

# Good Neighbors?

## From Soaring Rents to Sour Relations, Housing Dilemmas Confound New England College Towns

N. SEAN BOWDITCH

**D**ozens of *Free Pizza Delivery!* fliers and copies of *Just Rentals* swirl like tumbleweeds outside the entrance to the Asian Sunrise Market in Boston's Allston-Brighton section. Around the corner on Linden Street, the guitar strains of REM blare from an open window; Budweiser cans litter a grassless lawn. College students lounge in groups on front stoops.

ON SATURDAY NIGHT, they will pack Harpers Ferry to hear live blues. After 2 a.m., when the bars close, the walls of Allston-Brighton's neat, single-family homes and triple-deckers will vibrate to the bassline of all-night keg parties. By morning, longtime neighborhood residents and new immigrants from Southeast Asia and Russia will curse their common threat: the annual onslaught of house-partying, non-voting, rent-swelling college students.

For years, civic leaders have talked up the overwhelmingly positive impact of New England's 280 colleges and universities and their 800,000 students. But across the region, the effects of colleges on housing are increasingly problematic, and keg parties are the least of the problem.

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Many New Updates Refrigerator, windows, E  
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high a top Mission Hill, in one of BOSTON'S  
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hospital area; near all public transportat  
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Be Gas and Electric not included. Only M/F  
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ROOM FOR RENT—\$275 Mo. +

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entire, quiet adult. Vegetarian preferred. Call before 10pm.  
No drugs, no smoking. Early start only.

The issues are myriad. Despite evidence that living on campus provides more opportunities for students to interact with peers and faculty members and take part in extracurricular activities, large numbers of students—either by choice or due to lack of dorm space—seek out scarce housing in the community.

Of Boston's 135,000 undergraduate and graduate students, fewer than 29,000 live in campus housing according to the Boston Redevelopment Authority. The others, many bankrolled by their parents, are willing to pay more for relatively low-quality apartments, thus putting upward pressure on rents. The average monthly rent of a two-bedroom apartment in Boston rose by 7 percent from 1998 to 2000, to near \$1,600, according to the city's Department of Neighborhood Development. That's about \$450 per month higher than the maximum allowed under the federal Section 8 program for low-income renters.

With Boston's housing vacancy rate at a slender 3 percent, the flood of student renters leaves low-income families with few places to live. And as more non-resident, and thus non-voting students move into an area, neighborhoods lose political leverage. (Ever hear of college students pressuring a city councilor to fill potholes?)

Ironically, recent college graduates hoping to work in Boston find they are unable to do so because of the lack of affordable housing. In fact, nearly eight in 10 New Englanders surveyed by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Massachusetts Boston cited housing costs as a major obstacle to regional economic growth.



PHOTO BY REBECCA DEANS.

## Coming Back

In New Haven, Conn., Yale University officials remind visiting luminaries to stay with university-provided escorts as they walk from business meeting to evening cocktail reception. The same urban problems—namely, crime and drugs—that make Yale so security-conscious, have pushed many families out of New Haven. Nearly 8,000 residents, representing 6 percent of the population, have left in the past decade, leaving behind bankrupt businesses and shuttered brownstones. The city's chief housing problem is characterized oxymoronically as “undercrowding.”

Similar problems have plagued Hartford, where Trinity College has captured national attention with its \$175 million revitalization of the once-decaying neighborhood adjacent to its campus. Working with area banks and state and city agencies, Trinity has provided low-interest mortgages to encourage home ownership, developed housing rehabilitation projects and supported new housing construction. “We recognize that Trinity is an institution in a living community,” Trinity President Evan Dobbelle recently told a Hartford conference on university/community relations. “As such, we have a duty and a responsibility as well as the moral authority to make a difference in the health of that community.”

In Worcester, Mass., the neighborhood around Clark University was losing population so fast that the local Catholic church reportedly experienced a 50 percent drop in collections. Clark forged a partnership with the community to form the Main South Community Development Corp.—another national model. The collaborative has spearheaded several housing projects including the renovation of 170 affordable housing units and 14 triple-decker residences in the Main South neighborhood. A Clark homebuyer incentive program provides housing grants to staff members who buy in the neighborhood. And in a striking show of good faith, Clark converted one of the neighborhood's rescued Victorian homes into its president's residence.

