

# DEEP SPRINGS

DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE, CALIFORNIA

*Founded 1917*

*Andy Zink, President*

August 20, 2023

Dear Potential Applicant:

Deep Springs College defies simple characterization. It is steeped in tradition while remaining dynamic and pursuing a constant state of renewal. Many of our most cherished structures, existing since the founding of Deep Springs in 1917, are intentionally juxtaposed. They arise from the conviction that untold capacities, lying dormant in young adults, will emerge through responsible action in the face of conflict and tension. These responsibilities of the intellect, the physical, and the collective (reflected in the three “pillars” of the College) set the stage on which students discover their own unique paths toward embodying a life of service to humanity and its environment.

While our educational program has stayed true to the original vision of our founder L.L. Nunn, the demanding and dynamic structure of Deep Springs results in each year being unique. The success of this ongoing project depends, for all of us, on how each student rises to the occasion and takes on their extraordinary opportunities. The College asks that each student arrive with sincerity, humility, and a spirit of cooperation – but also a thirst for knowledge and the courage to hold themselves and their peers accountable to the highest of standards. Deep Springs applicants begin with an intuition that higher education is best experienced through a shared, collaborative process of discovery. They arrive to find an ecosystem of students, faculty, and staff all working together for the greater good.

Deep Springs College recognizes that the joys of an intellectual life are enriched by a balance with practical solutions achieved through manual labor. These two pillars of a Deep Springs education are stitched together by the third pillar of student self-governance, which empowers the students to make decisions that guide the very nature of their own education. Many colleges treat their students like customers and, as such, make them feel like consumers. At Deep Springs the students lead the committees that hire faculty, choose the curriculum, and admit the next class of incoming students. By collaborating with staff and faculty to help create their educational experience, students take ownership of the intended, and sometimes unintended, outcomes of their collective decisions. This process involves compromise and sacrifice; it demands leadership and a clearly articulated vision.

Deep Springs remains, to this day, unabashedly idealistic in an increasingly materialistic world. If you come to our college we will not consider you a customer or a consumer. We will not try to sell you a product but we will grant you the unique opportunity to become a steward of the College through the process of shared governance. This is one reason why our college offers a full scholarship to all admitted students, who do not pay for tuition, room, or board. We see in you a future friend and colleague, a collaborator in our effort to continually improve the Deep Springs project so that we may become something greater than we have ever been before. This is a responsibility that Deep Springs grants to its students: stewardship for the institution as a whole, both now and in the future. Instead of an education with items for purchase, we attempt to provide the very same promise as life itself: concrete responsibility for a living human enterprise, one that demands the best we can give of our entire self in order to flourish. If your heart yearns to find peers that will respect and continually challenge you to discover the greatest aspects of your unique character, then this is the place for you.

Life as a Deep Springs student is difficult and demanding, but it is in no way unreasonable. Work here has a purpose and a utility that keeps it from becoming overwhelming. And if the application committee admits you, it means we feel confident that you will be able to succeed within the broadly diverse group of students at the College. We value and celebrate diversity and inclusion, recognizing that different perspectives enrich the shared educational experience – generating new opportunities for our own evolution and discovery. If you are attracted to the uniqueness of the College, and are eager to learn about how it will lead to a life of service, that’s a sign that you will do well here.

As you may have gleaned already, a great deal is required of the students (as well as faculty and staff) at Deep Springs that differs from other colleges you may be considering. This includes:

- Isolation from most of your familiar surroundings, support structures, and typical habitual distractions while living in a devastatingly beautiful desert environment.
- Intensive academics with high expectations for participation and engagement across a liberal arts curriculum that is inspired and guided by the students themselves.
- Daily manual labor, including cooking, gardening, farming, cleaning, and ranching, that demands teamwork, resilience, compromise, and the willingness to guide and be guided.
- Active responsibility for individual and collective self-governance, which can at times be satisfying, tedious, joyful, and even agonizing.

In other words, your time here will require (as it does for all members of our community) initiative, responsibility, moral courage, humility, kindness, and collective self-reliance that is also supported by sensible self-sacrifice. Our mission is to educate Deep Springs students for a life of leadership and courageous service; the College’s founder L.L. Nunn wrote to the students in 1923 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 exactly what motivates our community to expect so much from itself and of each other. In this same letter, Nunn explains that he chose the location of Deep Springs Valley because “The desert has a deep personality; it has a voice. Great leaders in all ages have sought the desert and heard its voice.” We also strive to embrace this same gratitude and stewardship toward our beloved Valley, in both our ranching practices and our ecological ethic.

