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Living on the Edge College Students and Landlords: the Perceptions, the Misconceptions and the Reality

Carolyn Da Cunha

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Living on the Edge:
The Perceptions, Misconceptions and Reality between College Students and Landlords

Carolyn Da Cunha
Sociology Senior Thesis
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Policy Studies
Spring 2014

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Marjorie DeVault and Christine Himes for their commitment to helping make this thesis a success. Without their guidance and expertise, this thesis probably wouldn't have been completed. I would also like to thank Professor Glenda Gross and Gretchen Purser for being inspirational in my pursuit of a major in Sociology. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their tolerance and patience during my thesis research.

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Introduction/Abstract

I first became interested in the topic of community relations and housing when I took my honors orientation class during the spring semester of my freshman year at Syracuse University. The name of the class was “From the Hill to the Hood,” taught by Professor Mark Muhammad. In the course, I was introduced to the Syracuse community that exists beyond the borders of the University campus. As you gaze across the magnificent campus, you may not realize that Syracuse University resides in one of the poorest cities in the country. When you walk off campus and see the off-campus community houses in which the students live, you can see the reality of the situation. Personally, I was compelled to do a study of students’ experiences living off-campus because mine was such a difficult one. In the fall term of my junior year, my house was broken into, ransacked and robbed. (See photos below) To add insult to injury, when our landlord returned our security deposit, we saw that she had charged us \$500 to replace the door. We were penalized. Nearly 25% of our security deposit was forfeited because our landlord was

too cheap to
replace a door
that was so
old. It was
falling apart
and
susceptible to



a



break-in. My interests also lead me to conduct a study of barriers to housing in Onondaga County, which I did while interning for the Fair Housing Council of Central New York (CNY) during the fall term of my senior year. The work that I did for the organization inspired me to conduct a similar study for Syracuse University students living off-campus.

Research Questions

The housing options for students after they are no longer required to live in on-campus housing are vast. Students can choose from single houses, single apartments and even apartment complexes to choose from. The Syracuse University student off-campus housing community is a community that has been growing rapidly as the university has expanded. The University requirement to live on-campus is two years. After the two-year requirement is met, many students opt for a change in venue, electing to move off-campus neighborhood. My experience with housing has been a difficult one. Landlords, or “slumlords” to which they are sometimes referred, run the off-campus housing market. The houses and apartments available to students are typically old and in poor condition, and landlords do little to upkeep and maintain the property. Who is at fault though? The landlords for exploiting students and charging more than the house is worth, or is it the college lifestyle? Do students who live in these houses feel that they don’t need to care for the house because the landlord hasn’t done anything to upkeep the house? Or is it the other way around? Do landlords assume that college students are tenants who will not put effort into maintaining the quality of the house and hence go ahead and chose not to make an effort to keep it in good condition?

These questions led to a greater question about the relation dynamics between landlords and college-student tenants. Who has the power in the relationship? Are there resources for students to navigate the off-campus process, and if so are they being utilized?

This research is based on a quantitative study, of 200 students who live off-campus, using Survey Monkey. The students were asked about their housing experience, their relationships with their landlords and other questions about living off campus. The students were contacted

through the email list serve of Syracuse University's Off-Campus and Commuter Services and various social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

This survey can help the University develop a better understanding of how off-campus life can be improved for students.

Literature Review

College students living off campus and venturing out into the neighborhoods just beyond the hill can be a source of concern for residents of the community, many of whom are far past their crazy college years or who have never attended college at all. One goal of the literature review was to find out how the college-town community is fostered. Many studies focused on the college town and its dynamics between the different groups. One book, *The American College Town*, is an ethnographic study of America's college towns. It discusses how college towns are transient places and how college-town residents are more likely to rent and live in group housing. The residential landscape of a college town is one mostly comprised of students, faculty and staff. "Many college faculty and staff, along with townspeople, do not want to live near college students because of their life styles. For students, the college years present the first chance to live relatively free from adult interferences, so students, too prefer to live among their own" (Gumprecht, 2003). This residential isolation creates what Gumprecht refers to as the "student ghetto," a type of neighborhood that exists close to campus and consists of large homes mostly rented by students. In Syracuse, the "student ghetto" is mostly clustered along Euclid Avenue and the streets with which it intersects, Comstock Avenue and Westcott Street. The student ghetto of Syracuse fits Gumprecht's description. "[D]ilapidated houses, beat-up couches on porches, automobiles parked on lawns, and bicycles chained to anything that doesn't move" (2003). Walking down Euclid Avenue, though, it is still possible to come across single-family homes but it is a rarity. The staff and faculty have been pushed past Westcott Street, where they are sheltered from the student ghetto. Gumprecht also discusses the tensions that emerge between the town and the University, which are called town-gown relations. "The most divisive issue has been the erosion of single-family neighborhoods by student housing" (Gumprecht, 2003). Though my research did not indicate whether the city had a problem with the number of

houses that were off campus, I would assume that the families living in the single family homes that do remain are not pleased with the quality of the student homes because of how they degrade the overall value of the neighborhood and the homes in particular. Another source of tension is a result of the expanding campus. The University does not pay any property taxes on campus buildings; therefore, as the school expands and builds more facilities, the property is no longer on the city's tax rolls, which means the city loses money. Syracuse is deeply impoverished, so lost funds from property taxes are a cause of concern for the city.

“Renting in College Town” is an article that examines the difficulties students in Ithaca, New York, face with lease agreements and rental procedures. Specifically, the author argues that landlords should only use the Davis Model Lease form.

The existing research about renting in college towns does not offer any concrete evidence of the experiences students have living off campus. This research study provides a voice for the students who are being exploited and seeks action to help improve the off-campus community at Syracuse University.

Methods

Twenty-nine questions were created to collect data. The survey was comprised of both open- and closed-ended questions, which were used in order to get the most comprehensible insight into the experiences students have had living off campus. The set up was designed to have a closed-ended multiple choice question followed up with an open-ended free response question that would give the respondent a chance to elaborate upon the previous answer. The ultimate goal of the survey was to gather as much information from students about their experiences living off-campus. The closed-ended questions were in multiple choice and ranking format. The open-ended questions were short-answer questions that provided students with a chance to elaborate upon any positive or negative experiences they had while living in the off-campus community. The survey questionnaire can be seen in the Appendix section of this report. In order to reach as many students as possible, an online survey was created using an online survey provider called Survey Monkey. The survey was sent via email and posted on Facebook. A link was also created and sent to the Office of Off-Campus and Commuter Services that could be emailed to the entire off-campus population. The survey was out and open for collection for four weeks. Throughout the collection period, I regularly monitored the responses that were coming in and weeded out any data that was incomplete or did not conform to the target demographic. In that time, 137 responses were collected. Only 135 of the responses were valid because two of the surveys did not have any responses completed and were, therefore, discarded. Hence, the data was analyzed with the sample size of 135. The data from the responses were then put into graphs and tables, which can be found in the Findings Section of this paper.

