

Oberlin College

The Students Review series is intended to aid prospective college students in their search by offering insiders' views of selected colleges and universities, as expressed by current undergraduates or recent graduates who have high academic ability. Note that the number of reviewers is small. Consider their personal perspectives as only one factor as you gather information and impressions from many sources.

Our reviewers include 18 students, who major(ed) in African American studies (1), anthropology (1), art history (1), biochemistry (1), biology (4), creative writing (1), East Asian studies (3), English (2), French (1), history (2), labor relations (1), Latin American studies (1), neuroscience (2), politics (3), psychology (1), religious studies (2), studio art (1), and women's studies (1). (The number of majors exceeds 18 because several reviewers had double majors.) Reviewers' comments appear within quotation marks



Quality of Academic Instruction for Undergraduates

Reviewers spoke glowingly of the faculty's commitment to challenging the students and of the students' sincere desire to be challenged. One of the country's top liberal arts colleges, Oberlin also has a first-rate music conservatory. Qualified students may pursue a five-year, dual-degree program in which they complete both a liberal arts B.A. and Bachelor of Music degree.

► "Oberlin is an institution like no other. Professors are very accessible and without exception encourage students to come talk with them. The students are critical thinkers, thoughtful about society, and excited about learning."

► "Amazing. The dedicated professors take an active interest in their students. In some intro science classes, size exceeds 100; but in the one large science class I took, the professor knew my name by the second week. Most of my classes have had around 30 students, and some under 10."

► "Since Oberlin is a liberal arts college, undergraduate instruction is the primary focus and is usually excellent. Courses are generally pretty intense, and graded that way."

► "The academic resources are unbelievable, especially at the Art Museum, where I've been able to view anything in the collection, not just what's on display. The staff has brought items out of storage, even if they were not for a class. It's obvious that students are the school's first priority."

► "The curriculum is very open, with no core courses and very few requirements: just nine credit hours in social sciences, nine in

natural sciences, and nine in arts and humanities. The 9-9-9 system makes it easy to explore different disciplines without being stuck in large intro courses. And academic resources are excellent for a college this size. The library system, in particular, is quite large for a small liberal arts college—over two million items."

► "Oberlin completed a new science center in 2002, leaving us with arguably the best science resources of any liberal arts college, even rivaling those of some research universities. And the completely green Environmental Studies building is a leading design prototype for future environmentally friendly construction."

Social Life

Oberlin's academics are strong, but it is the social atmosphere that makes the school unique.

► "Oberlin is a thriving, crazy place. I find the people to be generally fascinating—intelligent and just a little weird. There's no social hierarchy, no cool crowds or cliques, a tremendous relief after high school. I love it. There are tons of interesting, smart people and a million clubs. Oberlin students love to start things and join things."

► "Oberlin tends to attract a lot of people who didn't fit well into high school. One of my school friends accused me of being 'just another non-conformist, like the rest of them.' Obies are usually extremely active, either politically or socially. The strongest sub-communities tend to be in the co-ops (dining and housing) and the program houses (language, ethnic and area studies). The co-ops are entirely student run, and it's really powerful to be part of such a large, collective student effort."

► "The school is kind of in the middle of a cornfield. Some long for the city, but I never get bored. No one will deny that Oberlin is isolated, but the college makes up for it by attracting great people to be around. The isolation and small size contribute to the sense of community; whenever something is going on, you know just about everyone there."

► "Social life tends to revolve around hanging out with friends and attending campus activities (concerts, plays, the campus dance club). You can find people engaged in just about any social activity—having philosophical discussions, going shopping, dancing folkloric dances, getting stoned, etc. You can also avoid just about any part of the scene, except possibly the long discussions."

► "There's always something going on; it would be impossible to do everything you would like to do at Oberlin. If you don't have a car, you're 'stuck' in town (which has about three main streets).

However, the powers that be go to a lot of trouble to make sure we have plenty to do, and the Conservatory of Music offers concerts of one kind or another almost every night.”

What Do You Like Best about Oberlin?

►“The opportunity to explore and redefine myself. Within the first month, I crawled out of the shy shell I was in during high school. For the first time since pre-adolescence, I felt like myself, not what I thought other people wanted me to be.”

