

**Commuter Student Housing: How to Improve Basic Needs Services for Off-Campus  
Students**

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## **Introduction**

On average, about 80% of college students live off-campus (Jacoby, 1989). This is one of the primary reasons why college campuses need offices like Off-Campus Life. Housing and shelter are basic needs that students need to meet to prosper and reach their full potential (Maslow, 1967). The work that offices like Off-Campus Life do helps set students up for success and, hopefully, a feeling of being connected to campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Much of this work is done through online websites that students can access when and wherever they please. This thesis aims to compare how CSU supports its off-campus students with off-campus housing compared to other universities across a variety of services. The final result of this thesis will be to offer recommendations to the Off-Campus Life office at CSU about how they could improve their services moving forward to better serve off-campus students.

Let's begin with a glance at this paper as a whole. I establish my credibility and position by explaining my years of experience in this field and related fields. I then deeply dive into the literature to help prove why this topic is important and relevant. Then, we jump into my methodology, looking at how I came up with my questions and who I decided to interview. Once we establish that, we go into my findings by examining each interview individually. Next, I will offer my recommendations to the Off-Campus Life office at CSU. I will follow up on what I learned about myself, the project, and what I would change. The thesis is then completed with a conclusion. Let's learn a little more about me.

## **Credibility and Positionality**

Before going any further, I would like to establish my credibility and background related to this topic. I have been in and around the housing industry my entire life. When I was little, both of my parents worked in real estate. At the time, this was under the umbrella of a

combination of REMAX and Prudential, both well-known real estate companies in the US.

While this was not directly tied to me, I learned much from my parents about how real estate and related industries work, like lending or property management. This especially relates to helping clients find the home of their dreams. This dynamic changed for us in 2009 when we went into business independently. Initially, we were fully on our own, not franchised out. A few years later, this changed as we were one of the first offices to join Co-Homefinder. My family had been with Co-Homefinder since their start. A few years later, they rebranded to what most people know today, 8Z. Growing up around this business, I continued learning and even planned to get my real estate license. This life stretch changed in 2017 when my parents divorced, and the real estate company stayed with my father. Since then, my mom has continued in the real estate world, working at Kittle Real Estate in Fort Collins. Especially over the last few years, since I now understand the finances, I have learned a lot more from these real estate conversations.

As far as my work experience goes, I started working in Off-Campus Life at Colorado State University in September 2021 and have remained in that office since. I am about three years and three months into my current role here. Off-Campus Life is an office focused on helping students find and navigate off-campus housing, resources, and community. When I started, I was a Program Assistant in the office. My primary job role was directly related to helping students find off-campus housing. This means I was very comfortable with the three primary resources we offered students seeking housing. The first one of these resources is RentalSearch, which is provided through Rent College Pads. This service offers three primary resources: listings from apartment complexes and other property managers, subleases from other students, and roommate listings from other students. This resource is one of the primary research points of the paper, so a more extensive and in-depth description will follow later. The second

primary resource I often recommended was the Apartment Complex List. This is a list that, depending on the year, includes 60-80 apartment complexes in Fort Collins. This list is useful because it includes a mix of student-focused and conventional housing a little further from campus. The final resource I needed to know is our Property Management List. This is a list of Fort Collins property managers willing to work with students.

Over time, the depth of my knowledge has vastly grown. Through helping students, I have been exposed to countless challenging situations. The only way to prepare for these situations is to get help from someone more knowledgeable. Over the last few months, my title has transitioned to Senior Guest Relations and Program Specialist. This change means that I have become one of the people in the office that others can look to when challenging housing situations come through the door.

While at Off-Campus Life, I have also attended some work-related events that have further developed my knowledge. I was able to attend the International Town and Gown Conference in 2023. This is a conference aimed at the intersection between universities and their cities. This included off-campus housing. I heard from many experts regarding how they handle off-campus housing and off-campus student services in general. While I may not have been on the same level of expertise as everyone else at the conference, I was able to learn so much and further my understanding of the subject.

In off-campus housing, I must also mention the positionality that working in this office gives me. Over time, I have gotten used to our office, the staff size, and our programs. This is not a typical thing at most universities. Our office is very large in comparison to peer offices at other universities, if one exists at all. Being that I have been in the office for as long as I have been, I have also seen many of our pain points. This may lead to viewing Off-Campus Life as more

middle-tier than I should because we are significantly larger and better equipped than our counterparts at other universities.

Because of my background in the topic, I also need to establish my positionality and how I influence the process because of my own lived experiences. For starters, I have never lived on campus. I have always, and still do, live with my mom. I have helped other students find off-campus housing but have not had to do it myself. In other words, I may struggle to understand the stress and intricacies of finding off-campus housing and living independently. Many pieces of this process may be simpler in my mind than in reality or vice versa. I might put too much weight on some items because of the personal housing security risks that I have faced. A few years back, my dad made it his goal to try and make my mom and me homeless. He failed, but this experience has changed how I view housing.

Another aspect of positionality that I should address is that I have worked with Rent College Pads for the last three years. Throughout this paper, this can be both an advantage and a detriment. In one sense, I know the platform exceptionally well and can speak to my knowledge through the paper and my presentation. On the other hand, I have seen the hiccups and pain points with the program that I have not seen with the others. This could lead to potentially being harder on my analysis of Rent College Pads when compared to others like Off-Campus Partners.

Overall, my lived experiences will significantly impact the paper and my views. My expertise will greatly benefit some areas, allowing me to speak in-depth about many of the processes essential to this paper and this topic. In others, my experience may skew the way I view a situation and lead me to be harsher because I have higher expectations than some schools have capabilities.

