

OLIVERIAN

A school as unique as its students.

Latest News from Oliverian

Is Oli a Prep School?

Message from Will Laughlin, Head of School/CEO

In traditional parlance, "prep school" is shorthand for "preparatory school" which is shorthand for "college-preparatory school." Prep school is kind of a fancy-pants sounding term and, for that reason and others I'm about to get into, I don't like it. But whatever elite



associations "prep school" may conjure, it really just indicates a school whose courses, credits, and services are principally designed to meet college-admissions requirements. By that definition, most high schools—private or public, day or boarding—are prep schools. So the prep school appellation, as commonly used, implies that a school's focus is on helping students get into college. That seems like pretty good focus because once you get into college you're home free, right?

Wrong.

Of the nearly 70% of high school graduates who are admitted to college every year (New York Times), upwards of 40% drop out for good, most during their first semester (US News and World Report). That figure roughly corresponds with the number of self-described "underemployed" young adults who live at home with their parents

into their twenties or thirties (Pewsocialtrends.org).

These stark statistics are not the result of inadequate academic preparation. They are the result of inadequate life preparation. Most of America's "college prepped" 17 - 19 year olds are expected to lurch suddenly into a new, utterly foreign, virtually independent existence, and just figure it out. They leave all that is familiar— friends, family, hometown, familiar teachers, lifelong routines, et cetera—to live with strangers far from home with no supervision. They have to pick a major, create a schedule, get out of bed (by themselves), speak publicly, get along with roommates, participate in highly social project and study groups, make their own dietary choices, manage personal finances, and so on. All that. All at once. No wonder so many students bounce right out college and onto their parents' couches indefinitely, defeated and lost.

College admissions requires a transcript, an essay, and some test scores. Finishing college, on the other hand, requires sophisticated social skills, a combination of academic skill and motivation, emotional resiliency, confident self-advocacy, domestic skills like cooking and money management, a strong sense of self, and the capacity for purposeful self-direction. And since those without college degrees have nearly three times the unemployment rate and more than twice the underemployment rate of those with (economic policy institute) it's clear that finishing college, not starting, is what counts. College graduation requires more than just academic skills— it requires life skills.

So I'm not a fan of the college prep designation because of its hyper focus on college admissions. But don't get me wrong. We're very proud that more than 90% of our students are admitted to an impressive selection of colleges. But if we stopped there, we would have to resign ourselves to the usual 50% college failure rate; and that might be conservative, since many of our students have struggled with traditional school. Fifty percent! We love our kids too much to settle for that...plus, we don't allow couch surfing here.

That's why we combine extreme support with a high level of freedom that mimics some of the most challenging aspects of college life—

personal responsibility, community living, self-advocacy, time management, technology management, et cetera. We call this a "step-up" approach because it gives our students a challenging but supportive transitional step from high school to college and independence.

This experiential approach to fostering healthy independence is in stark contrast to most traditional and therapeutic schools, both of which tend to favor uniformity through control over independence with support. The former—while presumably easier for adults to manage—requires students to make a monumental leap when they transition from high school to college; the latter—while a bit messier and more demanding for adults to manage—provides an experiential step up from high school life to college life. Oliverian's approach is not easy. It requires that faculty and parents let go a little more than might feel comfortable. It requires that they operate in some grey zones, treat each student differently, and allow students to fail on their way to success. In short, it requires that we engage our work with the professionalism of educators but the profound commitment and love of parents.

As challenging as our approach is, the results inspire us to persist. Not only do virtually all of our graduates gain admission to college, but most actually finish! They go on to become engineers, physicians, artists, teachers, therapists, chefs, carpenters, entrepreneurs, moms, dads, and lots of other wonderful things. These outcomes are all the more remarkable given that most students come to Oli having struggled—some profoundly—with traditional education. I believe our students' success is largely a product of the unique combination of support and independence that we offer.

So is Oli a prep school? Sure, if you must. But let's be more specific. We're a "college, life, career, relationship, and family" prep school. I can go along with that designation, but it is kind of a mouthful.

