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UNH Professor Writes First Book About Life In The American College Town

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DURHAM, N.H. - In the first book written about life in U.S. college towns, a University of New Hampshire professor explores the distinctive character and culture of these exceptional places that are so prominently held in the American mind.

Blake Gumprecht, associate professor of geography and chair of the UNH Department of Geography, has published "The American College Town" (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). In his new book, Gumprecht examines some of the most interesting aspects of college towns in the United States - their distinctive residential and commercial districts, their unconventional political cultures, their status as bohemian islands, and their emergence as high-tech centers.

"College towns are exceptional places, worth knowing and worth knowing about. They are an essential component of American geography. They are part of what makes life different in these United States. They reflect the singular nature of American higher education and the indelible characteristics of American culture," Gumprecht says.

Despite thousands of professors living in college towns, academic research about them is limited. That Gumprecht's book is the first written on the topic is due to academic farsightedness and the natural human tendency to overlook what is all around us, he says.

"Research on local topics is perceived as parochial and counterproductive to building a national reputation necessary to earn tenure. But I also have found that professors who live in college towns are often oblivious to those characteristics that make them unusual," says Gumprecht, a former newspaper reporter with a curious streak.

So what are some of those unusual characteristics? According to Gumprecht, the American college town is a youthful place that is home to highly educated residents who are likely to hold white-collar jobs. It is affluent compared to neighboring towns, but has high living costs, especially for housing. It is a transient place where residents are more likely to rent, live in apartments and have roommates. It is cosmopolitan, unconventional, and offers a high quality of life.

The geography of the American college town includes the odd mix of fraternity rows, student housing, and faculty enclaves. Commercial districts are home to interesting mixes of business - coffee houses, bookstores, pizzerias, bike shops, music stores, copy shops, bars, and ethnic restaurants. College towns are more politically liberal and politically engaged than their neighbors where people with widely differing backgrounds coexist. College sports play prominent roles in their culture, especially on weekends, and many are hubs for high-tech
research. And college towns are home to the inevitable "town vs. gown" clashes between student renters and homeowners.

In researching the American college town, Gumprecht conducted more than 200 interviews, took 2,000 photographs and amassed enough material to fill three filing cabinets and a six-foot-long bookshelf. He visited numerous U.S. college towns, and several are explored in depth in the book. They include Norman, Oklahoma; Ithaca, New York; Manhattan, Kansas; Davis, California; Athens, Georgia; Auburn, Alabama; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Newark, Delaware.

Gumprecht's book has been praised by scholars nationwide.

"Thoroughly satisfying! Blake Gumprecht has given us a keenly observed, richly documented, many-sided account of a critically significant part of the American scene, one too long ignored by its scholarly residents. A truly brilliant achievement," said Wilbur Zelinsky, author of "The Cultural Geography of the United States."

"'The American College Town' demonstrates Gumprecht's knack for recognizing a great untold story. It also proves that it is actually possible to articulate that most elusive of geographical concepts, the sense of place, when the writer is a master of landscape observation, as Gumprecht unquestionably is. This book teaches readers how to see the meaning embedded in places we take for granted. Gumprecht's exhaustive, multi-dimensional research enables him to read landscapes better than any historical geographer writing today," said Anne Kelly Knowles, author of "Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio's Industrial Frontier."

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