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America's Best Colleges

America's Best College

Hana R. Alberts, 08.24.09, 12:00 AM ET

College senior Raymond Vetter gets up at dawn to fit in a run or a workout. Then, hair shorn neatly and pants pressed, he marches into breakfast, where he sits in an assigned seat. After six hours of instruction in such subjects as Japanese literature and systems engineering, two hours of intramural sports and another family-style meal with underclassmen, Vetter rushes to return to his room by the 11:30 p.m. curfew.

Most college students, we think, do not march to meals. A goodly number of them drink into the wee hours, duck morning classes and fail to hit the gym with any regularity. But Vetter, 21, is a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., where college life is a bit different.

According to students, alumni, faculty and higher education experts, the undergraduate experience at West Point and the other service academies is defined by an intense work ethic and a drive to succeed on all fronts. "We face challenges and obstacles that not every college student has to face, but we are able to be competitive in all the different areas, from sports to academics," Vetter says.

No alcohol is allowed in the dorms and freshmen are given only one weekend leave per semester. That rigor, combined with the virtue of a free education, has made West Point tops in FORBES' list of the best colleges in the country, up from sixth place last year. The rankings are compiled in conjunction with Ohio University economist Richard Vedder and his Center for College Affordability & Productivity. ([Click here for the complete rankings and featured stories.](#))

West Point excels in most measures. It graduates 80% of its students in four years. It is fourth in winners of Rhodes scholarships since 1923 (ahead of Stanford), sixth in Marshalls since 1982 (ahead of Columbia and Cornell) and fourth in Trumans since 1992 (ahead of Princeton and Duke). This year 4 out of 37 Gates scholars, who earn a full ride to study at the University of Cambridge in England, graduated from the service academies. The Gates roster includes four Yale grads, one from Harvard and none from Princeton.

"I think I got a lot out of it," says Joseph M. DePinto, USMA class of '86 and chief executive of 7-Eleven. "Just the discipline, the approach I take to leadership, the understanding of the importance of teamwork. All of that stuff I learned at West Point, and I think that's what helped me be successful."

Classes are small, with no more than 18 students. Cadets work their way through a core curriculum in which an English major has to take calculus and a chemist has to take a philosophy course. Since there are no graduate programs, faculty and administrators can focus on the undergraduates.

"If you really look at Brown University or Boston College or Stanford, their number one mission is likely not to teach. It's to bring research dollars to the campus ... to write the next book that will get them on CNN," says James Forest, an associate professor at West Point who is the director of terrorism studies. "Pressure to be that kind of new academic star isn't there [at West Point]."

A big factor in its top rank is that grads leave without a penny of tuition loans to repay. The Army picks up all costs and pays the cadets a stipend of \$895 a month. On graduation, they start as second lieutenants, earning \$69,000 a year. They have to serve in the armed forces for five years plus three more years of inactive reserve duty. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have pulled 15% of reservists into active duty.

West Point has plenty of critics. In April Thomas E. Ricks, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has covered the military, wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, calling on the government to shut the military academies. West Point doesn't produce officers of any higher caliber, he argues, than a graduate from another elite school who has participated in an ROTC program. "It's not better than Harvard," he says, citing the fact that the majority of West Point professors don't have Ph.D.s and the school's

traditionally weak treatment of crucial subjects like anthropology, history and foreign languages.

It also produces young people more prone to groupthink than to groundbreaking ideas. W. Patrick Lang, a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute and a professor of Arabic at West Point in the 1970s, says the service academies "haven't been very good at producing people who were very good at humanistic, open-ended problems."

Bruce Fleming, who has been teaching English for 22 years at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., faults the service academies for their rigidity. "I really love my students. I just do. It's an institution that grinds students down," he says.

But the cadets know the drill: job security. Leadership training. Lifelong friendships. "A West Point diploma is at least as impressive as a Harvard diploma for a lot of things," says Robert Farley, an assistant professor of national security at the University of Kentucky. "Were I an employer, I'd have utter faith in a graduate of the service academies."

"We are giving up what may be the quintessential college experience. But we're getting a job where we're immediately in a leadership position, not a back-room job where who knows what your chances of promotion are," says Elizabeth Betterbed, 20, of Fox Island, Wash., one of the 699 female cadets at West Point. "Like any other school you incur a debt, and for us it only takes five years to pay off. It's really nothing."

Behind the Numbers

Our college rankings are based on five criteria: graduation rate (how good a college is at helping its students finish on time); the number of national and global awards won by students and faculty; students' satisfaction with their instructors; average debt upon graduation; and postgraduate vocational success as measured by a recent graduate's average salary and alumni achievement. We prize the undergraduate experience and how well prepared students are for the real world rather than focusing on inputs such as acceptance rates and test scores. Our data are from publicly available sources rather than surveys filled out by the schools themselves. Special thanks to Richard Vedder and his research team at Ohio University. ([Click here for the complete methodology.](#))

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