Even in less-populated sections of New England, housing issues are a point of contention between universities and communities. Explosive enrollment growth at the University of Vermont during the 1970s and '80s created enormous pressure on the city of Burlington's infrastructure and services, and relations with the city became, in the words of Mayor Peter Clavelle, “tense and acrimonious.” Similar frustrations exist in Amherst, Mass., where town officials say the University of Massachusetts enjoys a sort of “academic privilege.” Because UMass is a state-run entity, it is exempt from local zoning controls.

## Selling Campus Life

Community activists blame the colleges for Boston's student housing problems. They say colleges prefer to use their available land and money to build additional academic and cultural facilities, and that college officials, in fact, view student housing as an economic burden to be foisted onto the community.



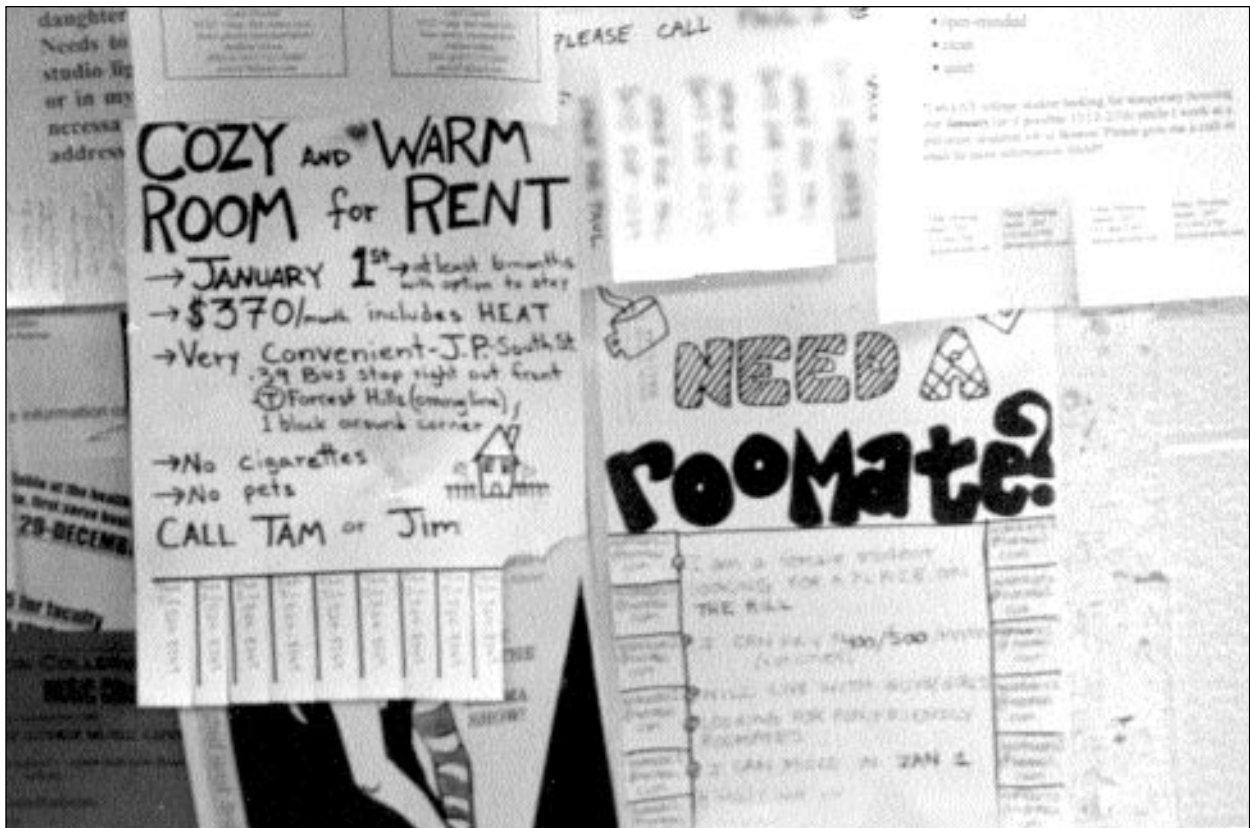


PHOTO BY REBECCA DEANS.

