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## Free College Options Still Exist, for Those Willing to Build Ships, Milk Cows or Salute

By **ARIEL KAMINER**

When the trustees of [Cooper Union](#) for the Advancement of Science and Art voted this week to start charging for an undergraduate degree, it ended the institution's lengthy reign as the most famous tuition-free private college in America.

But it was never the only such place. While most colleges grapple with the growing burden of student debt, a few outliers across the country and even New York State offer a college education for the one price that looks good in any economy: nothing.

To qualify for Cooper Union's largess, applicants had to prove themselves on the highest tier of the highest tier of academic or artistic achievement. That might strike some New Yorkers as easy compared with the requirements at some of the other free colleges. One requires students to work on a ranch, milking cows and harvesting alfalfa. Another requires them to build a container ship. And the national service academies, of course, require years of service in support of a robust national defense.

Applicants whose interests lead toward engineering — specifically, naval architecture and marine engineering — have a free alternative to Cooper Union's engineering school that is just a few stops away on the Long Island Rail Road. The [Webb Institute](#), in Glen Cove, accepts just 26 students a year. Admissions ratios are not even relevant, as only about 100 people a year have high enough scores and grades to qualify for the privilege of applying. Students work two months a year in related industries, design a container ship and complete a thesis. Hard work, but the results are hard to beat: Robert C. Olsen Jr., the school's outgoing president, says the institute can boast 100 percent job placement. Room and board and other fees come to a little over \$12,000 a year.

[Berea College](#), in Berea, Ky., has the opposite of need-blind admissions. In addition to applicants with strong academic qualifications, it looks for those with little or no ability to pay for college, and then each year gives 400 of them a free education for four years. They are required to work 10 hours a week, but they do get paid, a fact that significantly offsets

the \$7,000 in annual nonacademic fees; as a result students graduate with an average of just \$6,500 in debt.

The college was founded 158 years ago by an abolitionist with the goal of providing coeducational, interracial education, ambitious, given the era and the region. Today Berea has an endowment of over \$1 billion. That works out to \$625,000 per student, or more than 10 times the equivalent figure at New York University.

[College of the Ozarks](#), in Point Lookout, Mo., and the [Curtis Institute of Music](#) in Philadelphia also offer all students full tuition scholarships; [Alice Lloyd College](#), in Pippa Passes, Ky., does so for those students from Central Appalachia.

But for New Yorkers, the closest free-tuition college is also the newest: Macaulay, the honors college of the City University of New York. With a home base in Manhattan but with students spread across eight other CUNY colleges, Macaulay uses the city itself as both campus and curriculum. And on top of waiving tuition for its elite New York students, it throws in a laptop, up to \$7,500 for research, travel or internships, a “cultural passport” to many New York institutions, and in many cases housing subsidies, too.

[Deep Springs College](#), on a ranch in an eastern California desert, selects just 13 men a year for its two-year program. The only required courses are composition and public speaking, along with a seminar that Brother Kenneth Cardwell, the school’s dean, refers to as “an introduction to how to talk reasonably to people your own age about matters of common concern.”

The college [planned to begin admitting women](#), but because of a lawsuit filed by a couple of trustees who opposed the move, it remains for now all-male. Students also work 20 to 30 hours a week at a variety of jobs, from butcher to librarian to ranch hand. Most students transfer to four-year colleges, including a disproportionate number who depart for Brown, Yale, the University of Chicago and Columbia, said Brother Cardwell. Despite the bearded locavore vibe, the college gets very few applicants from New York.

*Alain Delaquérière contributed research.*