



### **Focus on Princeton University**

Princeton University, despite being one of the most competitive schools in the country to get into and requiring the highest quality independent scholarship, strives to be a friendly place with a real sense of community, and judging by the students I spoke with, it succeeds. The atmosphere among the 5,200 undergraduates is more collaborative than competitive, I was told, as academic support is readily available and students on the sports teams, for example, typically study together and help each other during bus rides.

Princeton likes to call itself “a world class university with the heart and soul of a liberal arts college.” That’s because the focus is so heavily on the undergraduate experience, and students work closely with professors right from the start, benefitting from the extraordinary six-to-one student-faculty ratio. Additionally, everyone is required to work one-on-one with a faculty member as to prepare a junior year paper and then again to prepare a senior thesis. These senior theses, which are all ultimately bound and retained in the library, can take many forms, ranging from scholarly analyses to works of creative expression like a recent novel narrated in the voice of Mary Todd Lincoln. Whatever the students do, though, they are expected to work with a high degree of independence and to challenge themselves to the fullest.

A few years ago Princeton had an initiative to “deflate” grades in response to rising concern that grades were not being assigned in a consistent manner across the departments and that some were inflated. While the initiative created consternation among some who feared it would hurt their chances of admission to post-graduate programs and professional schools, the administration reports that those fears proved unfounded. The effect of the grade deflation was actually minimal (a reduction of the median GPA by five hundredths of a point), and acceptances to graduate and professional schools have actually increased since the policy was put into effect.

Social life at Princeton is no longer dominated as it once was by exclusive eating clubs. These days, the students (98% of whom live on campus) are assigned to residential houses for their first two years. Each residential college not only has a dining hall, but also serves as a center for social activities, planning events and trips, organizing community service projects, and bringing in guest speakers and artists.

In their junior year about 66% of students join an eating club. These perform essentially the same role the residential colleges do for freshmen and sophomores, organizing sports, events, and projects. Some of them require an application, but others are open to anyone.

Alternatively, students may continue to eat in the residential colleges or join one of three co-ops to purchase food they prepare for themselves in the upperclass housing with kitchens. Guests are welcome everywhere, so it's common for students to join friends for meals all over campus regardless of their personal arrangements.

Princetonians are encouraged to explore a wide range of academic as well as social options. First year students are required to select a freshman writing seminar from a diverse array of offerings, and in order to graduate, everyone must take courses in seven curricular areas. Beyond those requirements, though, a multitude of interdisciplinary courses as well as courses in the School of Engineering and Applied Science and in The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs are open to everyone.

The campus is a beautiful enclave of mostly traditional ivy-covered buildings, but construction is currently underway for a new arts center due to open in 2015 that will greatly enhance the school's performance and exhibition spaces.

Admissions officers say they look first at applicants' grades and the rigor of their high school courses. Next they look at test scores, which are slightly less important insofar as they are allowed to be a bit "lopsided." Everyone must submit two SAT Subject tests, regardless of whether they are also submitting the SAT or ACT. For engineering applicants, one must be in math and the other in chemistry or physics. Engineering applicants also must write a third essay in which they describe their interest in engineering and why they wish to study it at Princeton.

Essays and letters of recommendation are important to help the admissions officers seeking "individuality" to distinguish among the applicants. The ideal fit for Princeton, according to Dean of Admissions Janet Rapelye, is the student who will contribute to as well as benefit from the community and who thinks and works independently. If all the applicant's activities don't fit on the application, by all means, send a resume, she says. Don't leave anything out, and do explain what everything on it means if isn't obvious. Alumni interviews are not required but are recommended.

Princeton now offers a Single Choice Early Action deadline of November 1<sup>st</sup>. Students who apply this way are not obligated to attend if accepted, but they are not allowed to apply to any other school early decision or early action except for their own state's university, to which they may apply early action. Regular decision is January 1<sup>st</sup>, but "December 15<sup>th</sup> if possible."

Financial aid is exclusively need-based, and the university meets 100% of need as determined by their own institutional review process, but applicants must complete the FAFSA anyway even though Princeton uses neither the FAFSA nor the C.S.S. Profile. Part of the need is usually met through employment on campus, and the rest through federal grants and institutional aid. Seventy-five percent of students graduate without any debt, and for the remaining 25% the average debt is \$5,000.