**EVEN HISTORICALLY ALL-COMMUTER, COMMUNITY COLLEGES  
ARE TRYING TO CAPTURE THE RECRUITING POWER OF ON-CAMPUS LIVING.**

But some evidence suggests otherwise. *The Wall Street Journal* recently swooned over the wave of new superdorms—complete with maid service, cell phone stores, miniature golf and beauty salons—being built by Boston University and other institutions to woo prospective student-consumers. Sasaki Associates, the Watertown, Mass.- and San Francisco-based architecture firm, is among those pushing quality student housing as a tool to recruit increasingly sophisticated freshmen and retain upperclassmen. “Students who have never shared a bedroom at home, who expect a high degree of technological connectivity, who are interested in living in a community of similarly focused classmates, or who are seeking a high level of convenience are unlikely to be satisfied by traditional dormitories,” writes Sasaki Principal John Coons.

Indeed, New England colleges and universities are on a dorm-building binge. The University of Connecticut began construction in November of an \$18.5 million residence hall that will accommodate 450 students; Assumption College completed construction this summer of two apartment-style residence halls; the University of Southern Maine next fall will open a new 224-room dorm; the University of Rhode Island is in the midst of a \$64 million initiative to upgrade 14 dorms over the next eight years; Plymouth State College is spending more than a half-million dollars

to upgrade one dorm. Even historically all-commuter, community colleges are trying to capture the recruiting power of on-campus living. Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner, Mass., now offers students the opportunity to live in dorms at nearby Fitchburg State College.

Boston campuses have boosted the number of beds by 59 percent since 1990—not enough, say activists in Allston-Brighton and other Boston neighborhoods with large student populations. Boston College houses a respectable 76 percent of its 9,000 undergraduates and plans to house an additional 10 percent over the next five years, according to Paul White, BC’s associate vice president of state and community affairs. But activists say the college should do more to repatriate the more than 2,000 undergraduates (and 4,700 graduate students) now living off campus.

Boston University houses 75 percent of its 13,600 undergraduates on campus, and a new \$83 million dorm opened in September providing an additional 817 beds. But students who opt out of BU’s housing system in their sophomore year—perhaps in search of cheaper housing a few blocks away or to escape strict campus rules—have no way back in.

Northeastern University recently opened two dorms with more than 1,000 beds and is rehabilitating a 625-unit complex for students as well as neighborhood



residents. But in what the *Boston Globe* termed an “admissions snafu” (and Northeastern called a “spike” in yield rates) nearly 25 percent more students than were predicted accepted offers to attend the university in fall 2000. The unexpected crush of 600 extra freshmen plunged scores of upperclassmen into the already-tight housing market of the nearby Fenway neighborhood, where the *Globe* reported that rents rose by a staggering 15 percent last year.

Across the river in Cambridge, Harvard University houses 98 percent of its undergraduates, but just over 30 percent of its graduate students. Cambridge Mayor Anthony Galluccio has been pushing Harvard to create graduate student housing with a low-income component for Cambridge residents. “Why can’t graduate students live with families of lesser incomes?” Galluccio recently asked policymakers gathered at a Boston conference sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth, adding, “We are who we are due in large part to the universities. But the neighborhoods of this city are not suburbs of the universities.”

Not that Harvard has ignored housing issues. The university’s Joint Center for Housing Studies helps leaders in government, business and the nonprofit sectors formulate effective housing policies. And a new \$21 million university initiative provides low-interest loans to Boston and Cambridge nonprofit organizations to expand affordable housing.

*continued on page 18*

# Dorm City

## College Students Put Pressure on Boston’s Housing Market

SHIRLEY KRESSEL

**B**oston’s critical housing shortage and soaring rents are exacerbated by the housing policies of the city’s renowned higher education institutions. Thirty-five colleges and universities call Boston home; more than 90,500 of their 135,000 students live in the city, constituting about 15 percent of Boston’s population. Though these institutions bring valuable intellectual and cultural vibrancy to the city, the impact of this added housing pressure on Boston’s neighborhoods is a significant issue in town-gown relations.

