



# Trends in Student HOUSING

DATA >> INFORMATION >> KNOWLEDGE >> ACTION



## Background

A number of factors have influenced the pace and quantity of new residential facilities being renovated or built on campuses. The undergraduate student population in 4-year colleges and universities grew 25% nationwide during the 2000's at the same time that much college housing reached the end of its functional life.

Undergraduate college culture has also begun to change, whereby colleges seek to increase the number of students living on campus to promote a sense of community and to foster collaboration among students and with faculty (or, sometimes, to appease the residents of neighborhoods around campus who do not want undergraduates living in their midst). Some upperclass students, who previously preferred off-campus housing, now prefer the convenience of on-campus housing as long as it can provide them with privacy and independence at an affordable price. It is a competitive advantage for schools to provide quality housing for a significant portion of students, as housing availability and options have been shown to play a role in students' (and their families') admission decisions.

The development of new housing for graduate and professional students has been in response to changing demographics such as fewer students with families and more single, younger, or international students. Price increases in the local housing market have sometimes made off-campus housing unaffordable, requiring schools to find cost-efficient alternatives for their graduate students. It is sometimes the case that schools, especially those located in more urban settings, seek to expand and secure their perimeter so as to ensure an adequate amount of contiguous land for future expansion. Purchasing existing housing in this area of future institutional

growth has also served to provide graduate students with affordable living accommodations, while helping to define the projected campus edge.

Over the past ten years, as Demographic Perspectives has provided research data and analysis for college housing strategy, it is evident that colleges' reasoning for providing housing has evolved and deepened, and that students' needs and preferences have also changed. We thought it would be useful to document some of the recent trends in residential facilities, and spoke to a sample of public and private college housing professionals and the architects who work with them to better understand the trends that they are observing or creating. Herewith, some interesting trends about college housing.

## About the Author



*Sightlines has partnered with Rena Cheskis-Gold, Principal of Demographic Perspectives, LLC, ([www.demographicperspectives.com](http://www.demographicperspectives.com)) to develop Sightlines University Housing Services. Demographic Perspectives brings extensive experience providing universities and colleges with strategic data and analysis for student and faculty housing planning. Together, we have developed Sightlines' tools for Housing Measurement, Benchmarking and Analysis to bring a better understanding of student housing to our member campuses.*

Written by Rena Cheskis-Gold for Sightlines.

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## **Part 1: Models for Undergraduate and Graduate Housing**

### **Building Mission and Layout**

*Tiered Undergraduate Social Experience via Housing.* Schools are increasingly providing a tiered social experience for their undergraduates through their housing options. Freshmen need staff support to help them acclimate to school, both academically and socially. Typically, they are offered double rooms and communal bathrooms, configurations that maximize social interaction. Rooms may be grouped in clusters. The building program should take into account significant space for residential staff.

As many schools provide housing only for freshmen, sophomores, who have no choice but to live off campus, struggle with maintaining appropriate academic and social interaction. Those who live on-campus need almost as much support as freshmen, though they rarely receive as much staff attention. A next step in housing options for sophomores is suite living, which offers a grouping of single or double rooms and a common room.

An emerging trend is for schools to require sophomores to live on campus. If new housing is built to accommodate sophomores, the school can continue to house the same proportion of upperclass students as before; but if no new housing is provided for sophomores, a larger number of upperclass students will need to live off-campus in either school-owned units, developer-owned housing built especially for students, or private-market apartments or houses.

Upperclass students are seeking apartment-style living and independence. While the campus culture may long have supported the notion that upperclassmen will live off-campus, schools have now brought some of them back to campus by offering upperclass housing with amenities such as furnished apartments, apartment and building cleaning, using student billing to pay for housing along with tuition, and no separate bill-pay arrangements for utilities or phone/cable.

*At Sightlines Housing Member Campuses, the ratio of resident advisors to freshmen is 27:1, while the ratio of resident advisors to other students is 41:1.*

*In the past 5 years, at Sightlines Housing Member Campuses, the number of Sophomores living on campus has increased by 20%.*

### **Case Study:**

*An equal proportion of upperclassmen in focus groups at a private, urban university say that they moved off-campus due to the desire for more independence, or because their housing lottery number did not allow them their desired on-campus choice.*



*Themed and Living-Learning Communities for Undergraduates.* Residential learning communities have been in place in higher education for decades and, most recently, have appeared in different configurations as cluster colleges, residential colleges, and living-learning communities.

It is crucial to understand how the building spaces support the living-learning goals and outcomes, but there has been surprisingly little research in this area<sup>1</sup>.

