



Ashia Freeden of Canada journals on campus at the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa. (Rachel Mummey for USN&WR)

Iowan City Transcends a Divide

Fairfield, Iowa — Of the dozens of [Iowa](#) cities with populations hovering around 10,000, only one can tout repeated visits from A-list celebrities and Transcendental Meditation practitioners from across the globe.

For more than 40 years, the city of Fairfield, Iowa, has been coming to terms with its dual role as the county seat of largely rural [Jefferson County](#) and the host city to the [Maharishi University of Management](#), the institution founded in the 1970s by the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and his followers.

The city of approximately 10,400 residents has the familiar mix of fast-food restaurants, convenience stores and big-box retailers seen in other similarly sized enclaves throughout the state. But it also boasts a retail area filled with yoga studios, wellness centers, high-end coffeehouses and the largest organic and natural foods store in southeast Iowa.

Over the past half-century, most of Iowa's rural counties have seen a population and economic decline. Fairfield, however, earned the nickname [Silicorn Valley](#) during the dot-com boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, highlighting the presence of dozens of tech and programming companies within its small confines. It's been touted as the Most Entrepreneurial City in Iowa and the Most Entrepreneurial City in America of its size.

[SEE: [How Healthy Is Jefferson County, Iowa?](#)]

"It's kind of a side attraction of Fairfield that every once in a while there's Oprah, or there's David Lynch or there's Jim Carrey," says Dick DeAngelis, a [New Jersey](#) native who first came to Fairfield to study in the 1970s and returned a few years after graduation to raise his family. "But it's also this small, Midwestern hometown steeped in family values and apple pie, which I love."

City and county leaders say the health and overall success of their community comes through the effective bridging of the small-town experience and the university's broader draw. The school incorporates Transcendental Meditation alongside more traditional academic offerings, such as majors in computer science, business or art.

"It's really gratifying to see the culture change so now we don't talk as much about the difference anymore," says Fairfield Mayor Ed Malloy, who was first elected to the office in 2001. "I'm always tickled when I hear a local person refer to one of our strengths as diversity. I think everybody is on board now. They understand that good values and good things come out of our diversity."

A Lessening Divide

Located just south of Iowa Highway 78, Jefferson County forms a [Wyoming](#)-shaped rectangle that's divided north-south by Iowa Highway 1 and east-west by U.S. Highway 34. About two-thirds of the county's estimated 18,422 residents live in Fairfield, with the rest in unincorporated areas or even smaller cities such as Batavia, Libertyville, Lockridge, Maharishi Vedic City, Packwood and Pleasant Plain.

Since the 1980s, the percentage of Fairfield's residents who practice Transcendental Meditation has stayed fairly constant, with somewhere between one-fifth and one-quarter of the city's population devoted to the meditative technique and broader movement founded by the Maharishi. Over that time, however, a once stark divide has lessened, as the "meditators" have become more invested in the community and the "townies" have become more open to a wider variety of perspectives on community health, wellness and nutrition.

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Perhaps reflective of that increased unity, Jefferson County ranks among the country's [500 Healthiest Communities](#), scoring well in categories such as [community vitality](#), [population health](#) and [infrastructure](#) in U.S. News' analysis of factors tied to health and well-being across nearly 3,000 counties and county equivalents.

"We have maybe more options or we think differently than a small community without some of those opportunities," says Christine Estle, administrator of the Jefferson County Public Health Department for the past decade. "Some people will think about chiropractic, but they won't necessarily think about acupuncture, massage, meditation, relaxation, prayer – whatever it is that you want to use to decrease the stress."

Estle comes from the "townie" side of the divide. Her family has been in the community for at least three generations, and she was in elementary school when the university relocated from [California](#) to the shuttered Parsons College campus in Fairfield.

She says the university has become a strong, consistent partner in many of her department's efforts, such as applying for federal [Community Transformation Grant](#) funding and seeking recognition from the [Blue Zones Project](#) for local efforts to create a "healthier, happier, and more resilient workforce."

Those and earlier efforts have led to many accolades, including the state government recognizing Fairfield as one of [Iowa's Great Places](#) and Mother Earth News describing the city as one of "[12 Great Places You've Never Heard Of](#)."

"There also have been a lot of people who have been attracted to Fairfield who don't have a TM or meditation connection," Malloy says. "I meet people all the time that are just here because they've discovered it as a very unique place and they were looking for a place to live."