Our educational program is the vehicle for these self-imposed demands of curiosity, compassion, courage, environmental stewardship, and service to humanity – all placed in the isolated desert ecosystem of the Great Basin at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. We hold these virtues by taking responsibility for a challenging program of academics, self-governance, and labor. Carried out on a small scale that intensifies and demands daily accountability, the education is based on:

- Taking on responsibilities that have real consequences for one’s shared community, in a way that liberates the social, intellectual, and ethical powers of a human being.
- The recognition that, when given such 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.
- The communal Deep Springs experience in turn expands, refines, and empowers the very generosity of spirit and exceptional ability that motivates students to make such effort.

What if you are not interested in certain parts of the Deep Springs education? Our educational program is a unity and all the parts require each other to make up the whole. Each part alone is available elsewhere, at lesser cost to your time and to philanthropic support. In this whole we are quite different from most other colleges. If the entire package of Deep Springs does not speak to your head and to your heart, dare we say to your particular soul, then it may not be the right place for you. We encourage you to apply and learn more, including an on-site visit if you make it to the last round of the application, to see if we are a good fit. Ultimately, however, we ask that you only accept our offer if you are “all in” and committed to the project that is Deep Springs College.

There are five fundamental elements of the College, these are the three “pillars” of academics, labor, and self-governance, plus the two “ground rules” known as the isolation policy and the alcohol and drug policy. **These five elements (described in detail at the very end of this letter) form the core identity of the College’s unique educational program. We ask that you read these descriptions carefully before initiating and completing your Deep Springs application.**

Deep Springs can be challenging, exhilarating, frustrating, and rewarding. Entering the College, you should be aware of the limitations around some forms of support, especially for medical and mental health, given our distance from other communities. We have basic health care and many members of the community have received training as Wilderness First Responders (the medical training standard for instructional jobs in most wilderness camps and outdoor skills programs like NOLS or Outward Bound). This means not only that you are never far from someone who knows how to respond to a medical emergency; it also means that all of us are quite conscious of minimizing the dangers around us. Yet regular and emergency medical care is an hour away over a mountain pass in Bishop, CA.

Similarly, Deep Springs does not have on-site mental health services. We do have a psychiatrist and a psychologist that are available every week via Zoom in times of need for any students who make appointments. And we have implemented a peer counselor system to support student wellbeing and mental health. Students requiring ongoing mental health support can certainly succeed at Deep Springs, but we request they establish stable and successful treatment routines before they come to the College. If you anticipate that our program will present mental health challenges for you, we ask that you discuss your intention to study at Deep Springs with your clinical provider and arrive here with a plan in place.

It is certainly true that Deep Springs isn’t the best choice for everyone. But for some students it can be a clear drink of water and a welcome antidote to some of the more materialistic aspects of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For over a century, our alumni have described their time at Deep Springs as one of formative and empowering importance. If the mission of the College calls to you, do not second guess your academic or other qualifications. There is every reason for you to believe that it is well worth applying. And if you have further questions before completing your application, do not hesitate to contact our Applications Committee: [apcom@deepsprings.edu](mailto:apcom@deepsprings.edu).

Thank you for your interest in Deep Springs,



Andrew (Andy) Zink, President

**Academic Pillar:** Classes are small and rely heavily on discussion; they cannot succeed without consistent preparation and participation, and the quality of both is evident to all. You need not be loquacious and many students are hesitant to speak up and make arguments in class when they first arrive. But it will be expected that you learn how to participate more fully while you are here. The students themselves 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, 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. Therefore student participation in academic governance manifests as an ongoing conversation about how best to shape a worthwhile, inspiring, and meaningful academic program for undergraduates.

