

Student Housing



Fig. 1

*Making both students and
townies happy about student
housing*

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Fig. 2

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Overview

How do we create student housing that's good for students and the community?

Across America, university student housing is becoming less affordable by the semester. Both on and off campus, pricing is inflating and space is becoming increasingly more scarce due to increase in student populations that outpaces housing growth.

In State College, housing growth has been happening since the early 2000s. In 2005, the first ordinance to approve taller buildings passed which permitted high-rise living. From there, progress was slowly made, before being halted due to the Great Recession in 2009, after which zoning was changed yet again in State College in 2013. This change in zoning increased residential density. Increasing residential density meant that more people could live in a single building with less commercial space- in other words, they did not need to have as many storefronts on the ground floor as they did previously (Rubin). Simultaneously, there was a widespread movement to build student housing in college towns across the country. In 2017, the first high-rise living building, the 12-story Metropolitan, came to State College, with the RISE being built only a year later. Since then, a total of six high-rises have been built in the town, with a possible 7th to be constructed in coming years.

While this growth of housing is beneficial to students, the growth cannot keep pace with the increasing demand for student housing. This contradiction presents the issue of the “student housing crisis.” Lack of student housing and growing numbers of student populations create residential scarcity, and this combined with new real estate developments means that off campus housing rates are rocketing. This issue is further exacerbated by the fact that real estate investors are buying properties as investments. This gives investors opportunities to rent out space, buy, hold, and flip properties. This drives up the debt they have to pay off and consequently raises housing prices. With rent reaching up to \$2,800 per month, this can put a strain on students and families to find affordable housing with proper amenities (Kovac and Lageurre).

According to an article written in The Daily Collegian, the hunt for student housing begins too early in the first semester. Students are “afraid to sign an apartment lease after knowing [peers] for two weeks” (Kovac and Lageurre). Signing leases in October of first semester simply is not convenient for many students, and can push students to sign leases prematurely, leaving them with poor living conditions or roommates they may not live well with. Thus, students may have to live on campus for more time than they want, and give up the freedom, independence, and convenient location that comes along with living off campus and makes it desirable.

Overview

Continued

The housing crisis and consequent attempts to expand residences not only puts strain on students, but also on college towns themselves, local residents and governments. In State College, there are 39,525 residents as of 2021, with approximately another 46,000 students both on campus and in town (Rubin). For older residents, this influx of students and housing has made the town less accessible, as it is now widely catered to students. According to an article written in the Daily Collegian, residents report that the town used to be a nice, quaint place to go. It hosted local businesses and a good feel, but since college housing has expanded the appeal of the town for them has died. Additionally, the influx of high-rise residences reduces the town's residential diversity, which is unappealing for governments such as the one in Centre County.

Evidently, this crisis has impacts on all stakeholders involved- from college students themselves, to realtors, town members, and local governments. Students are left with potentially poor living conditions, roommates they may not live well with given the fact that the housing process begins extremely early, and prices of living that make them question if the independence of living off campus is worth it. Attempts to control the building of high-rise residences have not been successful in fixing the student housing crisis, and in some ways have cost local governments and communities. This situation is only growing, and it is imperative that we consider how to best resolve it. We must ask ourselves, "How can we create student housing that is equitable, affordable, and supports and is good for both students and the wider community?"



Fig. 3

Approach 1: Make On-Campus Housing More Desirable

Overview:

When accepting their offer of admission to Penn State, it is required for every first-year student at University Park to accept and sign a contract to live in on-campus dorms for their first two semesters. Living on campus has many perks: close proximity to classes, meal plan discounts, and first-year floor experiences.

However, when a freshman wakes up and experiences trashed bathrooms and nauseating messes in the dorms every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday morning, it can be extremely difficult for them to see the appeal of living in dorms on campus.

Unfortunately, this causes most students to overlook the above advantages and move off campus into downtown apartments during their upperclassmen years. However, while signing leases, the majority of these students were still minors just several months ago; many of these young adults find themselves in unpleasant circumstances when it comes to reaching agreements with landlords, or making rent each month, or struggling to pay for groceries each week - situations that they would likely not find themselves in if they still lived on campus with a meal plan. Therefore, Approach 1 attempts to significantly decrease the number of students that move off campus in the first place - and on-campus housing must become more desirable as a result.

