

# THE AMERICAN COLLEGE TOWN\*

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**ABSTRACT.** With their unusual densities of young people, highly educated workforces, comparatively cosmopolitan populations, dominant institutions of higher education, and characteristic landscapes such as the campus, fraternity row, and college-oriented shopping district, college towns represent a unique type of urban place. This study identifies several basic differences between college towns and other types of cities, considers why the college town is largely an American phenomenon, distinguishes among types of college towns, and examines some of the characteristics that make them distinctive. *Keywords:* college towns, higher education, United States, urban geography.

The literary critic Henry Seidel Canby once wrote, “Surely it is amazing that neither history, nor sociology, nor fiction, has given more than passing attention to the American college town, for surely it has had a character and a personality unlike other towns” (1936, 3). Nearly four decades later, Wilbur Zelinsky observed that the social and cultural geography of college communities is “almost totally *terra incognita*” (1973, 136). Indeed, no major study of the college town has yet been published, despite the prominent image such towns have in American culture and the important role they have played in the lives of many Americans.<sup>1</sup>

In essence, the hundreds of college towns in the United States are an academic archipelago: Similar to one another, they differ in several important ways from other cities and the regions in which they are located. They are alike in their youthful and comparatively diverse populations, their highly educated workforces, their relative absence of heavy industry, and the presence in them of cultural opportunities more typical of large cities. The attributes of the institutions located in college towns and the people who live in them, furthermore, breed unusual landscapes—the campus, fraternity row, the college-oriented shopping district (Figure 1), the student ghetto, and more.

This study fills a gap in the literature by presenting a concise portrait of the college town in the United States. My goal is to demonstrate that the college town is a unique type of urban place and thus deserves in-depth consideration by scholars and others who are interested in the American experience.

## DEFINING THE COLLEGE TOWN

This study considers as a college town any city where a college or university and the cultures it creates exert a dominant influence over the character of the community. This definition is deliberately imprecise because there is not a clear distinction between a college town and a city that is merely home to a college. They vary along a

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FIG. 1—College Inn, on the Corner in Charlottesville, Virginia, where town and gown intertwine. (Photograph by the author, January 2003)

continuum. In this study I focus on towns in which institutions of higher education are clearly dominant. I will not discuss cities such as Austin, Texas, which possess major universities but are also state capitals, or university communities like Tempe, Arizona, which are part of major metropolitan areas, because the socioeconomic diversity of such places dilutes the influence of a collegiate culture.<sup>2</sup> Although Austin and Tempe possess some of the attributes of college towns, particularly in areas closest to campus, what makes the college town as envisioned by this study different is that the impact of a collegiate culture is more concentrated and conspicuous. In towns like Ithaca, New York, and Manhattan, Kansas, colleges and their people shape the urban personality.

To gauge a college's influence on a town, I considered my firsthand knowledge of numerous college towns and asked questions about hundreds of cities with colleges and universities that can be answered statistically: Is the college the largest employer in town? What is the enrollment of the college, compared with the population of the city? What percentage of the labor force works in educational occupations?

Using these and other indicators, published sources about cities with colleges, and personal experience, I chose 59 towns for closer study (Figure 2). The study towns range in size from Eugene, Oregon, with a 2000 population of 137,893, to Princess Anne, Maryland, with a population of 2,313. In 2000, in all but two towns, college students made up at least 20 percent of the population, perhaps the most basic barometer of a college's influence. I chose cities from all parts of the United States; in all, thirty-four

