Washington's colleges offer plenty of options when it comes to outdoor recreation, from degrees in recreation to trips across the Northwest.

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The New Tribune

Let's get something straight right from the start. If you use those readings to choose your college, your priorities are screwed up — you're going to have a blast in school. You can spend only so much time in the library during college before you need to escape for an outdoors adventure.

Some schools, like Gonzaga, only recently joined the fun. The Spokane Jesuit school started its outdoor program in 2000 complete with rafting trips for freshman orientation.

Others, like the Whitman College in Walla Walla, have had outdoors programs since the '70s.

As schools like Western Washington, there are certain assumptions about the student body. "You are liberal politically and you are into the outdoors," said Brin Sokolow, a Western student who helps run the school's equipment shop. "There is an outdoors mystique here."

Over the past decade, most Washington colleges have made significant efforts to quench student thirsts for adventure with climbing walls, rental shops, guest services and club activities.

But what school is best? The News Tribune took a look at what 16 colleges offer to outdoor nuts. (And we ranked them based on outdoors classes, clubs, geography and facilities.)

When we finished, Whitman College was on top. This small liberal arts school with a student body of 1,300 (16 percent women) will set you back $40,000 per year. But if you are into the outdoors, you're going to get your money's worth. Here's the skinny on Whitman and everybody else to see if you can pick the best Outdoor U. For you.

**WHITMAN COLLEGE**
WHERE: Walla Walla
CLUBS: Cycling, hiking, ultimate Frisbee
COOL CLASS: SRBA 198 - Telemark Sking; SRBA 197 - Mountaineering
ON CAMPUS: Whitman boasts the Northwest's only NCAA ski team. The Division II school competes at the Division I level — the equivalent of PUC joining the Pac-10 Conference. The school's rental shop is loaded with more gear than most large schools. The missionaries have robbed and outdoor-climbing walls, offer outdoor seminars and host a showing of films from the Saffil Film Festival.
NEAR CAMPUS: The cycling club holds a fundraising run through local wineries. Whitman Nice to ski areas in Buena Vista near Dayton Columbia County and Spout Springs, Ore.
OUTDOOR PROGRAM: The Outdoor Program on its recent summer summit from Snowmass, takes 15 percent of freshmen on orientation adventure such as new-day canoe trips. Trips like kayaking and ice climbing are offered most weekends. Write and fire rescue are among the clinics offered.
ADVENTURE ALUM: Craig Dickson, one of the world's most famous free divers, has appeared in the top two dramatic films.

**WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**
WHERE: Bellingham
CLUBS: The Climbing Club, capture the flag, hiking, skiing and snowboarding, wakeboarding, cycling, marathon, longboarding, scuba diving
COOL CLASS: PE 175 - Saltbox Racing; PE 135 - Advanced Skiing; PE 170 - Ice Climbing
ON CAMPUS: WWU hosts a bike race and marathon and Snoqualmie Hill offers several walls. NEAR CAMPUS: Students can make easy day trips to ski resorts such as Whistler Blackcomb and Mount Baker. Toddler slopes are even close in Bellingham, and no university is closer to the San Juan Islands.
OUTDOOR PROGRAM: The Outdoor Center leads numerous trips, the most popular being a climb of Mount Baker. The center has a bike shop that will fix anything for $5. The only catch: You have to help. Lakewood, the schools waterfront facility on Lake Whatcom has tuckabouts, kayaks, canoes and rowboats.
ADVENTURE ALUM: In 2000, Sky Thompson set a world record for the world's highest mountain climb — a 50-mile loop around Mount Rainier — in 25 hours, 15 minutes.

**EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**
WHERE: Cheney
CLUBS: Cycling, soccer and trap shooting
COOL CLASS: RSC 101 - Winter Survival 101; RSC 102 - Winter Survival 102
OUTDOOR PROGRAM: The Outdoor Program at WSU is a self-sufficient operation that includes a bike shop and climbing wall.
NEAR CAMPUS: The Turnbull National Wildlife Refuge, most of the roads leading to towns are excellent for cycling. Skiing and mountain biking are close to in Spokane County, the Idaho Panhandle, Montana and British Columbia.
OUTDOOR PROGRAM: The Outdoor Program at WSU is a self-sufficient operation that includes a bike shop and climbing wall.

**THE EVERGREEN STATE COLLEGE**
WHERE: Olympia
CLUBS: Crew
COOL CLASS: The Arts of the Slavic
ON CAMPUS: Most of the 1,000-acre campus is undeveloped forest. There is 500 feet of waterfront that can't be used for paddling. The school has a bike shop and climbing wall.
NEAR CAMPUS: In 2000, Olympia became the first school in the nation to offer outdoor courses, in partnership with the National Forest Service and the National Park Service. You have 30 minutes from the Pacific Ocean to the nearest state park.
OUTDOOR PROGRAM: The Outdoor Program at WSU is a self-sufficient operation that includes a bike shop and climbing wall.
ADVENTURE ALUM: Michael Richardson is a recreational mountain biker who lives in the town of Steilacoom, where he played on the basketball team.

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