ACTION 1: Improve Amenities of On-Campus Housing

Approximately half of the first-year population will be housed in one of the 16 East residential halls - it is the biggest residential area on campus ("East Halls"). However, most of these students' only hope is to be placed in one of the 10 East renovated dormitories. These dorms offer the luxuries of air conditioning, modern common spaces, and pod bathrooms, in which there is much more privacy. However, when examining the proportions of students, it must be understood that not every freshman will end up in a renovated residential hall. In fact, most won't. And unfortunately, the difference that this makes is considerable. For instance, Pollock is the second largest first-year residential area on campus, in which none of the halls are renovated. Due to this, this area is not desirable to students. When interviewed by a student-run newspaper, The Collegian, sophomore Erin Matthews claimed that Pollock Halls were "old and musty" (Irwin).



Fig.4 Renovated pod bathroom in East halls

Costs of Improvement

In an article published by The Collegian, the complaints that Penn State students made regarding unrenovated on-campus housing seemed to have a resounding bottom line: many disliked the lack of air-conditioning and the lack of privacy. While modern HVAC systems and posh new bathrooms sound extremely desirable, they do not come at no cost.

As stated previously, Penn State has already made great efforts to improve first-year living conditions in East Halls. In fact, on November 11th, 2022, the sixth and final stage of East Halls renovations was approved by Penn State's Board of Trustees. The budget for phase 2c alone is \$95.3 million ("Penn State East"). It was reported that East renovations were accomplished "with self-supported funds, without the aid of tuition dollars or state appropriations" (Chan). However, East only houses approximately half of all Penn State freshmen. It would be extremely unrealistic to expect university-wide renovations without receiving the majority of funds directly from student's tuition or housing contracts. To get a measure on how much this increase would be, South renovations that were completed in 2015 can be examined. During the 10 year project, tuition rose a steady \$200 per semester for the average student ("East Halls"). When paired with inflation and increased utility costs in the year 2023 and onwards, this may make the difference between staying on campus or moving downtown for some students.

Additionally, while renovations are taking place, Penn State will not be able to accept or accommodate as many first-year students as they would if all of their buildings were operational. Once the current renovations in East Halls are completed, 4612 students will be provided with a modern area to live (Chan). So, Penn State must ensure that they have the funds set aside to carry out large scale renovations years in advance, which may come as an extra cost to those who are currently living in on-campus housing.

ACTION 2: Lower the Costs of On-Campus Housing

Nowadays, housing costs have increased greatly and Penn State students are struggling between the tradeoffs of living on-campus versus off-campus. While off-campus housing allows students more privacy and freedom, it is often highly competitive to find a lease. On-campus, the average Penn State student pays \$7,360 per year for housing as well as an extra \$5,618 for a combined two semesters of meal plan ("Pennsylvania State University"). This totals up to \$12,744 for housing and meal costs for one year at Penn State ("Pennsylvania State University").

Approach 1: Make On-Campus Housing More Desirable

However, this does still include cleaning services, a shared kitchen, and common spaces. Maintenance workers contribute immensely to the upkeep of these residence halls. Some more perks to living on-campus include housing resources, security, and more opportunities to socialize with peers. Conversely, the luxury high-rise apartments downtown offer inflated rent prices and further off-campus, students may sacrifice location for cheaper options. Students can also take action to lower the rent that they must pay by increasing the number of roommates that they have (Frolo). With that said, it is also important to consider additional costs such as electric, grocery, and utility bills.

Is there any way to make campus living cheaper?

One way Penn State can reduce the price of housing for students is to implement work in co-ops to reduce the price of housing for students. Students can work for the university and in return get part of their housing bill paid for. An example of this being implemented is at Oberlin College in Ohio, where students are able to save money by working a couple of hour shifts in the kitchen every week (Driscoll). This would allow students to continue to live on campus and reduce the cost of their overall tuition. A drawback of this idea would be that college kids are full-time students and working would take away from the number of hours they are able to spend studying. This would add a lot of extra stress to some students' lives.

Another option that Penn State could consider would be to have lower-cost housing options for students on campus which are the basic requirements for housing. Renovations cost money, so having an option that is just the simple basics would reduce costs. These dorms would be intended for people who want to live on campus and be close to classes but have a hard time affording them. The benefits of this option would be that it allows students to get cheap housing without having to leave campus, but a drawback is that the student's living conditions might be less than ideal. While both options have their pros and cons, it would ultimately be up to the student what is most important to them and what they are willing to sacrifice.