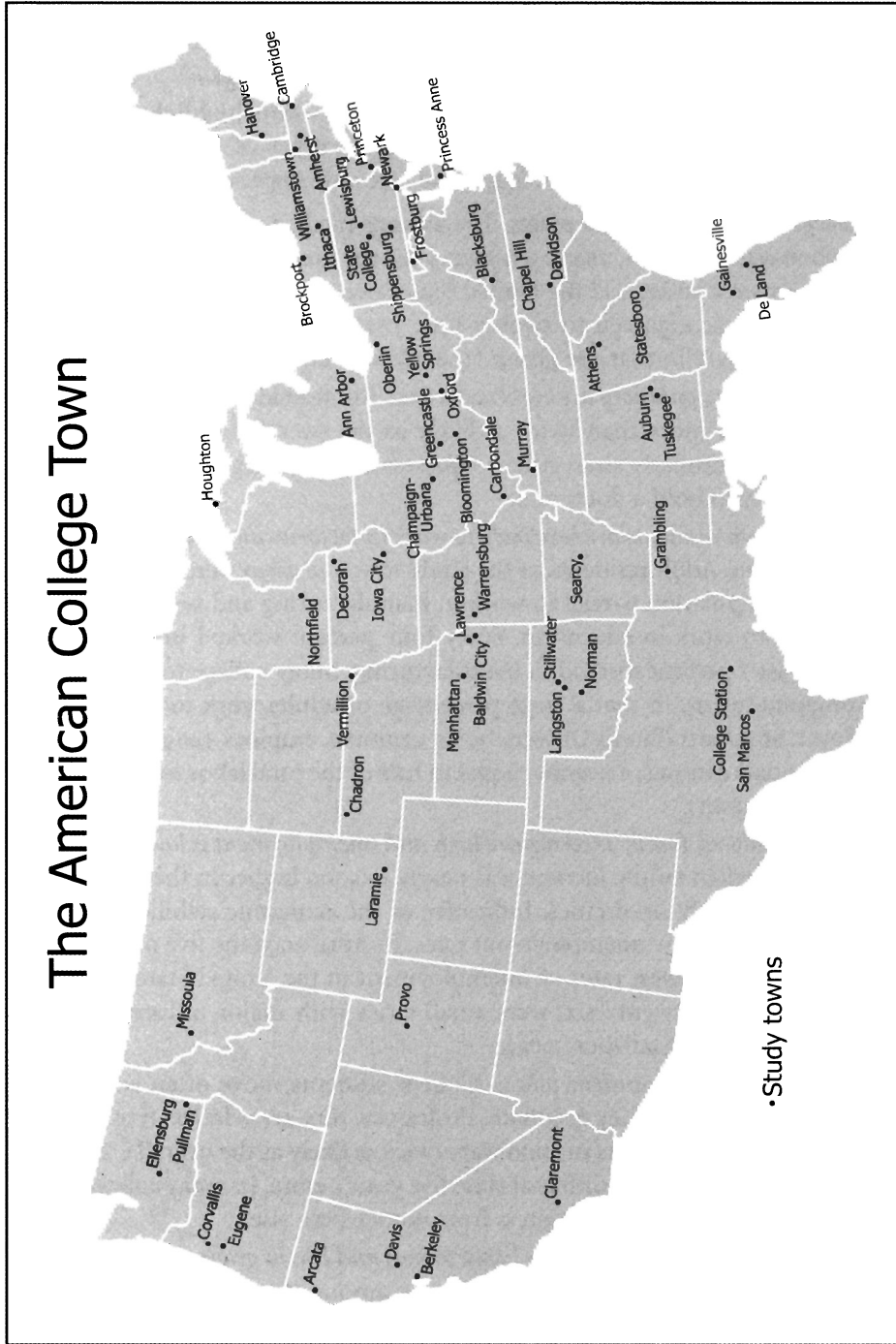


Fig. 2—College towns selected for study. (Cartography by the author)

states are represented. The study towns are home to a range of college types—public research universities, private liberal arts colleges, land-grant institutions, regional state universities, church-related colleges, and historically black colleges.

Data on the principal characteristics of the study towns highlight the fundamental differences between college towns and other types of cities and between college towns and the United States in general (see also Appendix I).

- *College towns are youthful places.* The average median age in the study towns in 2000 was 25.9 years, nearly ten years younger than the median age for other similarly sized cities and the United States overall. One-third of study-town residents were eighteen to twenty-four years old. Nationwide, fewer than 10 percent were in that age group (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).
- *College-town populations are highly educated.* Adult residents in the study towns in 2000 were more than twice as likely as the overall U.S. population and residents of similarly sized cities to possess a college degree and seven times more likely to hold a doctorate.
- *College-town residents are less likely to work in factories and more likely to work in education.* Adult residents of the study towns in 2000 were half as likely as the U.S. population overall to work in manufacturing and nearly four times as likely to work in education. Forty-four percent worked in education in 2000; just 7 percent worked in manufacturing. Many college towns resemble company towns, in that a large percentage of adults work for a single employer. Southern Illinois University, for example, employs 5,019 people on its Carbondale campus, a number equal to half of the total labor force in the city (NASULGC 2001).
- *In college towns, family incomes are high and unemployment is low.* In 2000 the average median family income was nearly \$10,000 higher in the study towns than in similarly sized cities. Indicative of the economic stability of college towns are their low unemployment rates. In April 2002 the five metropolitan areas with the lowest rates of unemployment in the United States, and thirteen of the top twenty-six, were small cities with major universities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2002).
- *College towns are transient places.* College students move often and usually leave town as soon they graduate. Professors, too, are relative gypsies. Residents of the study towns in 2000 were twice as likely as the overall U.S. population to have lived in a different state five years before. In many college towns the majority of the population is from somewhere else.
- *College-town residents are more likely to rent and live in group housing.* Homeownership rates in the United States are among the highest in the world. Nearly seven out of every ten U.S. residents in 2000 lived in owner-occupied housing. Given the transient nature of students and faculty, college-town residents are much less likely to own their homes. Fewer than 50 percent of study-town residents in 2000 lived in owner-occupied housing. Study-town residents

were nearly five times as likely as the overall U.S. population to live in dormitories, fraternities, and other group quarters.

- *College towns are unconventional places.* Many of them are home to unusually high concentrations of people who listen to National Public Radio, vote Green, or belong to a food co-op. The eccentric nature of college towns can be difficult to quantify, but data on commuting practices provide some insights. Residents in the study towns in 2000 were four times more likely to walk to work and seven times more likely to commute by bicycle than is the U.S. population as a whole.
- *College towns are comparatively cosmopolitan.* Because colleges recruit students and faculty nationally and internationally, college towns are unusually diverse in their population makeup. At Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, for example, students came from all fifty states and 115 foreign countries in the fall of 2002 (OSU 2002). Asians were three times more common in the study towns in 2000 than in similarly sized cities. Nearly half of the study-town residents were born in a different state, and more than 13 percent were foreign born.

Because of the unusual demographics of college communities, the traveler moving among college towns soon notices an idiosyncratic similarity to these places that makes them stand out regionally and nationally. As such, Zelinsky was correct in observing that college communities together represent a kind of “voluntary region,” made up of localities in which self-selected groups of like-minded people—in this case faculties, students, and “hangers-on”—have fashioned distinctive places that, though spatially discontinuous, exhibit a high degree of cultural coherence (1973, 136).

#### AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION

The college town is largely an American phenomenon. Nowhere else in the world are so many towns so dominated by colleges and universities as in the United States. In most countries, the majority of institutions of higher education are in large cities and national capitals.<sup>3</sup> In Europe, birthplace of the university, the oldest and most prestigious colleges are located chiefly in cities such as Paris, London, and Rome and in regional centers too economically diverse to be considered college towns. As Edmund Gilbert noted, only a handful of exceptions to this pattern exist, such as Tübingen in Germany, Siena in Italy, and Cambridge in England (1961).

Even in Canada, the country that most resembles the United States in history and government, college towns are rare. Nearly all of Canada’s public universities are in provincial capitals or major metropolitan areas. In only one city that is home to a university with at least 5,000 students—Waterloo, Ontario—is enrollment at least 20 percent of the population, a criterion met by dozens of cities in the United States. Those Canadian municipalities in which colleges exert the greatest influence are small towns with small colleges, such as Wolfville, Nova Scotia. But even those towns are less shaped by colleges than are many cities in the United States, because,

as Henry Srebrnik noted, the all-encompassing collegiate culture so common in the United States is largely absent. "In Canada," he wrote, "students treat their institution as they might a company where they work: they arrive on campus, attend classes, and go home" (1993, 396).

