College of Charleston

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Introduction

A liberal arts and sciences college on the Atlantic coast, College of Charleston is the thirteenth oldest institution of higher education in the country, and six of its founders either signed the Declaration of Independence or helped craft the United States Constitution. It “has a beautiful campus with a wonderful staff that is always there to help you” and where students say they take pride in “expressing yourself through your education.” A typical student “is trying to break out of the mold and be seen as who they really are.” Greek life at CofC is nearly as old as the modern Greek state, but it “is different at CofC as it seems less exclusive and all different sororities intermingle.” When they take a break from school work, students enjoy the sights in Charleston and “love to go to the beach nearby or walk to the waterfront.” As a sea-grant and space-grant university, CofC offers “a wide range of courses and majors in a variety of fields as well as research opportunities with professors who lead active lives as research scientists in off-campus labs.” It supports a vibrant leadership program and a student-run financial investment outfit that looks and feels like a top-tier Wall Street operation. CofC also boasts a first-year program that thoroughly integrates freshmen into the academic community, providing them with everything a great undergraduate institution can offer: compelling seminars taught by experts, study-abroad opportunities, undergraduate research, and built-in support systems. One student told us that even “as an out-of-state student, I did not find it difficult to fit in freshman year.”

Welcome to Freshman Year

The College of Charleston has done away the traditional “University Life 101” that so many colleges and universities require their freshmen to take. We talked to Dr. Christopher Korey, the director of the CofC’s revamped First-Year Experience, and he told us that, instead of a “transition to college course” that lacks academic content and student enthusiasm, CofC offers First-Year Experience courses that give freshmen a chance to interact with professors who are experts in their field,
participate in dynamic learning communities, and step into the academic community with some of the college’s brightest upperclassmen as mentors. Freshmen even have the option to spend some time studying abroad. The broad range of FYE possibilities have a few common themes: They get students interested in their future career and academic options early-on, help them make connections among academic disciplines, and give them a preview of what the college has to offer.

**First-Year Seminars**

Students choose from either a First-Year Seminar or a Learning Community. First-Year Seminars are topic-based classes taught by some of the college’s best faculty. The topics covered in these seminars are similar to what seniors might find in their senior level capstone, but these are specially designed with freshmen in mind. Past seminars have included intriguing topics like, “Genetics and Society,” where students learn about genetic science and its potential social, ethical, and legal implications; “Ernest Hemingway in the Hispanic World,” a literary class that focuses on Hemingway’s Spanish and Cuban work; and “The Science of Secrecy,” a class that explores secret messages from the Rosetta Stone to present day cryptography. All freshman schedules are often filled with intro classes—as they should be. These classes give students the fundamentals they need to enjoy more advanced topics. But the First-Year Experience seminars give freshmen a taste of the rich coursework that their academic careers have in store for them, while providing a bit of a respite from survey classes that cover a broader range of issues in less detail.

**Learning Communities**

The other FYE option is participation in a Learning Community, classes that combine the efforts of two professors who are experts in two separate fields into one interdisciplinary experience. Dr. Korey told us that these classes are particularly good at connecting students to faculty and for getting students to begin thinking about career options. For example, the course “Measuring the Impact of Tourism in Charleston” connects faculty in hospitality and tourism management and in mathematics. Charleston is a top international tourism destination, so faculty bring in local business leaders to discuss how they use statistics to measure and capture tourism revenue. The class takes outings to local businesses, including a cruise line, to further study the tourism sector. These connections to local business leaders can lead to internships or even jobs for interested students, Dr. Korey told us. Other learning communities include “Biology and Chemistry for Pre-Med Majors,” for students who have a career track in mind from the start, and “Gateway to Neuroscience,” a class that combines molecular and cell biology with psychology for students interested in neuroscience. Whether they choose a seminar or a learning community, FYE students also participate in a Synthesis
Seminar where they learn valuable transition-to-college skills while discussing their classes with an upperclassman who is a top student in the subject. This gives students a convenient way to get perspective and advice on the challenges and opportunities of college life—especially because everyone in the Synthesis Seminar is also a freshman.

