

# DEEP SPRINGS

DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA  
*Founded 1917*

David Neidorf, President

Dear Potential Applicant to Deep Springs:

Thank you for considering an application to Deep Springs. Our college is often described as “experimental,” even though it was founded a century ago. But although our 100-year-old educational *program* is neither new nor experimental, the unusually demanding nature of the program does make each year an experiment for each person here. Much depends, for all of us, on how each of you rises to the occasion.

**What does Deep Springs ask of you?** A lot. But it is not difficult unreasonably; life here is neither grim nor (most of the time) overwhelming. If the application committee admits you, we feel confident that you will be able to succeed within our broadly diverse group of students. If you are attracted to the uniqueness of the college, that’s a good sign that you will do well.

That said, a great deal is required of the students (and staff) at Deep Springs that differs from other colleges you may have visited:

- Relative isolation from your familiar surroundings, support structures, and habitual distractions
- Concentrated academics
- Almost daily manual labor
- Intensive and sometimes uncomfortably public community participation
- Moments of searing solitude and self-examination
- Active responsibility for individual and collective self-governance, which can be by turns satisfying, tedious, joyful, and agonizing.

In other words, your time here will require of us all initiative, responsibility, occasional moral courage, and a collective self-reliance supported by a sensible self-sacrifice. You have every right to know something about what “sensible self-sacrifice” might mean here, and why we consider it an educational good.

Writing in the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination, African-American author James Baldwin wrote that the civil rights movement had been “compelled to demand of Americans—and for their sakes, after all—a generosity, clarity, and a nobility which they did not dream of demanding of themselves.” “Perhaps,” he continued, “the moral of the story (and the hope of the world) lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself.”

Deep Springs is unabashedly idealistic. It aims to fulfill Baldwin’s challenge; to cultivate the “generosity, nobility, and clarity” that he aptly calls “the hope for the world.” Our mission is to educate students for “leadership and enlightened service”; the college’s founder wrote to students that “you came to prepare for a life of service, with the understanding that superior ability and generous purpose would be expected of you.” This aim is what motivates our community to demand so much of itself.

Our **educational program** is the vehicle for these self-imposed demands of generosity, clarity, and nobility. We cultivate these virtues by taking up responsibility for a challenging program of academics, governance of self and community, and labor—all carried out on a small scale that intensifies daily accountability. The educational model is based on these facts:

- (1) The assumption of real-world responsibility liberates the social, intellectual, and ethical powers of a human being.
- (2) When given great responsibility, young people of good will and talent can rise to the occasion with a courage and a joy they may not previously have known.
- (3) This experience in turn expands, refines, and empowers the generosity of spirit and exceptional ability that first motivated them to make the effort.

**What if you are not interested in some parts of the Deep Springs program?** If you attend, you should set aside your disinterest temporarily. Our educational program—academics, self-governance, and labor, inflected by the ground rules of isolation and abstention from illegal drugs and alcohol during terms—is a unity. All the parts require each other to make up the whole—and each part alone is available elsewhere, at lesser cost to your time and to philanthropic support. In this we are quite different from most other colleges.

Many colleges today treat students like customers, and so train them to think like consumers. They offer program elements like consumer goods you can mix and match, in whatever way personal choice or ambition may suggest. If seeking an education were like shopping for groceries to satisfy your appetites for the month, this would be all to the good. But you can see that in college, this consumer-based approach can too easily strand students within already familiar horizons, in much the same way that Pandora or Spotify, for example, offer “choices” based only on what you already like. In “allowing” you to choose what you already like, it can leave undisturbed the confining scope—to speak frankly, the youthful scope—of your intellectual desires and ethical ambitions.

Deep Springs does not consider you a customer or a consumer. We are not selling you a product—that’s one reason the college offers a full scholarship to all admitted students. Instead, we see in you potential friends and colleagues in the effort to become more than, so far, we have been. The responsibility with which Deep Springs honors its students is a stewardship for the institution as a whole, now and in the future. Instead of educational items for purchase, we offer the same thing offered to you by life itself; concrete responsibility for a living human enterprise, one that needs the best we can give in order to flourish.

There are five fundamental elements of our program—the three “pillars” of academics, labor, and self-governance, and the two “ground rules” known as the isolation policy and the drug and alcohol policy. **These five program elements form the core identity of the college, and brief descriptions of each follow at the end of this letter. You should read these descriptions before completing your application.**

Deep Springs isn’t the best choice for everyone. But for almost a century, alumni dedicated to a broad diversity of pathways in their lives—within different communities, professions, political and ethical commitments—have described their time at Deep Springs as one of formative and empowering importance. Be assured that if the idea of the college has been attractive to you, don’t second guess your academic or other qualifications. There is every reason to believe it is well worth applying.