## **Literature Review**

Throughout the literature review, I establish the research that supports my thesis. There are a few sections that are covered in depth. The first is focused on commuter students. This section looks at how we define commuter students and the things we need to know relating to commuter students. The second section looks at a commuter student's sense of belonging. Many commuter students do not feel a strong sense of belonging, and this is something that many universities are working on changing. The final section we cover is academics, looking at what it takes for a commuter student to be successful. All three sections tie together why it is so important to offer these students the best off-campus housing resources possible.

### **Commuter Students**

Most college students commute to CSU and campuses around the world. On average, about 80% of students live in non-university housing (Jacoby, 1989). While some universities are fortunate enough to have offices like Off-Campus Life that prioritize thinking about commuter students and their needs, many schools cannot run such an office. This means that commuter students are not part of the framework on which most universities are built (Jacoby, 1989). Most universities take a one-size-fits-all approach to helping students, ignoring differences in basic needs that make certain options unfeasible (Jacoby, 1989).

Most modern universities strive for some form of excellence (Jacoby, 1989). With universities being businesses that rely on revenue from students and their families, excellence often shows in places where universities can impress families. The more a university can impress a family, the higher the likelihood their student will pick that school. This often means striving for national recognition for a particular academic program or providing the best on-campus experience possible through many on-campus dining halls, rec centers, and activities. With these goals in mind, most universities entirely miss the needs of commuter students, making it harder

for them to connect to campus and lowering their potential to reach the same level of excellence as on-campus students (Jacoby, 1989).

To fully understand the group of students we are discussing, let's define commuter students further. Commuter students are defined as students who do not live in university-owned housing (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This can include any distance from campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Commuter students can be part of all classifications of students: Full-time, Part-time, and online (in specific contexts) (Jacoby, 1989). This can include students like me, who still live with my mom. It can range from single mothers trying to get an education to care for their children better to a group of friends renting an apartment together. While there are differences, the same needs still exist: transportation to class, jobs, and belonging on campus (Jacoby, 1989).

Many universities struggle to grasp the needs of commuter students. Most administration and other decision-makers went through a typical, on-campus college experience. They cannot understand the struggles and needs of an off-campus commuter (Jacoby, 1989). While a parking lot may be a start, it is not a fantastic solution to a much larger problem. A starting point would be to acknowledge the presence of commuter students and recognize their needs as valid and essential (Jacoby, 1989). Many of the research pieces regarding commuter students show that universities view their experiences as less important and not worth their time or effort to improve (Biddix, 2015; Fernandes et al., 2021; Jacoby, 1989; Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

For the universities that view the commuter experience as relevant enough to be focused on, they often build their programs off the same few models. These are human development theories, the design of the campus itself, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (a big focus in the work that I have done over the last three years), mattering, involvement, transitions, and family

involvement throughout (Jacoby, 1989). Out of this list, I will focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as that is the most relevant to my thesis. Housing, as a physiological need, sits on the first level as one of the most important needs one has. Making commuter students feel as if they matter is closely related to the needs that we see on Maslow's list (Biddix, 2015).

Universities should collect information from commuter students over time to see how well they serve them (Jacoby, 1989). A long list of information could be collected from students, but this will be specific to each university, its student population, and its services (Jacoby, 1989). An example of this would be collecting information about graduation retention and GPAs of commuter students. This can also include information from other departments on campus that may be readily accessible in the student's records. Universities can recognize a need for change by compiling information and analyzing trends. This is called a "Comprehensive Institutional Response" (Jacoby, 1989). Overall, there are thirteen areas that a university can focus on to ensure the inclusion of commuter students (Jacoby, 1989). These thirteen can be simplified into three main points: 1. Make sure the university recognizes and takes care of commuter students from a high level, including them like every other on-campus student (Jacoby, 1989). 2. Collect feedback from commuter students to see where they do not feel included and ensure they feel included moving forward (Jacoby, 1989). 3. Implement university-wide changes to ensure commuter students are included in all university activities (Jacoby, 1989). Combining these three will set any university up to better serve commuter students.

### **Sense of Belonging**

One of the areas in which universities can better serve commuter students is by creating a sense of belonging. This means to make a student feel cared about and included on campus (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). This is a role that is uniquely missed when it comes to many

commuter students. To dive further into the issue and collect more information, the University of Illinois Chicago recruited commuter students and collected their participants' data during an hour-long focus group (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). The first theme that emerged from their focus group was commuter students spend a lot of time and focus on commuting and related activities rather than enjoying the on-campus amenities (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). In my experience, that is an hour during which I search for parking rather than going to the student rec center. The second theme across all the commuter students was the distinction between commuter and on-campus students (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). The commuter students felt like outsiders, often outnumbered by the other students who had a dorm and that sense of community (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). Even being referred to as a commuter student made these students feel ostracized because it excluded them from most students (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). The third key theme was significant moments created by faculty or staff (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). While many of the other students would not want to include them in what was happening, the professors who took the time to care significantly impacted the commuter students' sense of belonging (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). The fourth theme of this study was that commuter students want to feel needed by their university (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). The commuter students who had on-campus jobs often felt a higher sense of belonging because they were doing work that mattered to the university (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). They were no longer viewed as simply a source of money for the university but as something the university gained value from. The fifth and final trend they saw was that commuter students weigh every choice (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). Before going to any on-campus event, commuter students will do a cost vs benefit analysis of their time to decide if it is worth coming to campus for an event (Alcozer Garcia et al., 2020). This is something that students who live on campus do not have to think

about as, at least at CSU, most buildings are within a ten-minute walk from any of our dorms. Overall, this shows that a sense of belonging is a very different concept for commuter versus on-campus students. They connect to campus differently than on-campus students do.

