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Merrimack College (MA)

Located in picturesque North Andover, Massachusetts, approximate an hour's drive from Boston, Merrimack College has over 3,400 full-time undergraduates, up from 1,800 eight years ago. The college's undergraduate enrollment is expected to top 4,000 as it adds more degree programs and advances its entire athletic program from NCAA Division II (scholarship) to Division I status.

Merrimack has historically been a regional Catholic college, one of only two Augustinian schools in the United States, Villanova University being the other. It would be fair to state that Merrimack is a smaller version of Villanova, with a very similar academic mix as well as the advantage of access to a major city that offers many employment and social opportunities for its students. Sixty percent of the current undergraduate student body is Catholic, although the college welcomes students of all faiths. Seventy percent attended public schools.

Due to the college's strengths, one out of every nine college-bound students in Massachusetts applies for admission to Merrimack, impressive considering that Massachusetts has one of the largest selections of small and mid-sized (4,000 to 10,000 students) private colleges in the United States, and Merrimack is not one of the ten largest among them.

Eight years ago Merrimack, then more of a liberal arts college, was more likely to be considered versus schools such as Assumption College in Worcester, Saint Anselm's College in New Hampshire and St. Michael's College in Vermont, all Catholic colleges in different orders, but similar size and academic focus, as well as Endicott College on Massachusetts' North Shore and Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. It was also more likely to be considered against the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, the Bay State's smaller public colleges, the University of New Hampshire and the University of Rhode Island.

As Merrimack continues to grow, the college is more likely to be considered against not only those schools, but also other mid-sized Catholic colleges such as Fairfield University (CT), Loyola University-Maryland, Providence College (RI) and Sacred Heart University (CT). Merrimack is also considered against mid-sized independent private schools such as Bentley University (MA), Bryant University (RI), Marist College (NY), Monmouth University (NJ), Roger Williams University (RI) and the University of Hartford (CT).

Like Merrimack, all of these schools have added pre-professional majors and expanded their graduate degree programs. All of these schools compete in varsity scholarship sports either at the Division I or Division II level. They are located either in a major city, or within an hour's commute to one. Merrimack is also being considered against the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the University of Connecticut, the more selective New England flagship state universities.

While virtually all of these schools have recently admitted a demographically stronger student body, and had more selective admissions, Merrimack is already doing a better job at retaining a freshman class and graduating students on time than four of these mid-sized private universities: Monmouth, Roger Williams, Sacred Heart and the University of Hartford, as shown on the next page. While Merrimack did not have the highest retention rate on this list, its four-year graduation rate is higher than all of the New England flagship state schools, excluding the University of Connecticut. This performance is quite good considering that many students who chose Merrimack were less likely to be admitted to the more selective colleges in this group.



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	Full-Time Undergraduate Enrollment 2016	Freshman Retention 2016	Four-Year Graduation Rate 2016	Average High School GPA/ Old SAT Scores 2016	Acceptance Rate 2016
Merrimack College	3,313	82%	68%	3.1/1000 Test Optional	82%
Bentley University	4,075	94%	83%	NA/1240	46%
Bryant University	3,399	89%	73%	3.5/1170 Test Optional	69%
Fairfield University	3,802	89%	78%	3.5/1190 Test Optional	61%
Loyola-Maryland	4,030	88%	76%	3.4/1200 Test Optional	66%
Marist College	4,964	91%	75%	3.3/1160 Test Optional	41%
Monmouth University	4,484	81%	55%	3.3/1030	77%
Providence College	3,997	92%	81%	3.4/1130 Test Optional	55%
Roger Williams University	4,119	82%	55%	3.5/1120 Test Optional	79%
Sacred Heart University	4,793	82%	54%	3.5/1130 Test Optional	57%
University of Hartford	4,506	75%	48%	NA/1040	72%

Source: 2016-17 Common Data Sets submitted by the schools to US News College Compass.

Merrimack admits students to the college, not requiring a student to choose a major, and will help them develop exploratory paths, even if, for example, they are undecided between business or engineering. Future students who are drawn to Merrimack would be advised to apply early—the college has two Early Action periods as well as the option to apply Early Decision—especially if they are interested in engineering or the health professions. Admissions into those programs are likely to become more competitive.