►“The genuine intellectual dedication that is the norm, which makes learning from fellow students easy. And the intimacy of the classes: the majority of my professors viewed education not as an interaction between a lecturer and a crowded classroom, but as a series of one-to-one relationships.”

►“Oberlin gives students the option to choose what and how to learn. In Oberlin’s Experimental College (EXCO), you can design and teach your own course on anything from creative writing to trapeze to aikido to Phish. A winter term lets students create a month-long project anywhere in the world on any topic they choose. Also, students have the option of designing a one-on-one private reading with a professor. You pick books and assignments, and discuss material every week with a Ph.D. who specializes in the subject matter.”

What Do You Like Least about Oberlin?

Most reviewers noted limitations common to all small liberal arts colleges located in small towns. A few had more specific observations.

►“As much as I enjoyed the engaging and varied liberal arts curriculum, I would have liked more of a focus on practical application of skills learned in college.”

►“I wish there were more diversity in the administration and faculty. I wish there were more community activism, not just talk. The people in career services office are very kind and helpful, but I wish they were more attuned to the fact that people with liberal arts degrees do not automatically find a career track.”

►“Despite the justifiably vaunted diversity of the student body, there is an underlying sameness to many of them. The typical student comes to Oberlin as the most interesting person he/she knows, and isn’t very happy to surrender that position. He/She is also usually in the awkward position of being alienated from society in some way yet simultaneously privileged (a \$25,000-a-year education is undeniably a great privilege). Too often, students compensate for this confusion by adopting a sort of militancy for whatever dogma (left, right, artistic, even apathetic) comes to hand.”

Who Would Be Most Compatible with the Academic and Social Atmosphere at Oberlin?

►“Someone intelligent and intellectual, who would rather stay up until 5 a.m. having a heated political discussion with housemates than attend a frat party. Oberlin has a reputation for attracting liberal do-gooders. Someone who is both conservative and irritated by liberals, or who doesn’t like defending his or her views, would not be very happy here. (However, a conservative who likes arguing would probably do fine. Little cadres of rich libertarians and Rush Limbaugh-heads do exist.)”

►“Open-minded is the best adjective I can come up with. The biggest social event of the year is the Drag Ball. (Talk about learning experience. Men trying to maneuver in high heels does more consciousness-raising than a weekend retreat with Gloria Steinem!) I don’t think there is any one Obie type. What happens is that somewhere in the years you spend here, you become yourself.”

►“Someone who is inquisitive, culturally sensitive, critical of all they learn, and not content to fit a social mold. The person best suited to Oberlin is one who is a social misfit, and I say that with fondness, being one myself.”

If You Had It to Do over Again, Would You Go to Oberlin?

All but two undecided reviewers enthusiastically said yes.

►“I likely would. I think the school’s location is one of its biggest drawbacks, but that said, I would never, ever trade the education or experiences gained at Oberlin. They have proven invaluable in every pursuit, from work to graduate education, and I cherish my memories from that time.”

►“Absolutely! When I was looking at schools, I got all sorts of college view books

promising that when I graduated from their college I would be this or that. Ready for a corporate job. Ready for law school. Ready to be some lofty *thing*, just like every other person who graduated from that college. Cookie cutters make me nervous. The impression I got from Oberlin (and what I can attest to, having spent four very interesting years there) was that when I left Oberlin, I would be myself. A stronger, clearer, better educated *me*. I certainly don’t feel like a finished product—I am very happy being a work in progress. But I am ready to be me in just about any situation I walk into. That is the most valuable education I can think of.” ■

Note: The reviewers quoted in the Students Review series are expressing their own views, which are not necessarily those of JHU or CTY.



Oberlin College

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www.oberlin.edu

- 4-year coed private college and music conservatory
- Campus in a small town in rural Ohio
- Full-time undergraduate enrollment 2004–05: 1,236 men; 1,505 women
- Special features: Conservatory of Music; Allen Memorial Art Museum; Lewis Center for Environmental Studies, the largest photovoltaic-run building among colleges and universities in the country