### **Academics**

Students in their first and fourth years score higher on academic benchmarks if they live on campus and do not commute (Biddix, 2015). This is often due to outside factors in a commuter student's life, such as dealing with family or needing a job to stay afloat (Biddix, 2015). Many studies show that students who live off-campus tend to be less engaged than those who live with other students (Cockerill, 2019). This can go much deeper than just academics, extending into social practices, behavioral tendencies, and mental health struggles (Cockerill, 2019). It is shown that students who live in dorms or around other students in general, like student-focused housing, tend to have a sense of belonging that is not shared with students who may still be living at home or in non-student-focused housing. (Cockerill, 2019). The earlier in their academic career that a student feels a sense of belonging is a key indicator of educational achievement (Cockerill, 2019). Therefore, schools must make the experience more inclusive for all students, especially commuter students (Cockerill, 2019).

While most students commute in one way or another, most universities do not adequately understand or incorporate these students (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Research defines a commuter student as anyone who does not live in university-specific housing (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). In other words, campus and home are not the same for those students, especially if they did not live on campus for their first year (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). The vast majority of students who are in their mid-20s and older are commuter students (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This makes up almost one-quarter of the student population (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Many of

this population is also working to help pay for college or their bills as they go (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). These students often struggle trying to do multiple full-time life roles at once (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). Adding on a lower sense of belonging and other day-to-day issues like transportation, it becomes clear why commuter students struggle more than on-campus students (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This can improve through greater student engagement and making the students feel they matter (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). There are many ways to include these students, who are often overly overloaded. The first would be to include them and their family in orientation, whether that be at the beginning of the semester or around the move in (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). We can include these students by offering more accommodating class schedules, courses specific to commuter students, and making them part of the learning communities already on most campuses (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). When commuter students get close to the end of their journey, we need to ensure that we are including them in the capstone experiences, career guidance, and successes as all students (Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

Students who live on campus for all four years have a statistically higher GPA and retention rate and tend to graduate in less time than those who commute (Malham & Clark, 2018). The GPA divide grows larger every year a student lives off campus. For students who moved off campus after their first year, there was a 0.2 GPA difference. Students who live on are 8% more likely to graduate and 15% more likely to graduate on time or early (Malham & Clark, 2018). Students who live on campus are significantly more likely to be more satisfied with their lives through college, have a greater sense of social belonging, participate in more extracurricular activities, and seek more on-campus resources (Malham & Clark, 2018). For students who live off campus for 4 years, they are 35% less likely to graduate (Malham & Clark, 2018). Those who make it to graduation are 11% more likely to finish in 6 years than 4 (Malham

& Clark, 2018). These percentages look even worse if a student is also in the first generation (Malham & Clark, 2018). Overall, students who live on campus are far more likely to be successful throughout college (Malham & Clark, 2018).

For a person to try to reach their full potential, certain aspects need to be met (Maslow, 1967). Having one's basic needs fulfilled allows one to work and build on the other areas of one's life (Maslow, 1967). This includes level-one items like food, water, and shelter but also goes further and includes belonging, respect, self-esteem, and affection (Maslow, 1967). To be truly successful, they will need all those in a satisfactory capacity. The more fulfilled someone is with these basic needs, the more motivation they will have to reach their full potential, whether that be related to life, work, school, you name it (Maslow, 1967).

As we age, our preferences change. When you think of the average college housing experience, the majority of people think of a dorm. But what matters to those who live off-campus? The top factor that matters to commuter students is finding housing (Johari et al., 2017). First and foremost, they are concerned about finding a place to live (Johari et al., 2017). The second most crucial factor for off-campus students is the quality of the housing that they live in (Johari et al., 2017). Students will not be able to reach their full potential if their housing is falling apart and adding more stress to their day-to-day lives (Johari et al., 2017). The third most important factor is the type of housing and the cost of the housing (Johari et al., 2017). Many students are limited by their budgets, which can greatly limit the types of housing they can afford (Johari et al., 2017). This varies by the location of the college and the cost of living in that area (Johari et al., 2017). The next aspect would be the housing location in relation to the university (Johari et al., 2017). Students prefer to be closer to the university and have a shorter commute (Johari et al., 2017). The final factor students look for in off-campus housing is the housing

environment (Johari et al., 2017). This would be looking at things like your roommates or those around you (Johari et al., 2017).

To include commuter students, some universities have started programs dedicated just to those students. One of these universities is the University of Melbourne, which has a non-residential college program (Fernandes et al., 2021). This program dedicated a building, mentors, faculty, and professional staff to the commuter students (Fernandes et al., 2021). They started with only 250 participants but now have over 1,675 students and 127 staff appointed to this program across seven colleges and three campuses (Fernandes et al., 2021). The program mainly focuses on hosting competitive (sports) and college-based events to build a community between students in the program (Fernandes et al., 2021). Each college and campus offers different events and services tailored to its students' specific needs (Fernandes et al., 2021). This study shows that the students who participated in the NRC program view their college experience more favorably than students who did not participate in the program (Fernandes et al., 2021). These students also confirm that because of this program, they felt a greater sense of belonging, spent more time on campus, and sought out more university resources than they would have otherwise (Fernandes et al., 2021). The program worked wonders, providing students a greater sense of belonging and a better overall university experience (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Having a baseline of what is common and expected regarding off-campus housing is essential. This study examines the off-campus housing market at 8 universities across the country (Fields et al., 2013). Most student-focused apartments had about 1,143 square feet, 2.76 bedrooms, and 2.53 bathrooms (Fields et al., 2013). The majority of these apartments ended up being about 2.43 miles from campus (Fields et al., 2013). Over half of the student-focused rooms came furnished with somewhere between 60-70% of the complexes, including utilities in the rent

(Fields et al., 2013). Around 90% of the complexes provide internet, which is growing as the internet has become a necessity for the modern student (Fields et al., 2013). For the student-focused complexes, occupancy sat at around 96% (Fields et al., 2013). This report also shows that units closer to campus are significantly more expensive than ones further away (Fields et al., 2013). If the apartment is more than 5 miles from campus, it will cost close to half of what an apartment right off campus costs (Fields et al., 2013). Since students desire these metrics to help them make their housing decisions, it is important that we incorporate them into the resources that we offer them.