If you have further questions before completing the application, don't hesitate to contact our Applications Committee: [apcom@deepsprings.edu](mailto:apcom@deepsprings.edu).

Best wishes,



David Neidorf

**Academics:** Classes are small and typically heavy on discussion; they cannot succeed without consistent preparation and participation, and the quality of both is evident to all. You need not be loquacious; many students when entering are hesitant to speak up and make arguments in class—but you will be asked to learn to participate more fully while here. Students, not faculty, are primarily responsible for the quality of this academic participation, and the Student Body's review procedures extend to responsible academic participation and preparation. The Student Body, both directly and through appointed representatives on the Curriculum Committee, also plays a major role in putting together our academic class schedule year-by-year. But this role does not guarantee that everyone studies whatever they wish; we can only offer one set of courses. One educational purpose of the student role in academic governance is to involve everyone in a conversation about how to shape a worthwhile academic program for undergraduates.

**Labor:** Our labor program requires a minimum of twenty hours' labor weekly, sometimes more. It combines boring and repetitive tasks like cleaning bathrooms, washing dishes, or maintaining the library, with more interesting and skilled tasks like cooking, working in the mechanic's shop, tending dairy cattle, or butchering. Both kinds are necessary for community life, so a member of a self-sufficient and democratic community has to be ready to take on both kinds by turns—and there are always days when you'd rather stay in bed or be elsewhere. When all goes well, the Student Body has the primary responsibility for maintaining the quality of its labor. But in so small a community, your success in acquiring the personal virtues demanded by the labor program is unavoidably public knowledge.

**Self and Community Governance:** Participation in the governance of your community is a desirable part of a whole human life; increasingly throughout the world, this requires the skills of democratic governance.

People frequently ask what prevents student self-governance from becoming a harsh or fanatical forum? Or what forestalls failure if, for example, persuasive or self-righteous voices try to impose heartfelt yet unrealistic or intemperate ideals on student body life? It isn't always easy; sometimes student body self-governance does founder for a time. But the concrete demands of ongoing life draw it back to reality and impose their own lessons. Over time, the student self-governance process is shaped by the same thing that prevents the staff, administration, or the board from imposing *their* idiosyncratic social ideals on the community at large; responsibility to the ongoing educational enterprise. As a result, although individuals at Deep Springs have considerable scope to influence the modes and ideals of community governance, as in any constitutional democracy that scope is not unlimited. There are two primary constraints:

First, our “constitution” is our program. The college community is “constituted” by its unique educational program; student body governance at Deep Springs is an educational instrument within which students carry out their responsibility for the well-being of the community and its “institutions” like the academic and labor programs. This means governance extends to choices and actions that affect the quality or even the possibility of those programs, and so sometimes it requires a sensible self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good—by, for example, student body enforcement of the ground rules, or participation with good cheer in a set of academic offerings that, while substantial, may not have been your first choice.

Second, democratic self-governance is limited by the nature of democracy itself, which demands that people with deep disagreements of principle find ways to cooperate for the sake of a common enterprise. This means that governance here cannot be the instrument of an ideology or the imposition of a single moral ideal. Instead, it lives and breathes through the ongoing conflict of ideologies and the valuable partial-truths embodied by most of them, through responsibility for practical compromise between them. It also requires compromise in other ways. Practical limits are imposed on governance by respect for individuals and by a dedication to cultivating leadership ability—cultivating, that is, the beneficial use of social power in a way that is humane and temperate as well as effective and decisive when necessary. Additional limitations stem from inflexible necessities like finite resources.

In sum, self-governance is like any other form of democratic citizenship; it inherits responsibility for a community and an educational program. We are not passing out blank paper and handing you paints. The college engages you as an adult, and real-world governance is never an opportunity to recreate the world anew, or to vacate its demands and re-shape it after your own image—that’s what recreation time and vacations are for. Accordingly, your admission honors you with the dignity and weight of hard work, not with a sheltered creative space. Like all governance everywhere, the self-governance experience at Deep Springs involves practical dialogue with real-world needs and commitments, within which we must all seek the improvement of human life.

**Isolation:** The Isolation Policy is one of the “Ground Rules” at Deep Springs; it means, in effect, that membership in this common enterprise requires reducing or postponing some of your ongoing ties to the broader social world. Specific constraints vary according to the deliberations of the student body, but they traditionally include a prohibition on visitors and on student absences from the college during our seven-week academic terms (the isolation policy is suspended during our frequent breaks). The isolation policy also facilitates largely student-controlled limitation of access to the internet (for example, the student body has chosen not to have an active internet connection in the dorm). Email and telephone service are baseline connections that are not subject to prohibition, although they are subject to limited bandwidth and occasional technical outages.

