recommend that sophomores not pursue specific majors if they are not making good academic progress in that major.

In addition, a student who chooses to double major must Moderate into each major and do a Senior Project in each major they choose, though s/he may obtain permission to complete a single Senior Project for both majors. Bard also offers Interdivisional majors as well as interdivisional concentrations.

Given the structure of the Freshman Seminar, the Citizen Science intensive, a four-course load (though students may take a fifth course for no extra charge) each semester and the Moderation process, its probably best for Bard students to arrive ready to consider possible majors during the first three semesters as well as any other distribution requirements to be admitted into those majors. A student undecided between, for example Economics and Political Science, would need to complete the “harder” math or statistics course to be approved into either major or both majors.

In addition, given the high expectations for Senior Projects—these are evaluated much like a graduate thesis—it might be better to have a major and one or two concentrations versus a double major at Bard. It is also better to leave distribution requirements that are the least related to possible majors to the junior or senior year. If that major is in the
Humanities or Social Sciences it might be best to hold off the science requirement until after completing Citizen Science.

Bard offers 35 majors, including 12 foreign languages; even far larger universities do not offer that many. Unique are majors in Film and Electronic Arts as well as Economics and Finance. There are also 10 interdivisional majors, including area studies programs, Environmental and Urban Studies, Human Rights and Global and International Studies as well as 14 interdivisional concentrations. Bard also offers two five-year dual bachelors degree programs, one with a BS in Economics and Finance combined with a BA in another major as well as a Bachelor of Music degree combined with a BA or BS in another major. There are also study abroad opportunities, including some in St. Petersburg Russia, Kurdistan and Berlin that are not available at other small liberal arts schools.

But Bard’s stronger five-year programs might be its unique joint degrees with Columbia and Dartmouth in engineering as well as its bachelors-masters programs. Instead of the 3-2 engineering programs available through other small private liberal arts colleges, Bard offers a 3-2 BA/BS, 4-2 BA/BS and 4-2 BA/MS in partnership with Columbia. and two configurations in partnership with Dartmouth: 2-1-1-1 BA/BE and 3-2 BA/BE. The access to multiple programs suggest that Bard offers an extremely rigorous education in Physics (the major to be completed at Bard) as well as other subjects.

Joint bachelors-graduate programs can lead M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. in decorative arts, design history, and material culture; M.A. in curatorial studies; M.B.A. in sustainability; M.S. in environmental policy and in climate science and policy; M.S. in economic theory and policy; a Master of Arts in Teaching; the M.F.A.; and the Master of Music. The options are impressive for a small school.

Bard is as far from a “vocational school” as a liberal arts college can possibly get. However, the school has built up an interesting set of accomplishments in social entrepreneurship. The Early College high schools as well as the Bard Prison Initiative, both under the Bard administration, as examples, are the brainchild of Bard alumni. The finance program, while theory-based, is highly mathematical. A Bard graduate would be as competitive a candidate for an entry-level analyst position in business consulting or finance as a graduating senior from a more selective college. However, Bard does not have as many connections to those fields as schools such as Amherst, Hamilton or Williams, among other liberal arts schools that are recruited by such firms.

Pretty much all classes at Bard will be small. Only one percent of all Bard classes have more than 50 students, according to U.S. News’ 2015 Best Colleges guide while 77 percent had fewer than 20 students. The College advertises a student-faculty ratio of 9 to 1, though that is brought down by the small, highly personalized graduate programs.

Bard students have exceptionally high regard for their faculty, giving them a rating of 3.92 (out of a possible 5.00) on RateMyProfessors.com. Within the Hudson River Valley, however, students at Sarah Lawrence (4.04) held their faculty in higher regard while students at Vassar (3.82) held them in lower regard than Bard students did theirs'.
Bard can be a very pleasant place to be—if you want an isolated college campus experience. While Bard is perceived as being “close to New York City,” it is actually more than two hours by car from Manhattan. Sarah Lawrence, for example, is less than an hour from the city, while Vassar is 90 minutes away. Even Pennsylvania schools such as Bryn Mawr, Lafayette and Muhlenberg are closer to New York than Bard—and they offer the added advantage of being close to Philadelphia.

