



October 17, 2019 | By Justin Boyle

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It's fairly well known that college students tend to have more success when they enjoy a comfortable learning environment. The scope of that discussion tends to focus on the culture and characteristics of the school itself, which are undoubtedly important, but there's another big factor in college life that often gets overlooked.

Whether it's a big urban center, a small rural town or somewhere in between, the city where your school is located can have a lot of influence on your overall experience as a student. Imagine this: you love the feel of a particular college campus, but its home city has a population that skews toward retirement age or a high rate of violent crime. Those features would factor into your decision to apply, right?

Cities that topped our list of the best college towns in the U.S. all showed strong positive indicators in categories that matter to students. Some had high percentages of college- or university-enrolled residents, providing a large peer group for new students, while others boasted affordable average housing costs or low overall unemployment rates.

You'll notice that some regions of the U.S. have denser concentrations of top college towns than others. Eastern Wisconsin, for example, is home to four of our top 20 cities, thanks in no small part to the generally affordable rent available in that area. We're also featuring a handful of cities that also made last year's list of the best college towns in the country -- we'll point out where they've held steady and where they've improved.

You can learn more about how we calculated the scores for each city by checking out our methodology below. Whether you're looking for the right place to go to school or you're just curious about where college students may flock to next, here's our list of best college towns in the U.S.

The 20 Best College Towns in the U.S.

1

Oshkosh, Wisconsin

POPULATION

66,668

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

53.6%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.5%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$7,140



Students who like living near water might find themselves right at home in this hidden gem in east central Wisconsin. Oshkosh is bordered on two sides by Lake Butte Des Morts and Lake Winnebago, and the Fox River – a major Green Bay tributary – flows through the heart of the city. The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh is located here, serving more than 16,000 students per term.

Oshkosh stood out in several categories of our analysis, posting strong numbers for affordable rent, college-age population and percentage of residents enrolled in college or graduate school. It also posted one of the best employment rates among the nearly 200 cities and towns we surveyed for this analysis, reporting just 2.5 percent unemployment among residents over the age of 16.

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2

Fargo, North Dakota

POPULATION

123,590

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

48.8%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.9%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$8,484



Fargo is one of the largest cities on our list in terms of population, but that doesn't disrupt certain aspects of that important small-town feel. More than 94 percent of residents report facing a workday commute of 30 minutes or less – the largest such percentage in the entire U.S. for two years running. This North Dakota municipality was also one of the best college towns in terms of its population of university-age students, with nearly one in three residents coming from the 20-34 age group.

The major university in Fargo is North Dakota State University, a public institution that educates close to 14,000 students each term. The University of Mary, a small, private Catholic college, also operates a campus here.

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3

Portland, Maine

POPULATION

66,878

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

53.2%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$11,256



Maine's largest city is just about the perfect size for a college town, reporting a total population of around 66,800 residents. It's also got a student-friendly age distribution, landing in the national top 20 for its percentage of residents aged 20-34, and the city's infrastructure permits one of the highest rates of alternative transportation among all schools we surveyed. Close to 20 percent of Portland residents reported walking, biking, or taking public transportation to work.

Portland is home to the flagship campus of the University of Southern Maine, which features a nicely close-knit ratio of 13 students per faculty member. Students looking specifically for art programs have another option: Maine College of Art, a private institution with an intimate learning environment of fewer than 500 students.

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4

Bloomington, Illinois



POPULATION

77,941

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

37.9%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.3%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$8,292



Bloomington, Illinois, holds steady at No. 4, named in the same spot in this year's and last year's ranking. Housing affordability remained the main bright spot for this central Illinois hub, improving from third place nationally to the best in the country with its average of less than 24 percent of the median annual income being spent on rent. Bloomington also features a 2018 unemployment rate of 2.3 percent, one of the lowest in the U.S.

A relatively small private school known as Illinois Wesleyan University is located within the Bloomington city limits, but students also have access to Illinois State University, a public institution, which is located less than two miles up the road from the city center.

