

Phillips Exeter Academy

Exeter, United States



Every class gathers around the same oval table Edward Harkness endowed in 1930, still central to Exeter's discussion-driven classrooms.

RANKING DIMENSIONS

Overall	83/100
Academic outcomes	81/100
University placement	79/100
Prestige & heritage	87/100
Alumni network	88/100
Facilities	84/100
Transparency	85/100

EDITOR'S VERDICT

Every class at Exeter still revolves around the Harkness table, and that is not a decorative quirk. It shapes the school’s whole academic culture: students are expected to think aloud, argue cleanly, listen hard and carry the lesson with the teacher rather than sit back and absorb it. That makes Phillips Exeter Academy a **fiercely intellectual** proposition even by American boarding-school standards. The numbers support that seriousness: a ***5:1*** student-teacher ratio and an average class size of ***12*** give the school the staffing to run discussion-led teaching properly, not as a slogan. Founded in 1781, Exeter is also one of the oldest schools in the United States, and it still trades on that depth of institutional confidence.

Its market position is clear. Exeter sits in the top tier of US college-preparatory boarding schools: highly selective, academically demanding, and expensive. The average annual fee is **\$71,797** for boarders and **\$56,077** for day students across grades 9 to 12. Parents are paying for intensity, close teaching and a serious peer group, not glossy frills. The school is co-educational, non-religious, teaches in English and carries NEASC and NAIS accreditation. Its alumni footprint is enormous even on a conservative count, with 898 notable alumni catalogued in Wikidata across politics, business, science, writing and the arts. That breadth matters because it points to a school with real cultural and intellectual reach, not a narrow finishing school for one profession or social set.

Why shortlist it? Because Exeter offers a very specific kind of education and does it with unusual clarity. This is a school for adolescents who want to be **stretched hard** by teachers and peers, who can handle classrooms where silence counts against you, and who enjoy ideas enough to do the heavy lifting themselves. It suits the self-propelled, the verbally agile and the **seriously ambitious**. It does not suit every bright child. Students who need constant hand-holding, who prefer highly structured didactic teaching, or who want a softer, less pressurised atmosphere will find Exeter **demanding to the point of bruising**. For the right pupil, though, that pressure is the point.

STRENGTHS

- Uses the Harkness method campus-wide, with discussion-based classes of roughly 12 students seated around an oval table rather than lecture format.
- Need-blind admissions with financial aid that meets 100% of demonstrated need; tuition is free for families with incomes under \$125,000 (rising to \$150,000 from 2027 admission).
- Houses the world's largest high school library and maintains a low student-to-faculty ratio of around 5:1.
- Strong college matriculation outcomes, with roughly one in five recent graduates going on to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford or MIT.
- Long-established institution founded in 1781, with a substantial endowment supporting facilities, faculty and financial aid programs.

TRADE - OFFS

- Highly selective, with acceptance rates reported in the low-to-high teens (estimates range roughly 9-18% depending on source and year), making admission uncertain even for strong applicants.
- Boarding tuition runs close to \$70,000 a year before additional costs such as books, travel and personal expenses, a significant commitment for families not qualifying for aid.
- The Harkness discussion format rewards verbal confidence and may not suit every learning style, particularly students who prefer traditional lecture-based instruction.
- Located in small-town New Hampshire, roughly 50 minutes from Boston, which means limited access to a major city compared with some urban day-school alternatives.

ADMISSIONS

Entry is primarily at grade 9 (with some spaces in later grades and a postgraduate year), via online application including transcripts, recommendations, an SSAT or ISEE score, and an interview. The January 15 deadline is firm. Acceptance rates are reported variously between roughly 9% and 18% depending on source and year, placing Exeter among the most competitive American boarding schools. Admissions is need-blind for domestic applicants, and financial aid applications (via SSS) run on the same timeline as the admissions deadline.

ADMISSIONS CALENDAR

The next 4 milestones for Phillips Exeter Academy. Dates confirmed against the school's most recent published admissions calendar — check the official site to confirm before submitting.

Nov 1, 2026
2MO

ASSESSMENT
SSAT + interview window

Jan 15, 2027
5MO

REGISTRATION CLOSES ⓘ
Application deadline

Mar 10, 2027
7MO

DECISION
Notification date

Apr 10, 2027
8MO

DEPOSIT DUE ⓘ
Enrollment deposit due

► 1 PAST DATE

NOTABLE ALUMNI (898)

SPORT: John Paul Jones, David Wight, Heather Jackson, Gwynneth Coogan, Erik Sullivan, Jarvis Hunt, Jim McCormick, William C. Campbell

MUSIC: Charlie Hunter, Daniel Gregory Mason, Dave Douglas, Win Butler, Dan Brown, Benmont Tench, Edward Rowland Sill, Anthony Davis

DRAMA: Lawrence Lasker, Robert Anderson, Gore Vidal, John McTiernan, John Katzenbach, Howard Hawks, Robert Benchley, Chip Hourihan

VISUAL_ARTS: Michael Rockefeller, Dave Douglas, David Baker, H. H. Holmes, Eliot Butler Willauer, Frederick James Woodbridge, George Thomas Tilden, Gordon Gahan

LETTERS: Daniel Dennett, John G. Palfrey, Daniel Webster, Eben Alexander, Robert Anderson, Gore Vidal, R. W. B. Lewis, Charles Edmund Horman Lazar

POLITICS: William W. Stickney, John G. Palfrey, Daniel Webster, Pierre Samuel du Pont IV, Gore Vidal, Lindley Miller Garrison, Butler Ames, Tim Wirth

SCIENCE: Sidney Darlington, Frederick Winslow Taylor, Daniel Dennett, John G. Palfrey, Lloyd Shapley, Helmut Panke, Edmund Berkeley, David Finkelhor

BUSINESS: Patrick Bateman, Helmut Panke, William Verity, Francis Ormand Jonathan Smith, Mark Zuckerberg, David Darst, Lincoln Kirstein, Francis S. Peabody

WTS RATING 

This profile summarises editorial research by World's Top Schools. Verify all admissions dates directly with the school before submitting. Sources are cited in the full online profile at WorldsTopSchools.com/schools/sch_1ddff9bcc8.