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The 'College City,' Defined

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The quintessential college town is lush and lined with quaint boulevards. It's Ann Arbor, Mich., Charlottesville, Va., and Boulder, Colo. It's dive bars and bookstores and movie theaters that still charge less than a meal.

Classic college towns are typically considered idyllic places to live. Plenty of institutions claim to being located in one, but there are some that simply cannot. They are the urban colleges, located in mid-sized or major metropolitan areas whose social and cultural orbits extend well beyond the campus. And these are where a large portion of professors reside.

If there's such a thing as a classic "college city," what defines it? For academics choosing where to plant themselves for graduate school or deciding among job offers (if they're lucky), what's important in the city where they choose to live? At a time when new Ph.D.s are increasingly mobile and, like other young professionals, thinking about living in an urban area, many are asking these questions.

Author Richard Florida, who discusses such issues of place in *The Rise of the Creative Class* and most recently *Who's Your City?*, argues that for people in creative fields, it's important to live near each other in order to spark innovation and drive regional economies.

"Collaboration is an essential element of creativity and innovation," Florida said in an e-mail. "You can see the results of this across the country with faculty and researchers from neighboring universities collaborating on successful projects."

This "clustering force," as Florida calls it, is especially strong for academics who want to live somewhere where they can rub elbows with a range of other faculty and graduate students. (Florida said that while this in-person interaction is crucial, academic conferences and virtual collaborative research relationships serve as viable alternatives.)

Ph.D. candidates, according to Florida, are the "poster images" of mobile professionals, a group that he defines as having the "means, resources and inclination to seek out and move to locations where they can leverage their talents." What the mobile understand, Florida said, is that the pursuit of economic opportunity often requires them to relocate — and graduate students tend not to think twice about making the first move for their career.

But where do many wish to move? Robert J. Sampson, chairman of the department of sociology at Harvard University, said there are a relatively small set of cities that are characterized by a critical mass of creative individuals. They are your usual suspects of hot cities to live: New York, Seattle, San Francisco and Austin, Texas. It's increasingly a case of the have and have nots. Florida's *Who's Your City?* cites statistics that in 2004, roughly 5 percent of the adult population in Cleveland, for instance, had an advanced degree. Compare that with more than 20 percent of the adult population in Washington D.C., a city that regularly tops the list of desirable places for young professionals.

It's not just the number of colleges or dot.com startups located in a given region that determine a place's attractiveness to academics, according to Sampson. Cities that are "naturally diverse" in population and are able to offer a range of cultural amenities like theater and museums prove to be most appealing.

By that definition, New York and Washington would be at the top of the list of so-called college cities. They are immensely diverse and have an abundance of museums and performance venues. Mark Hutter, a professor of sociology at Rowan University and author of *Experiencing Cities,* said that while these cities certainly cater to the creative class and are filled with faculty and students, they aren't classic college cities.

Put another way, New York and Washington are undoubtedly "college friendly," but they're hardly "college centered" like the quintessential college city — Boston.

What sets Boston apart, accord to Hutter, is that many of the city's landmarks and cultural points are campus buildings and centers. When you think of Boston, its academic institutions and their town squares quickly come to mind. That's not the case with other sizable cities. One associates New York with business, media and the arts; Los Angeles with entertainment; San Francisco with software and startups.

And, Hutter notes, a large percentage of the Boston-area economy is driven by education.

"The cultural climate of Boston is defined by its universities," Hutter said. "It seems to be so predominant, and there's no counter identity unless you talk about the sports teams. That's unique — the only similarities are small college towns."

Of course, it doesn't hurt to have Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as anchors. Norman Fainstein, chair of the sociology department and former president of Connecticut College, and an author of several books on urban affairs and policy, said that Harvard and M.I.T give Boston an aura that can't be matched — even by other cities with several prominent institutions. Combine the academic reputation of the colleges with the cultural amenities and regional density, and you have a formula that makes Boston the prototypical college city.

There are other factors at play. How inviting are the city's colleges to outsiders (are campuses walled or designed to be open; are they *in* the city and *of* the city)? How often do undergraduates and graduate students from different colleges intermingle? How far are the various campuses from each other? Are there athletic rivalries or academic competitions that give communities within a region a sense of pride?

As Hutter notes, a place doesn't have to have several prestigious institutions for it to be considered a college city. Because liberal arts colleges and large public universities are often located outside major metropolitan areas, when an institution is in an urban area, it can make an indelible mark on a city.

Take Austin, Columbus, Ohio; and Madison, Wis., where major research or land grant institutions (the main campuses of the University of Texas, Ohio State, and the University of Wisconsin, respectively) rub up against state government buildings. These academic hubs are prominent, and infuse culture and economic opportunities.

Hutter said he considers Minneapolis another example of a college city. The University of Minnesota is a high-profile institution there that has cultural landmarks and that draws outsiders to the campus for theater, lectures and sports.

Fainstein noted that regions that are far from being urban can also offer some of the lure of a college city. "The appeal to some professors has more to do with a critical mass of colleagues than with living in an urban landscape," he said. In central Massachusetts, for instance, Smith, Amherst, Mt. Holyoke and several other colleges are nearby, forming a collective sense of an academic community amid small towns.

Like other professionals, academics face choices about cost of living, public transportation and schools. Hutter said that universities like Washington University in St. Louis and Carnegie Mellon University that are located in lower-cost urban areas (Pittsburgh, in Carnegie Mellon's case) should continue to play up that aspect of what makes living in such places attractive.

Fainstein and others said it's also increasingly important that academics are able to live and work in regions where their significant others can find employment. While he was president of Connecticut College, he said he promoted the fact that the institution with within two hours of Boston and Providence, R.I., among other cities.

For young faculty members or graduate students, being located near what Florida refers to as a "mega city," which stretches for miles and miles and often includes several urban areas can be a selling point to single professionals.

"It has to do with where the person is in the life and career cycle," Fainstein said.

— [Elia Powers](#)

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