Fig. 5

ACTION 3: Modify our Dry Campus Status

Most public and private universities in the United States self-describe as “dry campuses,” where alcohol is not permitted in any form, whether in a container or in the open, by even those above the age of 21 in on-campus buildings. Penn State is one of those campuses, and currently, “the possession or use of alcoholic beverages is prohibited in ALL Penn State on-campus undergraduate residence hall buildings, including White Course Apartments, Nittany Apartments, and Eastview Terrace” (“Alcohol Violations On and Off Campus”).

The dry-campus status of Penn State began in 2011, three short years after a freshman student was found dead at the bottom of a stairwell after drunkenly falling over the railing (Henao). Since then, anti-alcohol policies have been implemented across all campuses, and residence advisors have aimed to stop on-campus drinking by reporting students with open containers of alcohol. For first offenses of underage drinking violations, students will be “required by Penn State to attend the BASICS program which has a \$250 fee” (“Alcohol Violations On and Off Campus”). For violations which aren't first offenses, a student's academic record may be flagged with student conduct violations, and some may lose their campus housing, be put on probation, or suspended from the university.



Fig. 6

Approach 1: Make On-Campus Housing More Desirable

The consequences of possessing alcohol have certainly led to a greater appeal for students to live in off-campus housing. For students who live off-campus, violations will generally only occur when they are accompanied by noise complaints or party disturbances. Therefore, for most upperclassmen who attend Penn State, a common culture is to drink at off-campus events, further contributing to the appeal of distancing oneself from being on campus by moving downtown. As “a lot of the things [at the university] are centered on drinking and that is how you socialize,” especially given the popularity of events like State Patty’s Day, the appeal of an off-campus social life is exacerbated by the school culture (Datwani).

How Can Penn State Modify Our Dry Campus Status?

The idea that the dry campus alcohol policy is outdated isn’t new: multiple student organizations, including The Daily Collegian, have advocated for its repeal or modification. The current argument by opponents of the university’s alcohol policy states that our status doesn’t prevent students from drinking, it only prevents them from being safe and healthy in their activities by taking risky measures to hide it. Currently, the University of California at San Diego, a highly accredited college, is one of the few colleges that has a wet-campus alcohol policy, and currently has five on-campus facilities which serve alcohol (“UCSD Parents and Families”). Instead of putting resources towards preventing students from drinking, they have an extensive alcohol and drug abuse counseling service to help students transition into post-university life, where they won’t have anyone telling them to not drink.

Another possibility for reducing the rate of students that move off-campus to be able to drink is to reduce the density of residence advisors in upperclassmen dorms. The Nittany Apartments is a prime example of this: students live in apartments where there is a single RA spread across multiple buildings. This housing option is only available to upperclassmen, where they are able to enjoy the benefits of on-campus housing’s location and cost while also maintaining some of the freedom of being of-age to drink.



Fig. 7

However, helping students have the ability to have more freedom and providing more incentives to stay in on-campus housing has severe drawbacks for the local economy. Bars downtown rely severely on the population of students who live in on-campus housing to spend their nights drinking downtown because these students don’t have the ability to provide their own alcohol. If more students were incentivized to live on-campus because they had more freedom to drink, these businesses would lose out on a big portion of their income.



Fig. 8

Approach 2: Increase Community Friendly Off-Campus Housing

Overview:

While Penn State University makes up a majority of the economy of State College, it is important to keep in mind both the values of the students and the permanent residents of the town (“Bendapudi”). The downtown area has been undergoing rapid change as landlords have been drastically increasing the cost of housing and business spaces and high-rises are being constructed (Estremera). Meanwhile, residents desire a decreased cost of living and wish to maintain the nostalgia and feel of the State College downtown area (Rubin). According to residents, prior to the rapidly increasing number of student apartments and bustling businesses, downtown State College was a secure, pleasant place to be (Rubin). Unfortunately, the high-rises eliminate space for these family businesses and workplaces (Estremera). Long-time residents feel that buildings steal the beautiful skyline the State College mountains have to offer (Rubin). On the other hand, students make up a large portion of the population of State College, but this town does not offer enough on-campus housing for all students. It is more convenient for housing to be located closer to campus; however, there are some further off-campus locations that offer cheaper options while forcing students to pay to commute to town. It is challenging to balance the wishes of both the community and the students; however, taking any one of the following actions would be a step in the right direction.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10

ACTION 1: Implementation of an “Office of Tenant’s Rights”

