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Students walk by a library on the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. // **Steve Helber/AP**

The Reality of America's College Towns

RICHARD FLORIDA SEP 8, 2016

Most of them aren't bucolic, ivy-covered places.

It's that time of year again when college students are streaming back to school. Across the nation, some 17 million Americans are headed to college this fall.

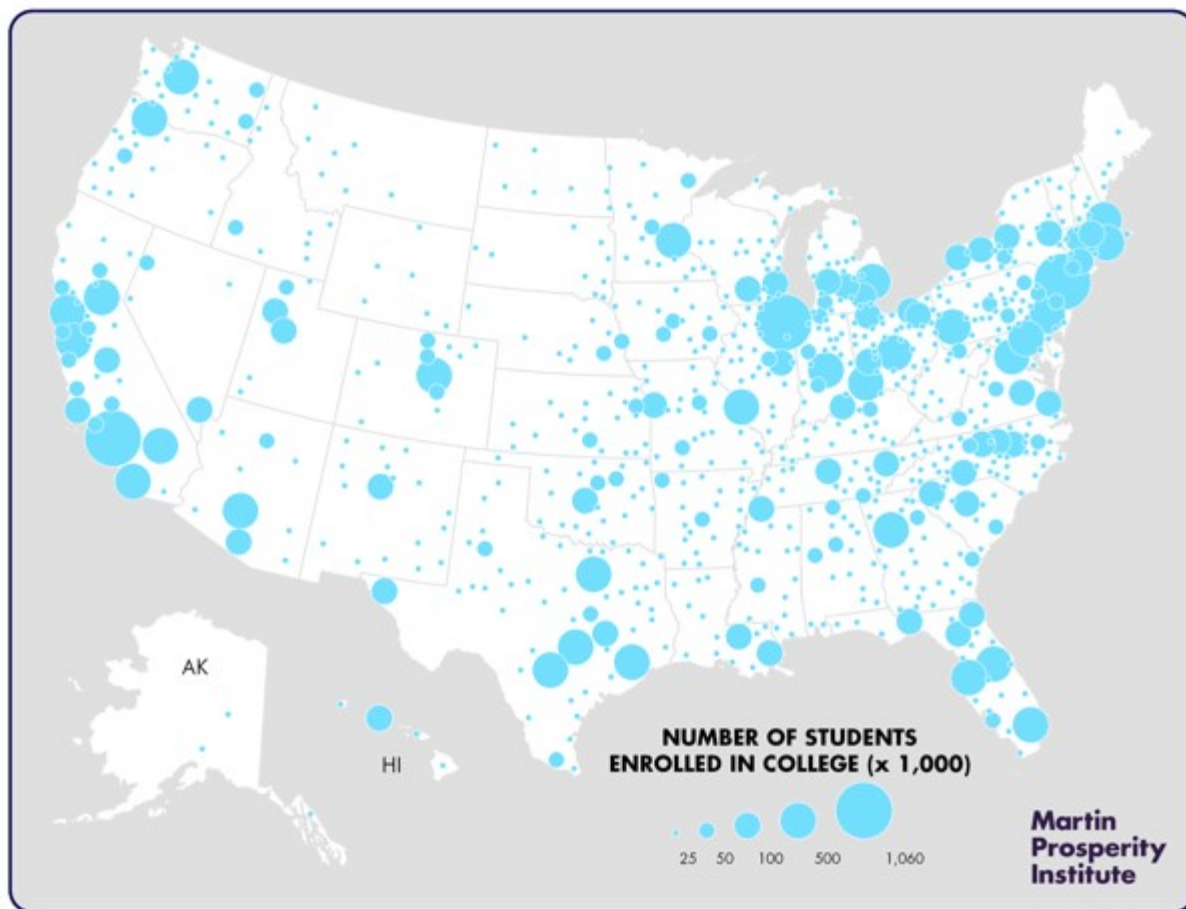
But, where, exactly, are they heading to?

To get at this, we charted America's biggest and best college towns based on 2014 enrollment data for some 750 metro and micropolitan locations across the U.S., including data from the economic and modeling firm [Emsi](#). Taylor Blake of the [Martin Prosperity Institute](#) mapped the data.

We broke out the data into three categories: 52 large metros with more than one million people; 321 metros with between 100,000 and one million people, the group into which most "classic" college towns fall; and 392 smaller places, mainly micropolitan areas, with less than 100,000 people. These enrollment numbers include students at two- and four- year institutions as well as other forms of post-secondary education, including undergraduate and graduate students, credit- and non-credit seeking students and some who do distance learning as well.

Our back-to-school image is one of undergrads streaming into dorms on lush campuses in classic college towns. But, the reality is that the great majority of America's college students actually live and go to school in big cities and metros.