Students who prefer an “urban vibe” might prefer to choose a school that is located within or quite close to a major city. At Bard most of the culture and entertainment will be on campus. However the surrounding community is connected to larger cities, including the Big Apple, by Metro North and Amtrak trains. Bus service to Hudson Valley Mall is also available.

Bard has one of the nicest campus settings among Northeast liberal arts colleges. The grounds, built up from the site of the original St. Stephens seminary as well as former estates, extend all the way to the Hudson River. Blithewood and its grounds, including the waterfront are worth seeing during a visit. Graduation takes place on the Blithewood lawn, also home to its graduate economics and finance program. The mix of architecture and art is more eclectic than at similar-sized schools, including the original Gothic campus, some fairly bland buildings (the Bertelsmann Campus Center, Kline Commons being two examples), and some eye-popping modern designs (the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, the Reem-Kayden Center for Science and Computation and the College’s three linked libraries). The landscaping makes it all come together. Bard also has its own field station as well as its own organic farm. A major plus with Bard’s setting is that the campus attracts many notable speakers, performers and visiting faculty during the school year. The college, which is the cultural center for the surrounding community, also hosts a well-attended summer arts festival.

Bard students (aka ‘Bardians) have more of a voice in the day-to-day life at their school than their peers at similar colleges. The students do not elect a student government, except for the leadership; the student body votes as a democracy on issues while students serve on college committees with faculty and administrators. Students also participate in decisions to hire new faculty. Among colleges that I have visited only students at Bryn Mawr and Haverford, both more selective schools, are similarly engaged on campus. There are also more than 270 student organizations, nearly triple what college-bound students are likely to expect from similar-sized schools.

Although the Bard campuses is separated from local roads, there were some crime and safety concerns as reported through the College’s Clery Report. There were an average of 23 burglaries per year from 2011 through 2013, high considering that Bard has a relatively small student body and that upper class students are allowed to live off campus. There were also 12 reported Forcible Sex Offenses in 2012 as well as eight in 2013, again high considering the student body. Reported incidents of disciplinary actions for drug possession rose from 57 in 2011 to 76 in 2012 to 93 in 2013, although there were no reported arrests for drug-related crimes over these three years. Reported alcohol-related incidents that were referred for disciplinary action rose from 116 in 2011 to 158 by 2013, but there were no reported arrests.
The statistics would encourage families to ask questions about law enforcement and campus policies towards drug possession and campus drinking as well as substance-free living options. Then again, Bard is a more democratic campus. Students might also have a stronger voice in the development and enforcement of these policies than they would at other small private liberal arts colleges.

Bard competes in 18 varsity sports at the NCAA Division III (non-scholarship) level. Bard participates in the Liberty League in most intercollegiate sports as well as the United Volleyball Conference, the College Squash Association, and other national organizations. But Bard has never won a conference title in any Liberty League sport since the league play began in 1995.

### Comforts

According to Bard’s residence life Web pages, the College offers more than 40 student residences that embrace a wide range of architectural characteristics, social styles, and sizes. All have Internet access, social rooms, kitchens, and laundries, and many boast beautiful views of the Catskill Mountains to the west. Most residence halls are coed, and roughly one-third of the rooms are singles. All first-year and sophomore Bard students are guaranteed housing. However, neither upper-class students nor transfers will be.

Bard requires freshmen to take on a 19 meal-per-week plan for the duration of their first semester. In the spring they have the option to change to the 265 block. Upperclassmen have the ability to change their meal plan during the first 2 weeks of the semester. Meal plan options for upperclassmen include the 14 meal plan, the 265 block plan, and the 175 block plan. The block plans are a better deal for students who do not eat on a regular schedule. Students who choose either plan are also given “Bard Bucks” that may be used on campus at the Green Onion Grocer, Down the Road Café and Manor Café. The College grows food on its own farm and it takes local sourcing for other foods quite seriously. The on-campus dining services recently took the added step of removing soda from its beverage options.

