Once an Ivy League also-ran, Columbia now rivals the Ivy League's "big three" in selectivity. Applications have doubled in the past 10 years for one simple reason: Manhattan trumps New Haven, Providence, Ithaca, and every other Ivy League city, with the possible exception of Boston. The often overlooked engineering program is among the best in the nation for undergraduates. The heart of Columbia is still its core curriculum.
Though students entering Columbia will, of course, expect the rigorous academic program they’ll encounter at this Ivy League school, there’s no room here in the heart of Manhattan for the bookish nerd. Students must be streetwise, urbane, and together enough to handle one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Columbia lets its students experience life in the Big Apple, but serves as a refuge when it becomes necessary to escape from New York; ideally, Colombians can easily be part of the “real world” while simultaneously immersing themselves in the best academia has to offer. “Columbia students are eager to step outside of their comfort zones,” says one student, “whether it’s in the classroom or the vast streets of New York City.”

With a total university-wide enrollment of more than 27,000 students, says one, “It’s easy to feel lost.” Columbia’s undergraduates are divided into two divisions: the flagship Columbia College, with about 4,200 students, and the School of Engineering and Applied Science, which includes another 1,400. (Sister school Barnard College, affiliated with Columbia but governed by its own board of trustees, has an additional 2,200 students.) Columbia’s campus has a large central quadrangle in front of Butler Library and at the foot of the steps leading past the statue of Alma Mater to Low Library, which is now the administration building. The redbrick, copper-roofed neoclassical buildings are “stunning,” and the layout, says an undergrad, “is well thought out and manages to provide a beautiful setting with an economy of space.”

Columbia is an intellectual school, not a preprofessional one, and even though 60 percent of the students aspire to law or medical school (they enjoy a 90 percent acceptance rate), “we are mostly content to be liberal artists for as long as possible,” says an English major. Even students in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences pursue “technical education” with a liberal arts base. Almost all departments that offer undergraduate majors are strong, notably English, history, political science, and psychology. Chemistry and biology are among the best of Columbia’s high-quality science offerings. The earth and environmental science department owns 200 acres in Rockland County, home to many rocks and much seismographic equipment. There are over 40 offerings in foreign languages, ranging from Serbo-Croatian to Uzbek to Hausa. The fine arts are not fabulous, but are improving, thanks to departmental reorganization, new facilities, and joint offerings with schools such as the Juilliard School of Music. And while the administration admits that the economics and computer science departments are geared too much toward graduate students, at least the comp-sci undergrads benefit from an abundance of equipment. Columbia offers many challenging combined majors such as philosophy/economics and biology/psychology. The East Asian languages and cultures department is one of the best anywhere. There is also an African American studies major, and a women’s studies major that delves into topics from the Asian woman’s perspective to the lesbian experience in literature. A major in information science was recently added.

The kernel of the undergraduate experience is Columbia’s renowned core curriculum. While these courses occupy most of the first two years and can become laborious, students generally praise them as worthwhile and enriching: “It truly unifies the school in a way that transcends most social limitations and gives us all a great basis for further pursuits of knowledge,” says a freshman. As it has since World War I, the college remains committed to the core while at the same time expanding the diversity of the canon and requiring core classes on non-Western cultures. While many students describe Columbia’s academic climate as intense, “they are all involved in at least two or three student organizations, not to mention internships and part-time jobs,” says one computer science major.
Two of the most demanding introductory courses in the Ivy League—Contemporary Civilization (CC) and Literature Humanities—form the basis of the core. Both are yearlong and taught in small sections, generally by full profs. “The quality of teaching is top-notch,” offers one student. “Professors are here not only to conduct research, but to teach undergraduates.” LitHum (as it is affectionately called) covers about 26 masterpieces of literature from Homer to Dostoyevsky, usually with some Sappho, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf thrown in for alternative perspectives. CC examines political and moral philosophy from Plato to Camus, though professors have some leeway in choosing 20th-century selections. One semester each of art and humanities is required and, while not given the same reverence as their literary counterparts, are eye-opening all the same. Foreign language proficiency is required, as are two semesters of science; two semesters of “global core,” classes dealing in cultures not covered in the other core requirements; two semesters of physics; and logic and rhetoric, a one-semester, argumentative writing class that first-year students reportedly “either love or hate.” Students at the School of Engineering complete approximately half of the core curriculum.