The educational value of the isolation policy is difficult to explain to those who haven’t experienced it. Critics sometimes propose that it is an artifact of the hyper-individualism of frontier-era American life, but such critics fail to realize that in fact, the isolation of frontier life in the western United States intensified community life, in much the same way that the crew of a ship leaving port constitutes its own community for the duration of the voyage. There is a great deal more to be said about the formative power of standing at a critical remove from the usual social ties that bind and shape us, and this is an ongoing conversation at the college. It is best to think of isolation as analogous to a long ocean voyage with the resulting need for sustainability and self-sufficiency among the crew, or as similar to (although, since limited to seven-week terms, shorter than) a semester abroad. Certainly all semester abroad

programs agree that the powerful experience of immersion in a new and challenging world is dissipated and devalued when students use social media to sustain familiar social ties instead of giving themselves to the more difficult experience of finding their center in unfamiliar environs. Our isolation policy is a program-level commitment to that challenging experience, while its ongoing adjustment and enforcement by the student body facilitates a more nuanced discussion about its meaning and importance.

**Alcohol and Illegal Drug Policy:** This policy is the second of the program-level ground rules at Deep Springs. In accepting the scholarship, you commit to abstain from illegal drugs and alcohol during academic terms, and to abide by the student body’s regulations at all other times.

This ground rule had its historical origin in the more puritan sensibilities of the Nineteenth Century, as well as the needs of a much younger student body in the early years of the college. But neither historical reason applies now. The presence of this ground rule in our educational program today has two contemporary motivations, both essential for the possibility of this unique program. We believe—in fact, we know—that for young people equipped with the broadness of heart and ability that the college seeks to educate, abstaining from drugs and alcohol for seven weeks at a time is a trivial requirement.

First, this policy is simply an extension of the isolation policy and its educational aims. Inebriation is often escapist in effect, if not always intent. It can “self-medicate” stresses that instead could and should become engines of self-discovery and growth. And it is, in effect, a way of going “absent” from the responsibilities of the common enterprise, in the same way as would disappearing for a day in town when the cows need milking or a class needs your participation, or in the same way that staying up late into the night on social media means a tired, distracted, less-functional presence in meetings or a diminished cultivation of friendships at the college. We know that it’s fashionable in American college life to see collective inebriation as a gateway to group bonding and friendship. We think that although it may be easier to form bonds in this way, that those friendships are superficial compared to the slower-developing kind that has at its heart shared dedication and shared actions of responsibility to an enterprise. If you can’t imagine that college is worthwhile without drunken parties, this is without doubt the wrong place for you.

Second, in addition to this primary educational aim, the drug and alcohol policy is a necessary condition for the wide latitude enjoyed by the student body in self-governance and labor. At Deep Springs, the student body governs its own residence; no staff live in the dorm or supervise residential life. To enact its beneficial ownership of college operations, the student body needs wide-ranging (and trained) access to potential sources of accident; sharp and motorized tools like knives and saws, tractors, highway vehicles and hot stoves in the kitchen. Committee work requires communicating with potential students and faculty members with grace and acuity. These real-world responsibilities are essential to our program, yet it would be impossible for long (and thus unconscionable) to run a college this way if the student body (or the rest of the college) were to tolerate ongoing drug and alcohol use. Their prohibition is simply the necessary price paid for the greater pleasures of life here.

It’s true that not all use is detrimental, and that mature and successful people are able to moderate their use of drugs and alcohol in a safe manner. But we also know that invariably, not everyone can do this, and we know that in any case the standards of maturity that individuals may achieve are very often impossible when it comes to group behavior. Experience has shown that when moderate and legal use of drugs and alcohol is tolerated as a matter of routine, use soon escalates into unsafe patterns of behavior. We—the students and staff together—are responsible not only for each other’s health and well-being,

but also for earning and sustaining the confidence of everyone who gives their time and resources to the college. And our stewardship includes maintaining the robust governance traditions necessary to ensure college operations are a going concern for its future students. Accordingly, the use of alcohol or illegal drugs by recipients of the Deep Springs scholarship is prohibited during terms, and violation of this ground rule is grounds for immediate suspension. Students—in fact, all community members—who have been prescribed drugs with potential to affect their reflexes or judgment are required to inform their labor supervisors. Finally, at any time, students with legal access to prescription medications who share them with others, or students aged 21 and over who provide alcohol to minors, are subject to immediate loss of scholarship and dismissal from the college.