Drexel University was founded in 1891 with a $3 million gift from financier and philanthropist Anthony Drexel. The University introduced cooperative education for all students in 1919. Drexel has gone through rapid expansion for a private university. In 2002, Hahnemann University, a Philadelphia-based medical institution became the Drexel University College of Medicine, College of Nursing and Health Professions, and the School of Public Health. In 2006, it established only the second law school (Northeastern is the other) around a cooperative education model. In 2011, Drexel also established an affiliation with the Philadelphia-based Academy of Natural Sciences, the nation’s oldest natural science museum and research organization.

Drexel has over 16,000 undergraduates, fourth largest among independent (non-religious) universities in the US after NYU, the University of Southern California and Boston University. It is the largest private university that is strongly committed to cooperative education aka “co-op.” More than 90 percent of Drexel undergraduates participate in the four-year or co-op programs.

Since the majority of these students opt for a five-year, three co-op, program, the five-year graduation rate was 70 percent for the class that entered in 2010. The university retained 88 percent of the students who entered in 2016, which is good for a school of this size. However, Drexel’s freshman retention and graduation rates were not appreciably better than Temple’s within Philadelphia, and Temple has similar degree programs and 13,000 more undergraduates.

In order to get a freshman class of approximately 2,300 students, Drexel received over 28,500 applications and offered admission just under 21,300, an acceptance rate of around 70 percent. Temple, by comparison, received just over 33,000 applications to get a freshman class of just under 5,200, offering admission to just over half of the students who applied. But unlike Drexel, which offers co-op in virtually every major, Temple offers co-op in only the business and engineering programs. The middle 50 percent of Drexel’s incoming class scored between 1080 and 1300 on the SAT and between 25 and 30 on the ACT Composite. That’s about the same as students in the incoming classes at universities such as Penn State and Rutgers-New Brunswick though higher than the range for Temple, which recently went test optional. The average GPA was just under 3.6.

Drexel is considered not only against the flagship state universities in the applicant’s home states but also against more selective private schools that do and do not offer co-op. While it is quite possible to find other schools within Pennsylvania alone that offer co-
op in engineering—Carnegie Mellon, Lehigh, Penn State, Pitt and Temple, for example, all do—it is much harder to find a similar or smaller school that offers it in the liberal arts, design professions, hospitality or business, among other programs.

Costs

Drexel offers generous merit scholarships compared to other large private city-based universities. But without them, the Drexel experience is one of the more expensive in the US, with a total direct charges (tuition and fees, room and board) near $66,000, leading to a total first-year cost of attendance that will easily exceed $70,000. While Drexel charges all students in good standing for only four years of tuition, opting for a five-year, three co-op program can easily add more than $20,000 to the costs of completing a degree for the additional year of housing and the payment of student fees for each quarter on co-op.

In addition, the Federal Government limits undergraduate student debt to $31,000 under its interest-subsidized and low-interest student loan programs. These programs allow a first-year student to borrow no more than $5,500 for the freshman year and an average of $6,375 per year over the remaining four years. Drexel does not publish student debt information. However, this writer does not recommend that students or their families take out higher interest loans through the Federal Parent PLUS loan program or a private lender to cover the costs of a college education.

Aside from scholarships, the best ways to lower the costs of a Drexel education while pursuing a five-year, three co-op program are to take one online or evening course during each quarter on co-op—permitted by the university, for no additional charge—or to begin the first two years at a community college where Drexel has an agreement to accept the transfer credits. Taking a single course during each of the six quarters on co-op reduces the time on campus for the senior year by at least three months, possibly six if the student enters with enough AP credits or takes classes during the summer after their freshman year. Drexel is relatively generous in allowing incoming students to apply AP or community college credits towards a degree, although it will be difficult to apply credits earned in the sciences towards degrees in science, health fields or engineering. Another way to reduce costs is to do the co-op close to home or in a community that has lower living costs than Philadelphia.

Curriculum

Drexel offers 80 full-time majors, including several unique programs that you are not likely to find at many other large public or private universities as well as many unique
minors. You can study virtually any subject in the arts and sciences, business, communications, computing, design professions, education, engineering, health sciences and administration, hospitality management and tourism and media production and graduate with a unique combination of majors and minors between different schools. Drexel also offers several accelerated programs towards advanced degrees, including a law degree as well as an assured admissions program into the university’s medical school. The Pennoni Honors College offers the opportunity to not only pursue honors-level work; it also offers about 50 students a year the opportunity to submit proposals for a self-designed major.