The literature review shows many reasons why commuter students need to be prioritized from the university perspective. This comes from defining these students and their needs. Universities do a great job of helping on-campus students meet their needs, but more work can still be done to support students. Universities can also further benefit these students by focusing more on creating a sense of belonging. Often, commuter students do not have a strong sense of belonging. Finally, I looked at commuter-student academics. We took a deeper dive into what it takes for a commuter student to be successful. Overall, combining all the literature shows the need for off-campus resources.

### **Methodology**

My methodology for this process included several steps, including creating a list of questions, finding interviewees, and conducting my interviews. Many criteria went into each of these areas, and I will explain each piece in detail.

The first area of methodology I will address is how I decided on the main components I wanted to research. I know that I want to focus primarily on off-campus housing websites. I started by looking at the primary service provider we use here at CSU. This is Rent College

Pads. I then began to look at Rent College Pads' direct competitors. Initially, I figured there would be a lot of options, but most of them, like Zillow, do not offer any services specifically to college students. Once I added that criteria, I discovered only one other company besides Rent College Pads. This is Off-Campus Partners. They are owned by Co-Star, the company that also owns Apartments.com. Outside of larger providers, the only other student-focused listing service I could find was from Ohio State University, as they run all their off-campus housing services in-house rather than using a third party. After completing my research and due diligence, I started to look for people from all three categories to interview.

Next, I solidified a list of the people I wanted to interview. I wanted to have at least two interviews per platform. The only exception would be Ohio State, which is the only university on their platform. I started by asking my advisor, Off-Campus Life's director, Dr. Lindsay Mason, if she had any connections. Lucky for me, Lindsay had a ton of connections that she was willing to share. Lindsay's connections made up the vast majority of my interviews; the only school that did not have a connection with Lindsay was the University of Arizona. I emailed them separately to schedule a time as I needed a final university that used Off-Campus Partners.

Before I started the interviews, I needed to create a list of questions I wanted to ask all these universities. In my interviews, I wanted some variety in the answers I was getting. I did not want the interview to be only about the online platform. This is because so many offices do more for students than just offer a website. I started by asking questions about their office and the university that they work for. From there, we transitioned into questions about each specific university's platform, whether that be Off-Campus Partners, Rent College Pads, or their proprietary system. Finally, I ended the interview by asking if there was anything else they thought I needed to know. Overall, I had 21 questions; they are as follows:

1. Tell me about your office. How many staff, where does your funding come from, where are you housed in the university org chart?
  - a. Do you have an office designed to help commuter students find housing, or do you only have the website?
2. What is the current platform/company you partner with or use?
3. How long have you been on that platform?
4. What made you choose that platform?
5. What services are you utilizing through that platform? Or what does your site offer?
6. What marketing do you do at your university to promote that platform?
7. Before this platform, what did your university do?
8. What improvements has moving to this platform made?
9. What do you like about the platform?
10. What do you dislike about the platform?
11. What would you change about the platform?
12. What are your pain points with this platform?
13. How detailed are the property listings?
14. Does your website use SSO (single sign on)?
15. What can the public access on your website?
16. What can only the students access?
17. Does your website provide education? (legal or lease info)
18. Does your university collect feedback from students regarding their experience with the platform?
19. Are there any partnerships from the properties directly to the university, possibly sponsorships and or recognition programs, that do not go through the platform?
20. Beyond the platform, what other resources does your university offer?
21. How do you collaborate with other departments or organizations to support students in off-campus housing?

The final thing I must discuss in methodology is how I scheduled and conducted my interviews. I emailed all of the contacts Lindsay gave, mentioning that I had received their information from Lindsay Mason. The vast majority responded quickly. From there, we set dates and times for a virtual Microsoft Teams meeting. For the schools I did not have contacts for, I just emailed their primary off-campus housing email. Also, I received pretty quick responses from most universities that were willing to meet. All the interviews took place on Microsoft Teams and lasted about an hour. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed as well.

## **Findings**

The findings section of this paper will be divided into three primary parts. The first part will cover all my interviews with universities using Rent College Pads. The second section will cover all my interviews with universities using Off-Campus Partners. The final section will cover Ohio State University's proprietary system.

### **Rent College Pads**

The first system we are going to explore is Rent College Pads (RCP). I will start by discussing my experience with RCP here at CSU. I will then cover my interview with Jediah Cummins, the Executive Director of Housing and auxiliary Services at the University of Northern Colorado. Finally, I will wrap up this paper section by covering my discussion with Chris Hoff, RCP VP of Partnerships.

Let's start by visualizing what the Off-Campus Life (OCL) office looks like here at CSU. Our office currently has about 20 staff members. The breakdown is about six full-time staff and 14 student staff. Not all staff are dedicated to off-campus housing, as some work for RamRide. We have our own branding and marketing team internal to only our office. This is a rarity on campus as most offices would have a designated marketing team in which they work with. Student fees fund most of our office, with other revenue coming from various property managers and the City of Fort Collins. We are viewed as a basic needs office on campus that can help students in emergency situations. While we can't offer them funding, we can offer them resources. On the university org chart, we are placed within the campus life cluster inside the division of student affairs. We are the primary office on campus to help students find off-campus housing. We also have a website with tons of resources on top of our physical space on the north side of the Lory Student Center.