More than half (55.9 percent) of all U.S. college students (9.5 million) go to college in the 52 U.S. metros with more than one million people, and more than a quarter (27.6 percent, or 4.7 million) attend school in just the nation's 10 largest metros. Another six million students (35.3 percent) go to college in places with between 100,000 and a million people; and 1.6 million, a little under ten percent, attend college in 392 locations with less than 100,000 people.



(Taylor Blake)

The map above charts the numbers of college students across these 750-plus locations. The biggest bubbles indicate the largest clusters of college students.

Not surprisingly, college students track population to a large degree. That is because most college students go to school where they live. It is typically only the most affluent and most talented students who go away to school.

Leading Large U.S. Metros for College Students

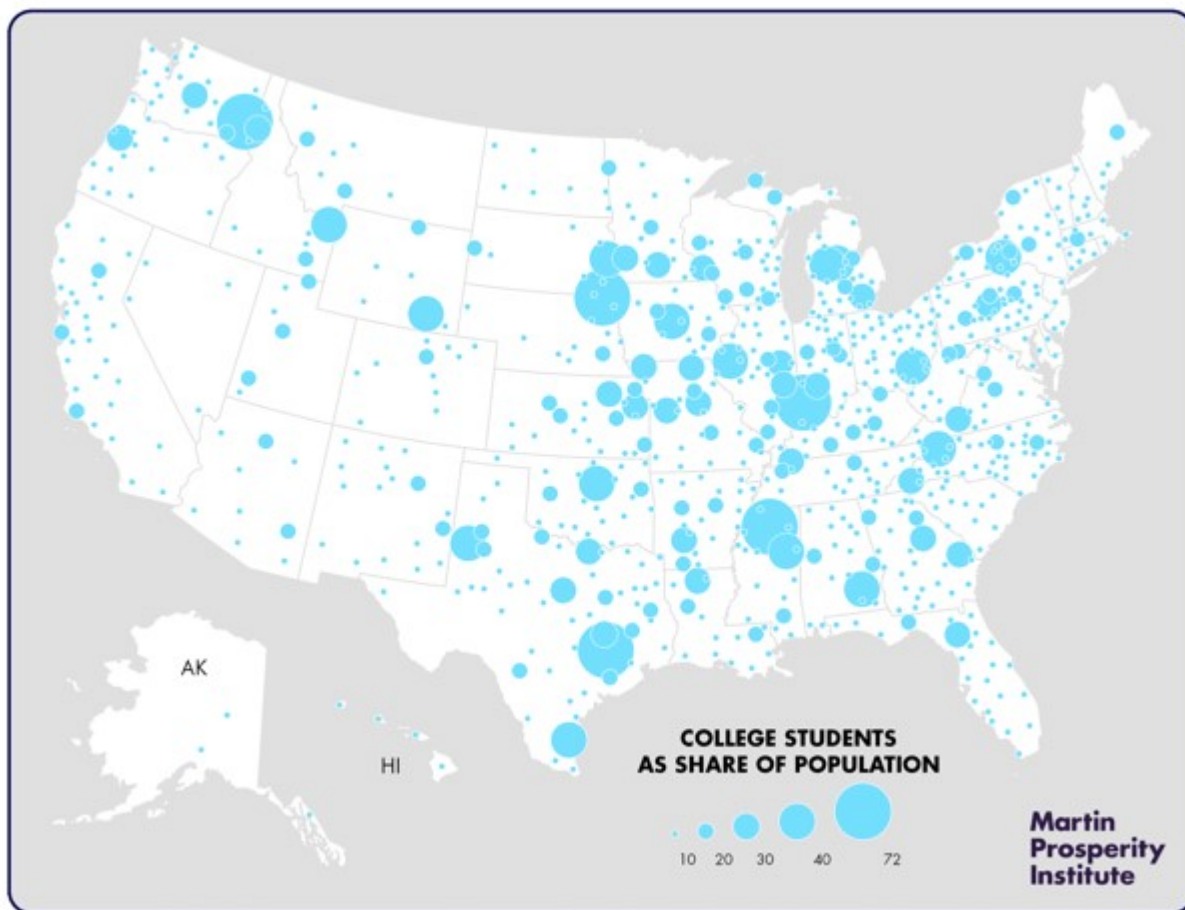
Metro	Total College Students	Example Universities and Colleges
New York	1,057,288	NYU, Columbia, The New School, CUNY, Fordham
Los Angeles	974,013	UCLA, USC, Occidental, Loyola-Marymount
Chicago	502,189	University of Chicago, Northwestern University, University of Illinois at Chicago
Boston	346,157	Harvard, MIT, Tufts, Boston University, Boston College
Philadelphia	342,994	University of Pennsylvania, Drexel, Temple, Villanova
Miami	308,348	University of Miami, Florida International University, Florida Atlantic
Dallas	302,572	Southern Methodist University, University of Texas at Dallas, University of Texas at Arlington
Washington, D.C.	293,391	Georgetown University, George Washington, American, Howard, George Mason
San Francisco	279,887	University of California at Berkeley, University of California, San Francisco
Houston	270,350	Rice University, University of Houston

By sheer volume, New York is the nation's largest college town with more than one million students. Los Angeles is next with 950,000, and Chicago third with 520,000. But then the connection between students and population shifts around a bit, as the table above shows. Boston is fourth in college students with 346,000 students, but tenth in population. Philadelphia is fifth in college students but seventh in population. Miami is sixth in students but eight in population. Dallas, which has the nation's fourth largest population is seventh in college students. Washington, D.C., is eighth in students but sixth in population. San Francisco is ninth in students and 11th in population and Houston, which is the nation's fifth largest metro, is tenth in college enrollment.