Incoming freshmen may enter a school within Drexel undecided on a major by checking Undeclared for the school of interest, or choose the Exploratory Studies option which allows for a Liberal Arts/Media/Business or a Science/Engineering academic pathway through the university’s Goodwin College of Professional Studies. But students interested in the programs in Architecture, Education, Heath Sciences, Nursing, among others, can enter them only as a freshman. While larger schools often “cap” the numbers that can choose majors, Drexel does not as long as there is space available in the classes required to complete the major. This is not always the case at the larger public universities.

Among universities that offer cooperative education Drexel is one of the few that offers it for virtually every major. These schools invest the most in providing career development resources to match students with the best available opportunities and to work with the students and employers to help ensure a meaningful work experience, as opposed to clerical and “gopher” duties.

While other schools ask students with lower GPAs--not uncommon in the scientific and technical majors--to take classes if they cannot be placed in a co-op, Drexel is able to place all but one to two percent of eligible students in paid or unpaid assignments. Those who accept unpaid employment work only 20 hours per week and may find a second job to help pay expenses. Drexel also offers venture funding for students who have entrepreneurial visions to allow them to develop, refine and implement their business plans while on co-op. The university goes further to aid student who want to become entrepreneurs than most other schools. Drexel has the only school dedicated exclusive to education for entrepreneurship in the US. Others offer entrepreneurship as a minor within a liberal arts or engineering curriculum or as a concentration within a business school.

Drexel operates on a quarter system. With the exception of the summer after freshman year, all students attend school or work in their co-op assignments over four ten-week
quarters with three-week breaks in between. Those who go the five-year route will have two quarters of work and two quarters of school during their sophomore, pre-junior and junior years. They will take five or six courses over the ten weeks they are in school, versus the 16 weeks students take the same number of courses over a semester at Northeastern, as well as other large public and private universities. Those who choose the four-year, one co-op route will do six months on co-op during their junior year.

While the five-year route is the more popular option among all undergraduates, new majors as well as those with smaller enrollments will offer only the one co-op option. This is to help ensure that all students in the major have the opportunity to complete all of the required courses in the major and graduate on time. It appears that as a major builds enrollment over time and the career center makes more connections, a five-year, three co-op option is made available.

You are less likely to see large classes at Drexel than you would find at a flagship state university such as Penn State, Pitt or Temple, but you will see them in the introductory courses such as Biology, Chemistry or Economics that are required within several majors. Drexel advertises a student/faculty ratio of 10 to 1, lower than any larger state university, while less than ten percent of all undergraduate courses had more than 50 students. Drexel students gave their faculty a rating of 3.59 (out of a possible 5) on RateMyProfessors.com. But students at Penn State (3.71), Pitt (3.74), Temple (3.70), Rutgers-New Brunswick (3.74) and the University of Delaware (3.73) held their faculty in higher regard as did students at Rowan University, a similar-sized school considered by New Jersey residents (3.71).

**Community**

There are few college towns that offer more for young people to do than Philadelphia. The city is the fifth most populous in the US. after New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston, as well as one of the most ethnically diverse. Access to cultural and social opportunities as well as airline, bus, subway and train services from Drexel is excellent. There is simply no reason for a Drexel student to bring a car to school if s/he lives on or near campus. In addition, according to the Pew Charitable Trust, the cost of living in Philadelphia is lower than it is for Boston and Washington D.C., which are also popular college towns, although the crime rate is higher.

Drexel's campus is not dominated by tall buildings like other schools in large cities, including cross-town Temple, though there is no dominant architectural theme nor considerable green space. The University has built modern facilities in media arts, science and recreation, among others, in recent years. There are few streets that cross...
campus; this school is relatively easy for campus police to patrol. While the campus is clean, and has some attractive structures, location is its greatest strength. Drexel's main campus in University City is next to the University of Pennsylvania and close to the University of the Sciences, making it possible for the city to develop broader educationally focused strategies for the neighborhood and for developers to offer a large selection of “university-affiliated” housing options near both campuses.

Considering the size of Drexel’s student body (around 16,500 undergraduates) and the school’s urban location, reported arrests for possession of alcohol (only 29 total from 2013 through 2015), drug possession (only eight total over 2014 and 2015) are very low on the main campus, according to the University’s most recent Clery Report. The University prefers to take matters in its own hands, and disciplinary referrals did trend down. So did other reported incidents of crime, with the exception of Dating Violence (seven reported incidents in 2015).

With so many students on co-op during any given quarter, Drexel is not likely to be a “spirit and sports” school such as Temple or Villanova. While the university competes in NCAA Division I (scholarship) varsity sports and plays against Penn, La Salle and Saint Joseph’s in basketball, Drexel is not considered to be one of Philadelphia’s “Big Five” basketball schools because it does not play Temple and Villanova.