We are currently on the Rent College Pads platform. We have been with RCP for about six years and have had mostly good experiences with the platform overall. We chose to partner with RCP for a few reasons. The first is that it offers a very customizable platform. If there is a feature we want to add to the website or something we want to change, we send over an email, and RCP will start working on the changes. Most of the time, the changes come back within a quick turnaround. Another reason we chose to work with RCP is because they share the profits they make from the local apartment complexes. Another reason we decided to work with RCP was because they are willing to work with CSU's single sign-on protocols. These are just a few of our reasons; others will be covered as we continue.

We are currently utilizing four services on the RCP platform (RentalSearch, n.d.). The first one is Listings. This page is full of rental properties, whether a home, an apartment, or a condo; all available properties posted by a property manager or landlord go on this page. A great way to think about this would be to picture a student-focused version of Zillow Rentals. These listings are often very detailed, including information about bedrooms, bathrooms, amenities, time to campus, and many more. Anyone can access this page; it is not behind a single sign-on (SSO) wall. The second service CSU currently utilizes through RCP is the Roommates features. This page is locked down to students only using the CSU SSO. This page is full of posts put up by students who are looking to live with other students. Typically, two types of people post on this page: People looking for a space and people who have extra space. A few years back, one of our marketing managers, Grace Bowen, and I crafted a list of questions to put on the website to help with roommate matching. What I have learned throughout this process is that these questions have become a site-wide option for RCP, no longer exclusive to CSU. The third service we currently use through RCP is Rooms for Rent. This is another page that is also limited

to students using SSO. The point of this page is that anyone with an extra room or looking to sublease their room or apartment can post on this website for free. The final service that we use through RCP is Marketplace. This is meant to be a college-specific variant of Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist. The point is that by locking the post to only people with CSU SSO access, we can significantly reduce the risk of a student falling for a scam. The marketplace usage varies but has proven to be successful at times.

We do a lot of marketing at CSU to promote the platform. Our office does so much marketing that we have a full-blown marketing and branding team. Much of our marketing is directed at first-year students to help them learn about the resources we offer when it comes time for them to move off-campus. Beyond first-year students, we also target transfer students, international students, and parents and families. We cover many forms of marketing, including physical posters or other displays in the residence halls. We also do a lot of social media marketing across multiple platforms.

Before RCP, our office had an in-house website that we ran. It turned out to be a colossal pain for our staff to run. Also, because it was internally built, the website quickly became outdated and tied to legacy software. By switching, we have significantly reduced the workload of our students on the website. Another improvement that has been made by switching is our relationships with the complexes. Rather than the complexes having to rely on us for support, they have a dedicated RCP representative to reach out to get help. This means that we get to work with the complexes in a more fun way, primarily focusing on events.

Overall, our staff have had a really good experience with RCP. Some of the primary benefits we have seen from the platform are that it is safe for students to use and makes it so that they do not have to worry as much about the potential for a scam. Using this platform has been

easy for our staff as we do not need to intervene beyond approving student posts. Another thing we like is that RCP provides education on their website for students. The pain points we often see with RCP are that when new features or customizations are released, they tend to break other areas on the website. For example, we need to manually delete half the URL for our staff to sign in. Another example would be that every few updates, the rooms for rent posts will stop auto deleting after 30 days, leading students to think there are more options than are available. RCP fixed most of our issues, except for the URL when signing in, in a timely manner.

Another service that our office offers is a Good Neighbor Program (Good Neighbor Program, n.d.). While it is not through RCP, I think it is worthwhile mentioning. To be listed as a good neighbor complex with CSU, the apartment complex agrees, in simple terms, to higher ethical standards and property management practices. This includes things like not using predatory leasing or wrongfully holding security deposits. There are also benefits for the different apartment complexes involved, such as on-campus marketing opportunities and being able to say they are a participant in the program.

Outside of that program, the Off-Campus Life office also heavily partners with other offices on campus, such as Student Legal Services (SLS). Off-Campus Life works with SLS by helping students find the apartment they are looking for, and then the student can take their lease over to SLS and have them read it and make sure it all makes sense and that there is nothing in the lease that should not be there. This is one of CSU's many excellent services to its students. Now, let's take a look at the University of Northern Colorado (UNCO).

UNCO is structured very differently than CSU and does not offer nearly as many commuter-related resources to its students as CSU does. The department that runs off-campus housing is Housing and Residential Information. That department has 17 full-time staff and

primarily focuses on on-campus housing. They used to have a separate office for off-campus housing, but that office closed back in 2018 as they did not see value given the rental market in Greely.

UNCO has been with RCP since about 2013. Jediah was not in the department when that decision was made and does not know the history of why they chose RCP. They have remained with RCP because they like the model, what they offer, and because it is what CSU uses. They want the ability to make changes if they have a problematic landlord. Like CSU, UNCO offers Listings, Rooms for Rent, and Roommates. They are taking part in a similar revenue-sharing program. UNCO has no marketing budget dedicated to off-campus housing; the only marketing they do is talk to transfer and grad students to let them know about the website.

Going forward, UNCO would like to make a few changes. The first would be to utilize UNCO's SSO. Currently, students are just making accounts with RCP. Jediah would also want the website to conform to the university's branding standards. Jediah would also like more information on the website for small landlords. They have had some issues with landlords not offering enough information to be useful.