Some shortcomings of the survey are that it is one-sided. I only surveyed students, not landlords or property managers. The fact that only students were surveyed means that this study

does not perfectly encapsulate the off-campus living experience entirely, since it does not include the landlords' opinions about renting to college students. In addition, the sample size is small in relationship to the total Syracuse University student population that lives off campus. In hindsight, using more qualitative questions would have been useful. My most valuable and convincing data came from open-ended questions. Also, there is slight selection bias in the data. In an attempt to get more responses, I reached out to friends via Facebook. By reaching out to them, all of the responses were not random but selectively targeted.

Findings

Each question of the survey was shaped to gather information about the scope of the student's experience living off-campus. The results can be seen in the tables and figures below.

Table 1
Class Standing
n=135

Class Standing	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate Student	Other
Number of Respondents	1	2	37	75	18	2

Comment: For the students who responded "other," the responses indicated that they were 5th and 6th semester seniors.

Figure 1

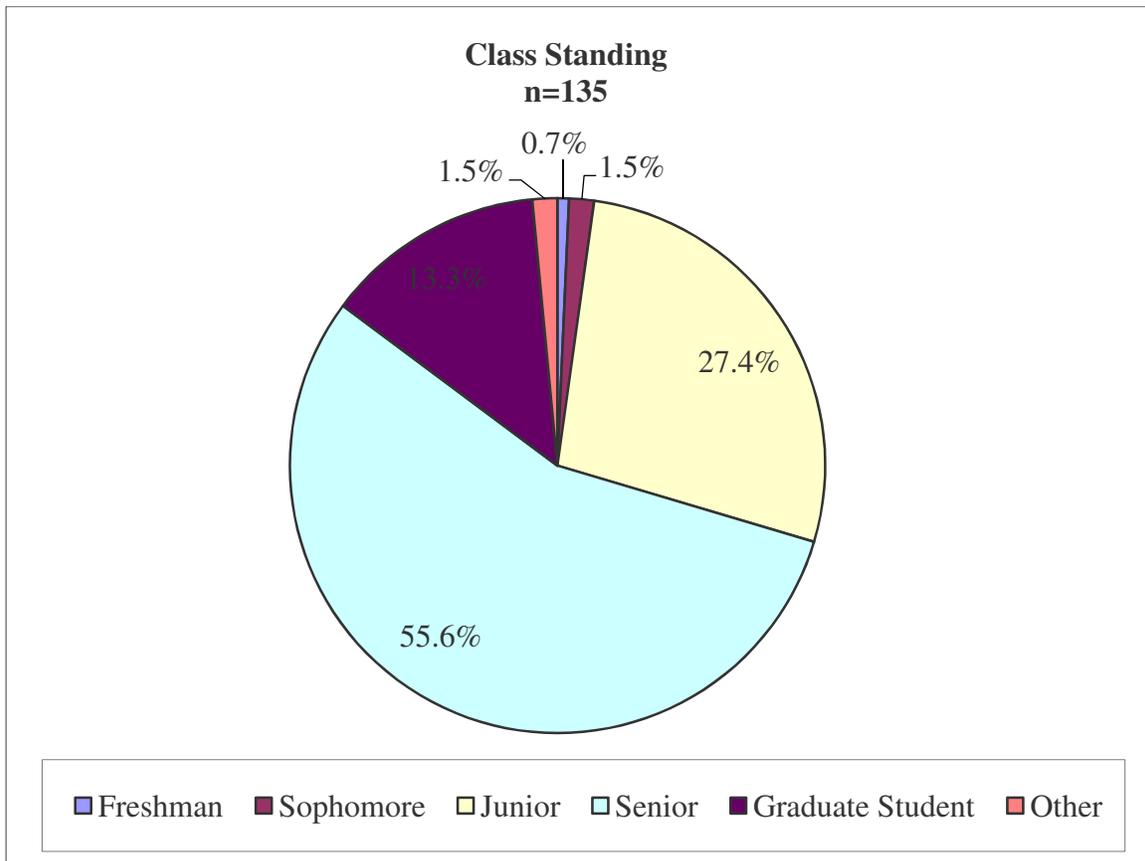


Table 2

Housing Type	Own Home	Rent Home/Apartment	Rent in an Apartment Complex	Fraternity or Sorority House	Other
Number of Respondents	0	109	17	5	4

Comment: For the students who responded “other,” all four said that they lived at home with their parents.