Several factors help explain why college-dominated cities are more common in the United States than in other parts of the world. First, the sequence of college development versus urban development was different in the United States. In Europe, cities preceded universities: Many of Europe's oldest universities emerged organically in locations where scholars and students gathered over time. Intellectuals were drawn to cities because they were the focus of economic, political, and cultural life (Haskins 1923, 6–12; Rüegg 1992, 11–12). In the United States, in contrast, large-scale settlement came after the emergence of the university idea in Europe. Many colleges were founded before significant urban development had taken place in a region.

The size of the United States and its cultural diversity have led to a proliferation of colleges. The large land area meant that more colleges were needed to serve a scattered population. The architects of the U.S. system of government sought to recognize the size of the country by delegating significant power to local governments. Today, each state controls its own system of higher education, which has contributed to a multiplication of campuses. The religious diversity of the United States has also been important. From the beginning the country was populated by people belonging to a remarkable range of denominations. Each wanted its own college and, because the country was large, many groups wanted at least one college in every state. This was significant because most early colleges were founded by religious bodies. Today the United States is home to a greater number of colleges per capita than any other country, so it was inevitable that many would be founded outside the largest cities (Tewksbury 1932).

The most common explanation for why the United States has so many college towns has been the perception that college founders believed that a quiet, rural setting, away from the evils of city life, was the only proper environment for learning. Influential in the spreading of this idea was the fact that the first college established in America, Harvard College, was founded in 1636 by graduates of the University of Cambridge, one of the few early European universities that developed outside a large city. Although Harvard has been subsumed by the Boston metropolitan area, it was founded at a distance from Boston because of the belief that a city was no place for a college (Turner 1984, 23). Harvard graduates who inherited this belief went on to found numerous colleges across the country and influenced others who decided on the location of colleges. Anti-urban sentiments prompted the state of North Carolina, for example, to require that the University of North Carolina be founded at least 5 miles from any seat of government (Snider 1992, 11).

The influence of anti-urbanism has been overstated, however. More important in explaining why so many colleges were founded outside large cities was the booster mentality that characterized town development. According to Daniel Boorstin, even the smallest of villages imagined itself as the "Athens of the West," and many town

leaders believed that no community could be complete without a college (1965, 152–161). Civic leaders actively pursued colleges as a way to assure their future, offering land, money, and buildings to persuade churches and governments to found a college in their town. As Stanley Brunn noted, “aside from the state capital, the state university was probably the second most important political prize a city or region could be awarded” (1974, 113).

A study of the factors shaping the placement of state teachers colleges found that 70 percent of such colleges founded before 1923 were established in cities that had donated sites or money (Humphreys 1923, 34). This was also true of other types of colleges. The University of Missouri, for example, was placed in Columbia after local residents outbid citizens of six other counties by offering the state \$82,381 in cash and \$35,540 in land. Backroom deals and unethical behavior were common. Town leaders in Lawrence, Kansas, bribed the legislators who were deciding where to locate the University of Kansas for \$4 a vote (Griffin 1974, 25). Large cities appear to have been less likely to enter the bidding for colleges, perhaps because they had other industries and thus were not as desperate to find ways to guarantee their economic survival.

#### DIVERSITY AMID LIKENESS

Although college towns share many attributes, their individual personalities vary. The varying nature of college towns strongly reflects the characteristics of the schools located in them. Schools differ in their missions, the fields of study they offer, their entrance requirements, the geographical areas from which they draw students, and the extent to which they regulate the lives of undergraduates. They attract students and faculty who reflect those differences and who, in turn, shape the character of the cities in which colleges are located.

College towns like Iowa City, Iowa, or Chapel Hill, North Carolina, are home to large state universities that are referred to as “flagship universities” because they receive the largest share of higher education expenditures in their states. The research orientation of such universities, their large graduate-student populations, and their historic liberal arts emphasis mean that the towns in which they are located tend to have a stronger intellectual climate than do other types of college towns. They are more likely to have bookstores that cater to non-mainstream tastes, active music scenes, and movie theaters that show offbeat films. Studies have found that students and faculty in the social sciences and humanities are more liberal in their political views than are those in the physical and applied sciences, so such towns are more likely to support left-leaning causes and candidates (Ladd and Lipset 1975; Hamilton and Hargens 1993). Flagship universities also attract students and faculty from a wide area, so the towns in which they are located tend to be more sophisticated culturally than do other types of college towns. Locals are more likely to read the *New York Times*.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic restaurants are more common.

Towns like College Station, Texas, and Manhattan, Kansas, are home to universities that were founded as land-grant colleges to provide agricultural and mechanical

education to rural and working-class populations (Eddy 1957). Although flagship and land-grant universities have become increasingly alike as agricultural education has diminished in importance, most land-grant institutions retain a strong rural orientation because of their historic association with farmers and their continued presence in rural areas through extension programs. At Kansas State University in Manhattan, for example, two-thirds of the in-state undergraduates come from counties that are outside metropolitan areas. At the University of Kansas in Lawrence, in contrast, nearly 80 percent come from metropolitan counties (KSU 2002; KU 2002). Land-grant universities also differ from flagships in their emphasis on the physical and applied sciences. The rural and small-town origins of students and the comparative conservativeness of people in the sciences tend to make college towns in which land-grant universities are located more conventional than flagship university towns.