First-Year Study Abroad
Dr. Korey told us that as an extension to the FYE program, students are able to take a weeklong study abroad class in the spring. These often dovetail with a student’s seminar or learning community—for example, students studying “Genetics and Society” in a fall seminar might investigate “Genetics and Ethics in Berlin,” or follow in the footsteps of Charles Darwin in “The Natural History of the Galapagos.” But no matter what they choose, these mini study away experiences show students the value of study abroad and provide them with connections that they might rekindle later. Dr. Korey told us about one such student who took the “UK Soccer Experience” class as a freshman, meeting with managers and marketing personnel from different English soccer clubs, including Nottingham Forest Football Club. The following year, as a sophomore, he interned with a local soccer club to get a sense of a career in sports management. Now, as a junior, he is studying abroad at the University of Nottingham and he was able to leverage his experiences into an internship in the community outreach program of the same Nottingham Forest Football Club he first visited as a freshman. When he gets back he will help run “Charleston Kicks,” a new youth outreach program being developed by the organizer of the FYE Study Abroad Programs, Dr. Bruce Fleming, at CoC and Nottingham Forrest FC. “He has closed the loop,” Dr. Korey said, “between his first year experience, internship, study abroad, and now.”

First-Year Study Research

“The school caters mainly to undergraduates, allowing for a great support system in your first year.”

There are a number of other ways that the First-Year Experience program at the College of Charleston lowers the threshold for entry into the academic community, such as the First-Year Research program, where students rotate through the different campus research labs to get a sense of which one they might want to join later. Dr. Korey added that “the program supports more casual interactions between faculty and students that can lead to increased academic engagement.” These are some of the reasons why students told us “the school caters mainly to undergraduates, allowing for a great support system in your first year” and “making the first year as pleasant and smooth as possible.”
School of Business Investment Program

Students told us that “because [CofC] is not a very large school there are more opportunities for hands-on learning and one-on-one instruction.” Well, it doesn’t get any more hands-on than this: School of Business students are applying the theory they learn in class to the real world—and it is paying dividends. The Investment Program looks and feels just like a Wall Street firm: Students manage two portfolios of investments and build relationships with local, regional, and national investment communities. The program operates just like a top-tier investment firm, complete with market analysts; Europe, U.S., Asia, and Latin America economists; an accountant and an operations manager; and asset managers covering the whole spectrum of financial instruments and investment classes (derivatives, ETFs, fixed income, private equity, and real estate). They even have an audio/visual specialist. All the while, they are learning to work as a team under the same conditions that they will be subject to when they enter the workforce. They also work with an advisory committee of seasoned investment and business professionals who have many years of experience as corporate executives and close ties to the College. These motivated students also have leveraged their experience with the Investment Program to intern as junior analysts at major firms analyzing global equity markets, study in language immersion programs, and secure internships at corporate law firms. When they graduate, these students will not only have a host of soft and hard skills for a competitive résumé, but they will also be able to list details about the portfolios they have been managing as an undergraduate.

Higdon Student Leadership Center

Another community-building entity on campus, the Higdon Student Leadership Center (which celebrated its ten-year anniversary in 2015) offers students a number of different leadership development opportunities from “one-time workshops to a whole six-day immersive experience,” according to the Center’s director Michael Duncan. Signature programs run the gamut from retreats—including a Cougar Excursion retreat for incoming freshmen—conferences, lectures, networking events with community leaders, and a Leadership Certificate Program.