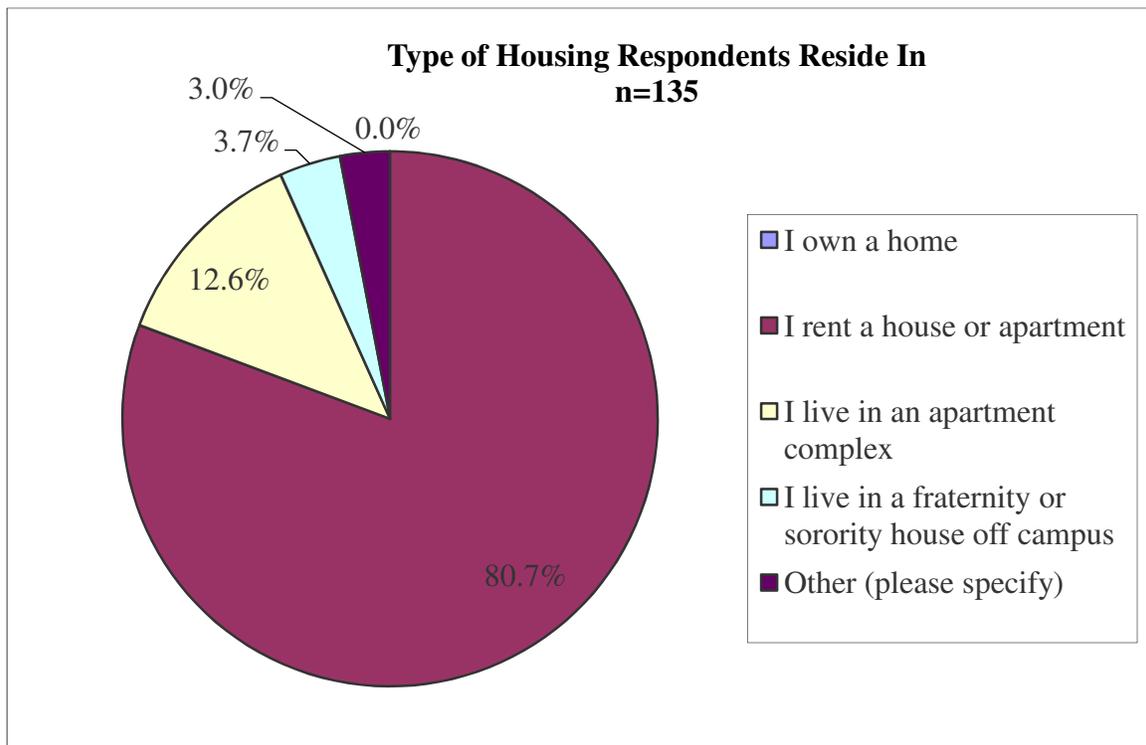
Figure 2

Table 3
Respondents Living Off Campus for the First Time

First Time	Yes	No	Other
Number of Respondents	82	49	3

Figure 3

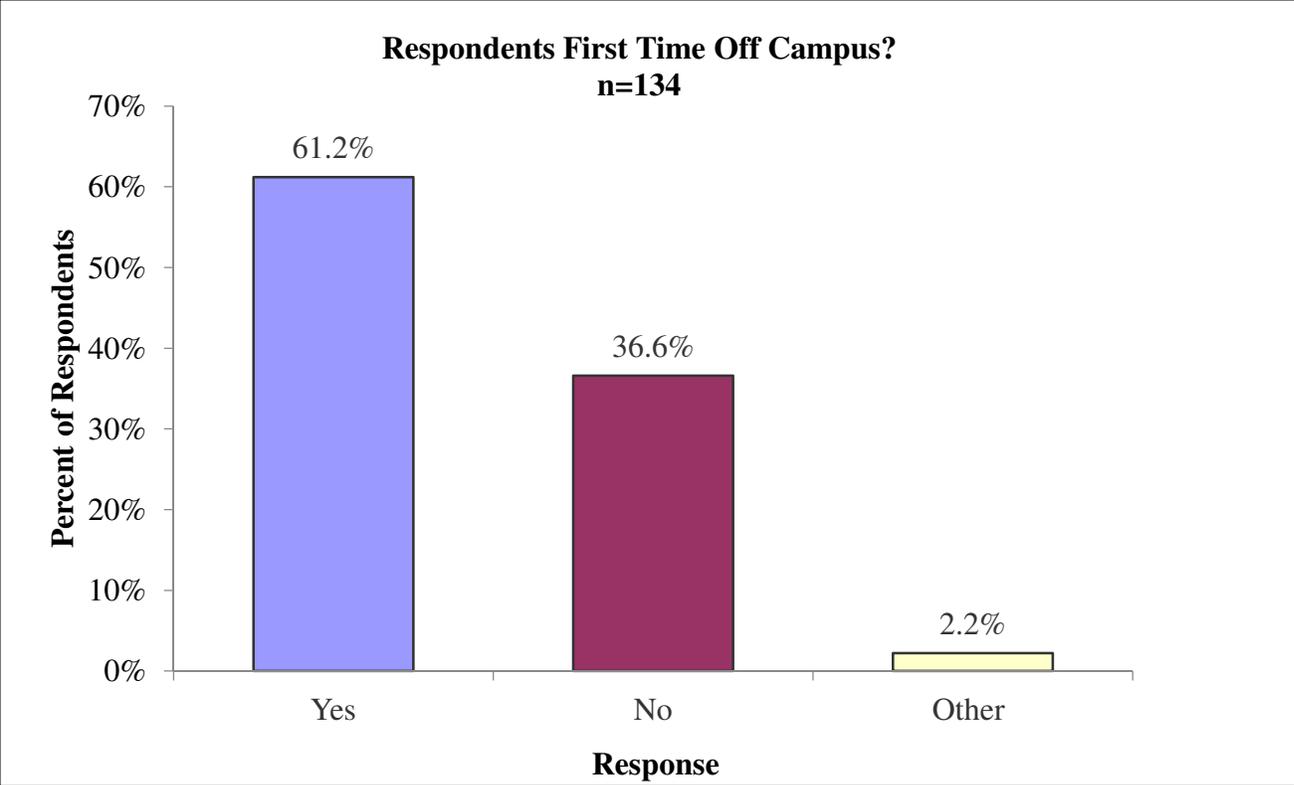
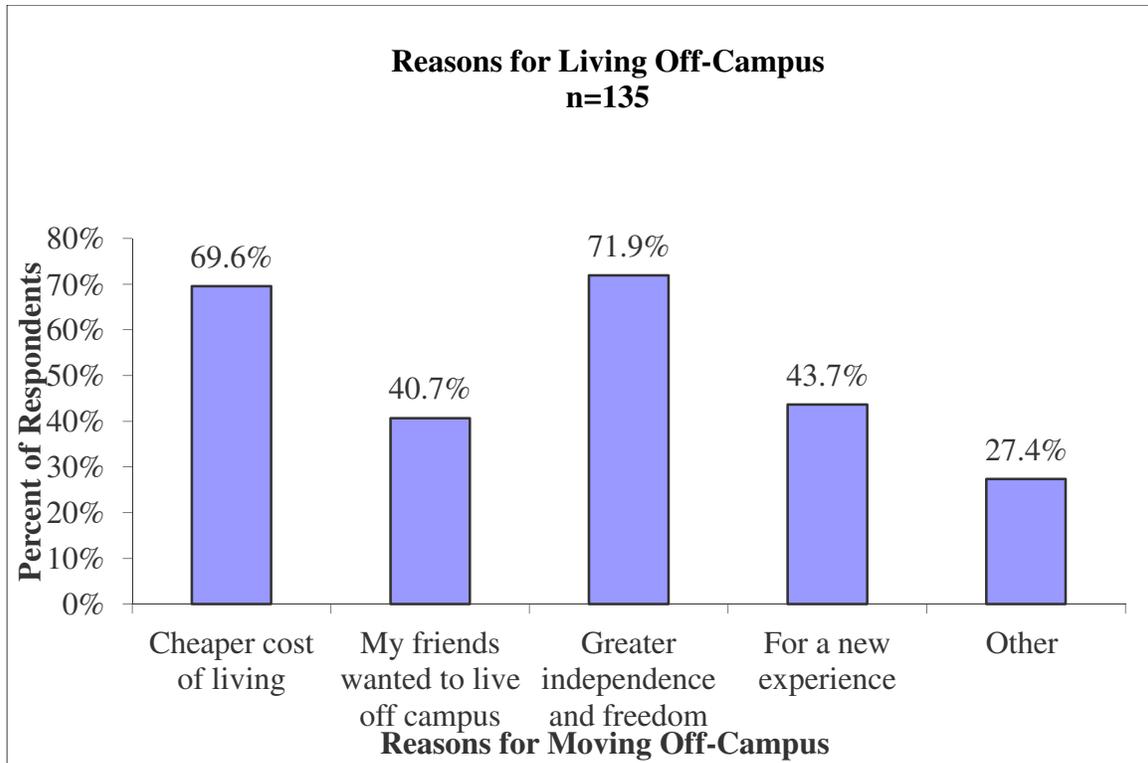