**Labor Pillar:** Our labor program requires a minimum of twenty hours per week, and sometimes more depending on the position. It combines less glamorous tasks like cleaning bathrooms and washing dishes with more interesting and skilled tasks such as cooking, gardening, landscaping, woodworking, or ranching. Every single type of labor is necessary for community life, so a member of a self-sufficient and democratic community must be ready to take on the tasks assigned by their peers. And there are always days when you must overcome the urge to stay in bed or be elsewhere. When all goes well, the Student Body has the primary responsibility for maintaining the quality of its labor in collaboration with our skilled staff as mentors and guides. Ultimately the labor program demands practical judgement and humility, as well as an understanding that serving the Deep Springs community in such necessary ways is a training ground for service to humanity. The program also instills respect for manual labor, skilled trades, and the appreciation that physical work can be a wonderful compliment to an intellectual, contemplative life. Students are held accountable, and receive appreciation, for these contributions to the community in the most practical of ways.

**Self-Governance Pillar:** Participation in the governance of one's community is an important part of a whole human life; increasingly this requires the skills of democratic governance. It is also what sets Deep Springs apart from most other small, liberal arts, working colleges. People frequently ask what prevents student self-governance from becoming a harsh or fanatical forum? Or self-righteous voices from imposing heartfelt yet unrealistic ideals on Student Body life? While self-governance does sometimes find an eddy rather than a flow, the concrete demands of ongoing life draw the process back to reality and impose their own lessons. Over time, student self-governance is shaped by the same factors that prevent the staff, administration, or board from imposing their idiosyncratic social ideals on the community at large: a responsibility to the ongoing educational enterprise. Although students at Deep Springs have considerable scope to influence the modes and ideals of community governance, as in any constitutional democracy such scope is not unlimited.

First, our democratic "constitution" is our educational program. The college community is entirely constituted by this unique program; as a result, Student Body governance at Deep Springs is an educational instrument by which students carry out a responsibility for the well-being of the entire community and its institutions such as the academic and labor programs. This means that student governance extends to choices and actions that affect the quality or even the possibility of those programs, and sometimes requires a sensible self-sacrifice in the name of a greater good. Second, self-governance is limited by the nature of democracy itself, demanding that people with principled disagreements find ways to cooperate for the sake of the 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 in them, through shared responsibility and respect for practical compromise.

There are limits to self-governance in that many decisions of the Student Body have implications for other members of the Deep Springs community (staff, faculty, administration, and board). As such, self-governance remains an important facet of the larger shared governance of the College. The professionalism and seriousness of the student-led committees (curriculum, applications, student reviews, communications) represent renewing evidence that the benefits conferred to the students are taken seriously and executed effectively. Ultimately, we find that shared governance and self-sacrifice is a matter of the heart, as L.L. Nunn wrote in his letter on the promise of the College: “The developing influences of Deep Springs should make the student conscious of that abundance of heart – should make that abundance coherent, and should bring it to expression.”

**Isolation Ground Rule:** The Isolation Policy is one of the “Ground Rules” at Deep Springs; it means that membership in this common enterprise requires reducing or postponing some of your ongoing ties to the broader social world. As Thoreau writes about going to the woods, we at Deep Springs have come to the desert “because (we) wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.” Specific constraints vary according to the deliberations of the Student Body, but they traditionally place limitations on student absences from the College during our seven-week academic terms (the isolation policy is suspended during our frequent breaks). The policy also facilitates student-controlled limitation of access to the internet (e.g. the Student Body has chosen not to have an internet connection in the dorm). Email and telephone service are baseline connections that are not subject to such prohibition. The educational value of the isolation policy is a program-level commitment to living together in a shared community with integrity and intention.

**Alcohol & Drug Ground Rule:** Attendance at Deep Springs requires students to abstain from illegal drugs, marijuana, and alcohol during academic terms and breaks (if you remain here on campus). This ground rule has two motivations. First, this policy is simply an extension of the isolation policy and its educational aims. Inebriation is often escapist in effect, and can “self-medicate” stresses that could and should become engines of self-discovery and growth. It is a way of being “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. Second, the alcohol and drug ground rule is a necessary condition for the wide latitude enjoyed by the Student Body in self-governance and labor. To enact its responsibility for college operations, the Student Body requires 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 students and faculty members with grace and acuity. These real-world responsibilities are essential to our program, yet it would be impossible 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 responsibilities and pleasures of life here. We (the students, faculty and staff) are responsible 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. Accordingly, the use of alcohol, marijuana, or illegal drugs by recipients of the Deep Springs scholarship is prohibited during all academic terms and breaks (if you remain here on campus), and any violation of this alcohol and drug policy is grounds for immediate suspension from the College.