

California's Biggest Bang for Your Buck Colleges

by [Alexandra Rice](#) on 25 Feb 2014 | posted in [College Comparison](#), [Education](#)
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Is college worth it? That seems to be the question on everyone's mind lately as tuition prices continue to climb. At NerdScholar, we argue yes, especially if students attend a high-quality college at a low-cost. But it isn't always easy to know which school will get you the most bang for your buck.

Student debt is at an all-time high, averaging \$29,400 per student. But at the same time, the earnings gap between those who hold a high school diploma and those who hold a college degree has never been higher. Someone between the ages of 25-34 with a high school diploma working full-time earns an average of about \$30,000, whereas a college graduate earns about \$45,000 annually and continues to move up in the pay ranks. So while college is an expensive investment, it is also one that will pay off for the rest of your life.

As 87% of public school students attend college in-state, we broke our rankings down by state. In California, colleges are abundant, so it can be particularly difficult to single out which schools offer the best education at the most reasonable price.

To narrow down the list, we chose the top 40 California schools included in the Forbes rankings of America's Top Colleges, then we asked a few key questions and crunched the numbers to find the best-value colleges in the state:

- 1. Is the college generally affordable, and does it offer aid?** We included the average net price, which is the price after grants and scholarships, and this constituted 50% of the overall score.
- 2. How does the college appear to the public eye?** We measured the prestige and quality of the school through Forbes' rankings and weighted this as 30% of the overall score.
- 3. Do students graduate within six years?** We included graduation rate within 6 years, which is the average number of years it takes students to graduate, and weighted it as 10% of the overall score.
- 4. Do students pay back their loans on time?** Loan default rates accounted for 10% of the overall score.

Here are the key takeaways:

- Private schools may be a good choice for high-achieving, low-income students: One-third of the 20 colleges listed below are private schools.
- The University of California system is a powerhouse for prestigious yet affordable colleges.
- Cost does not necessarily correlate with quality of school.

Here are the top 20 value schools in the Golden State:

NerdScholar Ranking	School	Net-Price	Graduation Rate	Loan Default Rate	Forbes Ranking	Overall Score
1	University of California, Los Angeles	\$14,474	90%	3.40	34	77.1
2	Pomona College	\$18,255	95.30%	0.00	2	76.9
3	University of California, Berkeley	\$15,589	90.50%	2.60	22	76.7
4	University of California, San Diego	\$12,621	85.30%	3.00	114	72.9
5	University of California, Irvine	\$13,217	84.60%	2.70	112	72.8
6	University of California, Davis	\$14,072	81.70%	3.00	99	72
7	Stanford University	\$21,421	96.10%	1.00	1	71.3
8	University of California, Santa Barbara	\$14,890	79.80%	2.60	96	71.3
9	San Diego State University	\$8,527	65.60%	3.80	264	66.4
10	University of California, Santa Cruz	\$14,238	73.40%	3.70	159	64
11	California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo	\$15,253	74.6%	2.80	170	62.5
12	California Institute of Technology	\$25,382	86.7%	0.00	18	61.9
13	Scripps College	\$22,441	87.5%	1.00	95	61.7
14	University of California, Riverside	\$11,340	66.8%	4.70	259	61.5

15	California State Polytechnic University, Pomona	\$6,789	50.3%	4.40	336	59.8
16	California State University, Long Beach	\$6,455	54%	4.70	363	58.5
17	Pepperdine University	\$22,432	81.3%	2.40	100	56.8
18	California State University, Fresno	\$5,805	49.4%	7.90	366	54.2
19	San Jose State University	\$11,723	46.4%	5.20	272	54.1
20	University of Southern California	\$27,541	90.1%	2.50	63	53.2

1. University of California, Los Angeles

UCLA earned the No. 1 spot on our list for its winning combination of a low price and student loan default rate, and a high graduation rate and Forbes ranking (it came in at #34 nationally and #6 in the West). Well known for its dynamic sports teams and sunny, urban setting, UCLA is not only a cool place to go to college, but it's also an affordable option that is sure to make any parent proud.

A public research university, the school is considered a “public ivy” for its rigorous academics but reasonable price tag. Offering 125 different majors, the most popular for undergraduates are political science, psychology, biology, business economics, and history. According to Forbes, 71% of students receive financial aid with the average grant award coming in at \$15,117 per student. Anyone hoping to take advantage of this school’s winning characteristics should be sure to make themselves stand out on their application—the school is the most applied to four-year institution in the U.S.

2. Pomona College

Nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, Pomona College boasts both a scenic setting and an intimate learning environment. With only about 1,600 students, the private college is able to keep its classes small and its tuition low. As Cynthia Peters, the college’s director of news and information puts it, Pomona “meets the full financial aid need of its students with no loans.” At Pomona College, “students enjoy both the advantages of a small college, where professors teach every class, and the resources of a much larger university,” she said. Pomona is the founding member of the Claremont Colleges consortium, which comprises seven adjacent colleges offering approximately 2,200 classes that are open to all students.

“With a faculty-student ratio of 8 to 1, the college is known for opportunities for hands-on research by undergraduates, close faculty-student mentoring relationships, high graduation rates, and opportunities for students to engage with Southern California and the world on issues of importance,” Peters added.