*At the Sightlines Housing Member Campuses, the proportion of beds devoted to an academic theme ranges from 0% to 57% (e.g., Living-Learning communities, Honors housing).*

At some schools, living-learning communities are only for first-year students, but other schools offer them throughout the undergraduate years; thus, the program for each of the many types of student housing configurations needs to include spaces for living-learning activities.

Often, living-learning communities are located in the middle of traditional residence halls, and the community members are grouped together in a section of the hall around designated common spaces and lounges that help facilitate bonding and social programming. Thus, buildings may require both general and living-learning designated common spaces.

The common spaces needed to support undergraduate living-learning communities vary with the specific program theme. For example, a 'Healthy Living' community might require on-site space for student consultation with a University dietician and student health staff; an 'International' themed program might require a kitchen and dining space for regular internationally-themed dinners and get-togethers; and a 'Green' community might have a roof-top garden. Many residential learning communities depend on establishing relationships between the students and faculty, and one way of doing this is to provide housing for faculty within the complex. The community may require a range of faculty apartments in styles to match the needs of the different levels of junior or senior faculty.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the National Study of Living-Learning Programs does not include any questions on building spaces in their student survey. Our own research regularly incorporates questions such as utilization of specific building features, such as lounges, terraces, study rooms, and floor kitchens, the importance students assign to these spaces, their satisfaction with these spaces, and, most importantly, students' thoughts about how these spaces promote community.

## **Part 1: Models for Undergraduate and Graduate Housing** *(Continued)*

*Graduate and Professional Student Housing Models.* For graduate and professional students, there are at least four different models for new housing. One model provides inexpensive housing, targeting first-year students and international students who are living alone. The goal is to help them with acclimation to graduate school life, and, in the case of international students, to American cities and university culture. In this model, graduate students might be housed in single rooms in traditional furnished dormitories with communal bathrooms. Eating options are sometimes provided as shared floor kitchens, a small shop or café, or, more rarely, a campus dining hall designated for graduate students. 'Low cost' means small rooms, basic interior finishes, and few building common spaces other than study rooms.

### **Case Study:**

*At one private, urban university, international graduate and professional students comprise 23% of the student body, but 49% of occupants in university dormitories.*

The second model provides housing for students with families, often in apartment buildings dating back to the 1970's. Many schools have a small neighborhood of buildings devoted to this type of housing, thus creating a community for the residents, and particularly to any non-working spouses of students. Communal spaces will include a laundry room, and may include a meeting or recreation room. Adjacent child care centers are often available where the residents' children have preferential admission. Typically, apartments have one larger master bedroom and smaller second or third bedrooms and are unfurnished, although some schools have experimented with renting furnishings.

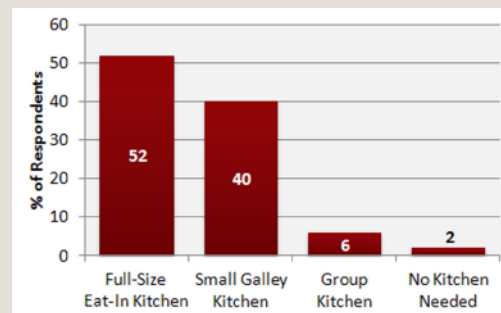
The third and fourth models provide apartment living for all graduate and professional students, but in very different settings. In the third model, the school buys older medium-sized multi-family houses or apartment buildings near to campus to house graduate students. Typically, these buildings provide very few common spaces other than a laundry room in the basement. The advantage for students, as with the first two models, is that this type of housing provides one-stop housing shopping geared towards graduate students. Often students can review and reserve apartments online before arriving, pay no security deposit, rent for the academic year instead of the calendar year, and pay by term using student billing. Some schools subsidize the cost of apartment housing, particularly in areas where the market rents are steep, while others price the housing at more reasonable market rates. As part of the price for renting University housing, however, utilities and Internet are often included, and buildings are serviced by University maintenance staff.



The fourth model provides new apartment living for all graduate and professional students, sometimes furnished. The key word is 'new' - graduate student housing designed for a purpose, not older buildings re-purposed. In these new-style residence halls, the buildings may include mixed use occupancy, with first-floor retail and residential on the top floors, and an underground parking garage. The buildings often have a wide array of common spaces to foster communication between different demographic groups of students, different intellectual disciplines, and between students and faculty. This type of mission dovetails with the increasingly popular university mission of interdisciplinary collaboration. In addition to study spaces, common spaces may include patios, fitness rooms, kitchens with eating areas for a private party, meeting rooms with smart technology that can serve an academic or social purpose, and a concierge desk to receive packages and monitor building security. New-style residence halls may also house residential life staff with a budget to either provide or facilitate high-level social and intellectual programming, and resident faculty who host programs for students.