I'm Oli: From Treatment to Oliverian to Rutgers

MSW

Having earned her Master's degree in social work from Rutgers University, alum Sara Feinberg '10 shares how Oliverian prepared her for college and helped her find her place in the world, "Oliverian made me realize that I couldn't force people to give up on me, no matter how hard I tried. Because of that, I no longer gave up on myself."



Q: Sara, can you share with us what path led you to Oliverian?

A: Well...when I was 15 I was a really angry and frustrated kid. I don't know why, my parents didn't know why, but I took out my anger at any authority figure I could find. My parents stepped in and sent me to a wilderness program for a little over two months. When I was done with wilderness, we looked at a few residential treatment centers and therapeutic boarding schools, but I really didn't need that level of clinical support. I really liked Oliverian right away because it was the perfect balance of not being overly restrictive but it had a lot of support that other schools didn't have.

Q: When did things start to click for you at Oliverian?

A: In the beginning, I wasn't committed to making changes in my life. My advisor sat me down and had a heart to heart with me that really hit home. I finally opened up to the counseling at Oliverian. Oliverian made me realize that I couldn't force people to give up on me, no matter how hard I tried. From then on I took everything Oliverian had to offer. I worked closely with all of my teachers about how to get on track. I did a complete 180 and everyone felt that change. Everything just shifted for me from that moment on and I have kept that momentum going to this day.

Q: Can you give an example of how Oliverian prepared you for your transition to college?

A: Oliverian really taught me how to be a student. Going to nightly

study halls taught me how to break down my work into doable pieces and getting it done in one and a half hours every night. I got into the habit of working piece by piece every night. Other students in college start freaking out when they see they have sixteen hours of work to do, but Oliverian already created the habit of breaking things down to manageable pieces. Also, the boarding situation really helped me to learn how to be responsible on my own. At Oliverian, I was pushed to get myself to breakfast, classes, and study hall. I was taught how to manage my own schedule and how to make good use of my free time and study time.

Q: What do you love most about Oliverian?

A: Definitely the staff and student relationships I was able to make, that was huge for me. My Oliverian teachers weren't authority figures I needed to battle; they were just friends trying to help me graduate. My non-Oliverian friends don't talk to their teachers the way I still do. To this day, when I travel I always make a point to visit the Oliverian friends I have made across the country. We still are family.

Q: What kind of student is best Oliverian for?

A: I would say someone who is struggling educationally and socially and clearly needs help, but they don't need too many restrictions. Really, anyone could benefit from Oliverian, but it especially works for someone who needs extra support and a different kind of learning environment.

Q: Any advice for a student considering Oliverian?

A: I want them to know that everyone fits in at Oliverian, even the ones that don't fit in at other schools. No one feels left out. Oli students are from all places and all walks of life, so that makes everyone come together. We are from all around the world and everyone has a place here. Our differences bring us together to make one solid community.

Students Vacate Campus to Rove the Globe



Honduras Service Trip 2015

During the first week of February, our campus will empty as students head off on trips around the region, country, and the world. These educational travel adventures will be the ultimate experiential learning opportunities immersing our students in art history, ice climbing, medical aid work, music history, winter adventures, and mindful living. Some students will travel as far as Italy and Honduras, while others will explore the otherworldly terrain of our own ice-covered White Mountains.

Why uproot ourselves from the snowy wonderland that is February in Pike, New Hampshire? Because we are preparing our young people for the world and sometimes we have to go out and explore it. While it is certain that all of the intersession trips will be fun, they will also be challenging. The students who head to Honduras to assist with medical aid work will encounter others of great need and suffering that can be heart wrenching to witness. The group that treks into the White Mountains will push their bodies to the limit climbing walls of unforgiving ice. Students that choose the meditation retreat will slow down and look inside themselves, long enough to become a bit uncomfortable. We haven't quite figured out where the hardship lies in the Italy trip (Too much pasta? Too much art? No such thing.), but even they will be stepping far outside their comfort zone to discover how expanding their awareness of another culture can also expand their sense of self.

Almost more exciting than leaving our cozy home to venture out into the world, will be the return to our campus and community, to reconnect and share stories and pictures. Our homecoming will be even more complete at the end of the month, when we welcome families to campus for parent conferences and our intersession showcase evening event. We will be sure to update you after intersession week!

There is no other school like Oliverian in the world.

[Click here to find out why.](#)

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