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Vassar College (NY)

Founded in 1861 in Poughkeepsie, New York, Vassar College was a women's college until 1969. As Vassar headed in its direction towards coeducation its faculty and administrators declined an opportunity to become the women's college for Yale. Today, this 2,450 student liberal arts college, which grants only undergraduate degrees, is 55 percent female, 45 percent male. Just over a fifth of the student body comes from New York; the second-largest contingent comes from California. One-third of the undergraduates are US citizens of color, high for a very selective liberal arts school. Direct charges—tuition and fees, room and board—are just over \$65,000 for the current academic year.

Vassar, a test-mandatory school, offers admission to between 20 and 25 percent of the applicant pool, and to between a third and 40 percent of those who apply Early Decision. The middle 50 percent of applicants who submitted SATs scored between 1370 and 1500 (out of 1600) on the older version of the test. The middle 50 percent for those who submitted the ACT was between 31 and 34. Vassar expects excellence in the academic record in all core subjects (English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Foreign Language and the Sciences) as well as electives that are also in the core subject areas. Vassar does not invite prospective art, dance and music students to audition; they submit clips or videos instead. The college does not use interviews in the admissions process.

Vassar admits need-blind and will meet the full financial need for accepted students, as determined through analysis of the FAFSA and the CSS Profile. The average indebtedness of 2015 graduates who had to take out student loans was less than \$19,000. Over half of the class had no debt at all. This shows that the college admits a significant share of full-pay students. But it also shows that qualified applicants should be encouraged to apply, regardless of need. The college is apparently trying to help students minimize debt, a major plus for cost-conscious families. Vassar's endowment exceeded \$980 million in Fiscal Year 2015, according to the National Association of College and University Business Officers, eleventh among all National Liberal Arts colleges in the US and within the top 100 among *all colleges of all sizes in the country*.

Vassar does an outstanding job of retaining and graduating a freshman class. Most recently, 95 percent of the freshmen who entered in 2015 returned for their sophomore year. The four-year graduation for students who entered in 2009 was an exceptional 86 percent, on par with not only the more selective liberal arts colleges but also the more selective private universities.

Are there schools that are similar to Vassar?

There are other liberal arts colleges that offer what Vassar calls an "open curriculum," meaning that there are no specific required courses aside from a year of a foreign language, one "class with numbers," and writing-intensive freshman seminar. There are no distribution, aka "general education" requirements. Other liberal arts colleges that offer a similar curriculum include Amherst (which has around 700 fewer students), Hampshire (smaller with over 1,000 fewer students but also less selective), Wesleyan (larger with graduate degree programs) and Smith (larger but also



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all-female). But while Vassar is a liberal arts college, it is considered vs. mid-sized private research universities including Brown (which also has an open curriculum) and Yale.

Like these schools, Vassar promises small classes (only four has more than 50 students during the 2015-16 school year). Most classes will have fewer than 20 students, even in the first year. More advanced courses are likely to have closer to 12, or even less. Vassar students gave their faculty a rating of 3.82 (out of a possible 5) on RateMyProfessors.com. Students at Amherst, Williams, Sarah Lawrence and Swarthmore held higher regard for their faculty (both slightly over 4.0) as did students at Haverford (3.93) and Brown (3.88). However, Vassar students held their faculty in higher regard than students at Hamilton (3.76) and in similar regard with students at Yale (3.83).

What else separates Vassar from most other selective liberal arts colleges?

Vassar has more majors (51), minors (40), foreign languages (21), college-unique study abroad programs (10) and certificate options (17) than one might expect for a school with fewer than 2,500 students. Students must complete 34 courses—each counts as a unit—to earn a degree, and they must be completed at Vassar. Between 11 and 14 units are required to complete a major, including a senior thesis. The open curriculum as well as the opportunities to enter with advanced standing for nearly a semester's worth of courses make it fairly easy to pursue a double major. Vassar is more reasonable with advanced placement credits—the college will allow up to four courses for entry into an advanced level class—compared with Ivies and other exceptionally selective colleges. However, Vassar offers no summer courses on campus.

Vassar is also a member of the 12 College Exchange, which allows students to spend a semester at other selective liberal arts colleges or at Dartmouth, which is considered to be a research university. Several of these schools, including Amherst, Dartmouth, Wellesley and Williams, might have been the reach for a Vassar student. Vassar students may also attend Howard, Morehouse or Spelman, all Historically Black Colleges and Universities, for a semester, along with other [domestic "study-away" programs](#).

Vassar also encourages students to do internships in either Poughkeepsie or New York City. The Poughkeepsie area is a prominent location for IBM as well as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's library and birthplace. It is also the county seat for Dutchess County, New York. The college subsidizes the commute to New York (a \$37 round trip) and provides shuttle service to the train. However, it is a long (over 90 minute) commute. Currently 70 percent of Vassar students work in internships for academic credit—in addition to paid internships over the summer.

