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Hampshire College

A member of the Colleges That Change Lives located in Amherst, Massachusetts Hampshire College graduated its first senior class in 1974. It has been founded nine years earlier and welcomed the first freshmen in 1970. Strictly an undergraduate liberal arts college, Hampshire has approximately 1,400 students.

Hampshire stands out for having no defined majors—students design their own—no grades and few required courses. The educational approach is much like going from high school, bypassing college, into a graduate program where your degree has a direction towards a thesis as well as life after the degree is completed.

No other college or university has as open a curriculum at Hampshire, except possibly excluding Amherst, Brown or Harvard which are far more selective schools. Schools that have been promoted as having a similar (politically liberal) campus culture include Bard, Bennington, Reed, Sarah Lawrence and independent art and design schools such as Parsons and the Rhode Island School of Design. However, none of these schools physically resembles Hampshire nor has as open an academic program.

Students have access to more than 6,000 courses through the Five Colleges. Hampshire students may take classes at Mount Holyoke College, the oldest private women's college in the U.S.; Smith College, the largest private women's college in the U.S.; Amherst College, one of the best-endowed private liberal arts colleges in the U.S., and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, the flagship university for the Commonwealth State. The options for Hampshire students are attractive since their degree programs are more self designed while the neighboring colleges offer more courses to take. They may also pursue majors as well as certificate programs that have been jointly developed through all of the school. Hampshire students will typically take between 4 and 6 courses on other Five College campuses.

The Five College opportunities are one of the most important reasons to consider Hampshire versus other liberal arts schools. There are liberal arts colleges that have similar consortial arrangements (Wellesley with Babson and Olin, Bryn Mawr with Haverford, Swarthmore and Penn) but these schools are far more selective than Hampshire. In 2014 Hampshire accepted nearly two thirds of the students who applied. A quarter of the freshman class was admitted through Early Decision. The college wait listed 128 applicants, according to its 2015-16 Common Data Set, but only five were later offered admission.

Hampshire is uniquely “test blind.” The admissions office gives absolutely no consideration to standardized test scores. Because of this the college is not ranked in *U.S News*. There is absolutely no need to submit them. However, the admissions office needs to not only read two short essays, but also to read examples of graded work.



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Students may also provide a written self evaluation. Evidence of intellectual curiosity is as important as academic excellence, even if the curiosity has come from outside a high school classroom. While it is to a student's advantage to have the teacher who graded their submitted work provide a strong recommendation, the admissions office will accept recommendations from anyone who knows the student well, even the student's family. One incentive to do the work if you like the school: No one pays an application fee.

Hampshire retained 82 percent of the class that entered in 2014, very good for a private liberal arts college, especially one that gives students tremendous freedom to design their academic program during the freshman year. The college has recently become more active in 1 to 1 academic advising as well as workshops with students who are making unsatisfactory academic progress. In past years about 25 percent of a freshman class would leave without completing a degree.

Hampshire's four-year graduation rate for a class is between 55 and 60 percent. This is below average for test-optional liberal arts colleges that admit students with a strong transcript though not necessarily elite standardized test scores. Seventy-four percent of the students who entered in 2009 finished within six years, taking time off during their education for work or other pursuits. The four-year graduation rate is an indication that Hampshire's academic approach is not for every admitted student. However, the most recently reported six-year graduation rate is an indication that most of the people who leave want to return, as opposed to transferring to another college or ending their college education altogether.

Costs

Hampshire charged approximately \$60,000 for tuition and fees, room and board for the school year that has just concluded. The average need-based scholarship award was just over \$35,900. On average, the college met 90 percent of demonstrated need for the students deemed to have financial need.

The college reported on its Web site that 2015 graduates owed, on average for those who needed to borrow, a reasonable \$23,000. This is below the debt owed by many average borrowers who graduate from the state university in their home state. While most scholarship aid is need based, the college also awards merit scholarships up to \$10,000.

The college reported that 91 percent of the student body qualified for financial aid, even if it was only student loans. This indicates that students who are seriously interested in Hampshire should not be discouraged to apply based on costs. Nor should those who have the most serious interest be discouraged from applying through Early Decision.

Curriculum



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Hampshire allows students considerable freedom to choose their courses, but the college also provides structure through “Divisions.”