As it stands right now, UNCO does not have a student legal services office. However, they have a connection to a local attorney who will work pro bono for some of the students, depending on what the attorney is needed for. They have previously held a housing fair, but that is not a regular thing; they did not see it as useful. Overall, UNCO is a smaller school that does not have the budget to offer the same services as CSU.

The final person I talked to about RCP was Chriss Hoff from RCP. This conversation went very differently compared to the rest of my interviews. Chris was able to highlight some of

the more unique things that RCP is doing, with the hopes of rolling out many of these features in the near future.

The first main thing we talked about was branding for partner schools vs. non-partner schools. Schools partnered with RCP will have that school's logo and URL built into their website, providing credibility for the students. They will also create YouTube commercials and run different Google ads for the website in these areas. The universities that are not partnered or potentially use a competitor will still have a non-university branded variant of the website for those cities. While they will still push advertising, it is not as effective as when partnered because the students may not necessarily recognize RCP as a brand.

Chris also mentioned many new features that other schools use or will use soon. The first was a rideshare feature that would allow students to find other students commuting into campus from the same area they are in. This is currently rolled out in western Washington. Another option they have is a feature where landlords can list and rent out parking spaces near campus. This is a feature at the University of Wisconsin. For areas like Washington, D.C., they have a public transportation overlay that students can also add to the map on the website. California State University has a feature where if students go through all of their rent education on the website, they can get a certificate to waive their application fees to specific apartment complexes. In Syracuse, all landlords must have a valid rental license with the city to post their listing. As RCP sits now, they are partnered with over 130 universities. Chris's overarching point was that their primary goal as a company is to provide students with a better and more educated decision regarding housing. RCP does not want students to leave or drop out because of inadequate housing.

### **Off-Campus Partners**

For Off-Campus Partners (OCP), I conducted interviews with three universities. The first was with Aaron Bachenheimer, the Director of Off-Campus Student Life at the University of North Carolina Chappel Hill. The second was with Jeff Morris, the Director of Off-Campus Housing and Neighborhood Relations at Colorado University Boulder. My final interview was with Ali Santander from the University of Arizona. Let's begin by breaking down my interview with Aaron.

Aaron has been with UNC since 2009, when he went there for his doctorate. During his time, he moved into the Dean of Students' Office to do some special projects. In 2011, he became the full-time Dean of Students and Director of Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL) and Community Involvement. With this role, Aaron has developed a few programs that are a knock-and-talk model. One is similar to CSU's community welcome, and the other is a loud party follow-up system. In 2017, Aaron became the Director of Off-Campus Student Life. As of recently, they just got funding to hire a coordinator specifically for Off-Campus Student Life. So, while their office is not fully up and running, they have put in much effort and preparation to make it a reality.

The platform they use is Off-Campus Partners, and they have been with OCP since 2017. They chose OCP because they knew the previous COO; she lived in Chapple Hill. With OCP initially being a smaller, family-run platform, Aaron's choice was obvious. At the time, they primarily did off-campus housing through the student newspaper, so almost any option seemed better. They have continued to stay with OCP even after Co-Star acquired the company.

On their instance of OCP, they currently offer Listings, Partner Properties, Rooms for Rent, and Roommates. Listings will be the only option open to the public; SSO protects the rest. Rooms for Rent and Roommates will resemble what you see with RCP. The one difference is that

rather than roommate matching questions, OCP has it set up more like a dating app for roommates.

Aaron likes many things about OCP. The first is their connection to Co-Star and apartments.com, which helps establish credibility for the website. He also loves how technologically advanced the website is in offering things like virtual tours. Aaron also likes how the Roommates' tab is set up. It often attracts graduate students. Overall, there was only one thing that Aaron could have been happier with: how hard OCP makes it for single-family home rentals. The website is designed for larger complexes.

Their office does much outreach to students. They primarily allow properties that are part of their Good Neighbor Initiative at the diamond level to do on-campus outreach. These properties table at many university-wide events throughout the year, including two housing fairs. They currently have over 25 partner properties in this system. Along with the outreach, their office is also connected to student legal services, so their students can take their leases to be reviewed before signing. They also partner with their conduct office and FSL to have a party registration system that includes loud party follow-ups. Overall, UNC offers many services to its students that strive to improve off-campus housing experiences.

The next university we are going to discuss is Colorado University in Boulder. I talked to Jeff Morris. Jeff is the director of the Off-Campus Housing and Neighborhood Relations office. They focus heavily on off-campus housing and neighborhood relations. They have a typical staff structure with student staff, front desk staff, peer advisors, and neighborhood ambassadors. One unique role in their office is that they have their own legal advisor, solving the need for a partnership with student legal services. Helping students find off-campus housing is about 25% of what they do. Other areas include student advocacy and a variety of town-gown activities.

They are primarily student-fee-funded with some revenue from different events, like housing fairs, throughout the year.

They are currently partnered with Off-Campus Partners. CU has been with OCP since its beginning, around 2007 or 2008. They were one of the original universities to work with them while they were still a family-owned business out of Boston. The primary reason that CU chose OCP was because they were practically the only option at the time. According to Jeff, OCP has been trying to keep up since the launch of RCP because they are less student-focused. Before the partnership, CU primarily ran off-campus housing through a manually updated excel sheet.

When Jeff talked with me about their OCP services, they were almost identical to Aaron's. The only primary difference is that CU does not have the partner property page. They currently utilize Listings, Roommates, and Subleases to recap these services. Jeff highlighted a few things that Aaron did not. Jeff appreciates all the education on the website, such as how to be a good neighbor or information about local utilities.

