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COLLEGES THAT CHANGE LIVES

40 SCHOOLS THAT WILL
CHANGE *THE* WAY YOU
THINK ABOUT COLLEGES

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WILLAMETTE  UNIVERSITY

Willamette is a university where engaged, enterprising, independent thinkers learn how to turn their knowledge into action. But don't just take our word for it.

The popular guide, "Colleges That Change Lives: 40 Schools That Will Change the Way You Think About Colleges," recognizes Willamette for hands-on academic experiences that cultivate critical thinking and creativity; professors dedicated to mentorship; and lively, diverse opportunities for fun and personal growth.



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Colleges That Change Lives*



Willamette University, Salem, Oregon

Willamette University is far away from the East Coast prestige machine in both geography and philosophy. It's a place where you will grow, if you take advantage of the university's abundant offerings and active community.

The sixty-acre campus is an attractive blend of red brick buildings, huge trees, and sweeping, expansive green space. It's home to the College of Liberal Arts and three graduate schools: law, education, and management. The undergrad program enrolls two thousand students from thirty-nine states and thirty-eight foreign countries. The majority come from the Pacific Northwest.

Unlike megauniversities, where professors tend to defend their disciplines against all others and where turf wars are legendary, professors here see themselves as part of the whole. Before they talk about the specific curricula in their departments, they talk about how a Willamette education changes a student. It is no wonder that ten Willamette professors won Oregon's Professor of the Year award between 1990 and 2011—a record unmatched by any other school in the state.



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"The thing we do is not about specialization," says Dr. Amber Davisson, who teaches in the rhetoric and media studies department. "We don't let students confuse a degree and a career. We focus on analysis, and we expect a lot of critical thinking. We teach our students how to ask questions and answer them. It's hard, but it's really good for them."

Across campus in the art history department, Dr. Ricardo De Mambro Santos shares a similar vision: "A big university is like a knowledge machine. At the University of Washington, I had four hundred students and four TAs in a single class. They were shadows in the arena, and I was the gladiator of knowledge. It drove me crazy. I wanted closer relationships with students. I wanted to help them analyze and solve problems, not just memorize. A book can give you information. We help students learn to do something good with that information."

A senior majoring in history says she loves this emphasis on applying knowledge and building skills: "In high school, you're asked to demonstrate that you can do busywork. You can just jump through the hoops. At Willamette there are not hoops to jump through. Everything you do has a purpose. In my department, we don't learn facts and dates. They teach you how to write, present, and think critically. It's no longer just about filling in the blanks."

Part of this magic comes from abundant hands-on learning opportunities. Students from across departments rave about how easy it is to participate in faculty research or design their own special projects.

One tremendous source of these opportunities is the University Forest at Zena, a beautiful plot of land comprising three hundred acres of forest and five acres of farmland. A twenty-minute drive from campus, it is a rich and diverse outdoor classroom, where professors of art, environmental science, biology, English, theater, politics, and history teach classes that tie the local landscape to academic exploration. As many as four hundred students a year, spend time at the forest.

"Zena encourages professors to be creative," says Dr. Joe Bowersox, a professor of environmental policy. "It's a great place for students to test their ideas. They learn that it's one thing to embrace a theory; it's quite a separate thing to have to apply it."

Students help maintain the land: They prune trees, thin the forest, and build trails as part of their education in sustainable forestry. One group used predictive models to determine whether they could control invasive species with hand labor. Another group built the greenhouse and a wind turbine that provides energy for the electric fence that surrounds the farm, where the college grows organic vegetables for the campus community. Each week during the harvest, the veggies are sold on campus at a farm stand; the campus bookstore sells honey from the beekeeping practice.

In the summer, the university offers a six-week program in sustainable agriculture at Zena. A small group of students live at and tend to the farm. They take two interdisciplinary courses that examine how our food system influences and is influenced by ecology, society, ethics, and the economy, and they travel to local dairies, farms, food-processing plants, and markets.



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"Students aren't just learning how to do research here. They're actually doing it," says Dr. Emma Coddington, a neuroscientist. "That's key because they're developing such important skill sets: how to filter information, how to observe and synthesize. That translates into being a great thinker. I don't care if they go to graduate school. I want them to be able to go into the world and actually think for themselves."

The biology department makes sure that its students know how to communicate their research to a broad audience by sponsoring a "reverse science fair." Middle- and high-school students from Salem attend the fair, where Willamette students present the research they conducted for their theses. The younger students vote on the "best" project.

And it's not just science students who get these opportunities. When Dr. De Mambro Santos discovered a collection of

106 unpublished drawings from the Renaissance, he arranged for the college's lovely art museum to host the first-ever exhibition of the art. Then he enlisted the help of his students; together they analyzed the drawings, attributed them, and created explanatory labels to give visitors context. "My students were young scholars," the professor says. "They went beyond the boundaries of the slim academic realm and into the community. Every single line they wrote had very serious consequences. They started providing ideas and analysis that I never would have imagined. I was learning alongside them. We were on fire."

The college has funds to support several dozen student-faculty collaborations for nine weeks each summer. Professors post descriptions of their ongoing research, and students apply to join their programs. In the fall semester, students present their research in a campuswide symposium. Science students travel to a regional conference for undergraduate research and present their findings. Many students, from all disciplines, have the chance to coauthor papers and present their work at full-blown academic conferences.