Division I is the first year, including a Freshman Seminar (which impacts the first-year housing assignment) and courses of the student’s choice that fall under four “Schools of Thought.” These are chosen with the help of the student’s Freshman Seminar instructor, who is also the first-year academic advisor. This is where it helps to have some direction before you begin the education. As two examples in the marketing material, the college features two recent graduates, one who entered interested in urban planning, the other who was interested in agriculture. The first-year courses chosen by each student were pre-requisite for advanced study in either field. For example, the student interested in urban planning chose first-year courses in Geographic Information Systems and Urban Politics. Because classes at Hampshire are small, it is quite possible to do project-based work during the first year.

Division II is the second and third year. Students have two advisors, a “chair” who helps to develop the academic program over the two years and a second faculty member. Not only are courses in the Five College system available to students. Study abroad and domestic exchange programs at other schools are available as well. It is also possible to do independent study courses with a sponsoring faculty member.

While creativity and an ability to work independently are assets in getting through Division II, so is the ability to work with the faculty and build relationships. Success at Hampshire is dependent on written evaluations, not letter grades. Too many bad evaluations can hurt a student here. Faculty would become more reluctant to work with such students. The students would not have the relationships that could help them on to further education or into their careers.

In Division III, the senior year, students continue to take classes, but also devote time to a capstone project which could be anything from a business plan to a novel to a performance. It is even possible to take graduate courses, primarily at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Only two classes taught at Hampshire had more than 29 students, according to the college’s 2015-16 Common Data Set. The students gave their faculty a very high (3.88 out of a possible 5) rating on RateMyProfessors.com. Within the Five Colleges the rating was the same as Mount Holyoke students gave their faculty, though Smith College (3.91) and Amherst College (4.06) held their faculty in higher regard. It is impressive to see that Hampshire students have access to good teaching among all of the schools. Even the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (3.71) students had higher regard for their faculty than peers at other New England state universities such as the University of Connecticut (3.64), University of New Hampshire (3.68) and University of Vermont (3.67).



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It is possible to liken Hampshire to Santa's Workshop. There are not only traditional classrooms, but also openly accessible design shops, studios and laboratories where students are trusted to work at all hours on their own projects. While Hampshire has no formal honor code, it is a small community where dishonesty will be known quickly among students, faculty and staff. Students who come to Hampshire with considerable talents also need to learn to collaborate and cooperate with each other. A student can be a loner at Hampshire, but s/he cannot have a hostile personality.

Community

Hampshire is located in Amherst, but the campus is outside of town, in one of the most rustic settings around. Hampshire looks to be a blend of a farm and an art school on a hilltop. While the college is a national model for sustainability, it does not have strikingly beautiful architecture. The mix of buildings could be described as eclectic. The naming of the dining hall for the former food service provider (Saga) adds to this eclectic nature. Workshop and laboratory buildings could best be described as functional spaces with little room to support a larger student population in the future. However, Hampshire has some of the most beautiful open spaces and mountain views that one would ever find on a college campus. Hampshire is not a "spirit and sports" school. The college competes in only eight varsity sports.

With five colleges in the area, spread across three college towns (Amherst, Northampton and South Hadley) there are plenty of dining, entertainment and shopping options for students. The Pioneer Valley transit system provides free and easy access by bus not only into downtown but also to shopping and the other Five College campuses. The Berkshires are nearby as well. Boston is just over an hour by car and Amherst is served by Amtrak trains to Boston and New York. It would be impossible for a college student to arrive here and find nothing to do.

With the exception of reported alcohol and drug-related disciplinary referrals, there have been relatively few reported incidents of crime on the Hampshire campus, according to the college's [2015 Clery Report](#). While there were no reported alcohol or drug-related arrests on campus from 2012 to 2014, there was an uptick in disciplinary referrals. The number of reported drug-related referrals (64) in 2014 was nearly twice the number of alcohol-related referrals (33). There were also eight reported rapes on campus. This is the most serious concern given the campus setting. Unlike the other four schools in the Five Colleges, Hampshire has few neighbors and does not open into a downtown.

Comforts

Nearly 90 percent of the student body lives on campus during the school year. The college can guarantee housing not only because of its small student body, but also



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because students will often spend part of their Division II experience aboard or in the domestic educational exchange programs within the U.S.

Hampshire places first-year and second-year students in the newest residence halls, Dakin and Merrill. These are traditional single and double rooms offer corridors sharing bathrooms. Co-ed and single-gender floors are available. Everyone who lives in these halls must purchase the full meal plan.

