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Obscure ranch is one of nation's most elite colleges

By Peter Y. Hong
Los Angeles Times

DEEP SPRINGS, Calif. — There is no ivy in the high desert between California's White Mountains and the Nevada border, but among the cows and scrub lies one of the most selective colleges in the nation.

Deep Springs College, a two-year liberal-arts school, has 26 students — all male — and occupies a 120-square-mile cattle ranch.

It has none of the plush facilities now common at colleges: no opulent student center, no espresso bar, no fitness center. Many in higher education have never heard of the place. Yet it draws some of the best young minds in the country. Only 10 percent of applicants are admitted, and the combined SAT scores of enrollees average 1500, putting them in a league with students admitted to Harvard University and the California Institute of Technology.

Instead of competing with other schools to offer more amenities, Deep Springs promises hard work.

Students rise before dawn to bale hay or milk cows and head for class with dung stuck to their boots to discuss Emily Dickinson. In exchange for working at least 20 hours a week, they pay no tuition and receive free room and board.

Students also take the lead in hiring professors, setting the curriculum and choosing the incoming class. So in the afternoon, some mend fences, scrub toilets or butcher meat for dinner, while others discuss whether next semester's courses should include thermodynamics or Marcel Proust and criticism, or both.

The arduous labor in the classroom and fields pays off when the time comes to transfer to a four-year school. Last year's graduates went on to Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Oxford and Stanford.

Each such success affirms the vision of the college's founder, an Ohioan who believed a combination of physical toil, book learning and monastic isolation would forge outstanding citizens.

Max Gasner, 19, a graduate of Stuyvesant High School in New York City, a highly selective public school, chose Deep Springs over Yale. He saw many of his peers caught up in moving from one prestigious school to the next, rather than focusing on learning.

"A lot of people who go to college don't really want to go to college, but do it because it's expected of them," he said. At Deep Springs, "people are here because they really want to do what we do."

The only required courses are composition and public speaking. This year's electives include philosophy and literature of love, geology of eastern California, 20th-century American theater and planetary science. The average class size is four students.

"You won't go to class and find half the people haven't done their reading," said Tony Sung, who graduated from Deep Springs last year and is a pre-med student at Stanford. "You, the other students and the professor have decided the goals for the class,



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The day's first chore for Deep Springs College students Nick Tsang, left, and Derek Spitz is milking the cows in the dairy. All Deep Springs students do chores in addition to class work.

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It's a five-hour drive from Los Angeles. The closest you can get by commercial airline is Las Vegas, 235 miles to the southeast. From there, it's a three-hour ride on a once-a-day Greyhound to the stop nearest the college, outside a brothel.

A college van takes students the rest of the way, an hourlong drive over a 6,400-foot-high mountain pass into the Deep Springs Valley.

Lucien Lucius Nunn, a lawyer, banker, gold-mine operator and pioneer in the electric-power industry, founded Deep Springs in 1917 as a refuge from what he considered the distractions of traditional campus life: women, organized athletics, bars and money.

He founded Deep Springs based on "three pillars": labor, academics and self-government. He wanted students to develop an understanding of democratic principles and the need to serve society.

Today, students do not leave campus without permission, and alcohol is prohibited. Television isn't explicitly banned, but there's no reception. Phone service and Internet connections break up in bad weather, and newspapers come by mail, two days late.

The school generates applicants by word of mouth and through a mailing to the top 14,000 male scorers on the SAT.

Diversity is the first casualty of the system's heavy reliance on the SAT-based mailing. All but a few of the current students attended either prestigious prep schools or top public high schools.

"We perceive it as a problem: Our applicant pool is overwhelmingly white and upper middle class," said Gary Gossen, the college's dean and a professor of anthropology.

The college's nine faculty members are a mix of one-year appointments and "long-term" professors who stay up to six years. Many are recently out of doctoral programs or retired. Distinguished figures from outside academia also are recruited. This year, acclaimed theater director Louis Fantasia will join the faculty. In November, author Philip Gourevitch spent two weeks at Deep Springs teaching writing.

Everyone at Deep Springs, it seems, has read Nunn's ideas on education, and students still invoke his writings.

Belief in the "Nunnian principles" gets Nick Tsang and Derek Spitz out of bed every morning. By 5 a.m., the "dairy boys" are in the barn tugging on Holsteins Ruth and Lillith, as the electric guitars of the pop group Fountains of Wayne blare over the sound of milk splashing into steel pails.

"It's our responsibility to provide the community with milk. If we don't do this, we don't have milk," said Spitz, a first-year student from Salinas, Calif.

If there's one area in which students often are at odds with Nunn's legacy, it is coeducation. Students this year voted to support admitting women, and the board of trustees is looking into the idea.

The all-male environment sometimes leads to exaggerated boyishness. Students compete to see who can go longest without showering. Student-body meetings sometimes conclude with wrestling matches. Only a couple of students seem to own a comb, and many dress from a communal clothes pile in the dorm hallway.

At the same time, they are willfully anti-macho: Knitting has been a popular hobby and a student's chard tart won a prize at last year's county fair.

The college's survival itself reminds students that risk-taking can pay off. A T-shirt sold on campus sums up the accomplishment. Featuring photographs of Vladimir Lenin and Nunn, it proclaims: "In 1917, two radical social utopias were born ... only one survives."

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