



Ferris Coffee & Nut

*Grand Rapids' college scene is on the upswing as more students settle in the city.*

# TRANSFORMED BY DEGREES

**WITH VIBRANT NEIGHBORHOODS**, bicycle-friendly roadways, strong job growth and more than a dozen colleges to choose from, Grand Rapids has become an attractive place for students to spend their college years and even start a life beyond graduation.

Many residents overlook the city's higher learning institutions because they are nestled in neighborhoods or located downtown, but the student demographic is increasingly hard to ignore.

Several colleges date back a century, including Aquinas College, Calvin College and Grand Rapids Community College. And

the continued expansion of Grand Valley State University and Ferris State University downtown and the opening of Michigan State University College of Human Medicine's Grand Rapids Research Center along Medical Mile in 2017 are helping to transform Grand Rapids into a true college town.

Grand Rapids has a student popula-



tion similar to Michigan State University, totaling around 40,000. The difference is students are spread throughout the city and attend many schools, says Suzanne Schulz, managing director of design and development for the city of Grand Rapids.

That growing demographic has spurred development in neighborhoods with hip breweries, cafés and coffee shops. The economic vitality and creative energy is really healthy for a community.

"There is definitely a sense there are more students in the community," Schulz says. "The good side is we're seeing additional vibrancy in our neighborhood business districts. It was a bit sleepy when I moved here 20 years ago. There's a whole different vibe in the city. We're also finding that those students turn into young professionals, and they are staying in Grand Rapids."

Aquinas and GRCC report a recent decline in enrollment due to the uptick in the economy and job growth. But the upside is students are finding jobs and integrating into the community.

GRCC has 15,000 degree-seeking students in all locations, and many commute to the downtown location.

"It's exciting to be in downtown Grand Rapids as a college, because there is so much going on around us, and it's a very vibrant community," says Tina Hoxie, associate provost and dean of student affairs at GRCC, which has been downtown since 1913. "I think any time you have a strong educational base in a community, that adds to the economy."

"It also adds a vibrancy of students pursuing educational goals and dreams that can then transition into available jobs and contribute to the community in a lot of ways."

Another benefit of having multiple colleges in one city is collaboration. GRCC partners with most of the other schools so credits easily transfer to four-year programs. Students can start at GRCC, transfer and still stay within the community and take advantage of convenience and affordability, Hoxie says.

That's what Matthew Rios, 33, plans to do. The Grand Rapids native didn't feel college was for him but found an open door and welcoming environment at GRCC. He enjoys the diverse ages and viewpoints in his classes and will graduate with his associate's degree in December, then transfer to GVSU.

"I've been able to explore the city I love as I experience my education, and it seems like every week we are slowly pushing forward to being a college town," he says. "Quite often no matter what time of day it is, you'll see people walking off campus to find something to do because you're downtown."

He used to live in Easttown but moved to Caledonia to find cheaper rent. He works at GRCC and enjoys grabbing lunch downtown or perusing comic books at Vault of Midnight between classes or work. He also enjoys the free admission for GRCC students at area cultural institutions such as the Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids Public Museum and John Ball Zoo.

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Grand Rapids Community College campus





GRCC students Tyler Burton, Clayton Muma, Alexandra Baker, Paige Pronger and Nathan Cummings hit some of the hot spots in downtown Grand Rapids.

GRCC's Go See GR! program, open to all students and employees with the Raider-Card, encourages students to experience the city for free, Hoxie says. Many restaurants also offer student discounts.

Rios also enjoys attending festivals such as ArtPrize, Pulaski Days and Hispanic Festival.

"I like the atmosphere in downtown Grand Rapids, the growth in the city," he says. "I like to walk around downtown and shop. I can park at CC, head on down and pick up a couple of comic books, have some lunch and enjoy free admission into the art museum. And it helps that we have so much great food like burgers at Stella's and pizza at Big O' Café."

He plans to stay in Grand Rapids and study political science, and he hopes to help with local community activism.

"There's no reason at all for me to leave," he says. "We have a lot of jobs coming in, and I love Grand Rapids. A lot of people don't understand I can go to Founders and then within the same hour be at the lake-shore."

Wyoming native Nate Cummings, 20, was attracted to GRCC for its law enforcement program and wants to stay in the city and give back as a police officer. He lives at home to save money but works on campus and enjoys the downtown nightlife and entertainment.

"GRCC has the best police academy program in West Michigan," he says. "I like Grand Rapids because it's a big city but it's got a small-town feel. You can go by and everyone will say hello. It's more chill and laid-back, but there's still tons of stuff to do. I go to swing dance, concerts at The Intersection. It's nice that Grand Rapids has so many colleges. It makes the nightlife more enjoyable."

