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Comparing Larger Public, Smaller Private Colleges

Some of the key perks of big public universities and smaller private institutions can be found in both settings.

By [Margaret Loftus](#) | Sept. 16, 2021, at 9:58 a.m.



Colgate University in New York funds undergrad research and unpaid or low-paying internships. (ANDREW M. DADDIO - COLGATE UNIVERSITY)

The daughter of [Clemson University](#) alumni, Cate Tedford initially resisted following in her parents' footsteps to the big state school in South Carolina. She had her sights set instead on a handful of smaller private universities and liberal arts programs.

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But once she compared aid packages, the Fort Mill, South Carolina, native had a change of heart: First picks [Boston College](#) and [Georgetown University](#) in Washington, D.C., would have cost her roughly \$50,000 a year. Clemson? Between in-state tuition and scholarships, her annual tally came to less than \$4,000.

The clincher was that, as a student in Clemson's honors college, she felt she would have the kind of access to faculty, special courses and guidance not unlike that found at the schools she'd had her heart set on.

"At the end of the day, the value for how much I'd be paying and all the resources – I couldn't pass it up," she says.

[**READ:** [See the Average College Tuition in 2021-2022.](#)]

As competition for a shrinking pool of college-age students heats up, many applicants are surprised and intrigued to see more and more overlap in the types of campus experiences available to talented students at large public universities and at smaller private institutions. Like Tedford, those who are looking for the academic rigor, tight-knit communities and intimate class settings characteristic of smaller schools are finding more of those options in honors and other programs at public universities for a fraction of the cost.

At the same time, even [liberal arts colleges](#) have been ramping up the sort of hands-on offerings more traditionally found at big universities, including undergraduate research, entrepreneurial opportunities and career prep. And while tuition and fees at in-state public schools are considerably less than at private colleges, the latter can often offset the sticker price substantially – especially for students they really want.

The bottom line: If you crave the culture and social life of, say, a football powerhouse, you may not have to sacrifice smaller-school amenities after all. And the inverse is also true: If an intimate, seminar-heavy liberal arts community is where you think you'll feel most comfortable, you don't necessarily have to give up the practical experiences that may ease the way to a job after graduation.

Honors Advantage

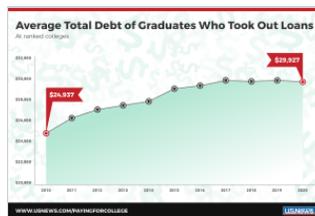
Now a junior majoring in philosophy and Spanish with an eye toward a career in immigration law, Tedford couldn't be more pleased with her choice. As an honors student, she's required to take at least one honors class per semester and maintain a GPA of 3.4.

While Clemson doesn't offer [scholarships](#) specific to the honors program, students in the college enjoy perks such as priority status for course registration, free tickets to cultural events and dinners with faculty.

[**READ:** [Public College Honors Programs Give Students VIP Treatment.](#)]

The university also supports undergrad research, internships and conference travel through

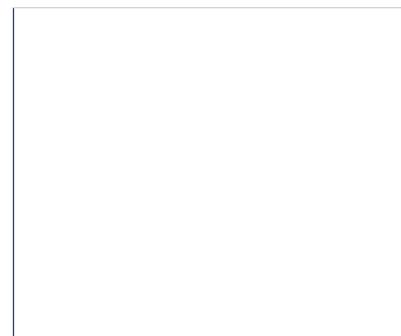
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grants, which Tedford leveraged to attend a women's conference in Washington, D.C., during her freshman year. That experience alone was life-altering, she says. "I felt very empowered. It set a flame in me to pursue the things I'm interested in."

Often, there's help with tuition as well. The [University of Arkansas](#) Honors College offers numerous freshman fellowships covering four years, as well as grants for study abroad and research, for example. First-year students get access to honors-only housing. There's a "Futures Hub" to guide honors students' academic trajectory, and seminars and courses on cutting-edge topics such as blockchain.

When weighing offers from the University of Arkansas and other schools, in-stater Mary Jia of Stuttgart was won over by the honors college's pledge of free tuition and a stipend. The [biomedical engineering](#) junior is conducting research on gene-editing solutions to rare genetic diseases.

And as someone who aspires to a life in academia, Jia especially appreciates the access to top faculty. When her plans to study abroad in China senior year hit a brick wall – the university isn't affiliated with a program there – an engineering dean worked with his contacts in Hong Kong to arrange for her to study there.

"It's very easy to get access to higher-up people and communicate with them," Jia says.