Warrensburg, Missouri, and Statesboro, Georgia, are examples of towns that are home to regional state universities that began as teachers colleges. Although most former teachers colleges have expanded their missions, teacher training remains the focus (Dunham 1969). Because most states have several such colleges, they draw the majority of their students from nearby areas. At Central Missouri State University, for example, one-third of all undergraduates are in the College of Education, and 60 percent come from counties within 50 miles of the school's campus in Warrensburg (CMSU 2001). With the limited curricula and comparatively homogeneous student bodies of regional state universities, the towns in which they are located lack the intellectual climate and cultural sophistication of other types of college towns. The impact of a collegiate culture is less conspicuous, and such towns tend to be more representative of the regions in which they are located than are other types of college towns.

Towns such as Searcy, Arkansas, and Williamstown, Massachusetts, which are home to private colleges, stand apart from other college towns because the schools in them are so different. Most attract a more select student body because of their entrance requirements, cost, or ideological orientation. They draw a higher percentage of students from out of state. Private colleges also typically maintain greater control over their students. At many, all unmarried students are required to live on campus, so town and gown are less integrated. At Williams College in Williamstown, for example, 83 percent of undergraduates come from outside Massachusetts, and 93 percent live on campus (Williams College 2003). Most private colleges are smaller than state institutions, have grown comparatively little since World War II, and place less emphasis on athletics. As a result, towns with private colleges lack the high-rise dormitories, massive sports complexes, and dense concentrations of student bars and apartments so typical of large university towns.

So far I have focused on general attributes of college towns, many of which can be measured statistically. But much of what makes college towns distinctive, the elements of life that help give them their peculiar flavor, cannot be quantified. Some of these characteristics are also present in other types of places. College towns are



distinctive because most of them possess a constellation of these traits, not just one or two, and because the theme described is more noticeable in towns in which colleges are large relative to the size of the city.

#### THE CAMPUS AS A PUBLIC SPACE

In many ways the campus is the center of life in the college town, much as the central business district was in the pre-automobile city or the shopping mall is in suburbia. With their residential areas, restaurants and bookstores, recreational facilities, concert halls, sports stadiums, landscaped grounds, and full calendars of events, campuses often function like self-contained cities. They are centers of culture. They are entertainment districts. They act as parks and historic sites. They have symbolic and public relations importance. They are a hub of activities that serve not only students and staff but also the larger population of the town and region. As such, the campus serves both as an environment for learning and as a public space.

The college campus is largely an American invention (Turner 1984). The belief that colleges should be set in a parklike landscape originated at Harvard and has been followed almost without exception ever since. The tradition of placing buildings far apart in an open landscape had its origins in concerns that were pragmatic and philosophical. The earliest buildings at Harvard were made of wood, so fire was a danger. Separating them reduced the risk that fires would spread. But Harvard's founders also believed in the Puritan ideal of community and thought that the college should be an integral part of the town that surrounded it. The distinctly American notion that college should be a total experience and not be limited to the classroom has also shaped the evolution of U.S. campuses. Whereas European universities devote comparatively little attention to extracurricular activities (Schwings 1992), U.S. colleges and universities spend millions of dollars to maintain their campuses and provide a range of activities for students, staff, and people with no direct connection to the educational institution.

The campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman is typical (Figure 3). Sprawling over 2,000 acres, it is active day and night, year-round. Indicative of the multifaceted role campuses play, its campus includes parks, formal gardens, a duck pond, an eighteen-hole golf course, a public swimming pool, conference facilities, a large hotel, and an airport, as well as eighteen restaurants, five bookstores, cappuccino bars, and convenience stores. Concerts are regularly held at the Fine Arts Center and the Catlett Music Center. The university recently built a \$38 million museum of natural history. Rotating exhibits are featured at two art museums, and sporting events draw more than a million people a year to campus. Once students leave town for the summer, children invade the campus for cheerleading camps, debate competitions, and the like.

Every year the University of Oklahoma spends more than \$1 million to landscape its grounds. Since becoming the university's president, former U.S. Senator David Boren has initiated a major beautification program and has promised to make



FIG. 3—With their cultural attractions, recreational facilities, and parklike open spaces, college campuses, like this one at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, are often the focus of college-town life. (Photograph by the author, April 1997)

the campus “in essence the ‘Central Park’ of the metropolitan area” (Boren 1996). Hundreds of trees have been planted. More than 250 wooden benches have been installed. Ornamental fountains, statues, and monuments have been erected. Even though many features of the campus have no explicit role in the educational mission of a university, every college president knows that a handsome campus is as important as a first-rate faculty for drawing students, pleasing alumni, and attracting donations.

#### RESIDENTIAL LANDSCAPES IN COLLEGE TOWNS

The social differences that exist in college towns have led to the emergence of distinctive residential landscapes. Many college faculty and staff, along with townspeople, do not want to live near college students because of their lifestyles. For students, the college years present the first chance to live relatively free from adult interference, so students, too, prefer to live among their own. At non-commuter colleges students are normally required to live in dormitories for at least their first year. Post-World War II growth of universities led many to build massive dormitory complexes. Most public universities have devoted a significant chunk of their campuses to such facilities.



FIG. 4—Greek Revival-style fraternity houses, like this one at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, are characteristic landscape features of fraternity districts in college towns. (Photograph by the author, December 2002)

After their first year, students begin to sort themselves out according to their interests and lifestyles. Away from home and perhaps lost in a university much larger than their high school, some choose to postpone independence and formalize their social lives by joining a fraternity or sorority (Hale 2000). In most college towns, fraternity and sorority houses are concentrated in one or two areas. Often, several line a single street, typically called “fraternity row” (Figure 4). With their classical mansions and the unusual traditions and active social lives of the people who live in them, the fraternity district is a landscape unique to college communities. Raucous parties pour from fraternity houses every weekend. Pledge-week rituals, formal dances, and the building of homecoming floats are local spectacles. Fraternity houses can make bad neighbors, which probably explains why they are so often relegated to



FIG. 5—Bookstores, such as this one in the Aggieville district of Manhattan, Kansas, are more common in campus-adjacent commercial districts of college towns than in other types of urban places. (Photograph by the author, December 1999)

a single area. Contrary to popular perception, fraternity houses at most universities are privately owned and located off campus (Anson and Marchesani 1991).