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5

Eau Claire, Wisconsin



POPULATION

69,835

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

51.9%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3.7%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$7,980



This right-sized Wisconsin city made the largest jump up our rankings of any city that appears on both this year's and last year's lists. A substantial 16-point improvement in the local unemployment rate was one of the main factors in Eau Claire's rise over the last year, as well as similar improvement in the percentage of people commuting 30 minutes or less to work. Eau Claire also features a young adult population that consists of around 30 percent of all residents, and more than half of people in the city are enrolled in college or graduate school.

The Eau Claire campus of the University of Wisconsin system welcomes roughly 11,600 students through its doors each term. An overwhelming majority – 94 percent – of students here are undergraduates.

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6

Waukesha, Wisconsin



POPULATION

72,483

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

35.7%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.9%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$9,540



Physical safety for students is always a concern, and the numbers show that Waukesha residents enjoy a safer environment than most. The violent crime rate in this Milwaukee-area city was low enough to land it a spot among the 25 best college towns nationwide. Waukesha also posted a sturdy unemployment rate of less than three percent, and around 38 percent of its more than 72,000 residents were enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs in 2018.

Students hoping to get started on the path toward a degree have more than one option in Waukesha. The city is home to branch campuses of both UW-Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin system at large. Carroll University, a private school that serves roughly 3,300 students, offers bachelor's and master's degrees here as well.

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7

Rochester, Minnesota



POPULATION

115,733

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

26.5%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3.2%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$9,528



This southeastern Minnesota city features one of the densest concentrations of universities in the country, featuring one major university and branch campuses of no fewer than four area colleges. Students here can choose to attend classes at UM-Rochester, Augsburg University, St. Mary's University, Winona State University and the College of St. Scholastica. On top of that, Rochester Community and Technical College serves more than 5,000 career, technical and academic students each term and the Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine provides high-level M.D. training for aspiring medical doctors.

Rochester is also one of best college towns in the U.S. for housing affordability, beating all but three other schools on our list in that category. More than 88 percent of residents here reported a daily commute of 30 minutes or less.

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8

Greenville, South Carolina



POPULATION

68,223

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

44.1%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.6%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$8,700



The overall population in this community at the northwestern tip of South Carolina skews toward college-age students, reporting nearly 31 percent of residents in the 20-34 age group. The numbers also suggest that Greenville residents tend to find jobs and keep them – just 2.6 percent of the population remained unemployed while actively looking for work in 2018.

Greenville is home to three options for degree-seeking college students: Bob Jones University, an explicitly Christian liberal arts academy that serves a student body of around 3,000 learners; Furman University, which traces its history back to 1826 and stands as the oldest private university in the state; and Greenville Technical College, where students have more than 100 academic and career programs to choose from.

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9

Conway, Arkansas



POPULATION

65,790

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

53.6%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

1.9%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$7,476



With a total population of less than 66,000 residents, Conway, Arkansas, is the smallest municipality on our list of the best college towns in the country. More than 53 percent of the population was enrolled in undergraduate or graduate college programs in 2018, and the unemployment rate of less than 2 percent took top honors among all U.S. schools we looked at in this study.

Despite its relatively small population, Conway features three higher learning destinations. The University of Central Arkansas is the largest school in the city, enrolling more than 11,000 students each semester, while Hendrix College and Central Baptist College each feature close-knit learning environments of around one-tenth that size and boast student-faculty ratios of 11:1 or better.

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10

Cambridge, Massachusetts

POPULATION

113,631

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

75.6%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

4.1%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$21,576



Cambridge, Massachusetts, may not be a household name outside of New England, but the names of two of its hometown universities might ring a bell. Perennial academic touchstone Harvard University makes its home within the Cambridge city limits, as well as the illustrious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Cambridge is also home to a medium-small private liberal arts academy called Lesley University and professional schools for businesspeople and culinary artists.

Only two other schools on our list had a higher percentage of college students among their population than the more than 75 percent recorded here. Cambridge was also one of the youngest college towns in our analysis, with nearly 44 percent of residents between the ages of 20 and 34.

