

# The College of the Atlantic (COA): Our Great Role Model

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## Locality

The College of the Atlantic is located in Bar Harbor on Mount Desert Island (280 km<sup>2</sup>) in the State of Maine, USA. The local population on the island is around 10,000, about half of whom live in the small town of Bar Harbor. 3.5 million people visit Acadia National Park every year, which covers a third of the island's surface area. As the 14th national park, it was founded at the same time as the Grand Canyon in 1919 and was the first park to be located east of the Mississippi. The COA campus covers around 15 hectares outside the settlement along Frenchman Bay, just a few steps from the ocean everywhere. "Sometimes all it takes is one deep breath to let all that water remind you of the vastness of the world," reads the COA website. According to Borden (2022), this is the only place on the east coast of the USA where mountains and sea meet directly. In the late 19th century, the island had become a summer vacation spot for wealthy families such as the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, Fords, Carnegies, etc., who built luxurious vacation homes. It was the Rockefeller family and the then president of Harvard University, Eliot, who took the lead in buying up the land for the future national park in 1906, albeit initially with the aim of preventing other families from building their country estates there.

This story came to a standstill during the Depression and the Second World War and then came to a definitive end during a major forest fire in 1947. Destroyed and still intact but abandoned buildings remained. Some were later taken over by the COA and used for new purposes. This includes *The Turrets*, an imposing house with a granite façade and cylindrical towers. It was built towards the end of the 19th century by John Josiah Emery - his father had made a fortune producing candles and soaps - as a gift to his 18-year-old bride (see Gold, c. 2010). Today, the building serves as the COA's administrative center and, in its renovated form, has become a symbol of its commitment to human ecology. On the other hand, the COA has built and furnished a whole series of new buildings itself, now with sustainability in mind. Today, the college comprises around 25 buildings. The campus also boasts majestic trees, hidden gardens, old stone walls and its own jetty.

Links: [Bar Harbor](#), [Mount Desert Island](#), [Acadia National Park](#), [Campus](#)

(Please note the information on external links in the footnote <sup>1</sup>)

## Special Feature

COA is a unique private college. "We are unlike any college you've ever known," says its website. It is based on the classic idea of the liberal arts, i.e. it provides a general education, but one that is specifically and comprehensively geared towards today's precarious situation of the relationship between humans and their environment. The usual attempt to address it by means of interdisciplinary projects encounters the difficulty that specialists from different disciplines may struggle to find a common language. Studying at COA, on the other hand, allows you to look beyond your own narrow interests right from the start. The concept coming to the fore here is what we call human ecology. There is no fixed definition for it. Of course, it has to do with

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<sup>1</sup> The links used in this text lead to an external website. Its operators are solely responsible for the website's content. The authors of this text expressly accept no responsibility. All links used were last accessed when this text was created on February 20, 2025.

the above mentioned relationship between humans and the environment, however not just the natural environment, but also the social and man-made environment. Within this framework the exact focus should remain flexible, depending on the people involved and their perspectives. Still there is always a common understanding of what the program offered is intended to achieve: "It is an attempt to help students pursue the following objectives: to learn how to learn; to learn how to deal with complexity, both theoretical and practical; to become capable of discerning major versus minor issues; to learn how to achieve change, or to paraphrase the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, to learn how to preserve order amid change and make change amid order; and to discover ways to enhance the human condition within the natural and human-made environments" (Rabineau and Borden 1989: 2). To summarize: it is not just about imparting knowledge, but just as much about personality development.

Links: [Mission & History](#), [Environmental Commitment](#)

### **Size and Funding**

The college was founded in 1969 as a private initiative and began operations in 1972 with 32 students and 4 teaching staff. To date, these numbers have risen to around 350 students and 35 full-time teachers respectively. In addition, there are associated teaching staff, unique research laboratories such as Allied Whale, collaborations with companies and the surrounding Hancock County and, of course, all the staff who keep the day-to-day operations running. But also the students are directly involved in many of these tasks. The overall aim is to remain a small, manageable college in which students do not sink into anonymity, but can receive the necessary advice and support at any time. From the beginning to the present day, a 10:1 ratio of students to teaching staff has been aimed for in order to guarantee good support at all times. Approximately half of the students come from the USA and half from abroad. The college is financed by tuition fees, contributions from individuals (well-heeled sponsors, but also alumni and alumnae, as is customary in America), companies and foundations. State support is limited to some assistance for students and support for the development of new programs. A Board of Trustees provides advice, develops external networks and contacts potential sponsors.