Table 4
Reasons for Living Off-Campus

Rationale	Cost	Friend Influences	Independence/Freedom	New Experience	Other
Number of Respondents	94	55	97	59	37

Figure 4



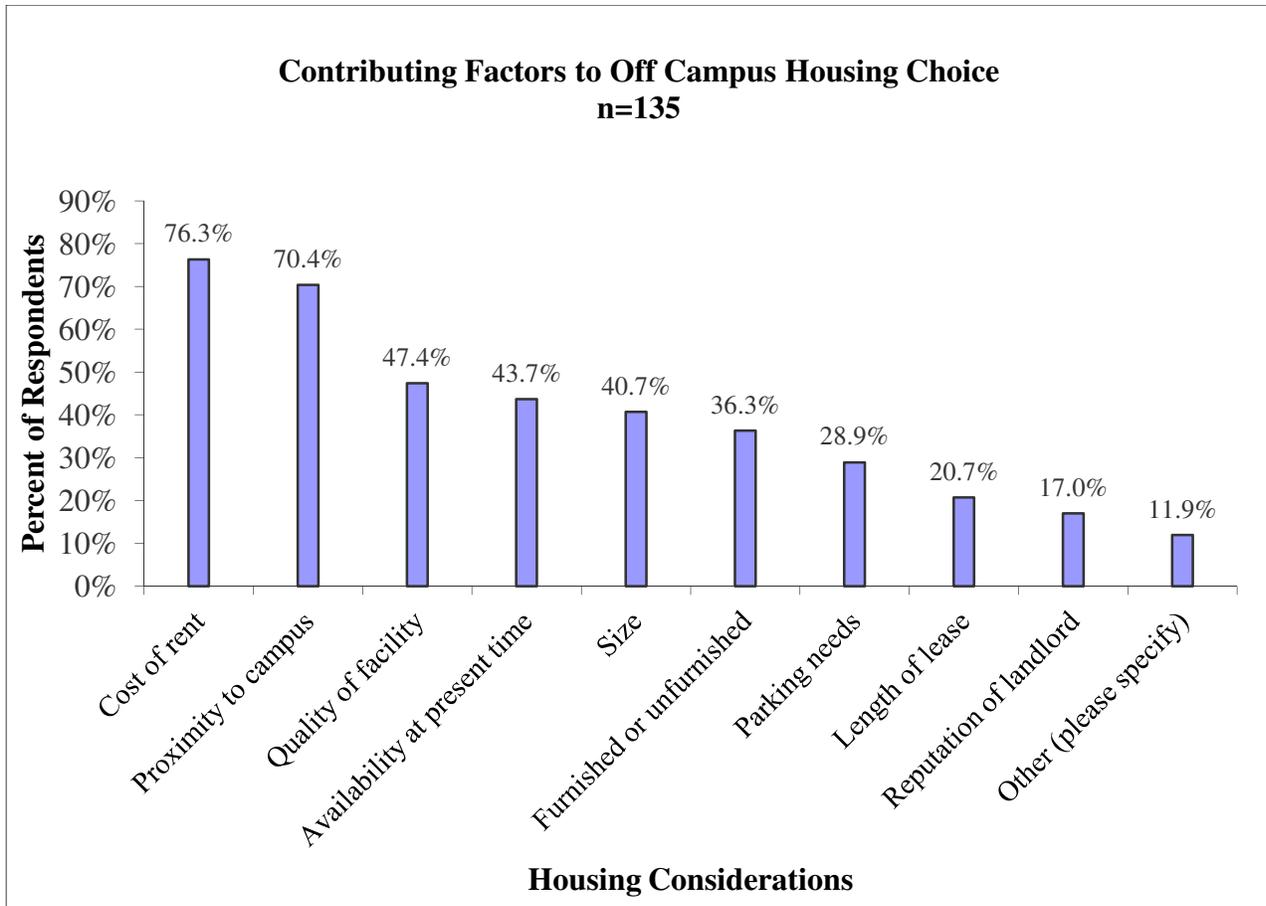
Comment: This finding is from a survey question which allowed respondents to “check all that apply.” Since most respondents chose more than one response, the percentages may exceed 100%.

- Respondents who listed “other” as a rationale cited the following categories of reasons. (n=37)
 - Graduate student, so no housing on campus is guaranteed, must find housing on their own (n=13)
 - Greater privacy than living in the dorms, no resident hall advisors, room checks, communal bathrooms or strict rules (n=9)
 - Married and/or married with children so a home off-campus was more accommodating (n=7)
 - Bigger living area (n=3)
 - No meal plan required (n=2)
 - Better quality (n=2)
 - Closer to campus (n=1)

**Table 5
Contributing Factors to Off Campus Housing Choice**

Deciding Factors	Cost	Location	Quality	Availability	Size	Furnishings	Parking	Lease Terms	Landlord Reputation	Other
Number of Respondents	103	95	64	59	55	49	39	28	23	16

Figure 5



Comment: This finding is from a survey question that allowed respondents to “check the top three factors.” Since most respondents chose more than one response, the percentages may exceed 100%.

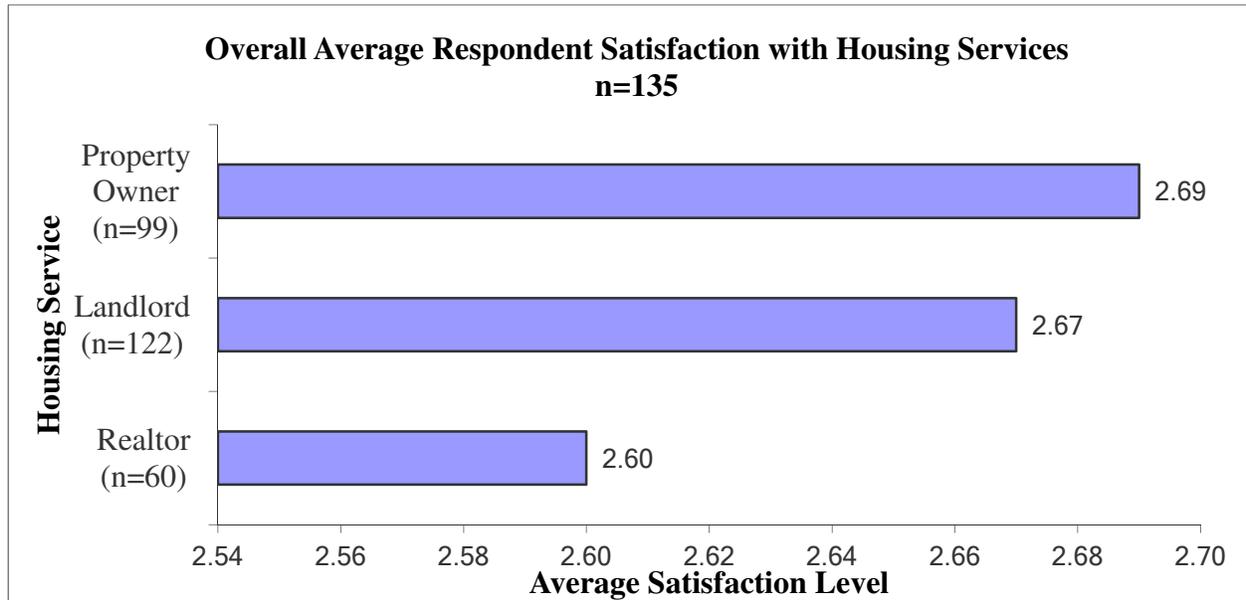
- Respondents who listed “other” as a rationale cited the following categories of reasons. (n=16)
 - o Relationship with previous tenants (n=6)
 - o Community amenities (n=4)
 - o Pets allowed (n=2)
 - o Garage (n=2)