Although membership in Greek-letter societies is declining and some elite private colleges have abolished them (Reisberg 2000), fraternities and sororities remain an integral part of student life in most college towns. At state universities, one-quarter to one-half of undergraduates pledge. And even though fraternities and sororities have long been criticized for their elitist (and bigoted) selection processes, dangerous hazing rituals, excessive drinking, and anti-intellectual attitudes—indeed, it is difficult to find noncritical accounts of life in such societies—they can serve a useful purpose for students who desire greater social interaction.<sup>5</sup> “For a certain kind of boy at a certain tender age, fraternity is simply a given,” wrote the novelist Richard Ford (1986, 231). “A go-along guy, who wants friends. For this kind of boy conformity is a godsend. And I was that kind of boy.”

Many students prefer to rent large homes near campus with friends or live in apartments. Campus-adjacent neighborhoods are often dominated by such rentals. Most college towns have at least one neighborhood that is home almost exclusively to students. Informally, it is often called the “student ghetto” and is characterized by dilapidated houses, beat-up couches on porches, automobiles parked on lawns, and bicycles chained to anything that does not move. Such neighborhoods emerged when enrollments mushroomed following World War II, colleges became less able to house their students, landlords saw an opportunity, and homeowners sought refuge from the influx of young people. Residences often filtered down to students from faculty and other homeowners as the housing stock deteriorated.

Neighborhoods such as University Hill in Boulder, Colorado, and the Collee-town district in Ithaca, New York, are the frequent subject of proposals seeking to control their spread and improve their appearance (Staeheli and Thompson 1997). Many college towns have implemented ordinances designed to discourage the conversion of single-family homes into rental properties. In a decision that could prove significant for college towns, an Indiana court in 2002 rejected a Bloomington ordinance which stipulated that no more than three unrelated adults could live in any dwelling (Paine 2002). Many college towns have similar ordinances. Couches are so central to the image of the student ghetto that an entrepreneur in Ithaca created a poster that is a parody of tourist posters such as "The Doors of Dublin." It features thirty-three photographs of couches on Ithaca porches above the banner, "Couches of Collee-town." Some see the proliferation of couches on porches as less benign. The Boulder City Council recently enacted an ordinance prohibiting upholstered furniture outdoors in response to several riots on University Hill in which couches were burned (Madigan 2002).

Most college towns have one or more older neighborhoods near campus that have resisted the invasion of undergraduates and are home to large numbers of professors. Often these neighborhoods were marketed directly to faculty through university publications. In Norman, Oklahoma, one such neighborhood was actually platted as "Faculty Heights." The faculty enclave is a neighborhood of classic homes and tree-lined streets, where residents vigilantly seek to preserve the area's character and prevent incursions by students. John Jakle, in a study of Urbana, Illinois, found that University of Illinois faculty members were concentrated in that city's Carle Park neighborhood and observed that professors were more likely to own houses that were architecturally distinctive as a way to set themselves apart as an "educated gentry class" (1983, 37). Gorman Beauchamp, in a portrait of Burns Park, a faculty enclave in Ann Arbor, Michigan, noted that residents of such neighborhoods are more likely to own a passport, subscribe to the *New York Review of Books*, and espouse liberal causes and less likely to go to church or fly the U.S. flag. "Ah yes, Burns Park," he wrote, "where they vote left and live right" (Beauchamp 1995, 337).

#### COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS IN COLLEGE TOWNS

The presence of unusual densities of students and highly educated adults has led to the development in many college towns of distinctive commercial districts, full of trendy shops, coffee houses, ethnic restaurants, and bars (Figure 5). In some towns these areas have developed separately from the city's central business district, perhaps because downtown was too far from campus for students to travel regularly in a pre-automobile age. The campus of Kansas State University, for example, is three-quarters of a mile from downtown Manhattan. The original road from campus to town was unpaved and impassable for much of the year. In the late 1800s a student and local businessman, recognizing a market need, opened a branch of a downtown laundry across the street from campus. From this nucleus grew the univer-

sity-oriented Aggieville business district, which today is more successful than Manhattan's downtown (Walter 1995).

Regardless of whether they are independent of a city's downtown or one and the same, two differences distinguish campus-adjacent commercial districts from the business districts of non-college towns: Certain types of businesses are more abundant, and numerous businesses cater primarily to the needs and desires of a college community. Businesses that are more numerous in college towns than in other cities of similar size include coffeehouses, bookstores (sixteen of which are within a fifteen-minute walk in Ann Arbor), pizzerias, bicycle shops, record stores, copy shops, ethnic restaurants, and laundromats. The most conspicuous difference is the large number of bars per capita. Eighteen bars are found in a six-block area of Manhattan's Aggieville district and thirty-two in a slightly larger area of downtown Athens, Georgia.

College-town bar districts have caused increasing problems for local police and university officials, whose ability to regulate student behavior has diminished since the 1960s. Occasionally, the mixture of students and alcohol gets out of hand. In recent years student celebrations have turned violent in several college towns, often in conjunction with sporting events (Strauss 2001). In April 2003, for example, eighty-seven people were arrested and twenty-three were injured in Durham, New Hampshire, when students went on a rampage after the University of New Hampshire hockey team lost in the NCAA championship game (Dekoning 2003). Alcohol-fueled disturbances became such a regular occurrence at Halloween in Carbondale that Southern Illinois University now closes for the last week of October. City officials enacted an ordinance forcing bars to shut down for the weekend before Halloween and on Halloween night (Luke 2001).

Businesses that are somewhat unique to college towns among cities of similar size because of their unusual demographics include movie theaters that show independent and foreign films, art galleries, tattoo parlors, shops that specialize in the cultural kitsch of the 1960s, stores that sell college T-shirts (half a dozen are in Norman, Oklahoma, and health food stores. Vegetarian restaurants, such as the Grit in Athens, Georgia, and the ABC Café in Ithaca, New York, may be more common per capita in college towns than in any other type of urban place. Although not overtly commercial in nature, another distinctive attribute of campus-adjacent districts is the presence of student-oriented religious organizations, such as the Baptist Student Union, the St. Thomas More Catholic Student Center, and the Methodist Wesley Foundation.