### **Studies: General Information**

An academic year comprises three trimesters lasting around 70 days each. The first begins in mid-September, the second at the beginning of January and the third at the end of March. A four-year course of studies leads to a *Bachelor of Arts in Human Ecology*, a two-year additional course of studies to a *Master of Philosophy in Human Ecology*. The program is completely interdisciplinary and can draw on the courses offered by the three fields of Environmental Sciences, Human Studies and Arts and Design. Students do not have to choose a disciplinary major, but can put together their own study program, with the exception of certain basic requirements. "The world isn't divided by majors. Neither is College of the Atlantic" is one of the institution's slogans. Accordingly, the faculty is not divided into discipline-oriented subunits. Student responsibilities include taking a comprehensive core course and two courses in each of the above three tracks, an eleven-week internship at an off-campus institution (company, NGO, school, etc.), 40 hours of community service, a written minor argumentative or narrative essay on one's personal understanding of human ecology (see the exemplary [Human Ecology Essay Collection](#)), and a written major capstone project (*Senior Project*. For examples, see the three studies by [Lisa Bjerke](#), [Emily Peterson](#) and [Anna K. Stunkel](#)). First-year students live mostly in on-campus housing; the older ones can find accommodation in Bar Harbor.

Links: [Basics](#), [Human Ecology Degree](#), [Internships](#), [Faculty](#), [Graduate Program](#)

### **Studies: Thematic Examples**

With so many courses on the program - there are more than 250, although not all of them are offered every year (Link: [Courses](#)) - students may run the risk of getting lost. To give them ideas, groups of courses are therefore suggested as possible areas of study. Examples are:

- *Marine Science*: It is pretty obvious that COA, which is located by the sea, offers opportunities to study it. There are courses, among others, on oceanography, marine biology, environmental chemistry, ornithology and marine mammals. In the latter case, the *Allied Whale* research facility, which was founded in 1972, plays a role. There is an observation station on a small island. Here it has been possible to identify individual whales and recognize them when they return. Links: [Marine Science](#), [Allied Whale](#)
- *Field Ecology and Natural History*: The life to be studied takes place outside, not in the laboratory or library. Field observations are used as much as possible to study organisms in their environment. There are also collaborations with the *Acadia National Park* mentioned above. The focus is always on living organisms in their entirety, with courses on genetics, for example, providing a complementary background. The college maintains research stations on two islands. The behavior of seabirds can be observed there. Birds that disappeared years ago, such as the *Arctic tern*, have been reintroduced. Link: [Field Ecology & Natural History](#).
- *Farming and Food Systems*: Courses can be chosen from the entire spectrum of the food system, from local production to food policy and global trade. On the practical side, students can work on two organic farms owned by the college. Here you can gain knowledge about farm management, but also about permaculture, organic horticulture, etc. Agricultural production supplies the food and raw materials for the college's cafeteria and canteen and other restaurants on the island that have emerged from student projects. This has given the college a reputation for offering the best food far and wide. Link: [Farming & Food Systems](#)
- *Climate Change and Energy*: In terms of knowledge transfer, the focus here is on the causes of climate change and the mathematics and physics of renewable energy sources, as well as aspects of global environmental policy, climate justice and environmental law. Practical elements can be found on the technical side in the installation of solar cells and wind turbines, and on the political side in the opportunity to take part in meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Link: [Climate Change & Energy](#)
- *Community Planning & Ecological Policy*: How can communities create a healthy and sustainable future? This is the fundamental question here. There are courses in community planning and decision-making, land use planning and sustainable economics. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) are not only used but also further developed in cooperation with the manufacturer. In recent years, the cartographic basis for the national park and Hancock County has been developed together with the students and is now the basis for environmental, urban and regional planning. Students can use this background to participate in off-campus projects. Link: [Community Planning & Ecological Policy](#)

