

Let's Build Something Great – Together

On-campus housing can work with off-campus providers to build a stronger industry.

By Mitchell Smith

The student housing industry has come a long way since my days as a resident advisor. Off-campus communities have grown in number, size and sophistication in physical nature and operations. The industry now attracts the savviest institutional and international investors, a confirmation of its evolution from local mom-and-pop shops to purpose operated student housing owners and operators.

Amid all the progress, the industry continues to grapple with many of the same challenges it has grappled with for so long, such as increased competition from new off-campus supply, and finding and retaining talented associates to operate ever more complex properties. Operators with a long-term commitment to the industry will continue to perform in the face of these headwinds. But recently, and more frequently than I can ever recall, the industry is facing new challenges in the form of increased competition from higher education institutions adding significant on-campus housing supply. While the development of on-campus housing is nothing new, what stands out to me is the evident desire from the schools to actively compete with the off-campus market.

I am faced with the realization now, more than ever, that the off-campus industry is not perceived by higher ed institutions as a complementary component of their students' academic journey. In many ways, it is not a surprise to see this sentiment expressed. Off-campus housing has not always been focused on helping students achieve the broader goals of their academic pursuits, especially dating back to the humbler beginnings of the industry. But the industry, communities, and operators have evolved, and on- and off-campus priorities are more aligned than ever before. I believe it is time we all recognize the contributions and benefits of both on- and off-campus housing in the success of the university's mission and in their students' lives and overall development.

We all understand that on-campus hous-

ing is a critical component in fulfilling the academic mission of higher ed. We all appreciate the value of on-campus housing and its impact on student success. There is well established evidence that shows better academic and engagement outcomes for students who live on-campus versus off, especially in their first year. On-campus housing also plays a social role as young adults have their first residential experiences away from home. It's a place where students form critical bonds with each other, organizations, clubs, professors, and other resources that serve them well through the remainder of their time on-campus and beyond.

Purpose operated off-campus housing also fills a legitimate and critical need in the community and the lives of college students as they transition from living at home, to living on campus, to living on their own. In fact, purpose-operated off-campus housing serves as a stepping stone between campus living and fully independent living after graduation. Additionally, purpose-operated off-campus housing provides a variety and quantity of quality, cost-effective and safe options to fill a demand for housing that higher ed institutions cannot fully meet on their own.

Yet, more than ever, I am observing schools that are actively working against the off-campus market instead of with it. I can think of multiple recent examples of schools that have constructed new on-campus apartment-style housing, are in their first or second year of operation, and have vacancy far above the off-campus market averages. Even after changing live-on requirements to avoid such a scenario. Several institutions have even taken the very dramatic step of actively advocating for students and parents not to sign off-campus contracts. Schools are barring off-campus communities from operating resident shuttles on public areas of campus, which is one of the ways the industry affords students the ability to take advantage of purpose operated lower-cost housing options while still

being able to access school in a timely and efficient manner. All of this and more is happening while the private industry is filling a need for affordable, student-focused housing that schools are unable to provide on their own.

The question is: can we all agree that it takes both on- and off-campus housing to meet the overall needs of the school and the students it is intended to serve? Providing a suitable amount of on-campus housing can give first- or second-year students the stability to transition from home to campus life, while providing enough off-campus housing can allow the private market to fill a gap that is not always economically feasible for the school to meet and is economically efficient for student budgets. Meanwhile, off-campus housing allows students to step into the next phase of adulthood, giving them enough additional freedom and support to continue their transition to adulthood, while also providing a student-focused environment that can help them meet their academic goals.

This is not a zero-sum game. Working together, we can create housing and experiences that fully support students. This requires open communication, ongoing dialogue, and genuine appreciation for the contribution of both on- and off-campus housing.

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