#### CENTERS OF THE NEW ECONOMY

Just as every nineteenth-century college had to have its neoclassical administration building fronting on a quadrangle, every twenty-first-century university must have its research park. The research park is the most conspicuous evidence of an economic shift that is transforming some college towns (Luger and Goldstein 1991). Growth in federal funding for research and pressure from state governments for

universities to become more self-sufficient has prompted many institutions to market their intellectual products more actively. They have established research parks to create public-private partnerships, business incubators to nurture the formation of new companies, and separate offices to market their patents. In the process, research universities have become engines for a “new economy” based on innovation and creativity. New knowledge created on campus has, in turn, triggered high-tech development off campus. Richard Florida noted that “the presence of a major research university is the basic infrastructure component of the creative economy—more important than the canals, railroads and freeway systems of past epochs” (2002, 291–292).

Ann Arbor, for example, has been key to Michigan’s efforts to reverse its economic fortunes following the decline of its automobile industry. The roots of the relationship between the University of Michigan and private industry run deep. In 1920 the university created a department to undertake contract research for corporations. During World War II it became a major defense contractor. After the war, federal expenditures for research grew rapidly, and the lines between academe, government, and industry blurred. In the 1950s a coalition of university, government, and business leaders mounted a drive to make Ann Arbor the “Research Center of the Midwest.” They persuaded Parke-Davis pharmaceuticals (now Pfizer) and Bendix Aerospace Systems to locate research facilities in the city. In 1962 the Ann Arbor Research Park was built. Such developments created “an atmosphere of high technology” that helped attract smaller research firms to the city (Dolgon 1998, 1999).

Today Ann Arbor is a high-tech hub. Technology companies employ 15,000 people in the area, and the city is home to more than 300 software companies. The presence of the University of Michigan Medical Center has spurred the development of a growing health care and life sciences sector. Pfizer employs 3,000 people in the city and in 2001 announced a \$300 million expansion (O’Donnell 2001; Wahlberg 2001). Ann Arbor is home to Internet2, the National Center for Manufacturing Sciences, and a major Environmental Protection Agency emissions testing center. Research parks are ubiquitous on the city’s periphery, and new ones are gobbling up real estate outside the city limits. Although Ann Arbor has seen moderate declines in its technology sector since the “dot com” bust of 2001, the continued growth of Pfizer and the insulating effect of the university have lessened the impact of downturns (Hilton 2002).

#### PLACES OF PERSONAL DISCOVERY

The college years are widely acknowledged as a time of individual awakening, but too often what happens in the classroom is given exclusive credit for this. Countless teenagers who go away to college with traditional aspirations of becoming businessmen, lawyers, or teachers discover something new along the way and abandon those goals. Away from home, thrust into communities in which young people are dominant, exposed to an eclectic mix of lifestyles at a time in their lives when they

are impressionable, many students are changed forever. Some drop out. Others never leave town. Often the experiences that trigger such life changes occur not on campus but in the nightclubs, coffeehouses, and student apartments so characteristic of college towns.

This is particularly common in college towns such as Athens and Lawrence, which are home to flagship universities. Such universities typically have strong programs in art, music, or literature that attract young people who see college as more than just a path to a job. Athens, for example, is world famous for its music scene. The people who helped create that scene were originally students in the University of Georgia's Lamar Dodd School of the Art. Music was something they did for fun when they put down their paint brushes (Brown 1991). Eventually, others became involved. Today, Athens is a bohemian pocket in the South. Many of those who have advanced the city's reputation as a cultural mecca came there to attend college but never left. Rock bands such as the B-52s and R.E.M. were a natural outgrowth of the nurturing environment for experimentation that exists in college towns.

Vic Chesnutt, for example, came to the University of Georgia from the small town of Zebulon, Georgia, with the goal of becoming a schoolteacher. Once he discovered the city's music clubs he stopped going to class (Chesnutt 1999). Today he is an eccentric singer-songwriter who has produced nine critically acclaimed albums. Barrie Buck came to Athens to study law, married (and later divorced) the guitarist for R.E.M., and now owns the 40 Watt Club, the most successful rock club in town (Buck 1999). But Athens is a breeding ground for more than just music. Joni Mabe, who grew up as the daughter of the mayor in Mount Airy, Georgia, came to Athens to study art. Today she operates her famous traveling "Everything Elvis" exhibit from a house in the city's Boulevard District (Link and Hammes 1998). Pete McCommons entered the University of Georgia in 1958, moved to New York in 1962 to attend graduate school but returned to Athens six years later. He is the editor of the local alternative weekly newspaper, *Flagpole* (McCommons 1999). College towns from Boulder, Colorado, to Burlington, Vermont, are full of people with similar stories. Even though such people make up a small percentage of city populations, because they are active and creative they influence life in college towns to a degree disproportionate to their numbers.

#### "ALL THINGS RIGHT AND RELEVANT"

With their abundant young people and traditionally left-leaning faculty, many college towns have become bastions of liberal politics. They have been pioneers in the slow-growth movement. They have fought the development of shopping malls and Wal-Marts. They have nurtured environmentally friendly industry, housing, and public works. They have sought to preserve green space, restore waterways, and build bicycle paths. Their local governments have attempted to shape policy outside their boundaries by establishing positions on national and international issues of the day. At the same time, such towns have been criticized for being elitist, too expensive for





FIG. 6—As the hundreds of bicycles that surround this campus food facility in Davis, California, attest, residents of college towns are more likely to travel by bicycle than are residents of other types of cities. (Photograph by the author, May 2001)

the non-academic people who work in them, and unlivable for those who do not share a liberal worldview.

