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The Biggest Bargains Among U.S. Colleges

The schools that offer the best value are often those with modest resources

By Alexa St. John
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While some of the top schools in the nation have the biggest endowments and other financial resources, the real bargains in higher education often come from schools with more modest means.

Eight of the top 10 best-value colleges in this year's Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings are public schools, whose financial resources are constrained by government budgets.

Berea College, a private liberal-arts school in Kentucky, is No. 1, followed by three schools in the City University of New York system: CUNY City College of New York, CUNY Bernard M. Baruch College and CUNY Hunter College. The University of Washington-Seattle rounds out the top five.

(You can see [our full rankings](#) as well as sort the complete rankings by a variety of measures and reweight the main contributing factors to reflect what's most important to you. Or you can [compare two colleges](#).)

The WSJ/THE rankings calculated which schools among the top 250 overall provide the best value, by dividing each school's overall score by its average net price according to Education Department data. The average net price is the total cost of attending a school—including tuition, fees, room and board, books and supplies, and other costs—minus federal or institutional financial aid that doesn't have to be repaid. Students who don't receive any aid aren't included in the calculation.

Students at Berea, a private liberal-arts college in Kentucky that ranks 155th overall, work campus jobs but pay no tuition. College President Lyle Roelofs says that makes higher education affordable for many students from families in the country's lowest income quartile. "Solving the economic worry enables them to have the college experience that an upper-middle-class college student takes for granted," he says.

At CUNY, more than 40% of students are from households with less than \$20,000 in annual income, and 80% of graduates leave without debt, according to the university. CUNY Chancellor

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez acknowledges the budgetary challenges the university faces, saying, “We need to be careful about the resources that we use.” But the university also takes advantage of the resources of its home city, by connecting students directly with employers, especially in New York, for networking.

City College of New York is No. 205 in the overall ranking, with Bernard M. Baruch College at No. 232 overall and Hunter College at No. 208.

The four lowest-ranked schools for value among the top 250 overall are Worcester Polytechnic Institute, No. 119 overall, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, No. 143 overall, Pratt Institute, No. 237 overall, and the California Institute of the Arts, No. 170 overall. Pratt and the California Institute of the Arts are small arts colleges.

The Best Values

The schools among the top 250 overall that provide the best value, based on overall score and average net price:

1. Berea College
2. CUNY City College of New York
3. CUNY Bernard M. Baruch College
4. CUNY Hunter College
5. University of Washington-Seattle
6. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
7. Purdue University West Lafayette
8. University of Illinois at Chicago
9. University of California, Los Angeles
10. Princeton University

Source: Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education College Rankings

Ravi Rajan, resident of the California Institute of the Arts, says ranking methodologies are often challenging for small arts schools, in part because they don’t have research programs and their more specialized teaching is more costly. “Other schools have a head start” in terms of their endowments and financial resources, he adds. He says the student-to-faculty ratio of 8 to 1 at CalArts fosters a mentoring relationship that helps students professionally.

Representatives from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Pratt Institute also stressed the individualized attention the schools provide their students, as well as their efforts to increase financial aid and their high rates of graduation. A representative of Hobart and William Smith Colleges cited the university’s educational value, particularly its study-abroad program, and the school’s overall impact on students’ professional careers, including the influence of its alumni network.