Hampshire's earliest student residences, Enfield and Greenwich, are called "The Donuts" for their circular design. Each unit has four to seven residents, living in one double, and two to five single rooms. Each contains a common living/dining room, a kitchen, and one to two bathrooms. Prescott is the far more modern complex. Each apartment has four to ten residents, each in a single room, a common living/dining room, a kitchen, and one to two bathrooms. [Prescott also has student-designed learning communities; they are called Intentional Housing Communities.](#)

It makes more sense to live on campus than off, unless students can find less expensive housing near a transit stop or have access to a car.

Connections

More than 7,700 Hampshire alumni are registered on [LinkedIn.com](#). Nearly 1,700 live in or around New York City, nearly 1,000 in the Boston area and just over 700 are based in or around San Francisco. More than 1,200 work in Media and Communications. There are also more than 1,000 educators as well as more than 1,000 entrepreneurs. Nearly 400 work in consulting as well while more than 900 are engaged in the arts. Notable alumni include author Jonathan Krakauer and filmmaker/historian Ken Burns.

The make-up of the alumni appears consistent with the intent of an academic program to encourage creativity while also offering practicality. The college organizes DIV (D-4) as a reunion event that features alumni, student and faculty work. The college also runs a similar Family and Friends Weekend.

One downside: given that Hampshire is still a fairly new college, the endowment is very small. According to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, the endowment was approximately \$39 million in Fiscal Year 2015, up just over \$1 million from the previous fiscal year. Such a small endowment will need to be well managed to assist current students with scholarships and to gradually upgrade facilities and equipment on campus. More important, it will need to grow as the alumni base grows, too.

The college proudly reports these outcomes on its Web site that should be repeated here:



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- 100% of students completed at least two community engaged learning activities which involve combining formal classroom study of a particular issue with direct real-world exposure to that issue in a community setting;
- 93% of students completed at least one internship, research assistantship, or similar activity. 70% of students completed two or more before their graduation;
- 65% of alumni earn advanced degrees within ten years of graduating;
- 89% of Hampshire alumni report receiving a job offer within one year of graduation.
- Hampshire ranks in the top 1% of colleges nationwide in the percentage of graduates that go on to earn doctorates; and,
- 1 in 4 graduates have started their own business or organization.

It is noteworthy to mention that success at a self-directed education is also likely to aid in a successful self-directed search for employment, pursuing further education or starting a business. The key is to know where and how to ask for help.

Conclusions

Hampshire is a great school for students who enter college with an interest that they want to explore deeply, even if it does not fit within a traditional college major. Such an interest does not need to be “academic,” but it has to be something where a student has intense curiosity that can be turned into tangible work, possibly a career-launching effort. This education provides excellent preparation for entrepreneurial and creative thinkers as well as for graduate school.

Hampshire students have access to a tremendous selection of resources to help on and off campus. The Five College area is also one of the nicest places to go to college within the U.S. It is also one of the few multi-college communities where students from different campuses truly mingle in the community. The college is also a national model for “green” environmental and business practices while set in a beautiful setting.

But Hampshire can be a difficult place for students who have never been pressed to have an academic direction or develop their interests before college. Division II is self designed by each student to define a direction. It is possible to enter Hampshire not knowing exactly what your interests are, but very difficult to get beyond Division I if they do not become clearer during that first year on campus.

Direction-related issues might explain why the graduation rates are lower than they are for similarly-sized liberal arts colleges within the Colleges That Change Lives such as Beloit (WI), Centre (KY) or Juniata (PA) or why students take time away from campus to define their direction before returning to campus to complete their degrees. Another downside: the alumni base is smaller than it might have been had more of those freshmen graduated. While Hampshire has done an admirable job in helping its students to afford their education, it has neither the endowment nor the alumni connections that it needs to advance and upgrade the physical campus.



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Hampshire can also be a difficult place for students who have limited people skills. Success depends not only doing good work but also getting along with your instructors. The upside: a student develops a number of relationships that may help for life. The downside is serious: the student may leave because he does not connect well with teachers and classmates. The number of faculty is small by discipline, the number of students is small as well.

It has been over 40 years since Hampshire graduated its first senior class, enough time to learn if the college's educational model has worked as its founders hoped. Hampshire's non-traditional approach to a liberal arts education has produced artists, entrepreneurs and scientists, among many others. It has successfully propelled graduates on to further education as well as employment.

The new has worn off the academic approach though the campus itself still appears cobbled together. Hampshire must be visited before an application is submitted. Its uniqueness must be understood and appreciated. Then you have to visit again after acceptance to confirm that you can sustain a direction to success.

Report Card for Hampshire College

- Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: C/B
- Freshman Retention: B+
- Costs: A
- Curriculum: A
- Community: A
- Comforts: B+
- Connections: B