Table 6
Overall Average Respondent Satisfaction with Housing Services

	Rating	Very Good [5]	Good [4]	Fair [3]	Poor [2]	Very Poor [1]	N.A.
Housing	Realtor	11	18	20	6	5	70
	Landlord	24	36	34	12	16	11

Service	Property Owner	18	33	24	10	14	31
Totals		53	87	78	28	35	112

Figure 6



Comment: Housing services were rated on a scale of satisfaction from 1 to 5: 1 being “very poor” and 5 being “very good.”

- Explanations of “poor” or “very poor” ratings fell into the following categories. (n=37)
 - o Unpleasant attitude and demeanor. (n=14)
 - o Laziness, little attention to detail, and lack of care (n=11)
 - o Poor quality and feeling of being ripped off (n=7)
 - o Not applicable (n=5)

**Table 7
Description of Housing Search Process**

Description Categories	Easy	Stressful	Difficult or Annoying	Fine or OK	Good	N.A.	Great
Number of Respondents	57	30	23	10	7	5	3

Figure 7

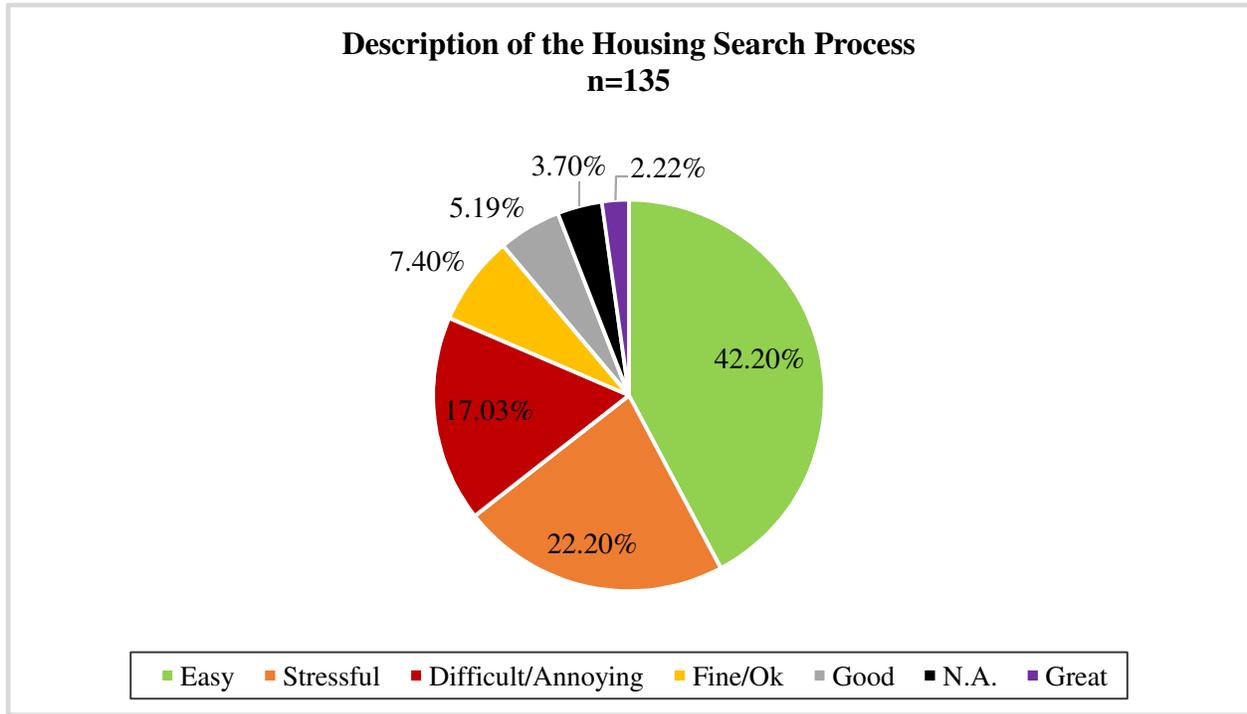


Table 8
Attention to Lease Agreement

Level of Attention to Lease Agreement	Yes, read in full	Briefly skimmed	None, not read at all	Went through it with landlord at signing	Copy given but not read	One of my roommates read it

Number of Respondents	73	25	5	22	2	6
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Figure 8

