

The Coolest Colleges in America

by Donald Asher

Did you go to a cool college, or just another school not any different from hundreds of others? Is one large state university interchangeable with another? Is one small liberal arts college pretty much a clone of the rest? Is your “regional powerhouse” going to be pretty similar to those in other regions?

In many cases, the answer to this type of question has to be yes. This fuels the cynical notion that where you go to school doesn’t matter. While it is true that a good student can get a good education at most of the schools in the country, it is also true that there are some bold and beautiful experiments in higher education. Here are some schools that are outside the cookie cutter models:

Deep Springs. Deep Springs is a men’s preparatory college located in such a remote part of southeast California that they have to drive to Nevada to get their mail. It enrolls only 13 young men per year, which leaves it with a total student body of 26. In some years it is the most competitive college in the country. It is rigorous beyond belief, and in spite of the academic load, students also have to manage a working ranch spread across dozens of square miles *and* govern the institution, hire incoming faculty, adjudicate disputes, and so on. This is a school like no other on this planet. After two years at Deep Springs, students finish up at the most elite colleges and universities in the country.

American College of the Building Arts. Located in Charleston, South Carolina, this school is a curious hybrid of a European apprenticeship program, an American trade union apprenticeship program, and a liberal arts college focusing on art, architecture, applied mathematics, art history, historical preservation, design and project management technology, and every related aspect of the art and business of fine building. Called “one of the most important preservation initiatives in America” by Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, this is an Old World aesthetic in a very contemporary package. (ACBA is licensed by the State of South Carolina to grant the degree of Bachelor of Applied Science in Building Arts.)

St. John’s College. St. John’s College is a throwback to a medieval monastery, in some senses. It has a classic Great Books curriculum, which means that most readings are original texts, not derivative textbooks or contemporary summaries. All students take the same classes in the same sequence. Except for a senior project, there are no elective classes, at all. One learns about calculus from Newton, poetics from Shakespeare, and political science from Machiavelli himself. With dual campuses in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, St. John’s aims to build an educated person out of every student.

Prescott College. Located in idyllic Prescott, Arizona, Prescott College is an experiential eco school. Students must engage themselves in hands-on experiential learning with a focus on environmental and social issues, as well as compile a portfolio to prove intellectual development at the college level. Students design their own curricula in collaboration with faculty. It takes a mature and self-motivated student to thrive in this academic setting.

Berea College. Berea College is a work college and one of the “free” colleges in the United States. Work colleges build on-campus employment into the educational program at every level, both as a way of reducing student costs and as part of a philosophy that work itself is sacred. To even be admitted, you have to qualify for financial aid. Every student has a job, and students do everything from mow the lawns to work in admissions. Although it focuses on the academic needs of students from Kentucky and Appalachia, Berea draws applications from around the world. So this is a low cost school with some amazing students.

Simon’s Rock. In one sense Simon’s Rock is a good liberal arts school located in New England. In another sense, it is a lifeline for the mature and intelligent student for whom the traditional high school is a hell on Earth. Simon’s Rock admits students *without a high school degree* who can demonstrate that they are both intellectually prepared to perform at the college level, and mature enough to handle college life at an early age. Simon’s Rock is a great option for the precocious, intellectually curious, and hard working student who simply can’t face another high school study hall under the supervision of some sullen and disinterested coach.

These are only a few of the more unusual schools in America. There’re also **Marlboro** in Vermont, **College of the Atlantic** in Maine, **New College** in Florida, **Shimer College** in Illinois, and **St. Thomas Aquinas** in California, among a few dozen others. For the student who is willing to look a little deeper, there is more to the equation than public vs. private and small vs. large.

BIO:

Donald Asher is the author of eleven books on careers and higher education, including *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming and Just Plain Different*. He welcomes your comments about cool schools at don@donaldasher.com or visit his web site at www.donaldasher.com. This article adapted in part from *Cool Colleges*. © 2010 Asher Associates.