In recent years, downtown State College has seen a drastic increase in the cost of renting apartments and business spaces (Estremera). As a result of the high-rise apartments downtown inflating the market and replacing local businesses, the cost of housing for permanent State College residents in the surrounding areas has greatly increased (Estremera). In addition, the rising cost of off-campus housing has made it unfeasible for some Penn State students to afford to live downtown. In order to prevent the increase of rent in the property nearby, it is important to hold landlords accountable through the creation of an “Office of Tenants’ Rights” (“Group Calls”). This allows people to support younger renters so that they do not get exploited by their landlords and trapped in deals that negatively impact the rest of the community (“Group Calls”). Particularly, the State College Borough Council has no power in stopping the landlords from capriciously increasing rent (“Group Calls”). Numerous accounts have shown landlords not maintaining the upkeep of their buildings and demanding extra rent for damage that is not necessarily the renter’s fault (“Group Calls”). Considering the lack of convenient and affordable off-campus housing options, it is difficult for students to protect themselves while signing these leases. In efforts to safeguard themselves, the State College community members have discouraged the construction of these luxury high-rise buildings for students who do not even contribute to the majority of the State College’s taxes (“State College”). In order to balance the demand for housing and the desires of the residents, the Borough should create a new “Office of Tenants’ Rights”.

ACTION 2: Offer Housing Options Further Off Campus

In the late 70s, there was a lot of pushback from community members who were against students moving into their neighborhoods, in fear of the disruptions that they would bring. Resultantly, many regulations were established preventing students from renting single-family homes (“Zoning Restrictions”). For example, regardless of the number of available bedrooms, only a maximum of three students would be allowed to live in a residence (“Zoning Restrictions”). Another law, the 1997 Student Home Law, limits the number of student homes within a particular area (“Zoning Restrictions”). In order to keep the peace between community members and students, increased publicity and additional options for further off-campus housing would aid in decreasing the high demand for nearby neighborhoods and downtown apartments.

Approach 2: Increase Community Friendly Off-Campus Housing

Providing Penn State students with these affordable and desirable living options would please State College residents who are against the dense student populations close to their homes and businesses. Moreover, student apartment options in downtown State College yield high prices. For example, the Canyon can cost as much as \$1,899/month for one bedroom (“Penn State University”). However, moving slightly further off campus to somewhere like The Bryn on Vairo Boulevard can cost as little as \$590/month for larger, renovated apartments (“Penn State University”). The apartment complexes that are further from campus also offer bus routes that travel to and from campus continuously. These options are more affordable for students who can’t pay the \$1000+ monthly rent of downtown rooms and can reduce student density downtown and in neighborhoods to please State College community members.

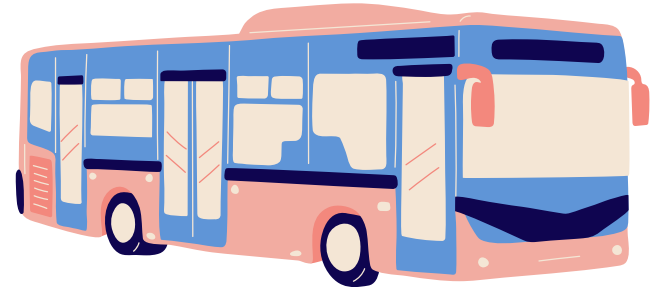


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

ACTION 3: Use Available Commercial Space for Student Housing

In State College, there has been a rising issue with the amount of commercial space available downtown (Rubin). The new ordinance, which was passed in October 2022, prevents the creation of high-rises for student housing and allows high-rises to be created for the primary purpose of commercial use (Rubin). In downtown, there is a surplus in the amount of commercial space available with the numbers tallying up to about twenty-thousand square feet (Rubin). This is a result of zoning laws that force the creation of student housing to come to a halt in order to support on-coming businesses and increase economic growth (Rubin). Consequently, there is an aesthetic issue with residents commenting on the gloomy look of the empty business spaces (“State College”). The State College Borough Council has been attempting to encourage businesses to open downtown; however, with the increase in demand for student housing and the lack of affordable options, it would be better for the interest of the townspeople to convert the space to housing (“State College”). While it would take money and more investments in order to convert these spaces into something more suitable for student living, it would increase the aesthetic value of the area that surrounds it while providing students with housing. It is not necessary to use all commercial space for student housing; however, the town should come to an agreement about how much of it can be allocated for housing and businesses.