In 1990, only 21 percent of college students residing in Boston were housed in dorms, leaving 67,000 students living in neighborhood housing stock. More than half of these students were concentrated in three neighborhoods: the working- and middle-class areas of Fenway/Kenmore and Allston-Brighton and the more upscale Back Bay/Beacon Hill. In those neighborhoods, students constituted large percentages of the total population (63 percent in Fenway/Kenmore, 27 percent in Allston-Brighton, and 26 percent in Back Bay/Beacon Hill) and significant proportions of people living in neighborhood housing (29 percent in Fenway/Kenmore, 22 percent in Allston-Brighton, and 17 percent in Back Bay/Beacon Hill). Students also accounted for about 12 percent of the population in central Boston, Jamaica Plain and the South End.

By January 2000, with rents rising and community pressure building, Boston colleges accelerated their construction of dormitory beds; the total number rose by 10,500 or 59 percent to 28,500, while enrollment grew by 4,480 or 3.4 percent.

Unfortunately, some of these beds were built on land that could have been used for neighborhood housing. For example, Northeastern University’s Davenport Commons project was built on urban renewal parcels on which residents who had been displaced decades earlier hoped to rebuild. The university obtained the land from the Boston Redevelopment Authority after much community protest, and built units for 625 students, along with 60 units for neighborhood residents. Despite the

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small victory for community housing, this dorm-to-housing ratio will never rebuild the neighborhood. Colleges have also annexed many neighborhood buildings for dormitory use, or, like Harvard University, have been acquiring large tracts of private and public land for academic expansion, reducing land available for the community. The very concept of a “core campus” is now ambiguous, and campus boundaries can scarcely be drawn when city-required Institutional Master Plans are prepared.

At last count, nearly 107,000 students in Boston’s colleges still live in off-campus housing, 62,000 in Boston, and 45,000 in nearby suburbs. Even assuming that three students lived in each unit, college students would occupy more than 20,000 of Boston’s 250,000 housing units. Meanwhile, overall housing in the city has increased by fewer than 5,000 units in the past decade.

In the areas of highest student concentration, the imbalance damages the neighborhood fabric. The issue here is not students behaving badly, but the actual occupancy of scarce neighborhood housing stock. Thousands of students take up apartments and houses in a city with an estimated shortfall of 40,000 housing units. Landlords buy spacious houses suitable for families, then chop them up, sometimes irreversibly, into student cubbies. Students group up and, wielding their parents’ money, bid rents beyond the reach of working-class (and even middle-class) families. In a gradual process of displacement without gentrification, prices and quality of life progress inversely as the nature of neighborhood life changes. A once-diverse commercial spectrum narrows to a pizza-beer-futon mix; in summer, it’s a ghost town that threatens small businesses.

The exodus of neighborhood residents, meanwhile, breaks up stable communities where families had lived together for generations. The infrastructure of community withers as churches, schools and civic associations lose membership. Ultimately, the neighborhood

loses political power as active voters leave, and local officials figure they can neglect residents’ needs with impunity.

**T**his situation is an enormous problem from the neighborhood perspective, but city governments and colleges share an interest in continuing the current pattern.