Unlike most liberal arts colleges Bard does not require students to live on campus after the freshman year. Students may live in apartments or share houses in nearby Red Hook or Tivoli and take a free shuttle to campus that runs hourly until midnight. The college also maintains a selection of residence halls in various designs from the former St. Stephens halls of the 19th century to more modern apartment-style suites. All Bardians are allowed to have cars after paying a $150 fee for a parking permit. It is possible to find housing off campus for under $500 per month in a room within a house or by sharing a house with a group. This is quite reasonable, considering Bard's location.

However, given that Bard lacks the beds to house every undergraduate, it helps to make friends as early in the education as possible. Bard has neither fraternities nor sororities, nor does it have “living-learning communities” within its residence halls. Bard attempt to bond the campus through the academics, clubs as well as campus governance. There are plenty of opportunities to find “your group” through these avenues for students who take the initiative.
Connections

Bardians identify with their class year more than they do with the College itself, says Timand Bates, Assistant Dean of Students. Alumni groups host City Parties where Bard has the largest concentrations of alumni including New York, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles, among other places. Homecoming takes place around Commencement; many other small liberal arts schools wait until a month after graduation has taken place.

Of the more than 9,400 Bard alumni registered on LinkedIn.com, just under half live and/or work in the New York area. But the base drops off considerably from there. The next largest group, just over 500 alumni, are based in the Boston area. However, the interests of incoming freshmen to be “near New York” suggest that these students hoped to migrate to the Big Apple after they had finished their full-time education. More than 2,500 alumni work in Media and Communications as well as the Arts and Design, over one quarter of the base.

Bard is a member of the Liberal Arts Career Network, a 37-college consortium that shares job opportunities. The College is as aggressive at matching students to opportunities through workshops and mentoring as any liberal arts school that also offers pre-professional majors. The College also offers the Bard-Rockefeller Science semester during the summer as well as Live Arts, a program where Bard students work side-by-side with professional playwrights.

Conclusions

Bard is a very demanding school. But the College also offers a very rewarding experience for a student who wants a well-balanced liberal arts education. This might be the best school for a student who has a very high level of intellectual curiosity, writes well, but is willing to be exposed to different creative viewpoints. If it was possible to grant an ‘A+’ for academic rigor, Bard would receive it.

Students who are interested in Bard do not necessarily need to be at the top of their class or have high test scores to prove that s/he is capable of doing the work. But s/he arrives with higher expectations from the faculty. Bard is a school where it is very tough to shy away from your weakest subjects, unless you can get along with your professors and your classmates and not be afraid to ask for help. Students are less likely to get away with “I don’t feel like it” when it comes to doing the work to earn a degree from Bard.

The Moderation process is an academic form of “tough love” that might not appeal to many college-going high school students. But it appears that students who get through the experience with flying colors are glad that they had gone through it rather than moving on to another college to complete their bachelor’s degree.

Bard has some tremendous academic strengths, especially in the humanities, the arts, economics and the sciences. While it does not offer a business program, the College has fostered an interesting tradition of social entrepreneurship as well as social responsibility. The rigor of a Bard education will also be solid preparation for a more
rigorous graduate or professional degree. Students here are well-prepared to compete for academic fellowships.

The Bard campus, while a beautiful setting, is also quite isolated. While the school is perceived as “close to New York,” and has a very strong alumni community within the city, it is really quite far away. It’s best to visit to be sure that you can appreciate not only the beauty, but also the true distance as well.

**Ed Quest’s Report Card: Bard College**

- Four-Year/Six Year Graduation Rates: B/B
- Freshman Retention: B+
- Costs: B+
- Curriculum: A—*though a very high ‘A’*
- Community: A
- Comforts: B+
- Connections: B+