Jeff highlighted many things that he likes about the platform. The first thing that Jeff liked was the ability to post advertisements for different events going on at the university. Another thing he liked was the additional benefits from apartments.com. Because of the partnership, their website gets millions of hits in a year and spans as far as 30 miles to help students who want to live closer to Denver. It is also a way for their students to find lower rent than what is available in Boulder. He likes that OCP requires all properties to have rental licenses to be on the website. He also likes not having to worry about updating the website; having OCP run things has been a lifesaver.

Jeff also highlighted a few pain points he has with OCP. The first pain point is that they do not offer an apartment rating system. Ratings come over from apartments.com, but the

students cannot add their ratings. Jeff understands why this is, but would still like the feature. Jeff's other pain point is that the platform is not customizable. For any change to be made, many universities must agree to it because it will be rolled out to all universities. The platform is not customizable beyond a logo, URL, and SSO for any specific university.

When it comes to advertising, they mention Ralphie's list (the name of their OCP instance) to everyone looking for housing. They post flyers and posters wherever they can. Specifically, they try to target orientation sessions and get the word out early. At least once a year, OCP will come into campus and advertise for them, which is a nice way to take some of the weight off the university regarding marketing. Overall, Jeff was very happy and honestly struggled with the things that he disliked.

The final university I talked to regarding Off-Campus Partners was the University of Arizona. I spoke to Ali Santander, who works in the housing marketing department. Their university does not have a dedicated office for off-campus housing. Instead, they primarily rely on the website as a resource. The person in charge of managing the website also works in marketing. They used to have a dedicated person but did not see the value in the long term. Because of this, they do not offer in-person help unless it is an emergency.

When it comes to the services that they offer through OCP, it is identical for CU. Those services are Listings, Roommates, and Subleases. They have been with OCP since 2013 and renewed with them in 2021. One change the renewal brought is that OCP will collect and share the money with the university rather than vice versa. This is the only school I talked to that used this model. They chose to stay with OCP in 2021 because they like how the website works on mobile and some of the integrated features from apartments.com.

They do not do much marketing for the website at their university. They market OCP primarily at their housing fairs. They are currently hosting two housing fairs in the span of a year. This is because of how early the different properties start pressuring students into signing.

Ali had a relatively short list of positives and negatives. For the positives, she liked the ease of searching. The students can put in the parameters of what they are looking for, and the website will give them the results. Regarding her negatives, Ali thinks the website can be overwhelming for students because of the information it offers. If there were one thing that Ali could change, she would make the education portion of the website easier to navigate. Overall, Ali is happy with their partnership with OCP.

### **In-House**

I interviewed one university that runs its own program in-house. I spoke to Dilnavaz (Dilna) Cama, the Director of Off-Campus and Commuter Student Engagement at The Ohio State University.

Dilna started off by describing their Off-Campus and Commuter Engagement office. It is one of 40 offices in the student life cluster at OSU. Specifically, they sit in the residential portfolio. Their office has been around for decades but got to be entirely revamped from the ground up in 2020. They now have nine full-time staff, two graduate student staff, and about 30 undergraduates. They make some revenue but are also student-fee-funded. Their campus is unique in having a 2-year live-on requirement. With that, they still have about 40,000 students living off-campus.

Their office is broken down into three primary teams. The first is the operations team. They are more front-facing customer service and focus on learning and development. This is also the team in charge of creating dashboards and helping with financials. The second team is

community outreach. They support off-campus students, neighbors, and community members. They are responsible for the orientation sessions. The final team is the off-campus residential experience team. This team focuses on engaging with their students and their partner properties.

Rather than partnering with OCP or RCP, OSU has built its in-house system, the Off-Campus Housing Network, launching initially in August of 2022. They have been working with the majority of these complexes for decades now, so revamping for a modern era made sense. Properties must be members, and a fee must be paid to be part of the network. Being a member means the complexes get to list on the housing network, they get to attend ten community round tables a year, and they allow the university and codes to inspect 5% of their total units in the county. The complexes also agree that they will address any report they receive from students, including having a conversation with the university and student legal services. This is so the university can ensure that the concerns are adequately handled or, if not genuine, address them with the student. Very similar to the other providers we looked at earlier, their housing network offers the equivalent of a Listings page, Roommates, and Subleases. One of the big drivers on their website is making the students feel safe at every turn.

Regarding marketing, OSU has more activity than any other university I talked to. They do marketing so that people will know about their events, and they focus on driving attendance through marketing. They are very strategic with marketing, having a weekly, monthly, and semester-based marketing schedule. They do a lot of marketing through relationships with other campus partners. In addition, they do the normal marketing you picture: screens, social media, newsletters, etc.

The final topic Dilna and I discussed was their rental inspection program. This was mentioned earlier, but this program is required for all members of their housing network. It

would allow the university and codes to come in and inspect 5% of a landlord's apartments in the county. One of the primary focuses of this program is to ensure that students live in safe environments that are up to the standards set by codes and universities. It also allows the university to understand the students and their living situations better.

Overall, OSU has done a wonderful job of making sure that its students feel safe and offering them a safe and secure way to locate housing. Running all of these programs in-house is a huge undertaking, yet one that OSU has taken in stride. Across all of my interviews, they seemed to be one of the most put-together programs that I came across.

### **Recommendations**

After all of my research and interviews, I have three recommendations for the Off-Campus Life office at CSU. These are to have two housing fairs, require rental registrations, and require rental inspections. Combining all three of these items could greatly benefit students and increase student safety.