### Case Study:

## Kitchen Options Preferred for Housing



*(Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors at urban, private institution.)*

### Top Priorities for Choice of Current Housing:

*(in rank order)*

- ◆ 15 minute walking distance from classes
- ◆ Opportunity to live with friends
- ◆ Building and unit amenities
- ◆ Area safety
- ◆ Housing quality
- ◆ Safety and security in building
- ◆ Laundry in building or unit
- ◆ Cost
- ◆ Sense of independence

*(Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors at urban, private institution.)*

As the buildings are new, there is an opportunity to customize the space for the particular student group or school culture.

A building in a northern climate may have skiing, skating and hockey equipment storage rooms, and designated areas for indoor bicycle storage, while a building in a hilly area may have moped storage. Housing for Business or Law School students will need group study rooms with audio-visual projectors and screens; in-unit closets may be sized to hold professional clothing for on-campus interviewing. If the building also functions as a graduate and professional student union, there could even be a fitness space, cinema, or grocery store, and a multi-purpose space for parties and events.

Finally, there is actually a fifth and very different trend for graduate and professional student housing - schools handing over the business of providing housing for their graduate students entirely to the private sector. In order for this housing model to work, there need to be appropriately priced apartments or small houses in the surrounding areas to the school or within commuting distance. Schools are also developing working relationships or partnerships with private developers to build and manage graduate student housing.



## Part 2: Building and Unit Trends

### Building Sustainability

LEED Silver certification is the norm for new student housing these days, and LEED Gold is nearly as prevalent. Schools are always looking for innovative ways to provide sustainable features, both to attract students who have a growing commitment to sustainability, and to support campus goals for energy efficiency.

Some schools are adding sustainability as one of the themed living-learning communities. (The students in this themed housing may participate in sustainability activities both in their housing and in their academic coursework, for example, classes such as environmental science or environmental justice.) At one school, a living-learning community provides an actual working greenhouse that students will use for growing their own food as well as a demonstration kitchen for food preparation.

Green roofs are also a popular way to provide outdoor common spaces. In building lobbies, schools have provided electronic or digital dashboards with measures of energy usage, sometimes to be used in a friendly, competitive way that lets students compare their building to others. In-unit, some schools are providing individual thermostats.

### Units

*The average gross square foot per undergraduate bed at Sightlines Housing Member Campuses is 290 GSF/bed for traditional rooms and suites in residence halls, and 366 GSF/bed for on-campus apartments.*

**Room Size.** Within units, room sizes vary significantly. As an example, within one single school, undergraduate single rooms range in size from 80 square feet in older buildings to 160 square feet in newer and/or renovated buildings. An architect reports the most typical demand for singles to be 100 to 110 square feet, with a wider range of 90 to 140 square feet. In fact, depending on whether rooms are new construction or renovation, there is evidence of two opposite trends at work. In one trend, square footage in singles and doubles continues to rise. In the other trend, square footage in single rooms within suites is pushed smaller and smaller, while more space is allocated to the associated common living rooms and bathrooms. The space and cost implications of varying room sizes are implicitly linked to the numbers of students to be housed, currently, and in the future.

**Interior finishes.** Architects and housing staff report that nicer interior finishes can sell the housing – thick carpeting, hardwood floors, unusual furnishings, and granite countertops. This may be important to a school

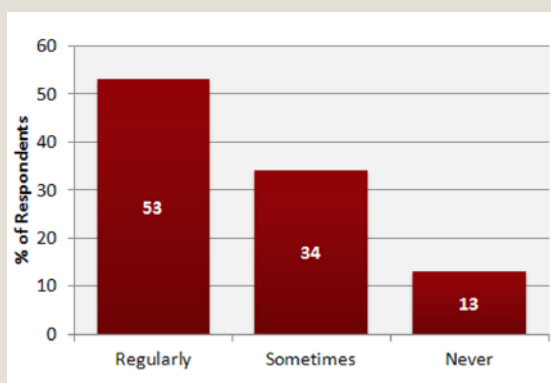
that relies on its housing for admissions purposes to attract students, or for a school that is competing with off-campus private-market housing for its upperclass students. Similar to the studies of urban public housing, nicer finishes are also linked to less vandalism of interior items. Sometimes 'new' is simply equated with 'nice,' resulting in better care of the housing.



