

Should I Go to Stanford?

Below, I try to summarize some of the neat things that make Stanford unique—what attributes might make it a good or bad fit for you.

Neat stuff about college in general

There are a few neat things about going to college in general that I'm sure are true at nearly any university:

- People who are smarter than you

Of course there were people smarter than you in high school, too, but in college you will find people *smarter* than you. These people—both professors and classmates—will amaze you with their knowledge and intellect.

- Freedom

Now that you're away from home, you have (near) total freedom: academic *and* social. You can decide what you want to study, whom you want to hang out with, when you go to bed, how long you can stay out, whether and how much to drink, and a host of other issues. Of course, you must guard against becoming intoxicated with this freedom by moderating it responsibly—but it is exciting and fun nevertheless.

- Initiative

One of the slightly scary but really neat things about college is that now everything depends on you. As someone once said, “you will no longer be forced to drink from the trough of knowledge; you must siphon it from your professors and the people around you.” Don't want to go to class? Don't want to do your homework? No dean of students or vice principal will chastise you—the consequences are much further down the line.

Neat stuff about Stanford

- Reputation

When I visited as a “pro fro” (prospective freshman), the guy who toured me around talked about how he figured out how much he was paying for each class and that it came out to almost \$100 per class meeting. He said that he became disillusioned, because he realized that few of the classes were worth \$100 each. (Despite having some great classes, I have also felt this on more than one occasion.) Then, he realized that “when I leave here, I'm going to get a little piece of paper that says ‘Leland Stanford Jr. University’ and it's all going to be worth it.” Especially on the West Coast, Stanford has an aura that is unmatched. As I will endeavor to point out, this doesn't mean that it's the best college for everyone, but that piece of paper can nevertheless open a lot of doors for you.

- Location

[Note that this was originally written for San Franciscans...East Coasters already appreciate what it's like to have a Real Winter:] You may not realize it, but we've been spoiled by San Francisco's mild climate. Even the eternally foggy Sunset district is downright balmy compared to most of the country during half of the year. At Stanford, the sky is almost always sunny and the only time you hear the words "snow shoes" are when your dorm is planning a ski trip to Lake Tahoe. True, SoCal schools probably boast the best college weather, but do you really want to go to school where they root for the Padres or the Dodgers?

Stanford is also in the heart of the Silicon Valley, and thus lucrative internships and exciting company partnerships abound. It is within short driving distance of the entire Bay Area, including our beloved San Francisco; one of the best experiences I've had was introducing my fellow freshmen to the City on weekend trips.

Finally, it is one of the most gorgeous campuses in the world nestled in the foothills outside of Palo Alto. I must admit that I was overwhelmed by the size of it at first (and I agreed with one observer's description of the Main Quad as "the world's largest Mexican restaurant") but on a bike you can get anywhere in no time. Every day that I go running up in the foothills and look down on the red tile roofs, every time that I walk along Lake Lagunita watching the sun set, every time that I gaze up into the sky in the Main Quad, I am glad that I came here.

That being said, if you want to go far away from home, Stanford is not the place. If you want to see snow (not just on a ski trip to Lake Tahoe) or go see the shows in New York every weekend, Stanford is not for you. Finally, Palo Alto is a quaint little town but it is not a *college* town: no real college town has expensive Silicon Valley prices and closes at 9 PM. Berkeley (as reviled as it is down here) is much better in this respect.

- Size

Like Goldilocks and the baby bear's chair, Stanford is just the right size for me. It's smaller than the you-are-just-a-number UC's but larger than many other schools (like Dartmouth, Rice, Cal Tech, Princeton, and small liberal arts colleges). It's small enough that you see people you know often but not so small that you feel you can't escape people you want to avoid. Another function of its size is that it is a research university with a sizeable grad student population, with a good balance between the undergraduates and graduates. Indeed, many grad students are "co-terminal" students who are working on undergraduate and graduate degrees at the same time. I often find the resources in the various highly rated graduate schools to be useful academically (such as having access to their libraries), and took advantage of the "co-term" program myself.

Still, Stanford's size and focus on research do sometimes distract from teaching. There *are* some really great professors who make going to class a pleasure, but there are also some awful teachers. Just because someone has a Nobel Prize doesn't mean he/she is a good teacher. There are also some great programs—programs that I think go beyond what any other large research university is doing—that try to foster intellectual curiosity, great teaching, and close relationships with professors, such as the Undergraduate Research Opportunities, Introductory Seminars, and Sophomore College. Each of these has allowed me to get to know professors

really well, and do some really exciting research. However, if you want a small school feeling or a *consistently* strong emphasis on teaching, one of the smaller liberal arts or technical schools might be best for you (for example, I considered Cal Tech, which has less than 1,000 undergrads and a handful of grad students, and is well known for having small, intensive classes with good teachers; I also looked at liberal arts colleges like Haverford, which emphasizes teaching in small classes over research).

Things that characterize Stanford

- Adult

I am very impressed with the way Stanford treats students: as adults. They figure that we are all intelligent students who can take care of ourselves. Although there is lots of support should you seek it out, they don't hold your hand through every academic, financial, or social process. Academic advising is somewhat spotty in the first year or so (unless you're lucky enough to be assigned a good advisor) but if you take the initiative, there are hundreds of knowledgeable people who give great advice. Likewise, a university honor code allows take-home and unproctored exams. Another example of the University's adult methods is its alcohol policy: while if you walk around campus with an open container the campus police might cite you, inside the residences the University is very *laissez-faire*. They figure that students are going to drink no matter what the policy is, so it's better for students to get drunk on campus than to drive elsewhere. Unlike many other schools, RA's do not police their residents; there is a sense of trust in the students to handle themselves responsibly and look after one another. [Note: as I left Stanford, this policy was starting to get a bit stricter...it's still much more enlightened than most schools, but the nationwide crusade against "underage drinking" and fear of liability are finally catching up with the university.]

