

The Ten Toughest Schools to Get Into

The Princeton Review

The prestigious schools listed here admit only top-of-the-line students, the cream of the academic crop. Here's what to expect if you have what it takes to gain entrance to their hallowed halls:

2005 Rankings

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1. **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

If you're talented (and lucky) enough to get in, research heavyweight MIT "is the ultimate academic powerhouse," its students brag. MIT is the type of place where "almost everyone, including the teachers, loves to learn for the sake of learning, and you end up loving MIT for what it gives you while hating it for the work you have to do to succeed." Sure, "it's hard to get into and hard to stay in," but the rewards for all the difficult work include "professors who are just as eager to teach in their field as they are to research in it." The overarching spirit of MIT is one of cooperation. As one student puts it, "If you are willing to put in the work, there is always a way to get enough help to complete all assignments." Students appreciate how "The name 'MIT' opens many doors for internships and full-time jobs." They also love that first semester freshmen are graded pass/no record in all their classes.

2. **Princeton University**

Applicants face daunting competition in gaining entrance to Princeton University, arguably the most undergraduate-friendly member of the Ivy League. Other institutions at a similar level of prestige often promote their powerful professional schools in business, law, and/or medicine, but not Princeton. Here, the focus is on the college student. "The lack of a large graduate school at Princeton allows professors to focus more on the undergraduate population, which is a significant contrast to other top schools in the nation." Students rate professors from "stars of academia" to "unknowns who are there because they are great at teaching." The students surveyed here are consistently among the nation's most satisfied with their overall academic experience. A sophomore sums it up as "my dream come true."

3. **California Institute of Technology**

The select students who get into Caltech arrive at the school knowing what to expect--namely, academic boot camp--and few graduate disappointed. The school's "grueling" demands "prepare students to face far more challenges than they ever thought possible." The school operates on the quarter system, which means "classes go by quickly." Warns one student, "Stay on top of things because before you know it, it's midterms. Then finals. Rinse and repeat two times. Then you have a complete school year." Another admits, "The system works, I guess, but there is a lot (and I do mean a lot) of homework involved."

Looking for the Right School?

4. Yale University

As a major national research center, Yale attracts many of the world's great scholars. It attracts a whole lot of talented undergraduate applicants, too. Yale can afford to be extremely selective with its surplus of applicants beating down the doors, but students report that "once you're in, they will pamper you and support your ambitions." Neither professors nor students at Yale rest on their laurels, though. Yale's professors, "in addition to being top scholars, actually seem to enjoy teaching undergrads." Lest you forget, it's worth repeating that "the schoolwork itself is hard, very hard, but rewarding, very rewarding."

5. Harvard College

World-class reputations like Harvard's aren't just handed to them; they are earned with "unparalleled resources," "excellent professors," and a "talented, motivated, unique, brilliant" student body. Students tell us that "the academic experience is amazing," but that "it's humbling to rub shoulders with Nobel laureates and presidential advisors." But don't think anyone caters to your needs alone: "There's no handholding. You'd better be an independent, self-motivated type" to survive in this academic powerhouse.

6. University of Pennsylvania

Penn is one of the hottest names in American higher education, and students here tell us that its reputation is well deserved. First of all, there's the top-notch faculty. While "professors expect students to think for themselves," they're usually open to "one-on-one instruction during office hours if lectures are not sufficient." In addition to office hours, undergraduates can access professors through freshman seminar classes, and many profs live right on campus.

7. Stanford University

Stanford gets mountains of applications from students competing to benefit from its unique blend of "world class" academics, "zesty spirit," "laid-back lifestyle," and "beautiful weather." Undergrads agree that Stanford lives up to its reputation as "an amazingly hard academic institution with a laid-back atmosphere" teeming with "brilliant and down-to-earth" professors. Students say the faculty is "approachable" and "often have opportunities for you to get involved in research." Those looking for a supportive, small-college atmosphere, however, should consider other private universities. "There is very little handholding" at Stanford.

8. Swarthmore College

If you have what it takes to win a place at Swarthmore, you'll soon learn that "A Swarthmore day is a 28-hour day," as one student tells us, reflecting on the notoriously heavy workload at this elite liberal arts school. Don't let the reputation scare you off, though; as another student explained, "Academics at Swat are hard; everyone knows that coming in. But that doesn't mean they aren't enjoyable." What do students get in return for their fretting and sweating? Academic freedom, for one; "students at Swarthmore manage to study anything and everything that interests them and may do so [to] whatever depth they choose." They also get abundant campus resources, professors who "love to really get to know their students," and an environment in which "learning is the goal, not the means."

9. Duke University

Undergraduates who make it into Duke express themselves with the pride and confidence that comes with national basketball championships AND a stellar academic reputation. As one typical student put it, "The academics here are top notch. It doesn't matter what field you go into, you are going to learn about the field, and more importantly, how to think about and analyze issues and events. I learned how to learn here." Though Duke is a major research university with world-class graduate programs, students report that their professors are "fantastic. This is why I came to Duke. In virtually all departments, the teaching faculty is superb. They do research, publish, and teach: a rare combination."

10. Columbia University--Columbia College

"Academic powerhouse" Columbia University boasts offerings in a staggering array of disciplines, a faculty that includes Nobel laureates, and one of the nation's few core curricula that students actually love. Even so, "how many schools can boast world-class education and location in the greatest city in the world? One: Columbia." All combine to make the Manhattan Ivy one of the most competitive colleges in the country.

College Rankings

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