Where college students make up the largest share of population

Thus it becomes important to look at college students in terms of the share of population made up of college students, as the map below shows.

Obviously, college students will be more likely to make up the largest share of population in the smallest places, so we divide this analysis into our three groups by size of population: metros over one million people, metros with between 100,000 and one million people, and metros with less than 100,000 people.



(Taylor Blake)

This second map looks quite a bit different than the first one. There are much smaller circles on the coasts and much bigger ones in the center of the country.

Interestingly, Los Angeles tops Boston for large metros. College students make up 7.34 percent of greater L.A.'s population, just a bit higher than Boston's 7.32 percent. San Diego is next with 7.27 percent, followed by Sacramento (7.23 percent), and Austin (7.13 percent). Rochester, New York (6.98 percent), San Jose (6.95 percent), Buffalo (6.92 percent), Tucson (6.89 percent), and Oklahoma City (6.8 percent) round out the top 10.

Indianapolis, Providence, Hartford, Orlando, Salt Lake City, Grand Rapids, Baltimore, and Virginia Beach complete the top 20, with between 5.7 and 6.7 percent college students each. Conversely, Las Vegas, Jacksonville, Charlotte, Birmingham, Alabama, Memphis, Kansas City, Atlanta, and Detroit are the large metros with smaller percentages of college students, ranging between 3.4 and 4 percent.

Metros between 100,000 and 1 million people

Next we turn to metros with between 100,000 and one million people. This is where most of America's "classic" college towns fit in.

College Town	Major University	Enrollment	Population	Percentage
Ithaca, NY	Cornell University	33,451	104,606	32.0%
State College, PA	Penn State	47,823	158,728	30.1%
Bloomington, IN	Indiana University	44,564	164,233	27.1%
Lawrence, KS	University of Kansas	29,512	116,559	25.3%
Blacksburg, VA	Virginia Tech	45,150	181,555	24.9%
College Station-Bryan, TX	Texas A&M	60,137	242,884	24.8%
Columbia, MO	University of Missouri	41,057	172,703	23.8%
Champaign-Urbana, IL	University of Illinois	51,660	237,199	21.8%
Ann Arbor, MI	University of Michigan	76,448	356,823	21.4%
Gainesville, FL	University of Florida	58,453	273,365	21.38%

Ithaca, New York tops this list, where students make up 32 percent of the population, followed by State College, Pennsylvania (30 percent); Bloomington, Indiana (27.1 percent), Lawrence, Kansas (25.3 percent); Blacksburg, Virginia (24.8 percent); College Station, Texas (24.8 percent); Columbia, Missouri (23.8 percent); Champaign, Illinois (21.8 percent); Ann Arbor, Michigan (21.4 percent) and Gainesville, Florida (21.38 percent)—all classic college towns.

However, the places with the largest shares of college students are all very small communities with less than 100,000 people.

Vermillion, South Dakota, tops that list, where more than 70 percent of its population is made up of college students. Pullman, Washington, is next (52.3 percent), followed by Brenham, Texas (51.4 percent) and Vincennes, Indiana (48.0 percent). This group also includes classic college towns such as Oxford, Mississippi (40.6 percent), Athens, Ohio (37.6 percent) and Ames, Iowa (35.1 percent).

Very small places (under 100,000 people)

College Town	Major University	Enrollment	Population	Percentage
Vermillion, SD	University of South Dakota	9,998	13,921	71.8%
Pullman, WA	Washington State University	25,823	46,808	55.2%
Brenham, TX	Blinn College	17,707	34,437	51.4%
Vincennes, IN	Vincennes University	18,198	37,937	48.0%
Oxford, MS	University of Mississippi ("Ole Miss")	21,482	52,921	40.6%
Athens, OH	Ohio University	24,358	64,702	37.6%
Starkville, MS	Mississippi State University	18,159	49,403	36.8%
Levelland, TX	South Plains College	8,534	23,577	36.2%
Kingsville, TX	Texas A&M University-Kingsville	11,619	32,593	35.7%
Ames, IA	Iowa State University	32,998	94,035	35.1%

* * *

While there are many college towns where students make up a large share of the populations, the perception of America's bucolic, ivy-covered college town experience is a misnomer for the large majority of college students. The reality is that many more students go to college in big cities than in "classic" college towns.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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