I can't see why this policy would be negative, but if you don't like it, go to Brigham Young University, which doesn't even allow students to drink anything with caffeine. Seriously, though, other schools do tend to have much more involved academic advising, helping you with each stage of the process. I personally like the Stanford way—having help available but not pushed on you. The real world works this way, after all.

- Well-rounded

If one had to pick a word to describe Stanford, it might be "well-rounded"—to describe both the university itself and the students. What other school seriously lists both Harvard *and* MIT as its academic rivals? What other school has both world-renowned academics and makes the *Sports Illustrated* list of "Top Jock Schools"? Where else can you live down the hall from Olympic athletes, professional actors, and (most importantly) the President's daughter? [Well, Chelsea's gone now, but you get the idea.] Stanford prides itself on being—both as a school and as a student body—the best in everything. To some degree this is true: many student activities, sports teams, and departments are at the top of their field. My own fields of interest, computer science and cognitive science [called "symbolic systems" here at Stanford], boast arguably the best departments in the country. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity—there are dozens of programs that try to combine different fields together to solve problems in unique ways. Finally, there is an overwhelming diversity at Stanford—geographic, racial,

ethnic, political, and just about everything else you can think of. There are many different kinds of people, making many other schools seem downright homogeneous.

However, as much as we would like to believe that Stanford is the best at everything, clearly other schools excel in some areas where we do not. I don't know specifically which departments are better than which other ones, but I know that if I wanted a classical, humanistic education I would have done better to go to a small liberal arts college (or perhaps a Jesuit college). Likewise, I would probably have gone to Georgetown if I wanted to major in Political Science, or to Cal Tech if I wanted to major in electrical engineering. Harvard, Princeton, Yale—all the other Ivies I'm sure have individual departments that shine brighter than particular stars in the multifaceted Stanford heavens. However, if I had decided on strict academic reputation, I would now be at Carnegie-Mellon University, which has a whole department devoted to my field of interest (Human-Computer Interaction). Why Stanford, then? Because its department is almost as good (or perhaps even better) and because everything else about the school is just so much more attractive than CMU.

- Laid-back

Finally, Stanford has a great laid-back atmosphere. You won't find the cutthroat competition that you might at Berkeley or even Harvard; people are more cooperative than competitive. The one exception to this may be the premed track; I've heard differing stories about the amount of competition among premed students. However, I think it's safe to say that even if there is competition, it's not as insane as at many other schools.

Stanford has been attacked in the past for “grade inflation”—that is, giving high grades for little effort. While perhaps we are less “rigorous” in this respect than some other schools (I know that Berkeley in particular tries to “weed out” the people who “don't belong”), I know that for the vast majority of classes, you must *earn* an “A.” Stanford is challenging—make no mistake about that. You will work hard here. Some contend that this is only true for “techie” (i.e. science and engineering) rather than “fuzzie” (i.e. humanities) classes, but I have found it to be true for both—they just require different kinds of work. One college guide I read summed up the laid-back mentality the best: “Stanford students are like ducks—placid on the surface, but pedaling like hell underneath.”

This laid-back mentality pervades much of Stanford and seems to almost seep from the sandstone columns of the buildings. Few people are uptight or rigid; while the campus is diverse (see above) it is also very tolerant. Another aspect of this mentality is the Stanford lingo (like “pro fro,” “techie,” and “fuzzie”) that pervades our speech, as you can tell from the preceding paragraph. True, there is often intense pressure, but everyone here knows how to have fun.

However, if you are a passionate, strong-willed political activist, you might find Stanford a bit too unopinionated for your taste. Likewise, if you want an intense, hyper-competitive environment, Stanford is not for you. (Don't think I'm joking about this—if I were a hard-core liberal, I would have a much more fun time at Brown. Likewise, if I were completely into hard-core, super-intense computer science, I would be at MIT or some other technical school. Which reminds me of what a friend told me, who went to grad school at MIT after having done her

undergrad at Stanford: “At Stanford, when an engineer is ‘well-rounded,’ that means that they also studied, say, medieval studies...at MIT, ‘well-rounded’ means you do more than one kind of engineering.”)

Conclusion

So, is Stanford right for you? I can’t answer the question for you. Although I have personal biases, I have tried to lay down very honestly the advantages and disadvantages of Stanford, and portray (sometimes in caricatures) who would or would not do best here. Decide for yourself whether the reputation, location, and size fit your image of an ideal college, and whether that college is adult, well rounded, or laid-back. Finally, come to Pro Fro Weekend; there is nothing like visiting a school yourself and talking with lots of people to get a feel for what it is like to go there.

Finally, one thing I did not discuss was money. Stanford is one of the most expensive universities in the country, and its tuition is a burden on almost any family. While they claim to offer enough financial aid to make it affordable for everyone, this is a bunch of bull. As <http://philip.greenspun.com/school/tuition-free-mit.html> argues, this is like United Airlines asking you to give them all your tax forms and then demand that you spend everything except what you need to buy food on an airline ticket. I was lucky to get a ROTC scholarship for Stanford, but there just aren’t a lot of other scholarships out there that cover that much. Stanford is a great school, but unfortunately it is very expensive.