*Beds.* A number of schools are sizing new undergraduate units for double beds to accommodate students who have grown up in homes with their own rooms and double beds. Most schools already offer extra-long twins to address the needs of tall students, but the double bed serves the needs of both tall students as well as an overall population that is trending larger. We have documented double beds in traditional dormitory rooms, suites, and undergraduate apartment units at private institutions, and in developer housing, but not at any public institutions. One architect, who works mainly with public institutions, said that although he has recommended sizing new rooms for double beds, schools are concerned with the difficulty of purchasing and managing both single and double beds. Another public system we queried viewed the issue of bed size not as one of student needs or preferences, but rather, a demonstration of cultural mores; describing themselves as a conservative institution, they chose to continue using single beds.

### Case Study:

#### Utilization of Fitness Room



*(Graduate and Professional students in residence at urban, private institution.)*

On the other hand, we heard that schools are regularly building rooms that accommodate double beds for graduate and professional student apartment housing. For schools that also provide furniture for their graduate and professional student housing, providing double beds increases the utility of the unit, as it can be used for either a single person or a couple. This trend is seen as a marketing necessity that offsets the space and cost implications of providing rooms that are large enough to hold a double bed.

Another interesting bed fact - some schools are raising the ceilings of their undergraduate rooms to accommodate lofting of beds and double-bunking; students like the extra space this creates, even in apartment-style units. By contrast, other schools are making conscious decisions to provide slightly larger rooms so that students will not need to stack their beds.

*Bathrooms.* The once utilitarian bathroom is a design of the past. Bathrooms are now both the symbol of

undergraduate students' increased preference for privacy, and schools' desire to help students socialize. Schools are still building centralized bathrooms, as they are believed to contribute strongly to developing students' connections with their peers. In other instances, communal bathrooms are part of a balanced inventory across buildings, also providing a tiered housing experience that changes by age and year in school. (In general, there are vast differences between the housing that is provided for freshmen/sophomores and for juniors/seniors.)

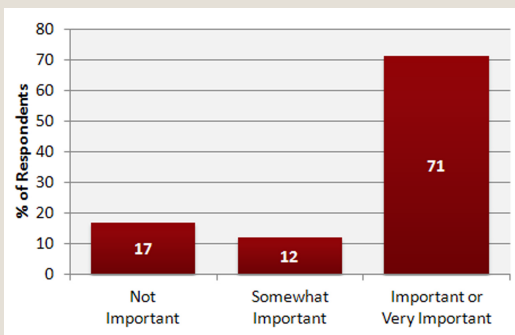
There are reports of private bathrooms for singles, Jack and Jill bathrooms between rooms, and multiple bathrooms within suites or apartments (each to serve 2 to 3 students). Some schools are planning for one bathroom per bedroom in apartment units, but this is not the norm. Putting toilets, showers, and sinks each in separate rooms is another way to allow students to share a bathroom without the expense of fully separated bathrooms.

One school designed 2-bedroom/ 2-bathroom graduate and professional student new-style residence hall apartments; the units were designed to be convertible into two separate 1-bedroom units as needed.

## More Trends and What's Next?

### Case Study:

#### Importance of Housing Availability and Specific Housing Type to Admissions Decisions



*(Graduate and Professional students in residence at urban, private institution.)*

Do the trends presented here resonate with the campuses you know? If you have examples of the trends that we discuss here that you'd like to share - photos or descriptions - we would be pleased to add them to our collection. If your housing is entirely different than described here, we would be interested to hear about that, too.

A related series of questions address how student housing will adapt and respond in the future to broader student trends such as remote learning, and the growing numbers of community college students and older students who desire on-campus housing. Some other topics we'd like to hear about:

- ♦ Are there examples of innovative and cost effective ways to build flexible unit layouts that accommodate changing demographic profiles of student bodies as well as new student needs or preferences?
- ♦ What types of housing are schools purchasing or building off-campus?
- ♦ Given equivalent cost and location, will students prefer old buildings with spacious layouts, or new buildings that are typically efficiently designed? How does this vary for different demographic groups of students?
- ♦ Is 'build it and they will come' always true? Are there cautionary tales regarding design, school and community approvals, and tricky student preferences?
- ♦ How have schools successfully incorporated student residential communities on the edges of campus, and what, if any, tradeoffs need to be offered to make this work?
- ♦ Building costs are high, and land is scarce. What are the answers?

For more information on the Housing module & integrated consulting services, please contact us at [insights@sightlines.com](mailto:insights@sightlines.com) or call 203.682.4950.

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