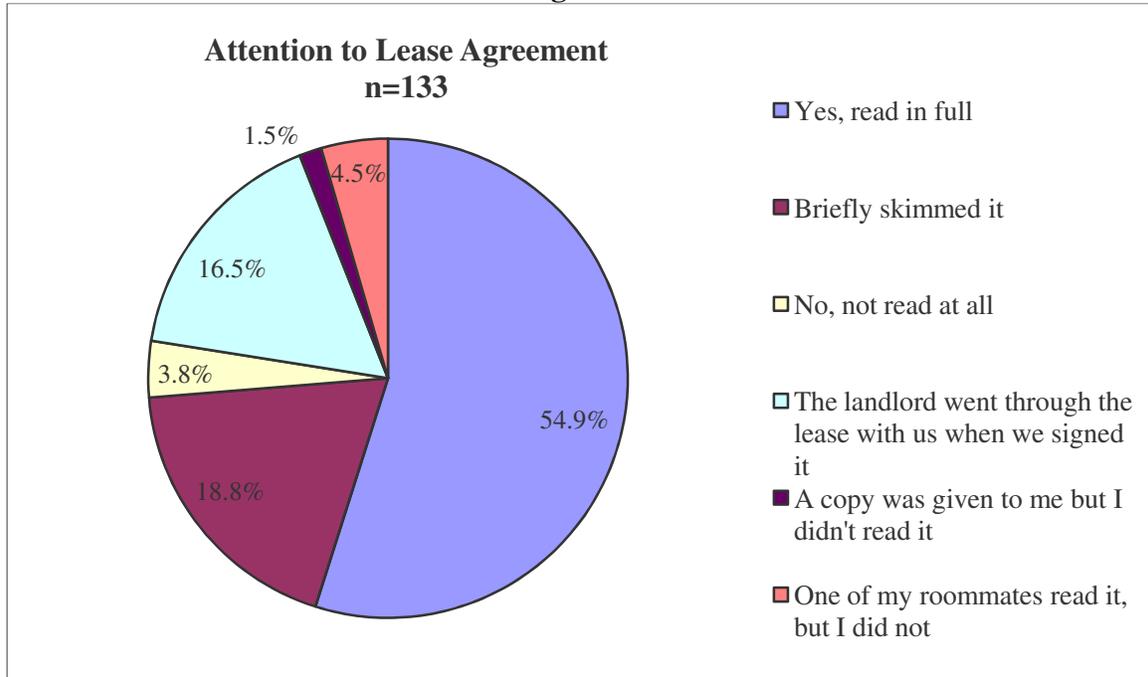


Table 9
Lease Agreement Retention

Level of Lease Agreement Retention	Yes, hardcopy at home	Yes, copy available online	No, don't have a copy	Not sure, might have misplaced it	One of my roommates has a copy
Number of	72	56	13	11	7

Respondents					
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Graph 9

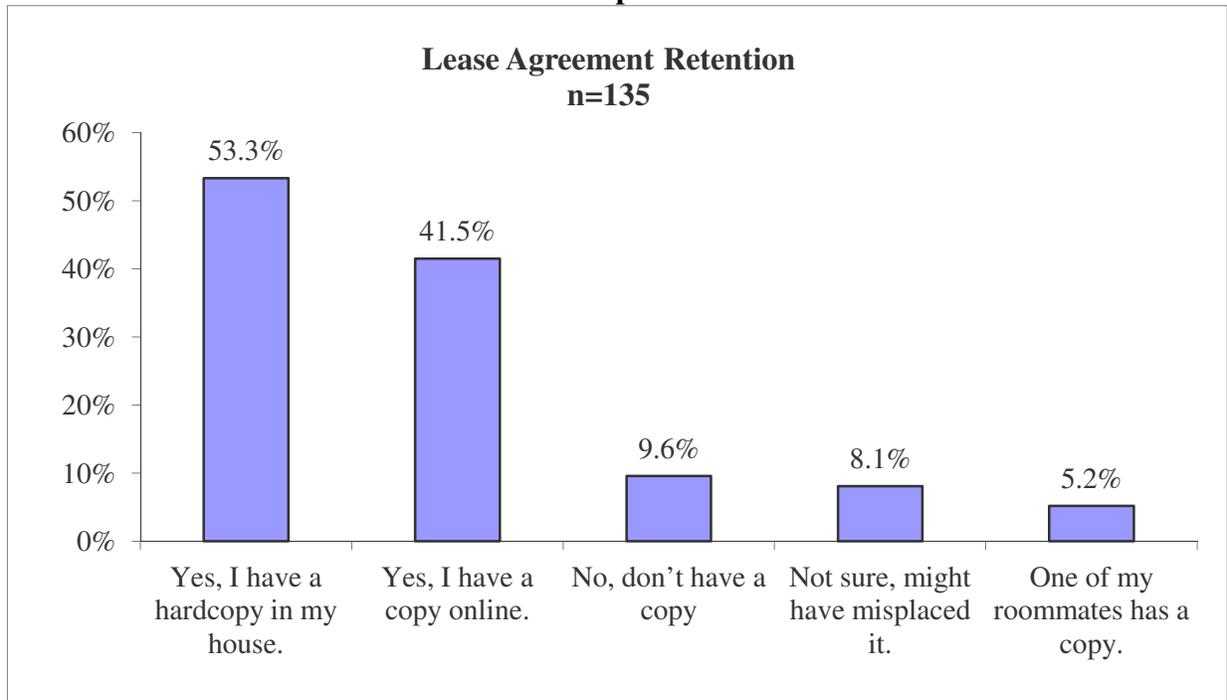


Table 10
Residents Perceptions of Landlords
n=135

	Rating	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very Poor
Personality	Communication	41	35	27	24	9

Characteristic	Reasonable	33	42	37	11	12
	Responsible	38	31	34	16	16
	Attentive	32	34	33	22	14
	Friendly	47	34	31	11	12
	Approachable	43	34	34	15	11