Twins Emma (left) and Gloria Proksch (right), along with Carolyn Pagenkopf (bottom right) and Christine Fonseca, gather over coffee and danishes at Revelations Cafe in Fairfield, Iowa. All of them practice transcendental meditation.(Rachel Mummey for USN&WR)

More Entrenched and Established

With each year that passes, the university becomes more of a fixture within the Fairfield community.

Fairfield had been home to Parsons College from 1875 to 1973. In the 1960s, the college reached a high of 5,000 students. Less than a decade later, the school declared bankruptcy – leaving the city without one of its major employers and with a vacant campus.

DeAngelis, who is producing a series of documentaries about the history of Fairfield, says many of the concerns raised by the Maharishi university's purchase of the campus were understandable in the 1970s. It was unclear at the time whether TM was merely a fad, and whether the school would stay in the community.

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With the university marking its 44th anniversary of calling Fairfield home this year, however, it's not far from hitting the halfway point of Parsons' multigenerational impact on the community.

Longtime residents repeatedly point to Malloy's election in 2001 as a key event in Fairfield coming to terms with its status as a Midwestern mecca for meditation. Malloy, a native of [New York](#), came to the city in the 1980s drawn by the mission of the university.

After rooting himself personally and professionally in the community, Malloy was elected to City Council in the 1990s and ran for mayor once unsuccessfully before winning in a close election. This year, he was defeated in a bid to represent the area in the Iowa Senate.

"Fairfield is quite unique because of its power to draw so many talented people and investment capital, but we've learned some very basic elements that can be replayed on other rural community economic development platforms," Malloy says. "It involves business incubation and organized mentorship, access to capital and ensuring that there's adequate broadband. There are a number of things that we know have to be in place."

Similar Charm, Similar Challenges

The university and its host county continue to face challenges similar to those of other town-gown relationships throughout the higher education landscape, such as finding a balance between on-campus and off-site programs, ensuring curriculum offerings match the needs of a quickly evolving workforce and securing visas for international students who want to attend the school.

"It's more similar to just another college town than it ever has been," says Steve Langerud, a senior adviser to the university who previously served as Grinnell College's dean of experiential education.

Of the 1,781 students enrolled at the university for the 2017-18 academic year, 688 were located on the Fairfield campus – down from 746 on-campus students three years ago. During that time, though, the university has seen its distance education program grow from 597 students to 938.

The Maharishi School – the private, pre-K-12 school attached to the university – has likewise seen peaks and valleys with its enrollment over the decades. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the school had been attracting 600 students. It now has about 185 students and makes its tennis and basketball facilities available to the public Fairfield Community School District.

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"There have been shifting relations with the community, but it's been moving in a real progressive direction," says Richard Beall, the school's headmaster.

Another sign of the community's growth and growing well-being, Langerud says, is how local high school and university graduates – those who go out to see the world and experience life in larger urban areas – are coming back to carve out their own niche in Fairfield.

"We're seeing a migration back largely because of lifestyle issues," he says. "They come back because they want to stay in this community. The university is a piece of that, but it's just a piece. You also have a regional medical center and a strong public school system. Those are all anchors."

Still, Fairfield's similarities with other cities in southeast Iowa bring ongoing struggles as well as small-town charms.

Jefferson County – like Iowa as a whole – has a low unemployment rate with "hundreds of job openings in the city," Malloy says. Yet there is a stark disconnect between the job descriptions for those open positions and the skill sets of the workers seeking employment.



A movie theater marquee advertises a weekly Bollywood movie in Fairfield, Iowa.(Rachel Mummy for USN&WR)

Ken Daley, head of the Department of Exercise and Sports Science at the university, says the region's focus on public health initiatives has succeeded in reaching all the "low-hanging fruit" – helping people eat better, for instance, or improving access to trails and other amenities to help them lead a more physically active lifestyle.

But Daley says the community now needs to focus its attention on larger-scale problems like:

- Food insecurity, especially among children
- Binge drinking among youth and 20- to 30-year-olds
- Under-18 use of e-cigarettes and other nicotine delivery devices
- Children in single-parent households
- Affordable housing
- Better work pay for those in lower income thresholds

Estle says she likewise struggles to get Jefferson County residents to understand that their small community contains many of the same public health threats as larger ones – from drug addiction to inadequate access to mental health treatment.

"I'm the bearer of bad news oftentimes, but the reality of it is you have to understand where you are at health care-wise to figure out where you need to go and what you need to do to improve," Estle says.