Passion for STEM

It's not just honors programs that roll out the red carpet for high achievers. The Meyerhoff Scholars Program at the [University of Maryland–Baltimore County](#) recruits a diverse population of applicants who plan to pursue a Ph.D. in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM – particularly Black and other underrepresented students – and offers them financial, academic and community support.

Students participate in a summer program before freshman year and must conduct undergraduate research.

"We often say we are looking for students who have a fire in the belly and a passion for STEM," says Keith Harmon, the program's director.

The Meyerhoff program has been lauded for its success – it's the No. 1 producer of Black graduates who go on to get an M.D.-Ph.D., as well as of those who earn Ph.D. degrees in the natural sciences and engineering – and has been replicated on campuses across the country, including the [University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill](#) and the [University of California–Berkeley](#).

Key to the Meyerhoff program's mission is collaboration over competition, and fostering a tight bond among students and faculty. That struck a chord for Talmesha Richards-Smith, who chose the program over full rides to [Johns Hopkins University](#) in Maryland and [Princeton University](#) in New Jersey.

"Science and engineering are difficult, and I knew I was going to have the support. It was important to me that there were people on campus who cared about me," she says.

For instance, students are highly encouraged to form study groups, which Richards-Smith believes made her a better scientist. "It definitely set me up for success," she says.

After graduating with two degrees, one in chemical engineering and one in math, she went on to earn a Ph.D. in cellular and molecular medicine at the [Johns Hopkins School of Medicine](#), all while traveling the world as an NFL cheerleader.

[[READ: A Guide to STEM Majors.](#)]

Meyerhoff encourages student pursuits beyond academia, too, she says. "I was supported not just from a financial perspective but a whole-being perspective."

Meanwhile, small liberal arts colleges, keen to dispel the perception that a broad education doesn't prepare students for the job world, are emphasizing more hands-on experiences like research and entrepreneurship.

"People assume that if I go to a small school I'm not going to have research opportunities, but in some cases, you're going to have more because there's no layer of graduate students," says Hannah Serota, founder and CEO of Creative College Connections in Leesburg, Virginia. "And students are not just getting to assist, they're getting to present at conferences."

Help With Costs

Increasingly, many such schools are underwriting these experiential learning opportunities as well. At [Furman University](#), a liberal arts school in South Carolina, 8 in 10 students participate in off-campus internships, study "away" programs and undergrad research made possible by cash grants through the Furman Advantage program.

[Colgate University](#) in New York also funds undergrad research and unpaid or low-paying internships. As a Colgate freshman, recent grad Jacob Watts was surprised at the extent to which research opportunities were available to students. A casual conversation with a professor about Watts' interest in plants led him to become a research assistant for most of his college career and eventually publish a paper on plant physiology with faculty.

His research earned him a number of grants and scholarships as an undergrad and will launch his career as an academic. Watts is working on his master's degree at the [University of Cambridge](#) in the U.K. as the recipient of the Churchill Scholarship, after which he heads to the [University of Minnesota—Twin Cities](#) for his Ph.D. That will be fully underwritten by the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program.

"My ultimate goal is to be a professor at a liberal arts school just like Colgate," he says. "All of that wouldn't be possible without my undergraduate experience."

Entrepreneurial Edge

At [Macalester College](#) in Minnesota, students can choose from a host of ways to engage with real-world problems in the classroom and outside it, including by taking advantage of a collaborative workspace called the Idea Lab and stipends for students to realize their

entrepreneurial ideas.

In 2015, the school named alum Kate Ryan Reiling its inaugural entrepreneur-in-residence. Until her recent departure, she was responsible for helping to set the strategic direction of entrepreneurial programs.

In her Introduction to Entrepreneurship course, Reiling asked students to present solutions to sticky problems like St. Paul's struggle to plow the city's streets satisfactorily in winter. That's the sort of issue that on the surface seems like it should be simple, she says, but has been complicated by factors such as wetter storms that have more sleet in the mix, privilege – those who have driveways vs. those who park on city streets – a lack of real-time communication and the fact that some residents don't speak English.

There's also the newly created Innovation Partners extracurricular program – a model pioneered with the [Mayo Clinic](#) – in which multidisciplinary teams of students work with MBA students at other colleges in Minnesota on the development of early stage medical companies. Think business school [entrepreneurship](#) course but with a broader lens.

Issues explored "include cultural context, competition, the nature of technology and things like bioethics," says Liz Jansen, academic program director for Innovation Partners and a faculty mentor for the teams.

"You are bringing fresh and – frankly – naive eyes to harness the power of liberal arts." That, she says, is how ideas are generated.

This story is excerpted from the U.S. News "Best Colleges 2022" guidebook, which includes in-depth articles, rankings and data.

10 Steps to Choosing the Right College



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