One option, Leadership CofC, offers a monthly all-expenses-paid outing for students to meet with local leaders while they learn about a diverse range of leadership approaches, network, and develop their own group dynamic and communication skills. “They’re able to get some real world experience from people who are out there leading beyond the College of Charleston,” Mr. Duncan said. Another, The Institute, a weeklong event run by the not-for-profit leadership development company LeaderShape®, is an activity-based retreat.
through which up to sixty students participate in “team-building [experiences that teach] the concepts of trust, communication and group problem solving.” Mr. Duncan revealed that the experience is “all about developing a passion and learning to lead with integrity. . . . It’s a very intensive process that ends with a blueprint for action. They’ve identified a vision—whether it’s in their own major, life, community, or anticipated career—and they’ve come up with an action plan to get to that vision.” This “highly interactive program” pulls students out of their comfort zones and gets them to interact in a variety of group sizes and activities that creates a diffuse learning environment where “everyone is a teacher and everyone is a leader,” according to the Center.

Leadership Certificate Program

Students looking for greater leadership growth can opt into the Center’s Leadership Certificate Program at any point during their college career. Over the course of three or four semesters, students who pursue the Leadership Certificate Program customize their own leadership development by combining a number of the Center’s offerings (leadership roles through other organizations on campus like an orientation intern or an officer position in a student club also can count as credit toward the certificate). A capstone project completes the experience. Mr. Duncan said, “Students have to create what we call a leadership artifact. Something like a blog or picture book that details their leadership development across the two to three years they’ve been in the certificate program and what they anticipate taking beyond the College of Charleston from those experiences.”

The Center also holds a workshop series that explores topics such as servant leadership theory, social change, community health, and various leadership models. Students pursuing a Leadership Certificate are also encouraged to find other events, lectures, and educational opportunities that develop leadership skills that they can add to their leadership portfolios—which shouldn’t be too tough, because students are proud that “there are [so] many opportunities for leadership and volunteering” on campus.

“We define leadership beyond just holding a title.”

As Mr. Duncan explains, the Leadership Center programming is truly focused on demonstrating “life skills.” He said, “We try to get at leadership beyond a positional model. It’s a set of characteristics and traits that a person can identify, learn, develop, and strengthen over time. We define leadership beyond just holding a title.” According to an alumni survey cited in the Center’s 2013-2014 annual report, 100 percent of the 150 alumni who participated in multiple Center-sponsored events during their time at CofC reported they have been able to apply what they learned at the Center to aspects of their life post-college.
Faculty

With a student-to-faculty ratio of 15:1, “class sizes are small enough to have a personal relationship with the professors in your major. Having this relationship makes learning significantly more enjoyable and memorable.” Many of them are experts in their fields and they “are all actively engaged in their classroom and love student involvement both inside and outside of the classroom.” Students said that the professors there “make you feel like an individual.” One theatre major told us that her professors “are wonderful and very supportive. They are always trying to find opportunities for their students.” Beyond being terrific teachers, the 500-strong members of the CofC faculty are quite distinguished in their fields. Among their ranks include past and present Fulbright, Guggenheim, and MacArthur fellows, a CAREER award winner from the National Science Foundation, a Grammy Award nominee, a Drue Heinz Literature Prize recipient, and a recipient of a Henry Dreyfus Teacher/Scholar Award.

Life after CofC

Prominent CofC alumni include Arlinda Locklear, the first Native American to argue in front of the Supreme Court; Nafees Bin Zafar, a two-time Academy Award-winning software engineer; and James B. Edwards, former Governor of South Carolina and U.S. Secretary of Energy. Young alums are making a splash out in the world as well. Among them are writer and actor Orlando Jones ‘89; boxer Lucia McKelvey ‘00; conservation biologist and filmmaker Justin Jay ‘08; and water quality specialist Cheryl Carmack ‘14. (You can read profiles of the stellar faculty, alumni, and current students alike at: cofc.edu/featureprofiles.) The college maintains an active network of alumni, who are more than willing to support the school as mentors and to advise students on career opportunities. The Alumni Association even offers a number of scholarships, including the Student Alumni Association Leadership Scholarship and those designed to help CofC students attend graduate school. Students say the College has “a great environment for networking.” and, as a current history major confides, “Networking is really big here and a lot of doors can be opened for you if you mingle with the right people.” With this impressive bunch, the alumni network seems like a great place to start.