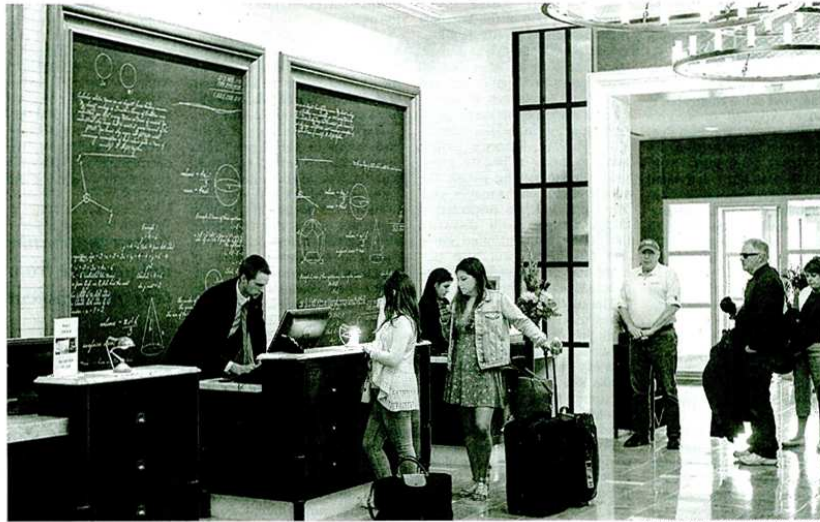


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JOE BUGLEWICZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Nashville Marriott at Vanderbilt University was redesigned in 2012 with academic and athletic inspiration.

Embracing the Campus Nearby

Hotels Alter Décor to Court College-Related Business

By JULIE WEED

College pennant over your bed? Recent graduate available to answer questions? Rooms decorated in the school colors? Hotels near college campuses are gearing up to attract graduation weekend crowds, just as they compete throughout the year to attract visiting high-school families, graduates attending reunions and parents dropping off freshmen.

Large chains are increasingly joining established independent hotels by tailoring their decorations and amenities to the college calendar.

"The hospitality industry is focused on the customer experience right now," said Michael Giebelhausen, assistant professor of marketing at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. "Hotel managers are integrating local elements and upping their games on unique offerings." This includes syncing those offerings with the rhythms of the local college.

Universities are a stable source of business with a predictable seasonality, Mr. Giebelhausen said. "They can help protect hotels from the ups and downs of the economy."

Hotels are varying their efforts to pursue college-related business. The Holiday Inn Elmira, near Elmira College in upstate New York, gets into the spirit by offering purple drinking water, among other things. And for the last two years, guests arriving for the Western State Colorado University graduation and staying at the nearby Holiday Inn Express Hotel and Suites have arrived to lobby decorations, gift bags in their rooms and a letter from the president of the university thanking families for their support.

A family's first visit to the college can be important to a hotel. "If you can create a memorable experience for the family in the beginning of their freshman year, then you can ideally earn a loyal guest for the four years or six years the student is in college," said Bryan Barbieri, director of public relations for the Revere Hotel Boston Common, which is near Suffolk University, Emerson Col-

lege, New England School of Law and Tufts University.

Leah Kronthal of Short Hills, N.J., stayed at the Best Western Plus Country Cupboard Inn in Lewisburg, Pa., throughout her daughter's time at Bucknell University. "The hotel was always decorated for freshman move-in, parents weekend, and they gave out cards with next year's events so we could reserve early," she said. "Friends would recommend this or that cute B&B, but the hotel did all the college events so well we always went back."

The Revere started offering college-themed packages for freshman move-in in 2012 and last year started offering

Welcome packages, gift bags and even drinking water in school colors.

graduation gifts. A welcome package available throughout the year for families includes college merchandise, museum tickets and other Boston-centric activities. The hotel keeps a supply of themed items from the local schools.

"Hotels associating themselves with a local college can be seen as a co-branding activity," Mr. Giebelhausen said, just as a food company advertising that its vanilla ice cream includes Snickers candy bar pieces. "They are leveraging the strengths of one brand to augment another."

Some hotels go far beyond the gift mug or color-coordinated balloon-arch and tie their interior decoration to the school year-round.

The 2012 renovation of the Nashville Marriott at Vanderbilt University renovated the hotel's interior to closely align with the university. On one wall are mathematical equations; the other has vintage school football helmets. Table linens for meetings are often Vanderbilt's black and gold.

"Becoming a close partner with the university has made for more camaraderie between their faculty and staff and our hotel," said Jodi Pfeiffer, the hotel's director of sales and marketing. "They recommend us to their colleagues coming in for meetings, or to families coming to see the school."

The Hotel Commonwealth in Boston near Boston University is opening the Terrier Suite, named for the school's mascot, this summer. The suite will feature a photo montage depicting scenes of the university gleaned from the school's archives, a minibar that looks like a Boston University locker with monogrammed glassware, and other themed elements. The hotel bills the suite as "an homage to Boston University and all it's done for the Kenmore Square neighborhood."

"It's a symbiotic relationship," said Adam Sperling, the hotel's general manager.

Other hotels also enlist the creativity of students. At the Revere, senior design students at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design designed the staff uniforms as part of a yearlong curriculum.

Four Seasons Hotel Austin near the University of Texas has a U.T. Concierge, a recent graduate who helps families with questions about the university.

Some colleges own hotels on or near campus. The Gettysburg Hotel, owned by Gettysburg College and managed by Waterford Hotel Group, is in downtown Gettysburg, Pa. Its recent renovation uses school colors throughout the property, and its lobby features a large round carpet depicting the school emblem.

Some hotels, of course, do nothing more than raise their rates on popular college weekends. But not all families flock to hotels.

Margo Swanson traveled from Seattle to San Diego last week to attend her daughter's graduation from San Diego State University. She joined with five other family members coming in from around the country to stay at an Airbnb rental. "It's more convenient and saves money to share a house and barbecue in the backyard," she said.