Davis, California, home of one of ten campuses of the University of California, for example, has sometimes been called “the most liberal town in America.” It has slowed sprawl with rigid growth regulations. It has fought to maintain the city’s downtown as its commercial focus by preventing the construction of a suburban-style shopping mall and keeping out most chain retailers. It was one of the first cities in the United States to institute curbside recycling. It has the most restrictive smoking ordinance in the nation: Smoking is even banned outdoors within 20 feet of a doorway unless the smoker is moving (Ignelzi 1994; Fitch 1998). Davis was the first municipality in the United States to create bicycle lanes on city streets and today has 98 miles of bicycle paths and lanes (Figure 6). One-quarter of Davis residents commute by a means other than private automobile (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Over the years Davis has declared itself a nuclear-free zone, the nation’s first pro-choice city, and a sanctuary for Sandinista refugees from Nicaragua.

In Davis and other college towns, the political culture started to shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s as academics and others who came of age during the Vietnam War began to make up an increasing percentage of college-town populations. The balance of power shifted still further in 1971, when eighteen-year-olds were given the right to vote. The very next year, with many students voting for the first



FIG. 7—Football fans fill downtown streets in Auburn, Alabama, to celebrate an Auburn University victory over rival University of Alabama in November 1993. (Photograph by Todd Van Emst; reproduced by permission of the photographer)

time, a liberal coalition of candidates wrested control of the Davis City Council from the business interests that had long dominated local politics (Lofland 2001). Similar changes occurred in other college towns. The dramatic shift could not be explained by the student vote alone; rather, it reflected a growing anti-establishment attitude that developed in the wake of the Vietnam War and the killings at Kent State University in Ohio. City policies in Davis became more self-consciously liberal. Some scholars have observed that the brand of liberalism practiced in college towns such as Davis is selective (Lofland and Lofland 1987), while others have argued that the city's policies are in truth regressive and intolerant, seeking to preserve the way of life of an educated elite. A local newspaper columnist, who has made a career of lampooning local liberals, dubbed Davis "the city of all things right and relevant."

The left-leaning character of college towns is also evident in election results. Davis residents preferred liberal Democrat George McGovern over Richard Nixon in the 1972 presidential election. They rejected Proposition 13, California's infamous taxpayer revolt, in 1978 (Fitch 1998). In the 2000 presidential election, Davis voters preferred Al Gore to George W. Bush by a two-to-one margin. Green Party candidate Ralph Nader received nearly 10 percent of the vote (Yolo County Elections Office 2000). Similar patterns are evident in college towns nationwide. Although Nader received just 2.7 percent of the popular vote nationwide, he won 25 percent

of the vote in Amherst, Massachusetts, 19 percent in Missoula, Montana, and 11 percent in Lawrence, Kansas (Olsen 2000; Leip 2001; Dalquest 2002).

#### STADIUM CULTURE

Different priorities are evident in college towns in which college sports are king. Stadiums and arenas tower over campuses and are often the most prominent buildings on the landscape. Tens of thousands of fans descend on towns for games. Such pilgrimages are economic boons and can leave a permanent imprint on the landscape and local way of life. College football has been so important to the development of Pennsylvania State University and to State College, the town in which it is located, that a local magazine tried to imagine what the town would be like if Joe Paterno had never become the university's football coach. It imagined a downtown full of boarded-up buildings and empty storefronts and a university with half its current enrollment, a crumbling library, and a meager endowment (Poorman 1998).

Like State College, Auburn, Alabama, home of Auburn University, is a football town. On a half-dozen weekends every autumn, the town is transformed. Auburn's football stadium holds 86,063 people, twice as many as live in the city. Visitors who attend games spend an estimated \$31.7 million annually.<sup>6</sup> Auburn sports paraphernalia are ubiquitous in businesses on College Street: framed newspapers, autographed pictures, and player jerseys, for example. Stores sell an unimaginable array of Auburn souvenirs. Friends and strangers passing on the street exhort "War Eagle!" the Auburn battle cry. If Auburn wins, fans fill downtown streets and throw toilet paper into trees (Figure 7). To businesses in college towns like Auburn, football season can be as critical in determining financial success as the Christmas season is to merchants elsewhere. When Auburn wins, said one store owner, "there's more beer drank, there's more T-shirts purchased, and there's more money given to churches on Sunday" (Johnston 1999).

Football permeates all aspects of life in Auburn. City officials say that its significance is overrated but acknowledge that it took a post-game traffic jam to convince a state official to push for the widening of the main highway into town (Watson 2002). The longtime mayor admitted that football so governs the mood of residents that she regularly changed the agenda for City Council meetings if Auburn lost on the preceding Saturday, postponing action on any controversial issues (Dempsey 1999). Cities other than college towns have large stadiums and universities with big-time sports programs. But the size of stadiums and the crowds that attend games in college towns are far larger relative to the size of the communities. If Yankee Stadium had as many seats per capita as does Auburn's football stadium, it would hold 16 million people. As Michael Oriard noted, "football's local importance tend[s] to be inversely proportional to the community's size and status." In college towns like Auburn, "the football team [is] the chief source of local pride" (2001, 70).

## TOWN-GOWN RELATIONS

Relations between a college and its town are not always amicable, however. Colleges and the communities that surround them have been in conflict since medieval times, when institutions of learning walled themselves in like monasteries for protection from townspeople (Barr 1963). Although town-gown relations are rarely violent today, even when a college and its town have good relations they are seldom in complete harmony. Much of that tension is the result of what happens when so many young people descend on relatively small cities, but other issues also surface again and again in college towns nationwide (Selland 1981; Lopata 1986; Kane and Roser 1989; Nichols 1990).<sup>7</sup>

Town-gown relations have been especially tense in recent years in Newark, Delaware, home of the University of Delaware. Although the intensity of town-gown hostility in Newark is unusual, the sources of tensions are common to college towns. The most divisive issue has been the erosion of single-family neighborhoods by student housing (Figure 8). The university has built little housing since the 1960s, but enrollment has doubled. The city has had to absorb the increased demand for student housing. Landlords have bought many owner-occupied houses and turned them into rentals. Entire neighborhoods have been transformed in this way (Vargo 1999). Year-round residents have protested, and city officials have tried various means of slowing the trend. In 1999 Newark's City Council implemented its most aggressive strategy yet, adopting an ordinance that prohibits new student rentals within a legally defined distance (typically 750 feet) of an existing student rental (Hale 1999).

