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Some students follow road less traveled to college

Walla Walla Where?

With great grades, well-rounded interests and high SAT scores, Marnie Burgoyne could have gone to -- in fact got into but rejected -- an Ivy League school. Instead, she chose Whitman College, a 1,400-student liberal arts college in Walla Walla, Wash.

She liked the fact that it was unpretentious and had no bureaucracy. She was attracted to its location in a small town, where the students were supportive and friendly, and it had a strong program in the major she was looking for -- environmental science with an emphasis on biology.

The Valley resident and Oakwood School graduate had applied to a bunch of schools and got into all of them, except Stanford, where she was wait-listed (and she only applied there to make grandma happy).

She knocked Berkeley off her list immediately, because it was too big, and she didn't want to be in a big city. She visited Brown, Dartmouth and Haverford, all in the Northeast. She wasn't thrilled about Brown, Dartmouth students seemed to be a little too focused on beer and skiing; and though she liked Haverford, students there encouraged her to go somewhere else. So she stuck with her gut and chose Whitman, where she has loved her three years, so far.

"This is small-town opportunity I'll never have again," she says. "The people here are really nice and down to earth."

Walla Walla is a five-hour drive from Boise, Ida., or Seattle and four hours from Portland, but the students rely on sports, not partying, to keep themselves entertained. The professors don't have much going on outside of school, so they focus on teaching. Her major of biology and environmental science, as well as the classes she needs for veterinary school, are strong.

Burgoyne started her academic life at the Valley Cities Jewish Community Center, then went to Stephen S. Wise Day School through sixth grade. At that point, her parents let her choose where to go next, and she opted for Oakwood School in Valley Village, which attracted her through the strong arts component, the freedom to express herself and the student involvement through regular town hall meetings.

Burgoyne always did well academically. She also played in the jazz band and orchestra, played volleyball and ran in track and cross-country. She was active in social causes for Mexico and AIDS awareness.



But she says her activities were based on what she liked and wanted to do -- not what would look good for college.

"I was pretty lazy about the whole college process -- I wasn't too stressed," she says.

She didn't study -- at all -- for her SATs, and got an 800 on verbal and 740 on math.

With the choice of colleges wide open to her, her mom and grandmother encouraged her to go somewhere with a large Jewish population. But Burgoyne says that being one of about 100 Jews on campus has been a great experience.

"I think I'm a lot more involved in Jewish life here than I would have been in any other college, because the Jewish community sought me out," she says.

When they found out she had a day school background and could read Hebrew, she ended up leading services, and by sophomore year she was president of the Jewish club.

"I realize more what it is to be a Jew in [a] small town where you have to fight to keep it alive," she says.