Figure 10

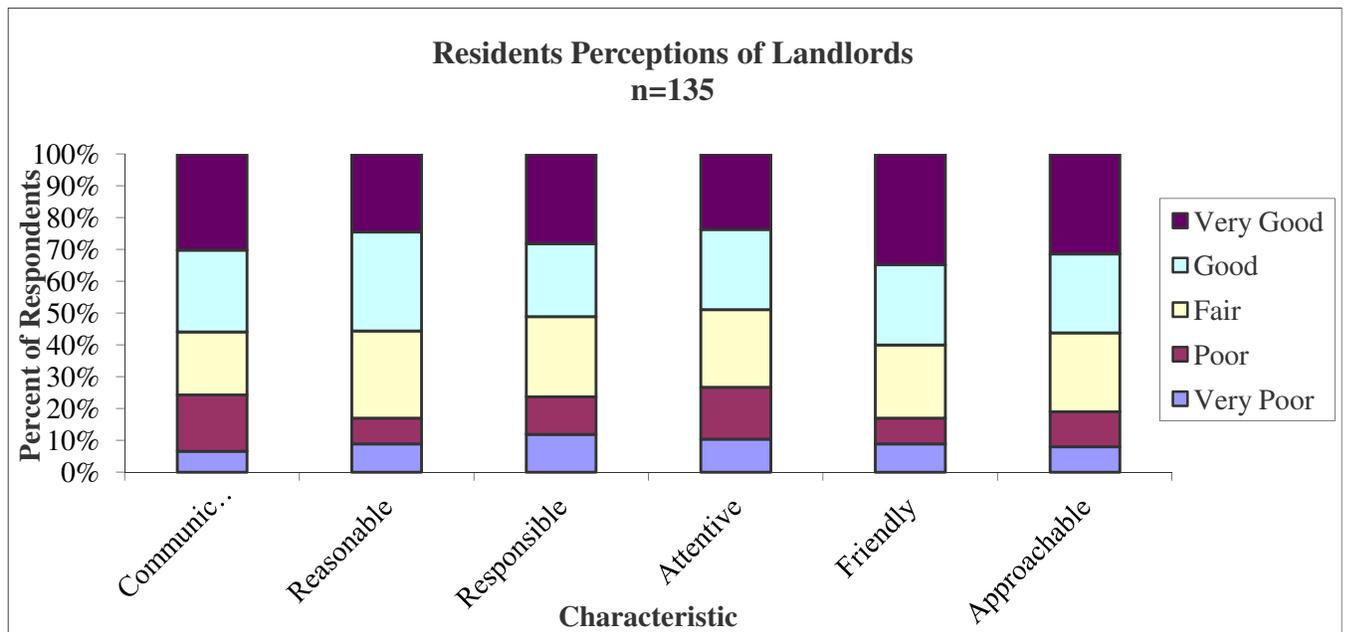
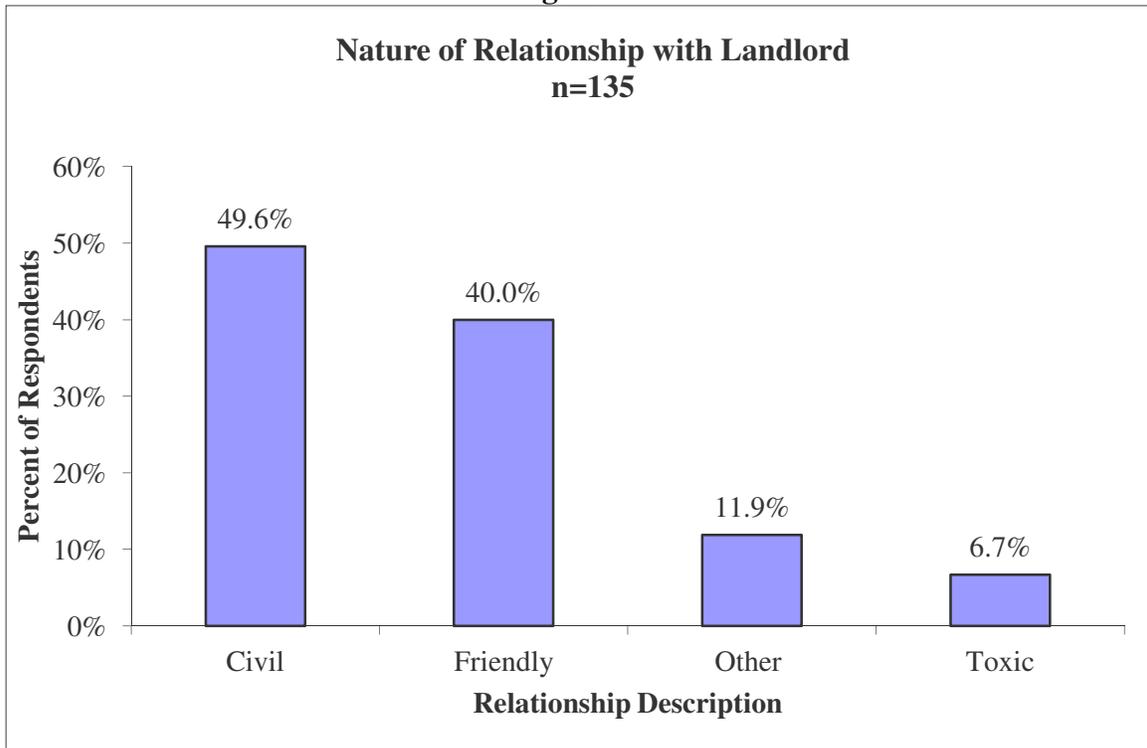


Table 11
Nature of Relationship with Landlord

Relationship Description	Civil	Friendly	Other	Toxic
Number of Respondents	67	54	16	9

Figure 11



Comment: Of the respondents who gave the response “other” (n=16), the categories of other specifications are,

- No relationship exists (n=9)
- Passive-Aggressive (n=3)
- Tolerable (n=2)
- Parent (n=1)

Table 12
Respondents Perceptions of Housing Quality

Quality	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
Number of Respondents	29	39	43	39	29

Figure 12

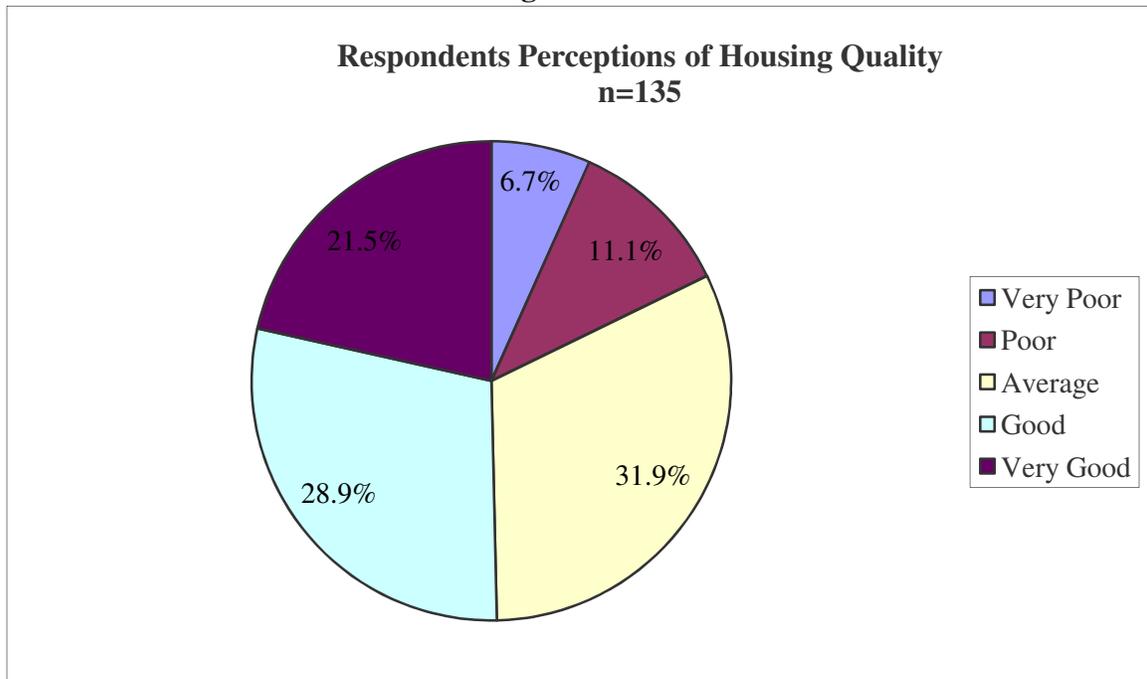


Table 13

Do students believe they are paying more than they should?