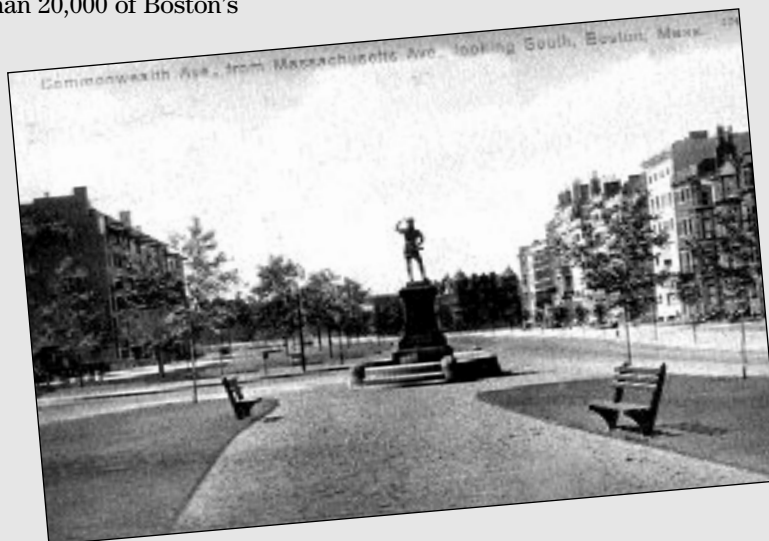
For colleges, student housing is an economic burden; schools prefer to use precious campus land for development that more directly promotes their core mission. They bank land in surface parking lots and

inexpensive, often “temporary” buildings. As they expand, they use it for building academic facilities and prestigious cultural and athletic venues, which are more likely than dorms to attract large donors and research money. Moreover, student beds can be located anywhere, with the burdens of providing

mundane services and

policing and dealing with occupancy fluctuations, which may lead to underutilization or shortages, all shifted to municipal government. (It’s an analogue of cities and suburbs. Cities want to have gleaming office towers and cultural centers and entertainment zones and commercial emporia, which generate money and prestige, but they are happy to let the suburbs carry the housing, with all its concomitant demand for schools and trash pick-up. In fact, they effectively force housing out by creating far more favorable regulatory and financial incentives in town for “economic development” and “world-class” icons.)

Many colleges have policies encouraging or requiring students to live off campus. Some deliberately maintain a dormitory shortfall; many price housing uncompetitively with neighborhood housing stock, requiring off-campus living by junior or senior year. (One college awards its limited campus housing to the





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best students, an obvious negative for neighborhoods who get the others.) These policies not only preserve campus land for the “highest and best use,” but provide planning flexibility for schools to adjust their enrollment to suit economic and demographic shifts. Neighborhood housing is thus used to buffer these contingencies.

From the city administration’s perspective, on the other hand, students are ideal citizens: temporary denizens who demand few city services and don’t meddle in local political affairs. Students spend money, then leave. They are essentially long-term tourists—a near-perfect “virtual population” for public officials trying to minimize their public service burden and maximize local spending.

Ironically, residents in the most heavily student-occupied areas now resist new housing construction, fearing it will just bring in more students and further inflate rents. In any case, the most afflicted Boston neighborhoods are older downtown areas that are relatively built out, so that the imbalance is even more difficult to rectify with new housing.

**W**e must be particularly wary of simple solutions. For example, dorm-building followed by enrollment increases, as we have seen at several colleges, will never help achieve an appropriate student-neighborhood balance.

Also inappropriate are town-gown “partnerships” wherein colleges become Community Development Corporations using neighborhood (often public) land and other public subsidies to build dormitories combined with neighborhood housing. Nonprofit institutions already receive tax, zoning and other benefits such as low-interest loans; it is important to devote those privileges fully to new neighborhood housing and not to allow institutions to double-dip while producing a token amount of housing packaged into a larger dormitory project.

There are problems, too, when colleges “give back” to urban communities by rehabilitating neglected commercial and residential buildings in the name of neighborhood “revitalization.” These efforts generally provide housing for faculty, and make the school appear safer and more appealing to prospective students and staff who fear “inner city” neighborhoods.

However, the effect is likely to be gentrification of the immediate “buffer zone,” displacing local residents but not addressing the underlying economic problems of disinvested neighborhoods. Such University Districts, like Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), tend to privatize community planning, absolve publicly accountable municipal governments of their service responsibilities and ultimately diminish the community’s capacity for self-determination by increasing dependence on the beneficence of their institutional sponsors. Colleges have professional staff and resources to devote to these planning activities; neighborhoods have only lay volunteers to guard community interests. And just as a BID is in fact a District formed to Improve Business, rather than a District to be Improved by Businesses, a “U-District,” when interests conflict, will choose to improve the U.

