

# The 25 best small college towns

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Living in a vibrant college town can have a positive impact on a student's educational experience, regardless of how they attend their classes. For schools with campus-based students, proximity to their college or university, even if they're taking some online courses, means greater access to fellow students and faculty who can help answer questions, assist with assignments or provide a sounding board for projects.

For online students, the local culture can help them combine their [nontraditional educational experience](#) with some of the perks of living near a college, such as a youthful population, varied entertainment options and a strong sense of community — not to mention potential access to a college library. In addition, these areas often have the advantage of a student-centered population and a cost of living that's more likely to fit within a student's budget.

Every college student may develop their own opinion on what makes the perfect small town experience, but for those who want to start by weighing the data, we've put together the following list. We scored 170 U.S. cities that have both a four-year college and a population of less than 150,000 on several criteria, evaluating both economic and quality of life factors. [Read more about our methodology](#), or scroll on to check out our list of the best 25 small college towns.

## 1. Fargo, North Dakota



- Population: 115,863

- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 24.8%
- Unemployment rate: 2.5%
- Median annual rent: \$7,260

Fargo takes the No. 1 spot on our list, due in large part to extremely low unemployment rates and short commute times: 88 percent of commuters spend 30 minutes or less on the road. Those strong lifestyle scores help attract an educated crowd, too — Fargo ranked ninth for the percentage of people over age 25 with a bachelor's degree. [North Dakota State University](#), a research university with a total enrollment of around 15,000, is located in the heart of Fargo.

## 2. Aberdeen, South Dakota

- Population: 27,800
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 19.2%
- Unemployment rate: 2.9%
- Median annual rent: \$5,688

Coming in at No. 2, Aberdeen ranks extremely well on several important lifestyle factors. Low rents are coupled with low unemployment rates, and those who do work enjoy the luxury of short commute times, with 90 percent boasting a commute time of 30 minutes or less. Much of Aberdeen is within an easy distance of the campus of centrally located [Northern State University](#), which was founded in 1901 and currently enrolls more than 3,200 students.

## 3. Bloomington, Illinois

- Population: 78,730
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 28.1%
- Unemployment rate: 5.5%
- Median annual rent: \$7,332

The bronze medal of small college towns goes to Bloomington, home of [Illinois Wesleyan University](#). Enrolling around 2,000 students, this small school packs a big punch when it comes to employment rates: 72 percent of Illinois Wesleyan graduates from the class of 2014 are employed full time within six months of finishing school, according to the school's website. This may be part of what is boosting an educated population in the town: Bloomington ranked third for the percentage of the population with bachelor's degrees. Although the median annual salaries are among the highest on the list, at \$41,332, rents have stayed relatively low, counting for just below 18 percent annually of an average individual's earnings.

## 4. Bozeman, Montana

- Population: 41,660
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 30.8%
- Unemployment rate: 3.5%
- Median annual rent: \$8,712

Ranked second for both educational attainment (more than 30 percent of residents possess bachelor's degrees) and restaurants (there are more than 14 per 10,000 people), Bozeman offers both demographic and lifestyle perks for college students. [Montana State University](#) enrolls around 15,000 students — a large student population relative to the city's. With two ski areas nearby, miles of biking and hiking paths, and Yellowstone National Park just 90 miles away, Bozeman is a great choice for students who love outdoor recreation.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“Bozeman is small enough to have a personality and big enough to have all the amenities of a city.

Four museums, numerous art galleries, a symphony, a ballet, an opera company and several community theaters set Bozeman apart as one of the most arts-vibrant small towns in America.”