What about the community?

Vassar has a 1,000-acre campus, including a farm and ecological preserve. To lend perspective, Vassar's campus is more than twice as large as the University of Vermont, a state university with nearly 11,000 undergraduates, which also has a farm and ecology programs. The campus also features the second-largest observatory in the State of New York (after the Brookhaven National Observatory on Long Island). Facilities for music (including more than 60 Steinway pianos and five pipe organs) and theatre as well as film study are also quite impressive as is the main library.



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Vassar's older buildings will be familiar to families who have been to schools such as Trinity or Yale with Gothic and other 19th century architectural styles. The academic and residential centers of the campus are well maintained and fairly easy to navigate.

Nearly everyone lives on campus. There is no "freshman only" housing at Vassar. Students are assigned to one of nine "houses," eight mixed gender, one all female. Unless they move into on or off-campus apartments, Vassar students are more likely to stay in their house through their education. Freshmen are assigned to either double or triple rooms, all others have the opportunity to apply for singles. The apartments have single bedrooms for each student occupant. The meal plan is based on swipes; students eat on their schedule. They are not limited to one breakfast, lunch or dinner in a day.

The most commonly reported crimes on most college campuses relate to possession of drugs and alcohol. These were the most reported crimes on Vassar's most recent Clery Report, though the numbers were quite low. There were no more than 34 reported drug-related violations in the years between 2013 and 2015 and no more than 18 liquor law violations, extremely low for a campus-based college community where more than 2,000 students live on campus. However, the numbers of sexually related crimes are high for a school of this size. Most recently, in 2015, there were 13 reported incidents of rape on campus, five reported incidents of dating violence, seven reported incidents of fondling and five reported incidents of stalking. This raises questions about either the reporting—students were more willing to report these incidents—or about campus safety and how the incidents took place. Prospective students and their parents should inquire further.

Poughkeepsie, home to Vassar, is a small (just over 32,000 residents) city. While there are two other four-year schools in Poughkeepsie (Culinary Institute of America and Marist) the students from the three colleges do not interact regularly. The city has a major shopping center, the Poughkeepsie Galleria, which has an 18-screen Regal movie theater. There are more than enough recreational and shopping opportunities in the Hudson River Valley, though it helps to have a car to get to them.

Can you make connections from Vassar?

Careers services and the alumni network at Vassar are among the best within selective liberal arts colleges. Vassar is one of only nine liberal arts schools in the US that is a member of the two selective liberal arts colleges jobs network: the Selective Liberal Arts Consortium and the Liberal Arts Career Network. Unlike most colleges, Vassar places career development within a Dean of Studies office that includes Class Deans for each class as well as the administrative team. This means that career development and academic advising are placed under one office, so preparation for the job market or further education better coordinated than it is at most other liberal arts colleges. The resources dedicated towards aiding students to find internships (called Field Work at Vassar) are as impressive as they would be at mid-sized schools such as Brown, Harvard or Yale that place all undergraduate majors within a college of arts and sciences—and they are shared among a much smaller student body with only undergraduates



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Vassar graduates in 2014, and prior years, preferred to seek employment after graduation according to the college's 2015-16 Fact Book. For the Class of 2014, 57 percent of graduates were working full time within a year after graduation while 13 percent were continuing their education full time and seven percent were engaged in community service. 93 percent of those who applied to law school were offered admission to at least one, the best among classes that have graduated since 2005. Medical school applications trended up to 78, more than any class since 2005, with 38 graduates accepted. However, in 2013, 62 of 77 medical school applicants were accepted to at least one medical school.

Among the nearly 20,000 Vassar alumni registered on [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com), more than 7,000 are based in or around New York City. Vassar also has more than 1,000 registered alumni in and around Boston, San Francisco, Washington DC and Los Angeles. While Education was the most commonly listed occupation (over 3,200 alumni), there were more than 2,000 media/communications professionals and over 2,000 entrepreneurs, among others, within the alumni base.

Notable Vassar alumni include actors Meryl Streep and Lisa Kudrow, computer scientist and Navy Admiral Grace Hopper (credited as inventor of the term "bug" in computer programming) and author/prosecutor Linda Fairstein, among many others.

Conclusions: Who would like Vassar?

Vassar is a great school for a creative, mature and well-rounded student, especially one who likes the arts (as a hobby or academic pursuit) or the sciences and prefers a liberal arts college setting. The academic choices, connections, facilities and resources are among the best within the selective liberal arts college community, although there are a few others (Amherst, Williams, the Claremont Colleges (CA), Haverford as examples) closer to cities or within nicer college towns. The decision to choose Vassar over such similar schools is likely to be based on the open curriculum, the connections to New York City and personal impressions of the campus community.

The Report Card for Vassar College

Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: A

Freshman Retention: A

Costs: A

Curriculum: A

Comforts: A

Community: B+

Connections: A