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11

Ames, Iowa

POPULATION

66,500

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN COLLEGE:

83.5%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3.1%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$9,324



This central Iowa city climbed four spots in our rankings since last year, thanks in part to its being one of the only college towns in the country to see a reduction in housing costs relative to the median annual income. Ames also nearly halved its unemployment rate over the past year, and the whopping 83 percent of its population enrolled in college programs has changed little since 2018. Around 42 percent of the population here fell into traditional college and graduate school age groups.

Iowa State University, the institution that serves as the heart of the higher education scene in Ames, is the largest college by enrollment in the Hawkeye State. Nearly 35,000 students attend classes at Iowa State each semester.

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12

Appleton, Wisconsin

POPULATION

73,984

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

27.9%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3.1%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$7,344



Housing in Appleton, Wisconsin, isn't just affordable, according to the data -- it also offers a worker-friendly commute to the majority of places where you might find a job after graduation. More than 85 percent of the residents of this Fox Valley town spent less than 30 minutes on the road to and from work in 2018, and the cost of rent came in at a respectable 29 percent of the median annual income.

The lone institution of higher education in Appleton is Lawrence University, an intimate liberal arts university with a student body of fewer than 1,500 learners and a top-tier ratio of 8 students for each faculty member. Those who prefer a public university environment can find the Fox Cities branch campus of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh just across the river in Menasha.

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13

Rochester Hills, Michigan

POPULATION
74,198

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:
25.5%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:
2.6%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:
\$12,912



Michigan students looking for a safe place to go to school should look twice at this city of around 74,000 in the southeastern corner of the state. Rochester Hills reported a violent crime rate of just 52 incidents per 100,000 people per year, the lowest such figure in the state and the best among all college towns in the country. The cost of living is affordable here, as well, with residents on average committing less than 27 percent of the median income to rent.

Two colleges make their home in Rochester Hills, each providing a very different academic experience than the other. Oakland University is a public institution of more than 19,000 students, while Rochester University is a private, Christ-centered school of with a student body of around 1,100.

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14

Ann Arbor, Michigan

POPULATION
121,461

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:
76.9%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:
3.9%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:
\$12,828



Ann Arbor is home to the flagship campus of the University of Michigan, which serves nearly 47,000 students each semester, so it should come as no surprise that just one other city among our best college towns reported a higher percentage of college students in its population. Any city with such a large university at its heart is likely to have a well-developed infrastructure of services and businesses relevant to student life, such as bookstores, apartment locators and cafés for studying.

College sports fans have an extra reason to consider Ann Arbor as their academic destination, as well. The athletic teams at the University of Michigan regularly compete in national championship contests, winning more than 50 national titles in 12 different sports throughout history.

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15

Bellevue, Washington

POPULATION
144,459

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:
23.2%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:
3.5%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:
\$19,260



Located just across Lake Washington from Seattle, the state's primary metropolis, Bellevue has the highest population among the best college towns in the country. More than 144,000 people make their home here, according to recent census estimates, and approximately one in four of them was enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate degree program in 2018.

Bellevue College, a mid-sized public institution that offers associate degrees, bachelor's degrees and certificate programs, is the main destination for students in the city. The institution offers a range of valuable student amenities, including a branch of the Benefits Hub by United Way that provides financial coaching, student aid counseling, housing assistance and a range of other services that can help students navigate the challenges of college life.

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16

Newton, Massachusetts

POPULATION
88,989

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:
42.8%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:
3.3%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:
\$19,788



A low crime rate and the ability to get around town without a personal vehicle are thought of as central pillars of a high quality of life in the U.S., and Newton, Massachusetts, was one of the best college towns in the country in both categories. More than 20 percent of residents reported walking, biking, and taking alternative methods of transportation to work in 2018, better than all but two other schools on our list, and only one other city in our entire study has a lower rate of violent crime.

Newton lays claim to two institutions of higher education, one large and one small. Boston College educates roughly 5,000 graduate students and 10,000 undergraduates each term, and Lasell College has a student body of just over 2,000 learners.