— Alison Reidmohr, Marketing Strategist at Montana State University

## 5. Grand Forks, North Dakota

- Population: 56,057
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 18.5%
- Unemployment rate: 2.9%
- Median annual rent: \$7,224

Grand Forks is home to the [University of North Dakota](#), the state's oldest and largest university, which currently enrolls more than 15,000 students. Grand Forks' low unemployment rates and commute times (more than 87 percent of commuters have a commute of 30 minutes or less) are part of what puts this small city at a healthy No. 5. Boosting its overall scores might be the nightlife — there are about four bars per 10,000 residents, plus a great deal of local enthusiasm for the university's ice hockey and football teams.

## 6. Mankato, Minnesota



- Population: 40,411
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 21.8%
- Unemployment rate: 3.4%
- Median annual rent: \$7,500

Mankato comes in as the sixth town on our list by virtue of its low unemployment rates and youthful population, with more than 28 percent of its adult residents being younger than 34. The majority of commuters — nearly 87 percent — enjoy travel times under 30 minutes. More than 15,000 people attend [Minnesota State University-Mankato](#), founded in 1868 as Mankato Normal School and later known as Mankato State University. The state university isn't the only option for higher education or entertainment, however. Mankato is also home to [Bethany Lutheran College](#) and a lively, revitalized downtown.

## 7. La Crosse, Wisconsin

- Population: 52,440
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 18.4%
- Unemployment rate: 4.4%
- Median annual rent: \$7,212

Ranking first for bars — with nearly seven for every 10,000 people — and 25th for its WalkScore, La Crosse's nightlife and walkability places it seventh overall on our list. La Crosse is home to the [University of Wisconsin-La Crosse](#), which enrolls more than 10,000 students, and also hosts [Western Technical College](#) and [Viterbo University](#), a private Roman Catholic liberal arts school. La Crosse is known for the strong sense of community between its student population and the rest of the town, and the university is proud of that fact.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“Families host dinners for host dinners for neighboring students or bring students cookies as they welcome them to the community. In return, numerous student organizations volunteer in the community for fundraisers like Rotary lights and Neighbor’s Day.”

— Brad Quarberg, Director of News and Marketing at UW-La Crosse

## 8. Appleton, Wisconsin

- Population: 73,971
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor’s: 19%
- Unemployment rate: 4.3%
- Median annual rent: \$7,224

Appleton, Wisconsin, coming in eighth overall, has a strong local economy, with low unemployment and relatively low median rent relative to incomes. Appleton also ranked well for nightlife, boasting just over four bars per 10,000 residents, and outdoor recreation is a perk of the area as well, given town’s location near the north end of Lake Winnebago. Located adjacent to Appleton proper is [Lawrence University](#), a liberal arts college and conservatory of music that enrolls around 1,500 students.

## 9. Helena, Montana

- Population: 29,943
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor’s: 23.9%
- Unemployment rate: 3.7%
- Median annual rent: \$7,644

Helena, the capital of Montana and also one of the smallest towns on our list, received high marks for the level of education — nearly a quarter of the town’s adult residents have bachelor’s degrees. That, in combination with a relatively low unemployment rate, short average commute times, and plenty of restaurants and bars, put it in ninth place overall. [Carroll College](#), a private Catholic liberal arts college enrolling around 1,400 students, is located in the center of Helena, as is [Helena College](#), a comprehensive two-year school affiliated with the [University of Montana](#).

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“Helena is a tight-knit community who embrace the college and the students as their own. There are an abundance of social opportunities within walking distance of campus including numerous



restaurants, quaint coffee and movie houses, unique stores and an array of community events.”

— Sarah Lawlor, Director of Public Relations at Carroll College

## 10. Cedar Rapids, Iowa

- Population: 129,195
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 20.2%
- Unemployment rate: 4.6%
- Median annual rent: \$6,444

Rounding out the top 10 is Cedar Rapids, which is located in the eastern half of Iowa and is the state's second-largest city. Low median rents relative to median incomes mean that housing can cost as little as 17 percent of a resident's annual earnings. Cedar Rapids is home to both [Coe College](#), founded in 1851, and [Mount Mercy University](#), a liberal arts college that boasts a student-to-faculty ratio of 13 to one. Both of these institutions enroll under 2,000 students each.