Let's start by looking at two housing fairs. We know that apartment complexes push students to sign their lease for the following year very early. Many of these complexes start this process in September. Students will begin to see the advertising or receive the emails and think they need to sign. This leads many students to make uninformed decisions because they do not know what is out there and often sign one of the first options they see. Hosting a fall housing fair would allow us to help educate our students about what is out there and better prepare them for the early leasing season. One consideration would be to recommend that students wait. While we want to prepare them, we still want them to wait until February or March to sign; that way, if life changes, they will not be tied to the lease they signed a year in advance. Given our timeline, we could easily combine this with our Homecoming Housing Tour, which would allow parents to

be part of the housing fair with their students and allow both the students and parents to go and see these properties.

My second recommendation to CSU is that we start requiring landlords looking to post on our website to have their rental registration with the City of Fort Collins. The rental registration is a new requirement from the city. The vast majority of rental properties need to be registered by January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025. Once this program is established, we could partner with the city to help verify that all properties on our website are registered and up to date with the city. The benefit to the students would be that we verify information about the rental property, reducing the likelihood of scams and making students feel safer in their off-campus housing decisions.

My final recommendation is that we start requiring rental inspections of all our good neighbor properties. While we partner with these properties, we do not currently know what the state of the actual apartments are. Are they up to code? In good repair? We could confirm these things, adding value to our good neighbor program. Parents always love to hear that the university works with these complexes; it would sound so much better if we could also confirm their safety. An example would be confirming that multiple units in a complex have carbon monoxide detectors and then being able to share this information with parents or students who are looking at the property. There are a few different ways we could go about this. The first way would be to make it a requirement that a combination of someone from the university and codes can inspect 5% of their total units in a property manager's portfolio to be listed as a good neighbor property. The second way, which would focus on revenue generation, would be to make it a certification. Every 5 years, a landlord would pay us and a person from codes to come out and certify that a specific property is safe and up to code. That landlord could then say that they have the certification from the university that they are compliant and safe for students.

Combining all three would significantly help prepare students for success and limit the dangers they would face as first-time renters. One of the most important things we could help provide students with is peace of mind. This would allow them to focus more on academics and feel more connected to campus.

### **Learnings**

Throughout the thesis process, I learned six things outside my recommendations' scope. The first thing I learned is that Off-Campus Life at CSU does a fantastic job and is overall a great program. The second thing that I learned is that I set very high expectations for myself and my work. The third thing I learned is that off-campus housing is not nearly as important at other universities as it is at Colorado State. The fourth learning came from the mistakes I made along the way. My final learning was that I could comfortably converse with experts in the field without feeling inferior in knowledge. Let us begin by looking at the different schools.

When taking a look at our office compared to other offices at other universities, we are huge. Before I started this project, our office was all that I knew. Being in the office for 3 years, I knew about all of our flaws and issues that we face. Because of that, I assumed that our office was somewhere in the middle when compared to other universities. Throughout my research and interviews, I learned that we are actually a top-tier office. I would rank us as 9/10, because there is always room for improvement. But some of our big benefits are having a physical office, a good neighbor program, and the ability to offer additional resources on top of RCP. I did not realize how lucky I was to work in this office compared to others.

This also showed me that I continually set my expectations very high. Our office was amazing, but I did not see that because I only looked at our issues and how we could improve. Going forward, I need to make sure that I do not fall into the pit of looking at the negative and

not acknowledging the positive. Our office has far more positive than negative, which I should have recognized initially.

Regarding other universities, I was very surprised at how little support they offer off-campus students looking for housing. I started with my base expectation being built off CSU as a middle point. So, I was very surprised when I talked to multiple universities that do not offer off-campus student services. While many of these schools offer the website, there is no one whose job revolves around off-campus housing. An example is the University of Arizona, where off-campus housing is half a single person's job in marketing. And the more people I talked to, the more I learned that this is fairly common. Again, this is another place I am lucky to be at CSU.

Throughout this process, I made one very large mistake. This would be the questions that I asked in my interviews. Many of the questions I asked in my interviews led me down a path that needed to be clarified for my thesis. While asking about additional programs could have been beneficial, I learned a lot about school newspapers. That is something that offered zero value to my thesis. Similar to that, some people went into too much detail, and others did not do enough. After being through this process once, I feel I am now better equipped to handle interviews in the future with a better sense of the depth of information that I need to gather.

Overall, I am proud of my knowledge and expertise in this adventure. Throughout my interviews, I met with many people, including some of the top experts in the US regarding off-campus housing and off-campus student services. Never throughout this process did I feel I was lost or not on the same page with the expert. Working in this industry for the last three years taught me a great deal of information that I did not think would be useful until these interviews, where it all became relevant and useful. I owe a lot of this knowledge to being involved with ITGA. I learned a lot about concepts I had yet to hear of throughout that conference, and many of

those concepts came up in my interview. Overall, it is a good feeling to understand the experts in the industry.

One final thing is that, since high school, I have improved my work management skills. When I wrote my first thesis four years ago, I did everything in one night. That was not good or ideal, and it showed. With this thesis, I have done a much better job writing it over multiple days. While this may not seem like a huge improvement to everyone else, it is a huge improvement for me.

### **Conclusions**

Throughout this paper, we started by establishing research into why off-campus housing is so important. From there, we dove into my interviews with other institutions, comparing their services under Off-Campus Student Services. Once I had gone through all of this information in depth, I provided my recommendation for how Off-Campus Life could better serve the students of CSU. We finally wrapped up what I learned and would change for next time.

Through this experience, I learned that CSU does an amazing job of serving students with the current structure of our office. On that same note, nothing is perfect, and there is always room for improvement. I recommended that CSU start hosting a second housing fair, requiring rental registrations and performing rental inspections on good neighbor properties. All three of these recommendations have the potential to help us better serve our students and provide them with both a sense of comfort and a sense of belonging. Under our current leadership, I think the office is in a wonderful spot to make some of these transitions.

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