Fig. 13

Approach 3: Student Education on Leasing Rights

Overview:

In State College, most realtors require future residents to sign leases almost a full calendar year prior to their lease start-date. This causes unneeded stress for students, especially freshman, in having to find roommates in a short time period, an affordable apartment, as well as pay a security deposit within 2 months of the beginning of the academic year. Many resources already exist at Penn State to help students through this strenuous process, but many students, especially freshman, aren't aware of this assistance that Student Legal Services, Student Affairs, and the UPUA, among others, offer. Increasing knowledge, as well as working with realtors to push the lease signing period back, will relieve stress off the shoulders of the students and make for a more smooth transition from on-campus to off-campus housing. Approach 3 discusses current and potential options for educating students on off-campus housing options.

ACTION 1: Increase Education for Incoming Students at New Student Orientation

The lease-signing period is one of the most stressful times in the year for students, and it is especially stressful for first-year students. First-year students lack the knowledge and experience that older students may have in this process which commonly leads to entering into bad lease agreements that they end up regretting. Currently, the earliest in-depth presentation that one receives regarding off-campus housing comes around Parents' Weekend, held in early October, which is extremely close to the deadline for many apartment complexes (Mertes). However, if more resources were made available at New Student Orientation (NSO), then students could begin this process sooner rather than later, and relieve the stress of a cramped process.

Since NSO is already mandatory for all first-year students, a session educating them on the do's and don'ts of this process could help fill the gap of knowledge between first-year students and other students. Though adding this session into NSO may not help students find a landlord, people who they would want to live with, or get into lease agreements, educating first-year students on this process and the potential problems will allow them to begin these respective processes earlier.

NSO

**NEW STUDENT
ORIENTATION
at Penn State**

Fig. 14

ACTION 2: Adjustment of Lease-Signing Period

With the cramped lease signing timeline being a cause of concern for a large amount of the student body, the University Park Undergraduate Association (UPUA), University Park's Student Government, passed a series of resolutions supporting pushing the typical lease-signing period, as well as implementing programs that can further educate the student body on their rights as renters.

Currently, most realtors require that leases be signed and security deposits be paid around the end of October. This means that any first-year student has to balance their first semester of college, a completely new experience, while also attempting to find groups of people that they feel comfortable sharing an apartment with. Moreover, many students aren't aware of the typical leasing process, which opens the door for realtors to potentially take advantage of students with inadequate leases. As Penn State's Student Government, the UPUA served the student body by making them aware of their individual rights when going through this process, and an increased amount of these campaigns will only benefit the student body when seeking off-campus housing.

Approach 3: Student Education on Leasing Rights

ACTION 3: Increase Off-Campus Housing Resources for Penn State Students

There are resources already established for Penn State students who are looking to or already are in lease agreements. However, countless students have no idea that these resources are available to them. If these resources are publicized more, conflicts between landlords and students will become less frequent. Additionally, more resources could be implemented that make the process smoother for students in other ways.

Student Legal Services allows undergraduate students to have their leases reviewed, as well as provides guidance in security deposits, roommate finding, and subletting; moreover, the PSU Student Affairs website hosts a “Know Your Rights” page (“Student Legal Services”). This site mostly highlights how to go about issues that may come up during a lease, but Student Affairs also has a step-by-step guide that goes from the lease-signing process through the time when you’ll move out of the apartment (Know Your Rights). With the exception of housing fairs and Parent’s Weekend, there are very few places in which students can discover these resources. Increased participation from Penn State and organizations like the UPUA can ensure that the resources aren’t being underutilized by students, and, ultimately, ensure a smooth process for those seeking off-campus housing.

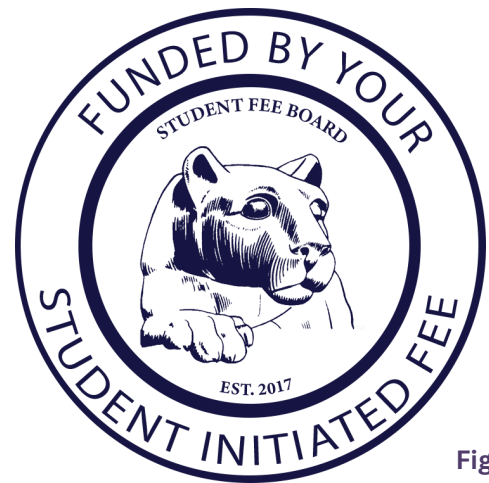


Fig. 15

More resources can also be implemented to make this process smoother. When seeking options for apartments, students must go to individual realtors or apartments in order to discover options, pricing, and find one’s right fit. With so many options in State College, an all-inclusive site with all of these same functions, but in one central location, would streamline this process and allow students to find their best fit in a less strenuous way.