Nor does the answer lie in various “community benefit” proposals, such as making monetary contributions for each off-campus student to an affordable housing trust, funding of community amenities such as parks, donations of college scholarships, grade-school sponsorships and other public education functions or sponsorship of neighborhood planning processes or other public services. These benefits create counterproductive incentives for municipalities to accommodate college plans over neighborhood needs, and erode municipal responsibility for public services. And they usually are expected to serve as bargaining chips for colleges whose plans are resisted by the neighborhood.

Most commonly, colleges offer to create long-term plans to gradually increase the proportion of students housed on campus. But over the decade or more that it may take institutions to carry out these plans, urban neighborhoods can suffer irreversible damage. For example, Boston University, the largest in the city with over 30,000 students, recently announced the opening of a new dormitory complex, which would free up an estimated 300 apartments in Allston-Brighton. BU now houses 75 percent of its undergraduates on campus—a goal the school set for itself in 1986. This still leaves 3,400 BU undergraduates and thousands of its graduate students to seek apartments in the neighborhoods. Even if all the colleges in Boston set an overall goal of 85 percent on-campus housing, some 10,000 students would remain in local housing, occupying thousands of apartments concentrated in a few neighborhoods.

And expanding enrollments and rising proportions of boarding versus commuting students make even this target elusive.

The city uses colleges as economic and cultural engines, but if we continue to accommodate college housing policies, we will lose vested, cohesive neighborhoods of people who make it a living city.

Colleges, in turn, use the city as an extended campus, constantly expanding geographically and operationally. But if students and college infrastructure continue to dilute neighborhoods, the balance will “tip,” and the resulting “college town,” less richly complex and diverse, will be less attractive in recruiting future students and faculty.

These complementary economic strategies—college land-banking and city “resi-temps”—will be costly in the end. Already, students cannot find affordable housing here when they graduate and join the workforce. For colleges, this is a sad loss of their graduate community, and a recruiting problem as well. The city loses an invaluable asset: its educated labor force.

**T**o solve the problem, the city should require colleges to provide on-campus housing at least for undergraduates (graduate student housing needs a more detailed analysis) before other institutional buildings are permitted. And schools should commit to full on-campus housing before enrollments are increased.

Colleges that don’t have enough land to build more student housing should limit their non-commuter enrollment, just as other types of developers must limit their program to match their resources. There must be a concerted effort among all the schools, so no single institution need fear “unilateral disengagement” that would merely give up to others the available housing resources.

Colleges as well as neighborhoods will benefit from playing by such rules. Students living within their academic community will enjoy the out-of-class learning and socializing that is the most lasting educational experience. And campus extracurricular activities will find a new population of participants and audience.

Colleges and communities each have to be responsible parties in maintaining the delicate balance of their differing needs. They depend on each other, and, like members of any ecological system, must learn to support each other as they grow.

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*Shirley Kressel, a landscape architect and urban designer, is president and co-founder of the Alliance of Boston Neighborhoods.*

## New England College Towns

About two-thirds of New England's 795,000 full- and part-time undergraduate and graduate students attend college within the borders of the following cities and towns:

CITY	NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONS	TOTAL ENROLLMENT
Boston, Mass.	42	136,900
Cambridge, Mass.	6	46,930
Providence, R.I.	6	36,200
New Haven, Conn.	4	29,780
Amherst, Mass.	3	27,890
Worcester, Mass.	8	24,840
Storrs, Conn.	1	22,240
Warwick, R.I.	2	18,210
Springfield, Mass.	5	17,880
Manchester, N.H.	6	17,080
Lowell, Mass.	2	15,040
Kingston, R.I.	1	14,580
Durham, N.H.	1	13,230
Burlington, Vt.	4	13,040
Portland, Maine	4	12,560
New Britain, Conn.	1	11,900
Fairfield, Conn.	2	10,700
Waltham, Mass.	2	10,240
Orono, Maine	1	9,950
Medford, Mass.	1	9,190
Bridgewater, Mass.	1	8,960
West Hartford, Conn.	2	8,620
Hartford, Conn.	5	8,150

*Source: New England Board of Higher Education; unpublished FACTS 2001 survey data.*