Beyond the bars on Ionia Avenue, hot spots for college students include Brewery Vivant, Billy's, Founders, The Pyramid Scheme, Tin Can Bar and The Intersection.

When it comes to studying or a caffeine fix, Ferris Coffee & Nut, MadCap, Lantern Coffee Bar and Lounge and PaLatte Coffee & Art are popular hangouts.

"Our shop gets a really diverse crowd just from people from the YMCA and the local colleges nearby," says Hannah Saylor, café manager at Ferris Coffee & Nut, which underwent a large expansion two years ago and plans to add a patio and second location in the Michigan Trust Building this summer. "The majority of our customers are college students, and it's usually filled with students doing homework or studying. The community aspect of this café is unlike anything I've ever seen. It's a great place to share food and conversation."

Aquinas, located between Robinson Road and Fulton Street, offers a liberal arts

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curriculum with a global perspective. The small Catholic college just graduated 414 students — the largest class in its 130-year history. Enrollment hovers around 2,000 but has been on the decline for a few years, says Carl Apple, associate vice president for marketing, communications and public relations.

Sixty percent of students live on campus, and others often commute from home. Some upperclassmen rent houses or apartments in Easttown or the Fulton Heights Neighborhood.

"We hear that our students are very welcome in the neighborhoods in which they live, as they provide community service and energy," says Brian Matzke, associate vice president for student affairs. "Some of them historically have gotten involved in different associations. They bring a source of commerce, as well."

Aquinas students often frequent Spoon-lickers and area coffee shops such as Bitter End, Sparrows and Lyon Street Café. In the summer, Jersey Junction is a popular spot.

Miranda Burel, a senior at Aquinas, had never been to Grand Rapids before a campus visit and was impressed with the city, campus and Aquinas' community leadership program.

"I fell in love with the campus and community, seeing how close Aquinas was to Easttown and I didn't have a car," she says. "It's interesting because Aquinas is such a small school in comparison to Grand Valley, Michigan and Michigan State, but you don't really feel like you're isolated as you might at some other schools. You get that big collective community amidst all your smaller, individual communities."

Burel now lives year-round in Easttown and works part time in Aquinas' communications office. She doesn't own a car and enjoys being able to walk to class and various restaurants in Easttown. She also frequents Reeds Lake and Wilcox Park and



says The Rapid is a great way for students to get around.

"There's a lot to do no matter what anyone is interested in," she says. "It's a great area. It's a half mile to campus, and I get to walk through Eastown. It's hard not to buy all the delicious food around."

Aquinas subsidizes The Rapid so students pay only 25 cents per way and can easily navigate the city. The college also has a popular program allowing students to inexpensively rent a bike for a day, week-end, month or semester. Many students also bring their own bikes to campus.

"It is a very livable city for college students, as it provides them with a lot of options for work, play, art," Matzke says. "They can easily become a part of the community."

Grand Rapids also is attractive for interns. GVSU helped house nearly 200 people at downtown residence halls who come from all over to intern at various companies during the summer, says Andy Beachnau, associate vice provost for student affairs and director of housing and health services.

Grand Valley opened its first building downtown in 1988, investing millions to expand the Pew Campus to accommodate

graduate and undergraduate programs in engineering, business, nursing and public administration. In 2015-16, GVSU's enrollment exceeded 25,000, and about 13,000 attended at least some of their classes downtown, says Philip Batty, director of the office of institutional analysis. In 1990, about 3,500 students had some classes downtown.

"Every few minutes, we're running a bus between the two campuses, coming down Lake Michigan Drive and making it seamless for students," Beachnau says. "During the spring and summer, students are looking to live in the city to do internships, work and just experience Grand Rapids."

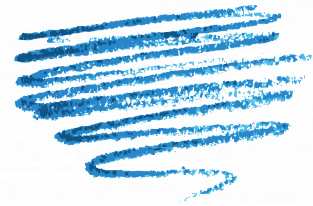
Even during the school year, students elect to live in Grand Rapids because there are more opportunities, whether working in the service industry or volunteering in the community, Beachnau says.

"They do service in the city that endears them to have an affinity to the Grand Rapids west side," he says. "It's student-friendly time to be in the city. There are so many things going on in Grand Rapids, and students from other parts of Michigan are choosing to make this place their home."

"You're getting some of the best and brightest committing to Grand Rapids,"

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Aquinas students Miranda Burel and Katrina Danko shop at Rebel gift boutique in Eastown.





Grand Valley State University  
downtown campus

Beachnau continues. "They're coming here for school, but they're staying because of the community. The students agree that this is a dynamic place to be."

Miah Hagy, 22, moved from East Lansing for the nursing program at GVSU. She lived in Allendale until her sophomore year, then moved to the city's west side to be closer to her classes. The recent graduate landed a nursing job at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital and plans to stay.