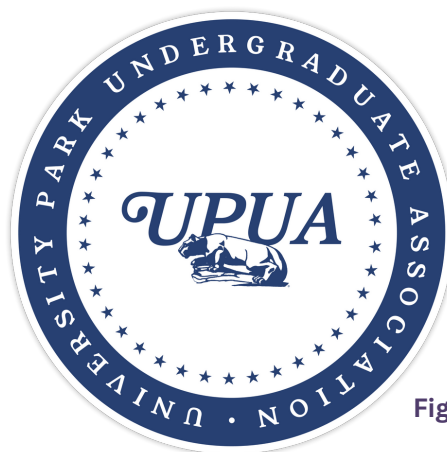


Fig. 16

Approaches: From a Glance

Approach 1: Make On-Campus Housing More Desirable

Pros

More students living on-campus prevents inventory shortages off-campus, and ensures a quality of life that cannot be guaranteed when privately renting

On-campus housing protects students from predatory apartment leases that often bind students into a decision early into the semester.

Increasing the upperclassmen only housing options would give older students the freedom of off-campus housing without infringing on the local community.

Students who live on campus have more financial security of fixed meal plans and semester basis payments, which can come from college savings accounts.

Cons

More students living on-campus can harm the downtown economy, both for renting and for businesses like restaurants or shops.

Renovations and construction are timely processes that require taking land from the local community and more money from students.

Accommodating upperclassmen's desires for a non-dry campus increases the risk of alcohol related problems, both medically and socially.

Increasing the student density on campus would cause strain on university resources like the buses, gyms, and dining commons.

Approach 2: Increase Community Friendly Off-Campus Housing

Pros

Creating a "Office of Tenants' Rights" would protect local property taxes and rent from rising, and students from getting exploited

Using available commercial space for student housing would bypass the need to develop new land.

Dispersing off-campus housing options across a larger geographic area would decrease the density of students around bars and crowded spaces.

Making affordable off-campus housing options would protect students from financial overexertion on rent or leases.

Cons

Many upperclassmen students rely on an increased selection of off-campus housing, making it challenging to limit the market.

Moving off-campus housing away from downtown would force students to pay for transportation to classes everyday.

Dispersing off-campus housing options would cause an infusion of students into residential areas, impeding on the local community.

To develop commercial space, costly zoning revision and renovations would have to take place.

Approaches: From a Glance

Approach 3: More Student Education on Leasing Rights

Pros

Building in leasing education at NSO would give first-year students ample time to consider their options for housing in the coming year.

Extending the leasing deadlines would give students a chance to research various options and create meaningful connections with potential roommates.

Increased education to actively enrolled students would limit the number of conflicts between students and their landlords.

If more students are aware of the legal services available to them, they will feel more empowered to advocate for themselves in their time leasing.

Cons

With the excitement surrounding starting college, students may overlook leasing education that occurs at NSO, an event months before leasing deadlines.

Pushing back leasing deadlines would mean altering Penn State's on-campus housing timeline, potentially rushing room assignments and contract offers.

Penn State cannot force students to engage with resources, and the well-established system remains underutilized.

The university and local government are limited by the amount of involvement they can have when moderating private leases between students and landlords.





Summary

Affordable student housing for college students in America is a consistent problem that universities must address. Coming up with a solution to keep both students and city residents comfortable is an important task; one that does not have a simple solution. State College has experienced a higher demand for affordable student housing compared to previous years and while actions have been taken to add more housing options, student populations continue to rise, as well as the demand for housing.

It is important to reflect on all three approaches, including the pros and cons each has in order to gain a better understanding of the possible effects each action includes. Each approach comes with benefits and sacrifices that are critical to not only universities and their students but communities in America. Remember that this discussion is meant to be mindful of every aspect of each approach, respect other people's opinions, and collaborate on finding an acceptable solution to benefit everyone.

College students should have the opportunity for affordable housing that suits their needs. Community members in college towns are highly affected by student housing, especially when it interferes with their local neighborhoods. How do we find a balance that benefits both community members and college students? Does campus need to expand their housing options for more appealing on-campus housing or is more education of off-campus housing a better option? The impact of affordable housing is a major issue that affects a widespread group of people. The ideas and information in this issue brief are meant to allow for a civil discussion in order to have a deliberate conversation.



Scan for Deliberation Survey

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[FIG. 8] <https://liveon.psu.edu/university-park/housing>

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[FIG. 16] <https://www.upua.org/about-us>