- *Mind, Meaning & Consciousness*: Fundamental questions about the conditions and meaning of human life on planet Earth are asked here. How are they dealt with in psychology, philosophy, religion and literature? Course topics include Psychology of Nature; Philosophies of Love; A History of God: Mysticism, Metaphysics, Politics and Nature; Literature, Science and Spirituality. Link: [Mind, Meaning & Consciousness](#)
- *Educational Studies*: The starting point here is the question: How is it that so many people experience education as conformist and rigid? Yet learning should free our minds from narrow views of ourselves and the world! For this reason, special emphasis is placed on teaching projects in informal settings, outdoors, but also in museums, institutions, etc. Local teachers are often involved in the teaching projects. The COA program is accredited by the Maine Department of Education, which makes it possible to earn certification for teaching at the primary and secondary school levels. Link: [Educational Studies](#)

### Course Design

When designing courses, care is taken to ensure that the number of students per course remains small. The form of teaching dispenses with frontal lectures. It has the style of team teaching, seminars or tutorials. A special offer is the opportunity to spend a trimester abroad. Two programs, in Yucatán (Mexico) and in France, are standard, others are activated from time to time. In the former case, the program includes a language course and information about the country in the preceding trimester. As one can imagine, this all makes for a lively atmosphere. "The commitment and enthusiasm of the students ... is remarkable," state Rabineau + Borden (1989, 3).

Link: [Study Abroad](#)

### Democratic Organization

In planning the college, then-President Ed Kaelber (1970, 8) wrote, "Current disenchantment with undergraduate education is due in large measure to breakdowns in communication among administration, faculty, and students. All too often, the channels have become frozen: board of trustees has spoken to administration, which has spoken to faculty, which has spoken to students. Listening has become a one-way street and many are no longer listening." From the outset, the organization of the college's operations was therefore put on a completely democratic footing. Teaching staff, administrative and technical staff and students decide together in mixed committees on changes to the courses on offer, the appointment of new teaching staff and issues relating to the maintenance of buildings and technical facilities. The open attitude also includes striving for equality and inclusion despite the diversity of the participants' backgrounds. A daily routine here is the Students Meeting at Noon in the Dining Hall, which is named after Ed Kaelber for a reason.

Links: [Administration](#), [College Governance](#), [Diversity, Equity & Inclusion](#)

### Career Prospects

»What do students do with a COA degree? Just about everything you can imagine,« says the website. Over the years, the following percentage distribution has emerged (for a somewhat more detailed list see [COA Degrees in Action](#)):

19 Economy (business, commerce, industry)

18 Education

14 Arts and design

12 Sciences (mainly natural sciences)

11 Public services (law, politics, social services)

6 Healthcare

6 Engineering, technology, architecture

5 Communication

5 Hospitality

5 Agriculture, horticulture

### **Sustainability**

COA also strives for sustainability in its own operations. In 2007, the college was the first American university to announce its “carbon neutral” status. The use of fossil fuels is to be completely eliminated by 2030. The newer buildings are constructed from recycled materials, use passive solar technologies and/or local, renewable energy-based heating (e.g. wood pellets), utilize natural light whenever possible, are equipped with dry toilets to reduce water consumption, and use wastewater from showers to preheat water for the hot water system. Leftover food is composted or used as feed for the pigs and chickens on one of the farms. This means that there is no food waste. The campus greenery is maintained using organic methods, and a community garden is also maintained and available to college neighbors. The Princeton Review, a company that advises universities, develops standardized admissions tests, but also compiles rankings, maintains a list of the 50 most sustainably oriented colleges in the USA, and in autumn 2024 named COA the greenest college in the USA for the ninth year in a row.

Links: [Environmental Commitment](#), [Rankings & Accolades](#)

### **Member of the EcoLeague**

The EcoLeague is a consortium of six liberal arts colleges in the United States that are committed to environmental responsibility and social change and offer students an educational program designed to empower them to shape a sustainable future. COA is one of them. The other five colleges are the following:

Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, AK

Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA

New College of Florida, Sarasota, FL

Northland College, Ashland, WI

Prescott College, Prescott, AZ

Between these colleges temporary student exchanges are possible. Link: [EcoLeague](#)

### **Conclusion**

Steve Katona, a former COA president, said: “People tell me, ‘Oh, you’re really unique.’ Yes, we are, but I hope we don’t always remain unique, because we’re much too small to solve all the problems ourselves.”

(Clark 1997, 6). In other words: If we want to avoid a future that is difficult to cope with, there actually needs to be a global proliferation of COA-type colleges!

## Documentation

### Websites

COA: <https://www.coa.edu/>

Ecoleague: <https://ecoleague.org/>

### Literature

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### Talks on Video

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