Maybe this collaborative spirit is born of Willamette's oft-quoted motto: "Not unto ourselves alone are we born." Students mention it. Professors point to it. It's a guiding principle, not a marketing mantra. Professors demonstrate its essence by being generous with their time and encouraging their students. As students benefit and grow, they begin to think about their own powers to do good in the world.

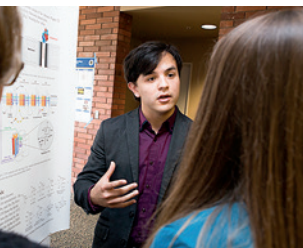
So it is no surprise that Willamette's sense of community is deep and dutiful. Students take community service seriously, and they talk a lot about their own responsibilities in light of the world's challenges. Most of them want to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. A senior explains, "We are concerned about living the best life we can. That goes beyond finding the best jobs we can."

They see themselves as tolerant, liberal, diverse, involved, and compassionate. The happiest say they took on leadership opportunities early—an easy option, given the wide range of student activities on campus. They're zealous about sports, particularly intramural athletics, and the outdoor program, which takes full advantage of the Pacific Northwest's natural playground. The program hosts as many as fifty trips a year to take students hiking, camping, white-water rafting, mountain climbing, whale watching, skiing, snowboarding, ice-skating, fishing, and more.

Sustainability is also a major topic on campus. Not only do most students embrace sustainability as an important political topic, but the college also has made commitments to reducing its environmental impact. It has



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large-scale commitments, like cutting its energy consumption in half by 2020 and constructing LEED-certified buildings when it needs more space. And across campus there are small changes too: Students get free city bus passes (rather, the cost is included in their fees). A campus bike shop, staffed by students, offers free loaner bikes to students. The college recycles everything it can, including cooking oil and garden debris. For its work, Willamette has garnered praise from the growing cohort of organizations calling for eco-friendly practices in higher education, including the Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation.

Politically active (or interested) students can cross the street to Oregon's state capitol, where many of them intern for elected officials and state agencies. "I do casework for constituents in the governor's office," says a junior majoring in politics and Spanish. "It has made me even more interested in politics, but it has also shown me the limits of political theory. It's pretty common for us to be talking about an idea in class and for someone to bring up practical issues from their internship at the capitol. You learn both sides here, the theoretical and the real-life side."

In academic and extracurricular offerings, Willamette gives students opportunities to explore. Students who say they were dreading the liberal arts requirements when they arrived have discovered what students at other innovative schools find: an array of courses that testify to professors' creativity and boost students' curiosity. A chemistry major who "hated history" in high school was worried about taking a history course until she discovered a class about the history of Western medicine. Many students say they underestimated how valuable the exposure to wide-ranging topics and ideas would be. "The things you look for [during your college search] aren't the things you end up appreciating most," says a junior majoring in rhetoric and media studies. "I complained about my liberal arts requirements, but I'm most grateful for the liberal arts vibe here. Even if you come here wanting to do one thing, you won't be disappointed if you fall in love with something else."

A student who grew up wanting to be a graphic designer—and had the portfolio to get into design school—chose Willamette because he had a hunch he wanted to learn more than "how to do one thing." He says he made the right choice: "I feel vindicated now. I have an awareness of the world that I didn't have. It's only the educated person who can speak the truth, and I want to use my art to speak truth. The perception is that you can't get good at art if you don't go to art school. I want to challenge that."

When students arrive, professors say, they're still in high-school mode. They expect to be spoon-fed the information. "They've had the curiosity beat out of them in many cases," Dr. Coddington says. "We help them fall in love with

biology—or whatever their discipline is—and then we refine, refine, refine. By the time they're seniors, they can read widely and discern reliable knowledge. They know how to challenge each other without getting emotionally charged. It's a lovely thing to see. It's why we teach."

This transformation happens to students who say they were "average" and "low B" students in high school as well as to students who were valedictorians and salutatorians. The college has room for many of them: It accepts 60 percent of its applicants. The middle 50 percent have SAT scores between 1160 and 1340 (critical reading and math) and ACT scores between 27 and 30. Their median high school GPA was 3.7. The college meets an impressive 91 percent of demonstrated financial need; 65 percent of students get aid.

Eighty-eight percent of freshmen return for their sophomore year, beating the national average for similar schools by 16 percent, and 70 percent of students graduate in four years. Nationally, only 46 percent of students at private four-year schools that grant master's degrees manage to finish in four years.

Each year, Willamette students add to the college's respectable list of awards. Between 2006 and 2011, graduates won thirteen Fulbrights, putting Willamette among the top fifty or so colleges in the country in production of Fulbright Scholars. Between 2005 and 2011, Willamette students won eight National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowships, which support three years of graduate study toward a master's or doctoral degree in science, math, or engineering. And between 2000 and 2011, eight students won Goldwater Scholarships, which also encourage students to pursue careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.

The sense around campus is that Willamette is a rising star—a place that does its work well and has momentum to claim its rightful spot among the few colleges in this country that prioritize undergraduate education. Its students happily skip the prestige mill in exchange for honest mentorship, a rich array of hands-on experiences, and liberal learning that cultivates critical thinking and values. You would do well to join them.

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