

THE RISE OF THE IVY LEAGUE UNIVERSITIES

Read the following article, pausing to summarize your learning after each section.

What is the Ivy League? A History

The Ivy league is a group of eight prestigious schools, located in the northeastern United States, known worldwide for academic excellence, top-notch faculty, high admissions standards, and social exclusivity. Most of the colleges have an acceptance rate of less than 10 percent. The Ivy League resembles groups of elite universities in other countries: Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge) in the UK, the C9 League in China, and the Imperial Universities in Japan.

School	Location	Year founded
Brown University	Providence, Rhode Island	1764
Columbia University	New York, New York	1754
Cornell University	Ithaca, New York	1865
Dartmouth College	Hanover, New Hampshire	1769
Harvard University	Cambridge, Massachusetts	1636
University of Pennsylvania	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1740
Princeton University	Princeton, New Jersey	1746
Yale University	New Haven, Connecticut	1701

Harvard students began an annual tradition of planting ivy vines and giving a student speech, “the ivy oration,” in the mid-19th century (Carlton, 2023). The term “Ivy League” was first used in 1933 to refer to the athletic conference of the eight schools. By 1954, it was being used in a broader sense to refer to the schools themselves.



Stop and Jot your thoughts on the reading so far:

The Evolution of the Ivy League

In colonial times, most graduates of these schools went on to careers in the church or as lawyers. Today's graduates have expanded into every career available: software engineers, doctors, scientists, venture capitalists, journalists, financial analysts, economists, novelists, neurosurgeons, judges, mathematicians, etc.

For most of the colleges' history, wealthy white male students were the majority of the student body, and to this day many students come from privileged backgrounds. Student athletes and those with legacy status (students whose family members are alumni, a reliable source of donations) are prioritized (Gross, 2019). Despite resistance, the colleges began to admit women in the mid-20th century (Carleton, 2023; BestColleges, 2023), some of them decades after many other U.S. colleges. More people of color have also been admitted in the decades since, especially following the Civil Rights Movement (Glasker, 2019). Economic diversity remains a challenge: five of the Ivies admit more students from the top 1 percent of the income scale than they do from the bottom 60 percent (Aisch et al., 2017).

Other elite universities are now often included in discussions as the "Ivy Plus" group, such as Stanford University (California), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Duke University (North Carolina), and the University of Chicago.



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The Ivy League's Impact and Future

The eight colleges consistently rank in the top 10 of *U.S. News & World Report's* list of the best national universities. Sixteen of the 44 U.S. presidents attended Ivy League schools. The schools' graduation rates are high: 95 percent, compared to 81 percent at all U.S. four-year colleges and universities. Graduates also earn a significantly higher median salary (\$80,000) than their state school counterparts (\$58,000). They make up a significant percentage of, but by no means dominate, corporate and political leadership (Carlton, 2023). Ivy League universities

also have large financial endowments—money and other financial assets that are invested in order to provide a self-sustaining source of revenue to support their teaching, research, and public service missions. Only a small portion of the endowment is spent each year, so that it continues to grow. Endowments range from Brown's \$6 billion to Harvard's \$53 billion (NCES, 2023), so even this small portion can be substantial. Sources include research funding from the federal government and private companies, taxpayer-funded government subsidies, and charitable donations from individuals and corporations (Phung, 2024).

The Ivy League schools are members of the Association of American Universities, a global organization of 71 American research universities founded to “transform lives through education, research, and innovation.” Research excellence at American universities, fueled by government and private investment, became a focus after the industrialization of society following the Civil War. This was followed by the country’s explosive economic growth post–World War II, fueled by free-market capitalism (Staddon, 2020). Today, American universities lead the world in scientific research, despite the fact that American students lag behind their counterparts in other developed countries when it comes to math and science literacy.

In 2019, the “Varsity Blues” scandal broke, exposing the many ways wealthy and famous parents seek to influence undergraduate admissions decisions at top American universities. Many calls for transparency followed, and while some changes were made (including firings and prison sentences), systemic change is still needed (Hartocollis, 2019).

The Ivy League gets far more attention than its impact warrants, partly because of the weight of history and tradition. The fact remains that only 0.4 percent of undergraduates in the U.S. attend an Ivy League school, while 77 percent opt for a public school. Put in context: while an Ivy League education can provide a model to aspire to, it is not essential for success in life.



Stop and Jot your thoughts on the reading so far:

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