Costs

Next year Merrimack will charge approximately \$41,800 in tuition and fees, and, on average, \$15,800 for room and board. The college estimates its Total Cost of Attendance, including these direct charges on the term bill plus books, transportation and personal expenses, to be approximately \$60,100. The tuition and fees are lower than most of the more selective schools that are direct competition for Merrimack students: Bentley, Bryant, Fairfield, Loyola-Maryland and Providence. Among less selective schools, Monmouth, Roger Williams and the University of



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Hartford will charge less, Sacred Heart will charge about the same. [However, Merrimack also offers discounts to families who enroll more than one child at the same time.](#)

On average, the college met two-thirds of a student's need in 2016-17. Only 12 percent of the student body had their full need fulfilled. The average merit-based award was about one-third of the tuition and fees. The largest award is currently \$21,000, just over half of tuition and fees. The college appears willing to come within \$3,000 to \$4,000 of the resident costs for the University of Massachusetts-Amherst for the needier students who present credentials and/or potential as well as need. However, Merrimack's sticker price is higher than non-resident charges for any New England flagship state university, with the exception of the University of Vermont.

Merrimack has added accelerated Bachelors/Masters programs over the past eight years. The college will apply AP or IB credits to help reduce completion time for both degrees. Students accepted into these programs begin the coursework for the advanced degree in their senior year, paying the undergraduate charges, less scholarship aid, for two courses.

Merrimack reported no student loan information to the Project on Student Debt, which should raise concerns for interested students and their parents. Among the similar private schools, only Monmouth graduates in 2016 who took out loans graduated owing less than \$30,000 in debt, and several of these schools reported an average borrower indebtedness exceeding \$35,000. The maximum that undergraduate may borrow towards an undergraduate degree through the Federal Direct Student Loan program is \$27,000 over four years, \$31,000 over five.

Curriculum

All Merrimack students, regardless of their major, must fulfill:

Five [Area Requirements](#): Quantitative Reasoning, Cultural Diversity, Writing Intensive, Experiential Learning and Academic Convocation. The last is completed through a first semester freshman seminar program. Some of these required courses will "double dip" with other requirements under Foundations, Explorations and Connections

Three [Foundations Requirements](#): These are courses in Ethics, Philosophy and Writing.

Eight [Explorations Requirements](#): These are liberal arts requirements similar to those expected at most other colleges and universities.

Three [Connections Requirements](#): These are courses for writing within the major as well as experiential learning to gain exposure to possible career options.

Merrimack uses a cohort model to place 80 percent of the incoming class into at least one defined group. That group may be a Living Learning community, an honors-level community, the Dean's Forum, or one of two communities, Compass and Purpose, targeted to students who enter requiring more academic support services at the start of their education. The college's student success professionals reported that students who were actively engaged in one or more cohorts were more likely to progress towards their degrees, all the way to graduation, and usually towards a direction afterwards. First-year retention in the Compass and Purpose cohorts, students who required the higher levels of academic support and encouragement, has been higher than 85 percent, better than the freshman class as a whole. Honors students sign contracts to do honors-level work in courses as well as complete a capstone project.



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Merrimack has a very comprehensive selection of majors for a school that is neither small nor quite mid-sized. But the college offers as many programs [business](#); [education and social policy](#); [health sciences](#); [the liberal arts](#); and [science and engineering](#) as you are likely to find at a much larger school, and many more minors, too. The college plans to expand its health science program to offer Nursing (Bachelors and transfer options) and Physical Therapy. Engineering offers may expand to include Biomedical, Chemical and Industrial Engineering. The Athletic Training program is fairly new as is Computer Engineering. Thirty percent of the students are currently enrolled in the Girard School of Business, though enrollments in Engineering and Health Sciences will grow as these schools add more majors.

Less than one percent of all classes offered at Merrimack during the 2016-17 academic year had more than 50 students. Sixty percent had between 20 and 49. Thirty-nine percent had fewer than 20. The college reports an average class size of 21 students and a student/faculty ratio of 14 to 1. That ratio actually matters, since students are taught by faculty, not teaching assistants or graduate students, as well as adjuncts who are experienced professionals in the workplace.

Merrimack students gave their faculty a rating of 3.7 (out of a possible 5) on [RateMyProfessors.com](#). They held their faculty in the same regard as their peers at Sacred Heart University and the University of Hartford, in less regard than students at Monmouth (3.76), but in higher regard than students at Roger Williams (3.58). When compared with schools that might be viewed as aspirational institutions for prospective students, Merrimack students held their faculty in higher regard than students at Bentley University (3.58), Bryant University (3.58), Fairfield University (3.68), Marist College (3.62) and in equal regard with students at Loyola-Maryland. This should be viewed as a positive reflection of the quality of the education at Merrimack, given that the college admits about a fifth of its class based more on potential and less on statistics.

Community

Merrimack's campus is relatively easy to navigate as well as find parking, a difficult task at most similar schools, though the newest lots need surfacing. The college allows all students to have cars, but gives first-year students a lower priority for parking permits. Those who receive a permit are also assigned a parking space.