## 11. Columbia, Missouri



- Population: 116,906
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 27.1%
- Unemployment rate: 4.1
- Median annual rent: \$7,416

Columbia got high marks for the portion of the population aged 20-34 (more than 30 percent) and for the percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree (ranking fourth overall). Columbia hosts several festivals throughout the year, including the “Blind” Boone Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival,

the True/False Film Fest, and the Boone County Fair, established in 1835. [The University of Missouri](#), which enrolls a whopping 34,000+ students, was founded in 1839 and holds the distinction of being the first public university west of the Mississippi River. The college football team is one of the town's most popular draws and games are a citywide event, even for those outside the stadium.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“Mizzou Tigers game days mean everyone throughout town is dressed in black and gold. The university is a large economic driver for the city and is one of the city's largest employers.”

— Jesslyn Chew, University of Missouri News Bureau

## 12. Dubuque, Iowa

- Population: 58,436
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 17.6%
- Unemployment rate: 4.3%
- Median annual rent: \$6,480

Dubuque ranked 11th for commute times, with almost 87 percent of commuters getting to work in 30 minutes or less, and 12th for the number of bars per 10,000 residents. [Clarke University](#), with a total enrollment of around 1,200 students, is a Catholic liberal arts college started by a pioneering Irish woman named Mary Frances Clarke in 1843. Clarke offers 31 different majors and a student to faculty ratio of 11 to one. The city has been recognized before, too: In the past, Dubuque has been rated as one of “America's Top 100 Places” by RelocateAmerica and was ranked No. 10 on Kiplinger's list of “Great Places to Live.”

## 13. Stillwater, Oklahoma

- Population: 48,406
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor's: 20.9%
- Unemployment rate: 3.7%
- Median annual rent: \$6,504

The students of [Oklahoma State University](#) have called Stillwater home since the founding of the university in 1890. Today, they enjoy a young city demographic — more than a third of adult residents are younger than 34 — and low unemployment, tying for 15th overall. The community is known for being incredibly welcoming to Oklahoma State's students and for what's described as “America's Greatest Homecoming Celebration,” a weeklong event that includes a carnival, parade and, of course, a football game.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

“The community and university have an outstanding town-gown relationship. The community relies heavily on OSU students for employment, so students get plugged into the community. OSU employees are also active in the community in both service and leadership (the current mayor is an OSU faculty member). The school color of bright orange is the dominate color across Stillwater.”

— Gary Shutt, Director of Communications for Oklahoma State University

## 14. Burlington, Vermont

- Population: 42,211
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor’s: 25.8%
- Unemployment rate: 3.1%
- Median annual rent: \$10,488

A large city by Vermont standards, as the whole state is home to only 626,562 people, Burlington has several advantages for college students, including a large demographic of educated residents, low unemployment (it ranked sixth) and plenty of dining out opportunities (nearly 10 restaurants per 10,000 residents). The [University of Vermont](#) enrolls more than 12,000 students on its campus near Lake Champlain. Founded in 1791, it is the fifth-oldest university in New England, after Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth and Brown.

## 15. State College, Pennsylvania

- Population: 42,100
- Percent of people 25+ with a bachelor’s: 20.8%
- Unemployment rate: 4.1%
- Median annual rent: \$9,540

As the name might suggest, State College is home to [The Pennsylvania State University](#), better known as Penn State, which enrolls more than 46,000 students. It ranks sixth in our analysis for the percentage of residents aged 20-34 and ninth for walkability, based on its WalkScore of more than 65. The State College area, which includes the borough and the townships of College, Harris, Patton, and Ferguson, is commonly referred to as “Happy Valley” by its enthusiastic residents. Penn State was chartered as one of the first colleges of agricultural science in the nation in 1855. Today, it offers a wide range of graduate and undergraduate degree programs.