Conflicts caused by student behavior are another source of friction in college towns. Student drinking is considered such an issue in Newark that the university has become active in a national anti-binge-drinking campaign sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and has expanded its student judicial code to include off-campus behavior (University of Delaware Messenger 1999; Hale 2000). The city has taken a more punitive approach, increasing fines for underage drinking, revamping its noise ordinance, and instituting a zero-tolerance policy for noise and alcohol offenses. It recently took over enforcement of liquor laws from the state government and increased its liquor-license fees to pay for stricter enforcement (Besso 2003). It also hopes to persuade the university to prohibit students from graduating if they owe fines for alcohol offenses (Brown 2002).

The enlargement of campuses and the building of new campus facilities are also common sources of tension in college towns. Given that colleges are exempt from property taxes, whenever they buy property it is taken off tax rolls, which reduces a city's tax income. Newark, like other college towns, has been forced to annex surrounding areas in order to maintain its tax base (Lopata 1982). Residents and government officials have also opposed university building projects that they believe would have adverse effects on the city, such as the building of a parking garage adjacent to a residential neighborhood (Gopal 1999). Universities are often viewed with

conflicting emotions in college towns: welcome because of the economic benefits and quality of life they bring, but resented because they are seen to act without regard for the interests of permanent residents.



FIG. 8—Erosion of single-family neighborhoods by student housing, such as these rental properties in Newark, Delaware, is a common source of town-gown tension in college towns. (Photograph by the author, March 2000)

#### THE FUTURE OF COLLEGE TOWNS

What does the future hold for college towns? Some say that the growth of Internet-based distance education will eventually mean the extinction of the bricks-and-mortar university, which would also mean the end of the college town. Skeptics argue that Web courses are merely technologically enhanced versions of correspondence courses, which have hardly transformed higher education. Still others believe that college towns are representative of a new kind of geography that is the result of

a changing economy (Lewis 1991). Rich Karlgaard, publisher of *Forbes* magazine, recently told a university audience that, because college towns have strong research infrastructures, relatively inexpensive real estate, and the cultural amenities necessary to attract creative people, they are poised to become the big winners in our increasingly innovation-driven economy (Fagan 2000).

College towns are also being discovered as high-quality places in which to live by people who have no direct connection to a university. Lawrence, for example, has seen its population grow by nearly 30,000 since 1980, despite the fact that enrollment at the University of Kansas has remained about the same. College towns that are within commuting distance of major metropolitan areas are growing rapidly because of an influx of young professionals drawn by the cultural attractions, youthful energy, and small-town feel for which they are known. College towns are also being marketed as retirement destinations (Mangan 1994). One builder of retirement developments, the Pennsylvania-based Kendal Corporation, specializes in developing retirement communities in college towns, marketing them not only to retired faculty and administrators but also to alumni and others for whom the sun and sedentary lifestyles of Florida and Arizona hold little attraction. Realizing that retired faculty and alumni who are close at hand are more likely to donate money or think of alma mater in their wills, some colleges, such as the University of Michigan, are developing their own retirement communities or entering into partnerships with private developers (Pastalan and Schwarz 1994).

Clearly, college towns are changing. Many of the adjectives once commonly used to describe them—words like “sleepy,” “idyllic,” and “unhurried”—are no longer accurate. James and Barbara Shortridge observed that the movement of lifestyle migrants to college towns threatens to erode the characteristics that made such communities attractive in the first place (2001). The fastest-growing college towns are acquiring some of the negative attributes they long resisted, such as traffic, sprawl, high real estate prices, and chain-store culture. Will college towns merely become the enlightened exurbs of the information age, David Brooks’s quintessential “latte towns” (2000)? Perhaps, but as the Shortridges have also noted, migrants to college towns are drawn to them because they match the existing image. It could be argued that newcomers in places like Lawrence have intensified those characteristics for which college towns are known. Most college towns, moreover, are too remote to experience significant non-university-related growth. Overall, the college town will remain a place apart, a unique type of urban community, shaped by the sometimes conflicting forces of youth, intellect, and idealism that have been a critical but underappreciated part of American life.

#### NOTES

1. The only general study of university communities that has been published is Gilbert 1961, which, though acknowledging that college-dominated communities are most abundant in the United States, focuses on university towns in England and Germany.

2. The larger research project on which this study is based does include three college towns that are part of major metropolitan areas: Berkeley, California; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Claremont,

California. I chose them because they remain relatively self-contained college communities despite their metropolitan locations. Berkeley and Cambridge were also included because of the importance of the universities located in them to the history of higher education in the United States.

3. My observations about the relative absence of college towns outside the United States are based on a comparison of college enrollments and city populations in eighteen countries using data from Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada 2001, International Association of Universities 1998, Statistics Canada 2001, the *World Gazetteer* 2002, and *The World of Learning* 2001.

4. Ten of the twenty-five metropolitan areas outside the New York metropolitan area in which market penetration of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* is greatest are small cities with flagship universities (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2000). The household penetration rate for the Sunday *New York Times* is greater in Iowa City than in Boston or Philadelphia.

5. For a sympathetic but objective history of Greek-letter societies, see Owen 1991.

6. A 1996 study reported in Day 1998 found that visitors spent \$27 million that year. I adjusted that figure for inflation.

7. A professor and resident of the college town of Oxford, Ohio, created a Web page on town-gown issues: [<http://www.users.muohio.edu/karrowr/College/>].

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