

# 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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