Merrimack is a fairly new college, opening in 1947, first to accommodate returning military veterans who attended college using the benefits from the GI Bill. While its main administration building dates back to the college's founding, the rest of the campus appears to have been constructed after 1970. The newest buildings, which house the business and health science programs, were recently completed. A new admissions welcome center and career development building is under construction. Interiors of the older buildings, including laboratories, library spaces and study areas, dining facilities, classrooms and athletic facilities appear to have been renovated quite recently.

Merrimack's [Clery Report](#) for 2014 through 2016 shows an increase in alcohol-related disciplinary referrals from 507 to 874; the latest number appears high for a school with 2,500 students residing on campus. Reported drug-related referrals, however, dropped from 169 to only 3 from 2015 to 2016. While reported incidents of sexually related crimes have declined, there were two reported arrests for weapons possession reported each year from 2016 through 2016 and, in 2015 there were 17 reported disciplinary referrals for this.

[North Andover](#), the home to the college since it's founding, is a well-to-do community with a downtown that resembles a New England village in a [Norman Rockwell painting](#). Only one mile from campus on foot, the downtown offers many coffee shops and dining places that will be



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attractive to college students on more limited budgets as well as an ample choice of restaurants that their parents can take them to dine. North Andover is also home to Philips Andover Academy, one of the oldest private residential preparatory schools in the nation. The community is served by commuter rail service to Boston, though the trip is nearly 90 minutes.

Merrimack currently competes in 22 NCAA Division II (scholarship) varsity sports, and also competes at the higher Division I (also scholarship) level in Men's and Women's Hockey. The school currently competes in the [Northeast 10 Conference](#) against schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont for all sports excluding hockey, where it competes in [Hockey East](#). The college's most recent strategic plan mentions that the institution hopes to [move to Division I competition in all varsity sports](#). However, it has not announced the conference where these teams, excluding hockey, will affiliate. The [Northeast Conference](#), which includes Bryant University (RI) and Sacred Heart University (CT), both competitors versus Merrimack for students, might be a possibility, because the majority of members play football. The college opened its 4,000 seat football stadium this past season.

Comforts

Seventy-five percent of Merrimack's undergraduate student body lives on campus, occupying approximately 2,500 beds in traditional (several rooms sharing a common bathroom), suite-style (a small number of rooms, usually two to four, sharing a common bathroom) and apartment-style housing. North Andover is a well-to-do community, making other off-campus living arrangements within walking distance cost prohibitive.

Connections

Being a fairly new, as well as a growing college, Merrimack does not have as large an alumni base as the mid-sized and larger schools that compete against it for students. However, the alumni relations, career development and student success functions of the college are better coordinated towards helping students prepare for the internship and job search, and successfully find positions, starting the summer after the sophomore year. The college embeds career services advisors within each of Merrimack's six schools. These advisors maintain offices within the school as well as the college's student center.

While the Honors level students are as likely to succeed as peers at similar schools, Merrimack also has a Dean's Forum that works with the next level in cohorts of 60 juniors and seniors at a time, once each semester. These students attend a three-day retreat in Boston with alumni who hold senior management and professional positions in the city. Those selected receive advice not only for their career development and their job search, but also dining and workplace etiquette. The college attracts over 100 employers for its spring career fair, a large number for a school that graduates fewer than 1,000 seniors each year. Merrimack also hosts a fall career fair for Accounting and Finance majors that attracts 40 employers.

Merrimack is a very regional school. Among the more than 20,000 alumni registered in [LinkedIn.com](#), more than 15,000 live in or around Boston. This is not surprising, considering nearly 70 percent of the students came from Massachusetts, and another 20 percent came from other New England states. New York City and its suburbs are a very distant second, home to just under 900 alumni. However, the college leverages its Boston area alumni base extremely well, not only for the Dean's Forum, but also as sponsors for internships and co-ops (Accounting majors) and as participants in on-campus panels and events.



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Conclusions

Merrimack continues to be an up-and-coming mid-sized private college for a B/B+ student who wants to take advantage of the Boston area for entertainment and internships as well as life after college. While not exceptionally selective, Merrimack does an excellent job at graduating a class that includes students who were less likely to be admitted to more competitive schools. Merrimack is a very attractive alternative to the larger New England public colleges and universities for students who receive sufficient aid, or arrive with the funds to cover the costs.

Report Card: Merrimack College (MA)

- Four-Year/Six-Year Graduation Rates: B+/B+
- Freshman Retention: B
- Costs: C+
- Curriculum: A
- Community: A
- Comforts: B+
- Connections: B+ (Boston area)/C (elsewhere)