She's among a group of regulars who visit Ferris Coffee & Nut, 227 Winter Ave. NW, to study and socialize with friends. For nightlife, they venture to Brewery Vivant or Founders.

"Living downtown, I've met way more people than I did in Allendale," she says. "I absolutely love Grand Rapids. I love to go for walks, and Reeds Lake is a great place to run. It's a place I could spend the rest of my life. It was really appealing to be in the city, but not in a city that's too crowded."

From bike shops to breweries, businesses also reap the benefits of having more college students in town. Bartertown Diner, a casual, worker-owned diner serving meatless fare and locally sourced ingredients on Jefferson Avenue, draws a diverse crowd including students and young professionals.

Vault of Midnight, selling comic books, graphic novels and games at 95A Monroe Center St. NW, sees a lot of foot traffic from students, says Kaitlin Diemer, a manager at the store. They also support local artist events at the store and in the community.

"We actually have fans of all ages, but

we have a lot of students who shop and browse," she says. "We do a lot of free events here and around town, at the library and The Pyramid Scheme. We do different art-based events in the community where people can drink, draw, hang out and sketch things up and share technique."

Ferris State University's presence in Grand Rapids continues to grow with the addition of its College of Pharmacy Center for Innovational Learning and Research. The university also renovated the historic Federal Building to provide additional classroom, gallery and office space for the rapid growth of its Kendall College of Art and Design.

Kendall has about 1,300 students, the majority from Michigan. Many commute, but a growing number are deciding to live closer to campus in Heritage Hill or Easttown, says Kristopher Jones, director of talent acquisition and recruitment.

KCAD sells itself as an urban art and design college in a growing city that's accessible and responsibly priced, offering more than \$2.8 million in scholarships and 17 undergraduate programs.

"The creative students don't always come from an art program," he says. "We have a really open, encouraging atmosphere. The curious students also look at how to interact with the world and how to make it better."

Jones says events like ArtPrize and the college's annual student exhibition and other public events showcase the caliber of student and faculty artwork and help sell the school to potential students.

"We have a great reputation in the state of Michigan," he says. "Our real excitement as the city grows is that we will see an increase in national students."

There is also a strong network of graphic, furniture and industrial design in West Michigan, which is appealing to students looking for real-world experiences and careers after graduation.

"We have a growing art community that really supports art and design," Jones says. "Art students from high school come and visit Kendall and see Grand Rapids is a clean, exciting, safe city that has an art school."

"We have very permeable walls. Students are getting internships just down the street, and there are places to hang out and live and eat. Our class sizes are relatively small; the professors are accessible and excellent designers themselves."

The city's efforts to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and mobility are also perks for students, since many do not have cars and use The Rapid or walk or bike to work and school.

Expanded bike lanes throughout Grand Rapids benefit all residents, but it was no accident that the first bike lanes were installed along Lake Drive in Easttown, Schulz says.

"We already had a built-in population of students who live there and had been asking for bike lanes," she says. "The areas where we've had the most traction and enthusiasm are definitely where students reside."

The biggest issue has been around housing, parking and noise complaints in established, owner-occupied neighborhoods. Easttown and Heritage Hill are popu-







Brewery Vivant is a popular hangout for students like Miah Hagy, second from left, talking to Santiago Quiroga as Paige Vandegrift looks on.

lar with students who attend Kendall and Aquinas, but a growing number are moving into homes on the west side around the GVSU Pew Campus. The city has partnered with several colleges to teach students how to be good neighbors.

"It's driving up the price points but also the availability for housing," Schulz says. "They're parking on the lawn or in the back, and it has a different feel. It's not a neighbor-

hood feel but more of a student feel."

The demand for housing is also driving developers to build new apartment communities with students in mind. Fulton Place, opening this month at Fulton and Seward, is within walking distance of the GVSU downtown campus and other attractions. It caters to college students by offering furnished apartments and all utilities included with the rent.

Orion Construction opened 7th Street Lofts in 2015, featuring 27 apartments with one to four bedrooms and individual lease options so it has almost a dorm-type process and flexibility. On the west side near GVSU's campus, all of the units are leased, and a bar and restaurant is moving into the ground floor. The current renters are mostly students, says Jason Wheeler of Orion.

The Gateway at Belknap has a strong potential for attracting GVSU grad students and young professionals, or those completing internships or other medical training along Medical Mile, Wheeler says.

Another Orion project underway is Fulton Square at Fulton and Carlton near Aquinas College's campus. The 47 market-rate apartments should be completed late this year.

"With proximity to Aquinas, coupled with a demand for student apartments," Wheeler says, "we are expecting a lot of student activity and interest."

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