

QUICKNOTES

Making Space for Student Housing

Cities and counties that host colleges and universities often face challenges associated with off-campus student housing. In some neighborhoods with a mix of student and family housing, resident complaints or conflicts over noise, parking, overcrowding, and property maintenance are common. In others, fears related to these potential conflicts can fuel opposition to new student housing in or near established neighborhoods. Meanwhile, enrollment trends and shifting preferences for student living mean that established and emerging college and university communities alike must confront the challenge of making space for student housing.

BACKGROUND

The market for college and university student housing is complex. Some students live on campus in dormitories or apartments. Others live off campus in purpose-built multifamily residences or private dormitories. Some students live in purpose-built or converted fraternity, sorority, or rooming houses or housing cooperatives. Others live in formerly single-family homes that have been converted into multiple rental units. Still others compete on the open market for single- or multifamily rental housing.

In the U.S., college and university enrollment increased dramatically in the decades following World War II, plateauing in 2010 at 21 million students. Meanwhile, few colleges or universities provide on-campus housing for all students, and many house fewer than half of their full-time students. Rising enrollments and an undersupply of on-campus student housing often leads to a steady demand for conversions of single-family housing to student rentals near college and university campuses and, over the past 20 years, a growing supply of purpose-built student housing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OFF-CAMPUS STUDENT HOUSING

While many colleges and universities have committed to aggressively expanding on-campus student housing, these commitments seldom eliminate the need for off-campus housing. In most communities, it is cheaper for students to pool resources for off-campus housing than to pay the room and board fees for a room (or a shared room) on campus. Beyond simple economics, many students will gladly trade the convenience of an on-campus dorm for the added independence and experience of an off-campus house or apartment.

Beyond just acknowledging the inevitability of off-campus student housing, it is important to consider the valuable contributions students living off campus can make to host communities. When students live off campus, they have more opportunities to interact with longtime residents, participate in community activities, and contribute directly to the local economy. Students who connect with their communities are more likely to stay and join the local workforce or start their own businesses after graduation.

THE CHALLENGE OF 'STUDENTIFICATION'

For some communities, the increasing supply of off-campus student housing has led to "studentification," a process often likened to gentrification, whereby students displace permanent residents, reshaping the markets for housing, retail, and services. Depending on context, studentification may cause a shortage of affordable housing, dramatically lower home ownership rates, or incentivize deferred maintenance as landlords wait for lucrative redevelopment opportunities.

In these communities, there is often a tension between providing sufficient space for off-campus student housing and protecting established residential neighborhoods near campuses from being overrun by student rental conversions and new purpose-built private dormitories and apartments. Traditionally, one of the most common responses to fears of studentification has been to adopt a restrictive definition



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*Purpose-built student housing in
Minneapolis's Dinkytown neighborhood
near the University of Minnesota.*



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of the term “family” or “household” to prevent groups of students from occupying single-family homes. Unfortunately, this approach does not address the demand for off-campus student housing, and it can have the unintended consequence of discriminating against blended families, unmarried couples, those who may need to live as a household for medical reasons, or people who need to share housing costs to meet the costs of living.

IDENTIFYING APPROPRIATE LOCATIONS

Given that demand for off-campus student housing is tied to enrollment trends and student preferences, identifying appropriate locations for that housing is key to coping with community change. Typically, colleges and universities are the best sources for information about projected off-campus housing needs, and building collaborative relationships with these institutions is a necessary ingredient for success. The goals in making space for student housing are to prioritize development or conversions in locations that make walking or taking public transit safe and convenient for residents, while limiting student encroachment in established neighborhoods.

Meeting these goals is often easier when communities have undeveloped sites adjacent to campuses or along transit corridors, or an abundance of older small commercial or residential structures or parking lots in areas near campus that have already been colonized by students. A growing number of developers specialize in purpose-built housing and can deliver new, high-quality private dorms or student-focused multifamily residences that can house students much more efficiently than ad hoc conversions of single-family homes. For emerging or growing small college towns, the best locations are typically along corridors bordering the campus and in campus-adjacent neighborhoods.

Many cities and counties use zoning to designate and incentivize student housing development in prioritized locations. In some cases, this means adopting special zoning districts or overlays for campus-adjacent neighborhoods or corridors to better control the form and nature of student housing development. In others, it means defining and regulating multiple types of student housing as distinct land uses.

MITIGATING POTENTIAL CONFLICTS

While most students living off campus are good neighbors, a small number of “bad actors,” in the form of inconsiderate residents or irresponsible landlords, can generate serious conflict. When mitigating potential conflicts, it is important to target problematic conditions or behaviors and not to paint all student residents with a broad brush.

For example, some communities require landlords to register rental properties and submit to periodic inspections to raise the bar on property management practices. Some use neighborhood parking permits to mitigate conflicts over student parking. Others have established processes for residents to create neighborhood conservation districts to prevent incompatible infill and redevelopment. And a few have even adopted nuisance party ordinances to increase penalties for raucous student gatherings.

CONCLUSIONS

High student enrollment rates and shifting student preferences are fueling demand for off-campus student housing in many communities. While some cities and counties have already embraced student housing as a vital component of their communities, others are in the early stages of developing a strategy that balances a desire to welcome students without displacing longtime residents. Once a city or county has identified a desire to make space for student housing, it's important to identify and prioritize suitable locations and consider adopting appropriate regulations to mitigate potential conflicts.

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FURTHER READING

1. Published by the American Planning Association

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Sitler, Dan, Michael Rudden, Rob Holzman, and George Homsy. 2006. “Town Gown Partnerships for Success.” *PAS Memo*, May/June. Available at planning.org/pas/memo/2006/may

2. Other Resources

La Roche, Claire Reeves, Mary A. Flanigan, and P. Kenneth Copeland, Jr. 2010. “Student Housing: Trends, Preferences and Needs.” *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*, 3(10): 45–50. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1072668.pdf>.

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