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Lively, walker-friendly college towns become hot destinations



The first time she dropped off her son at California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, Jackie Caplan Wiggins didn't stick around for very long.

But as she started going back to visit, and for his graduation, and when her daughter also chose the same school, she realized something unexpected:

"I love going to San Luis Obispo," said Wiggins. "There are some great restaurants. There's wine-tasting. There's hiking." Now, she said, "I use the fact that I have a student there as an excuse to make it a mini vacation."

So appealing is the city that Cal Poly last year launched a program called *Poly Parents*, in collaboration with the local tourist industry, to offer special activities and discount rates for parents when they drop off their kids each fall, including whale-watching, paddleboarding, zip-lining, tours of Hearst Castle, and visits to botanical gardens and hot springs.

"There's so much vibrancy of arts and athletics and lectures and all sorts of things that are really stimulating in the areas around college campuses," said Keith Humphrey, Cal Poly's vice president for student affairs.

College towns from Austin, Texas, to Ann Arbor, Mich., and from Berkeley, Calif., to Burlington, Vt., have become hot destinations, and not just for parents dropping off or visiting their kids. Nor are universities alone in suddenly noticing this. A venture capital firm has launched a chain of hip hotels called *Graduate*, with clever college-themed amenities, in Charlottesville, Va., Athens, Ga., and other college towns, and plans 20 more over the next five years.

"We didn't feel there were hotels that really captured the spirit, the personality, and the rhythm of these incredibly interesting and dynamic places," said Ben Weprin, CEO of Graduate parent AJ Capital. "These are great towns, great communities, and great destinations."

The Graduate in Tempe is a meticulously renovated former Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge originally built in the early 1960s. The key cards look like student IDs, the desks are study carrels, the notepads are made of graph paper and the "do not disturb" signs are college pennants that say "Studying."

But these aren't dorm rooms. Those are across the street at Arizona State University, the kind of campus credited with giving college towns the youthful energy that makes them fun.

"The emotion around that is really strong — just the pride of alumni, residents, current students," Weprin said. "There are sports and cultural events and authors coming through. It's a great vibe, and then what happens is you just have interesting people who come and stay in these towns" and keep them lively.



Downtown Tempe, Ariz.

There are practical advantages to visiting a college town, too. Because most students don't have cars, they're pedestrian friendly. Because most students don't have money, they're comparatively cheap. And there are a lot of live music venues and good bars because . . . well, you get the idea.

"There are annoyances too, like the hung-over college kids," said Bob Conlon, owner of Leunig's, an iconic restaurant and bar in Burlington. "But because there are a lot of young people around, there are a million coffee shops. There are people moving around. There are street musicians. There's life."

There are often also more than just the universities. Austin and Madison, Wis., are state capitals, too, for instance. Boulder, Colo., boasts breathtaking views of the Flatirons. And universities are good at helping to preserve some of the best things about their natural settings, said Mary Ann Mahoney, executive director of the local convention and visitors bureau.

"Not only does the student population bring that great youth, but the academics help make our culture, because this is where they live," Mahoney said.

Her city has over the years bought up 45,000 acres of open space to preserve for walking, hiking, and mountain-biking, thanks in part to the leadership of university faculty who study climate change. Like many other college towns, it has a bike-share program and dedicated cycling lanes.

"Those kinds of things are important to people here," she said. "It's part of their body of work. And what better place to improve the quality of life than where you live?"

Universities also bring high-quality but low-cost entertainment — and not just sports events.

"Football games are great, but there's something always happening on a university campus," Mahoney said. The University of Colorado, for example, hosts a Shakespeare festival, and just revitalized its planetarium.

Sports remain a huge draw, of course. In a survey of visitors to Tempe, more said they came for sporting events than for any other reason. Arizona State sells more than 340,000 tickets annually to its football games. And Madison on game day looks like a religious revival, with crowds of people in Wisconsin red lining a parade route through town as the fight song blares from speakers on the sidewalks.



"People have a tremendous amount of loyalty and connection to the school, so there's a lot of support for the sports teams, and a lot of pride," said Eliot Butler, a transplanted New Yorker who co-owns the Great Dane Pub in Madison. And that translates into something else, he said: "Tons of openness. They want to share with you their favorite places in the city, which might not be in the guidebook."

That shouldn't overshadow the sophisticated side of college towns, however, Butler said.

"You definitely get a more cosmopolitan sense in Madison than you would think from the 'midwestern' label," he said. College towns, said Butler, are "small towns with big-city amenities." And now, "with the do-it-yourself culture and all the entrepreneurship, graduates aren't going and working for IBM, or going to the big cities where the big firms are. They're starting their own niche businesses. Even if they're from a big city they like the quality of life in the college towns and smaller cities. So they stick around."

You don't have to have kids in college to visit college towns, these boosters say. And even if you do, they say, it's best to come back at some other time than during the emotional frenzy of freshman orientation. (The Graduate in Athens offers parents dropping off their freshmen a package that includes a Target gift card, a bottle of champagne, and a box of Kleenex.)

"I always tell all the parents when they come with the kids, 'Why don't you come back in a few weeks, when everybody's not here to drop off their kids, or back for homecoming or graduation,'" Conlon said.

Wiggins's daughter is scheduled to graduate in June, but she still plans to return to San Luis Obispo after that. "We'll be real empty-nesters at that point, so it will be easier for us to spend time there," she said.

Without a student at the university, however, she may not go as often, something she said she regrets enough that she's asked her daughter: "Darn it, don't you want to get your master's?"