Columbia is tough, and students always have something to read or write. Student/faculty interaction is largely dependent on student initiative. Additional interaction stems from professorial involvement in campus politics and forums and from the faculty-in-residence program, which houses professors and their families in spruced-up apartments in several of the residence halls. First-year students are assigned an advisor and receive a faculty advisor when they declare a major at the end of sophomore year. Columbia students can take classes at Barnard and graduate-level courses in several departments, notably political science, gaining access to the resources of the School of International and Public Affairs and its multitude of regional institutes. For students wishing to spend time away from New York, Columbia offers credit through more than 150 programs in 100 countries.

“No one activity dominates the social scene.”

Even our most academically driven students are involved in an array of different clubs and activities,” says an urban studies major. “No one spends all of their time in the library.” Columbia has the largest percentage of students of color in the Ivy League; 10 percent are African American, 11 percent are Hispanic, and 18 percent are Asian American. Twenty-six percent of the students come from New York. Socially, the campus is also diverse. The university has eliminated loans for all students receiving financial aid and replaced them with additional grants. Students coming from families with annual incomes below $60,000 are not expected to contribute to the cost of tuition, fees, room, or board.

Columbia remains one of the nation’s most liberal campuses and “there was a significant debate this year over the issue of having ROTC on campus,” says one student, “because of its ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy for homosexuals.” Although 35 percent of the students go Greek, Columbia is hardly a Hellenocentric campus, mainly because, as a junior argues, “the frats are chock-full of athletic recruits, the organizations—even the co-ed ones—are deemed elitist and politically incorrect, and there are too many better things to do in NYC on a Friday night than getting trashed in the basement of some random house.” The advent of co-ed houses has raised interest in Greek life as has the arrival of sororities open to both Columbia and Barnard women.

With the New York housing market out of control, 95 percent of Columbia students live in university housing, which is guaranteed for four years. “Columbia students are the luckiest tenants of NYC,” cheers one junior. “There is nowhere else in the city that you could live so comfortably and cheaply.” Security at the dorms

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is rated as excellent by students. "I think the best feature of campus safety is the security guards that swipe students into dorms 24/7," says a senior. One exciting aspect of Columbia housing is that many rooms are singles, and it is possible to go all four years without a roommate. Carman Hall is the exclusively first-year dorm and "the fact that you get to meet your classmates compensates for the noise and hideous cinderblock walls," says a music major. First-year students can also live in buildings with students of all years. First-year students are automatically placed on a 19-meal-a-week plan and take most of those meals at John Jay, an all-you-can-eat "binge-a-rama with salad bar, deli, grill, and huge dessert bar." Many soon-bloated students scale down their meal plans or convert to points, a buy-what-you-want arrangement with account information stored electronically on their ID cards. Several dorms have kitchens, allowing students to do their own cooking. Kosher dining is also available.

"Columbia has an excellent relationship with its Morningside Heights neighborhood," explains a freshman. The social scene starts on the Columbia campus and spills over into the bustling streets of New York City. "There is so much going on on campus that sometimes you end up not leaving like you had planned," says one student. Rarely are there big all-inclusive bashes, the exceptions being fall's '60s throwback, Realityfest, and spring's Columbia-fest. "I love that no one activity dominates the social scene," says a freshman. "You do not have to attend the basketball and football games to be 'in,' nor do you have to pledge fraternities and sororities."

Columbia athletics don't inspire the rabid loyalty of, say, a Notre Dame, because "Columbia students are individualists," according to one sophomore. "This is not a school that rallies together at football games." Still, the fencing teams are superlative, and men's soccer and basketball are also strong. As an urban school, Columbia lacks team field facilities on campus; however, a mere 100 blocks to the north is the modern Baker Field, home of the football stadium, the soccer fields, an Olympic track, and the crew boathouse. On campus, the Dodge Gymnasium, an underground facility, houses four levels of basketball courts, swimming pools, weight rooms, and exercise equipment. The gym is often crowded and not all the stuff is wonderful. "It does the job, as well as providing for the best pickup basketball this side of Riverside Park," notes a sophomore. Intramural and club sports are popular, with men's and women's ultimate Frisbee both national competitors.

Columbia is proud of the fact that they are going to college in New York City, and most would have it no other way. Explains an art history major: "Choosing to isolate oneself in the middle of nowhere for four years isn't what college is about. It's about taking one's place as an adult in an adult society. Columbia is the perfect place for that."

If You Apply To