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17

Olathe, Kansas



POPULATION

137,500

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

20.2%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$9,180



This college town in the Kansas City metro area has an estimated population of more than 137,000 – one of the largest among all cities we surveyed nationwide for this report – which makes the following statistics stand out even more. Housing expenses here were some of the lowest in the country, with an average rent that amounts to less than 27 percent of the median annual income, and the 2108 unemployment rate was just three percent.

The oldest college in Olathe is MidAmerica Nazarene University, a private institution geared toward the Christian faith that provides a supportive learning environment with its student-faculty ratio of 8:1. In 2011, Olathe also became the site of a branch campus of Kansas State University.

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18

Sandy Springs, Georgia



POPULATION

106,742

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

27.7%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2.1%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$11,976



Located just north of the state capital of Atlanta, Sandy Springs posted fairly solid numbers across the categories of our analysis, but the two figures that stood out above the rest paint an impressive picture. Its violent crime rate, for one, ranked in the 93rd percentile of all cities we studied, and the 2.1 percent unemployment rate was good enough to land it a top-three spot nationwide. Only two other cities in our top 20 offer a similar combination of safety and employment security.

A wide range of colleges are available to Sandy Springs residents. Creative students can pursue their passions at the Art Institute of Atlanta, while the business-minded can attend DeVry University's Keller Graduate School of Management. Georgia State University also maintains a two-year college in the area.

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19

Green Bay, Wisconsin



POPULATION

105,114

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

25.4%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

3.3%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$7,128



It's par for the course that Wisconsin college towns offer generally affordable average rent, and Green Bay is no exception to the rule. Residents in this legendary NFL town paid less than 28 percent of the median annual income in basic housing costs throughout 2018. Green Bay also offers an agreeable environment for workday commuters, with nearly 90 percent of people employed here spending less than half an hour on the road to get to work.

The University of Wisconsin maintains an outpost in Green Bay, offering all levels of degree from associate to doctorate and educating more than 8,500 students each term. Two faith-based private colleges, Concordia College Wisconsin and Lakeland University, are also located nearby.

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Lee's Summit, Missouri



POPULATION

97,101

PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE
ENROLLED IN GRAD OR
UNDERGRAD PROGRAM:

20.9%

UNEMPLOYMENT
RATE:

2%

MEDIAN ANNUAL
RENT:

\$9,996



The unemployment rate in Lee's Summit was one of the lowest in the country, with just two percent of job-seeking residents unable to find work in 2018. The eastern Missouri community also low rate of violent crime that landed it among the 20 best college towns in the country in terms of safety. Affordability of housing was another bright spot here, better than all but five other cities nationwide in this year's study.

Lee's Summit is home to a branch location of the University of Central Missouri that offers more than 50 bachelor's, master's, doctoral and professional degree programs taught by the same faculty employed at the institution's main campus. Students pursuing associate degrees and technical certificates can enroll at the Longview Campus of Kansas City-based Metropolitan Community College.

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For a deeper look into other cities with schools to further your college goals, explore [schools by state](#) or [schools by program](#).

Methodology

We ranked U.S. cities that have populations under 150,000 and are home to at least one 4-year college or university, based on 2016 data from the U.S. Census and the National Center for Education Statistics. Colleges whose courses were offered exclusively online were excluded from the list. Each of the resulting 195 cities was ranked on a 10-point scale on the following seven factors:

1. **Percentage of the population aged 20-34**, American Community Survey, 2017
2. **Percentage of Population Enrolled in College or Graduate School**, American Community Survey, 2017
3. **Median annual rent as a percentage of median annual earnings**, American Community Survey, 2017
4. **City unemployment rate**, American Community Survey, 2017
5. **Percentage of commuters whose average travel time is less than 30 minutes**, American Community Survey, 2017
6. **Percent of workers who bike, walk, or use public transportation**, American Community Survey, 2017
7. **Crime Rate**, Uniform Crime Reporting, 2017

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