3. University of California, Berkeley

Another competitive UC school, Berkeley is UCLA’s counterpoint as the flagship school in the northern part of the state, and is also considered a public ivy. The school has a prestigious research reputation and claims 29 Nobel Prizes won by alumni. On top of its impressive academic offerings, Cal is also able to offer generous financial aid to its students: 66% of students receive some form of financial aid and 56% receive grants. Only 1% of students receive non-federal loans, which may contribute to the low default rate of 2.6%.

Despite the school’s sizable student body population of nearly 36,000, class sizes are still kept relatively low with 77% of classes holding fewer than 30 students. The school’s most popular majors include electrical engineering, computer science, political science, and molecular and cell biology. Remaining true to its research roots, the school says that often more than 50% of seniors assist faculty with research or creative projects.

4. University of California, San Diego

Located in picturesque La Jolla, UC San Diego is a school largely influenced by its geography. Another UC school to top our list, UC San Diego was previously a U.S. military training ground and then a marine research station; today the school includes the day’s surf height on its homepage and the mascot King Triton cheers on the sports teams. UC San Diego is a public university that specializes in both space and sea research.

UC San Diego offers the lowest net-price among the top five schools at our list, with an average price tag of \$12,621 per student per year. The school offers 75% of students financial aid and 68% of students receive grants, with the average award coming in at \$15,325. The school’s largest field of study is social sciences followed by engineering and biology.

5. University of California, Irvine

One of the youngest schools in the UC system—it will be 50 years old next year—UC Irvine holds its own in terms of both academics and pricing. UC Irvine is known for its medical school and teaching hospital, creative writing program and the Donald Bren School of Information & Computer Sciences, which was the first computer science school established within the UC system. The university continues to expand its academic offerings with newly successful programs in public health, education and law. With a 47% admittance rate and an average grant award of \$14,480, UC Irvine is both accessible and affordable. Seventy-two percent of students receive financial aid, and 62% receive grant awards.

6. University of California, Davis

Sitting just west of Sacramento, the state's capital, UC Davis was founded as a farm school in the early 1900s. Today the school stands out among the other UCs for its sustainability initiatives, veterinary teaching school, interdisciplinary studies, and emphasis on public service. UC Davis also boasts top schools in management, law, medicine, engineering, and education. Students in all fields of study are encouraged to think "green" and to figure out how to give back to society. The school also gives back to its large student body by offering 77% financial aid and 69% of students receive grants.

7. Stanford University

Ranked No. 1 on Forbes' listing of America's Top Colleges, Stanford University is a medium-sized private institution located in the heart of Silicon Valley. Often referred to as the "Harvard of the West," Stanford is well-known for its academic rigor but probably less so for its substantial financial aid offerings. The university admits U.S. undergraduate students regardless of their ability to pay. Parents with under \$100,000 in family income and typical assets are expected to pay nothing toward tuition, according to senior communications director Scott Hayward. Additionally, at Stanford more than 75% of students graduate debt-free. The school has the highest graduation rate among the California schools in our ranking at 96%. It's hard to go wrong when picking a major at this school, but the most popular ones include social sciences, engineering, and interdisciplinary studies.

8. University of California, Santa Barbara

Not only does this school offer stunning views of the Pacific Ocean, but it also offers students a quality education at a reasonable rate. UC Santa Barbara stands out for its College of Creative Studies, in which classes are primarily tutorials, studios or small seminars. Students in this college take a deep-dive into their field of choice, and often graduate only after having contributed to their field often through a creative project or research study. To help students focus on academics, UC Santa Barbara offers 69% of students financial aid and 57% grants.

9. San Diego State University

Perhaps the underdog of the top 10 colleges and universities on our list, SDSU certainly deserves its spot nonetheless. With an after-aid cost of only \$8,527 per year, SDSU is by far the least expensive school in our top rankings. But the price tag alone didn't land SDSU on our Biggest Bang for Your Buck colleges—it's also an excellent state school with a vast number of course and degree offerings. Natalia Elko, a media relations specialist at the school, says: "It is wonderful to see SDSU being recognized for the top quality education and opportunities offered to students. The efforts of faculty, staff, students, alumni and community supporters have created the academic and co-curricular excellence these rankings recognize. We are extremely pleased to see the strength of the Aztec alumni network is helping our alumni attain great professional success."

10. University of California, Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz, located about 30 miles south of San Jose, has several distinctions, not least of which are its mascot, the banana slug; its recent past use of a nontraditional grading system; and its comprehensive library of Grateful Dead memorabilia. And while the quirks give UC Santa Cruz its unique character, it's the substantial financial aid and premium academic offerings that make the university stand out. Michael McCawley, the school's director of admissions, said that UC Santa Cruz "ranks second in the world for the impact of its research, as measured by the average number of times its faculty's published work is cited by scholars around the world; and the campus was also recently ranked seventh overall in the world among universities founded within the last 50 years. "At the same time," he said, "we work closely with students and their families to make a UCSC education affordable, and nearly two-thirds of all our students receive some sort of financial assistance in pursuit of earning their degrees."

View the complete listing of [California's Biggest Bang for Your Buck Colleges](#).