**Comforts**

Drexel requires all freshmen and sophomores to live in university housing, unless they reside within ten miles of campus or receive approval to commute from the home a family member or legal guardian for financial or medical reasons. The University actually provides a list of zip codes that fall within the ten-mile radius. Sophomores have more options under the two-year residency requirement. They may live in the residence halls, fraternity or sorority housing, University-affiliated apartments owned by American Campus Communities, a private developer or University-approved housing, which is also privately owned. In addition to the halls available to freshmen, Axis and University Crossings are open to sophomores as well as pre-juniors, juniors and seniors.

Altogether, less than a third of Drexel students live on campus, less than ten percent of the men are members of fraternities and less than ten percent of the women are in sororities. Drexel has 13 fraternities and sororities, nine of which live in university-owned housing in a row on 34th Street or on Powelton Avenue. The other four Greek organizations, which are on the same streets, own and manage their houses.
Because Drexel operates on a quarter system where students either go to school or work on co-op over 12 months housing decisions should reflect where the co-op is likely to be. A 12-month lease can work when a student remains in Philadelphia all year round. But a university housing contract or Greek housing are more flexible options for students whose co-ops take them out of the city.

Connections

Drexel handles co-op through a single office that has 60 full-time career development professionals who match students with positions available. Students may apply to up to 25 positions after completing a Co-op 101 preparatory class that covers resume writing, interview preparation and job search skills.

Most positions will be in the Philadelphia area, a good thing for many students. The metropolitan area has among the largest sectors in the arts and design, consulting, education, financial services, health care and public/non-profit management, among other industries. The downside: there is intense competition from other colleges, including Penn, Temple and Villanova, among others, when a local employers will consider students for co-ops, internships and entry-level full-time jobs.

While some co-op programs try to match students with assignments with the same employer over three co-op cycles, Drexel does not make this promise. The preference is to listen to students and their observations about different work settings. Those who are not happy in their first setting are matched to others where the student and counselor believe that success is more likely. Students can also be fired during a co-op cycle. They must write a letter of apology to their former employer before they can be placed in a new position. The employers are evaluated as well as the students so that their talents and skills are properly utilized.

Engineering and Information Sciences positions pay the most, followed by Biomedical Engineering, Science and Health Systems. However, students in education will, on average, earn about half as much. In other cases, Media Arts being one example, they might earn no salary at all. In these situations, students work only 20 hours per week as opposed to full time. Co-ops may also be entrepreneurial opportunities where students receive start-up stipends of $15,000 to implement a business plan, or they may be research opportunities. They have also been made available in fields where positions are hard to get such as Fashion Design and Music Business. International co-ops typically carry a stipend for air fare, as well as housing arrangements similar to study abroad programs where students live in university housing on a host campus. The
stipends and subsidized housing are necessary because these co-ops are among the lowest-paid for salaried positions.

Although nearly half of all Drexel students who participate in co-op are often hired by one of their co-op employers, they may also find work through the University’s Fall and Spring Career Fairs, each of which attracts approximately 250 employers or the Engineering Career Fair.

Nearly 57,000 of the approximately 103,000 Drexel alumni registered in LinkedIn live in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. This is interesting because more than half of the undergraduate student body at Drexel came from states other than Pennsylvania. The New York area ranks a distant second with just under 9,500 alumni. According to LinkedIn, nearly 16,000 alumni work in either Engineering or Information Technology. While the alumni base registered in LinkedIn is impressive, it also considers alumni who have graduate as well as undergraduate degrees. Drexel is a very popular destination for graduate students who commute from within the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Drexel separates student and alumni career services, although the number of alumni networking events is impressive for graduates who live in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Graduates may join the University’s alumni association for no charge while other large schools, public and private, charge dues.

Given Drexel’s emphasis on co-op and the share of alumni near campus, it is wise for a student to develop their own LinkedIn profile as s/he progresses through co-op assignments. A Drexel student is given a better opportunity to build a resume than peers at other schools that do not offer co-op or are not in large cities. S/he can also build their network earlier in order to build it for life.

Conclusions

Drexel is a great option for mature students who have some idea of what they want to study and want to test that out in the workplace as soon as possible—especially if they can cover their costs. They can build an impressive resume, often a better one than they would have developed had they chosen a more selective school.
The Report Card: Drexel University

- Four-Year/Six Year Graduation Rates: Not Applicable/B
- Freshman Retention: B+
- Costs: C
- Curriculum: A
- Community: A
- Comforts: B
- Connections: A