Response	Yes	No
Number of Respondents	72	63

Figure 13

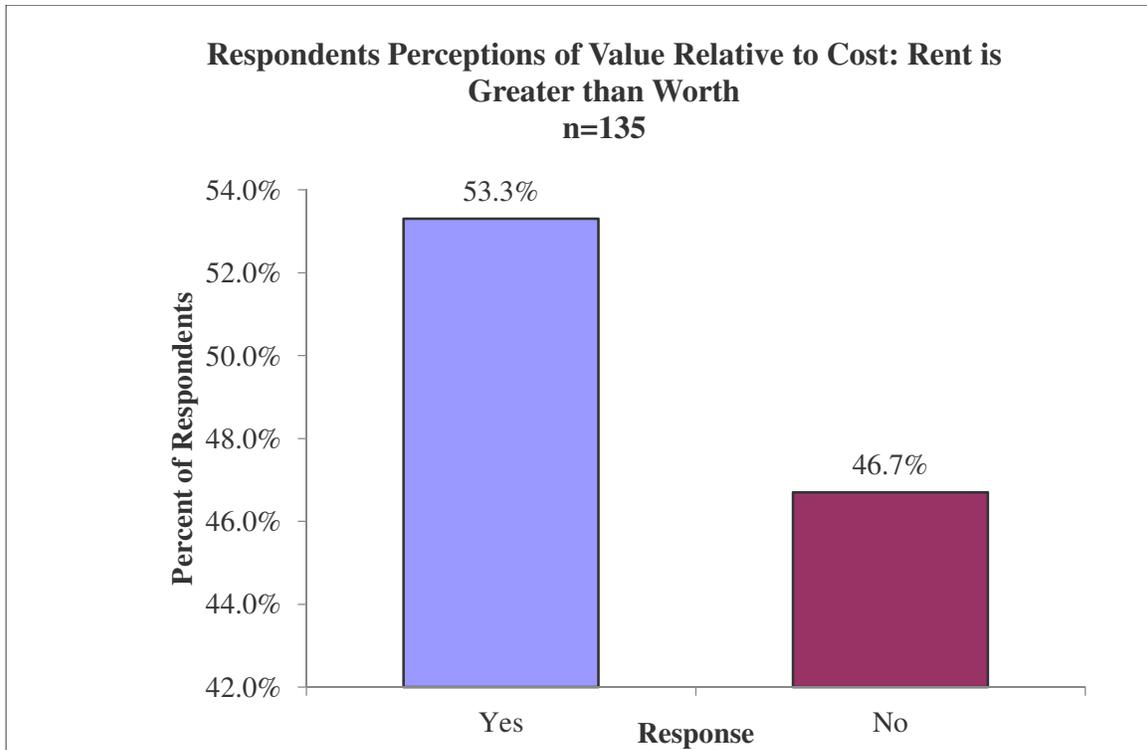


Table 14
Frequency of Reminders for Repairs

Frequency	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Occasionally	Often	All the time
Number of Respondents	23	30	33	24	18	7

Figure 14

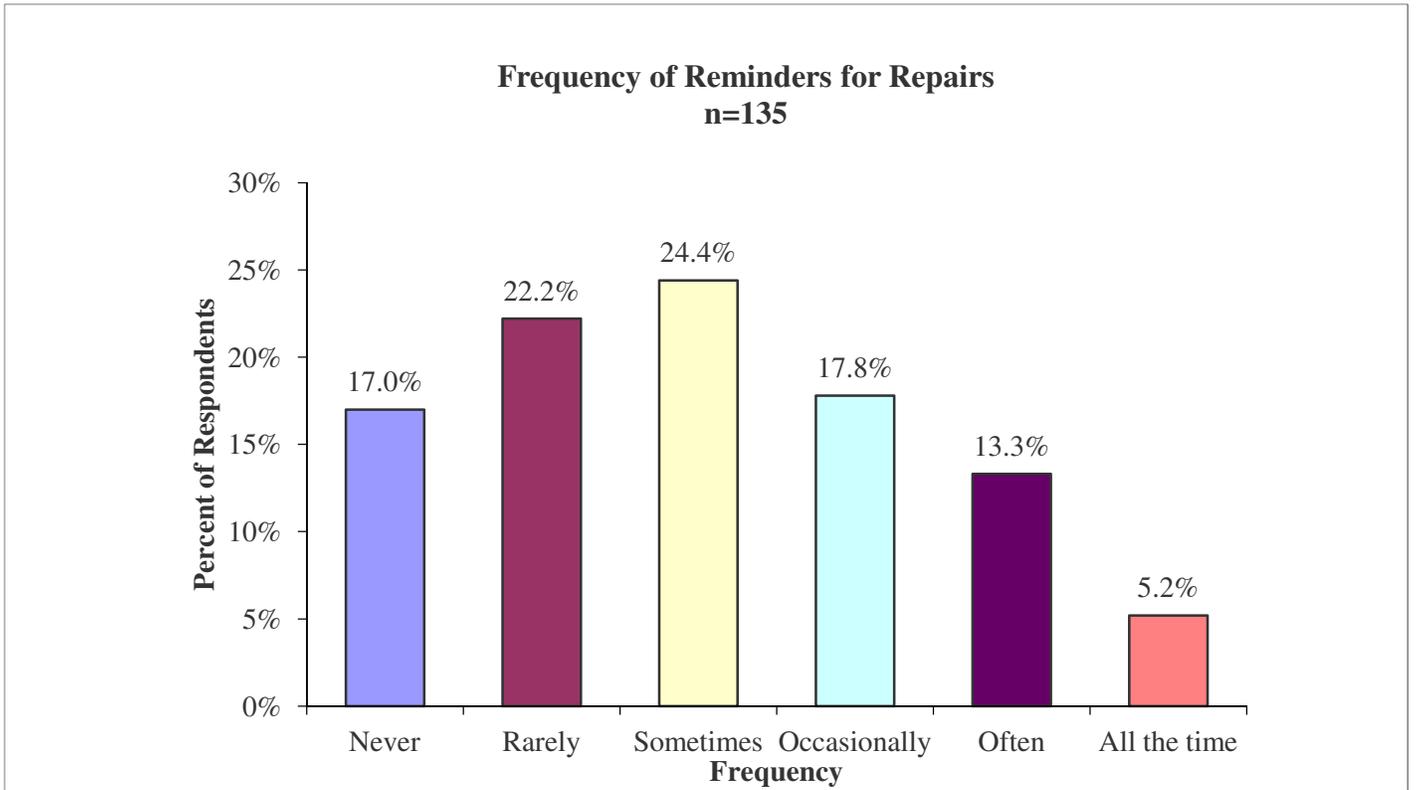


Table 15
Length of Maintenance Repair Time

Length	Month +	3 weeks	2 weeks	1 week	1-3 days
Number of Respondents	9	4	17	29	76

Figure 15

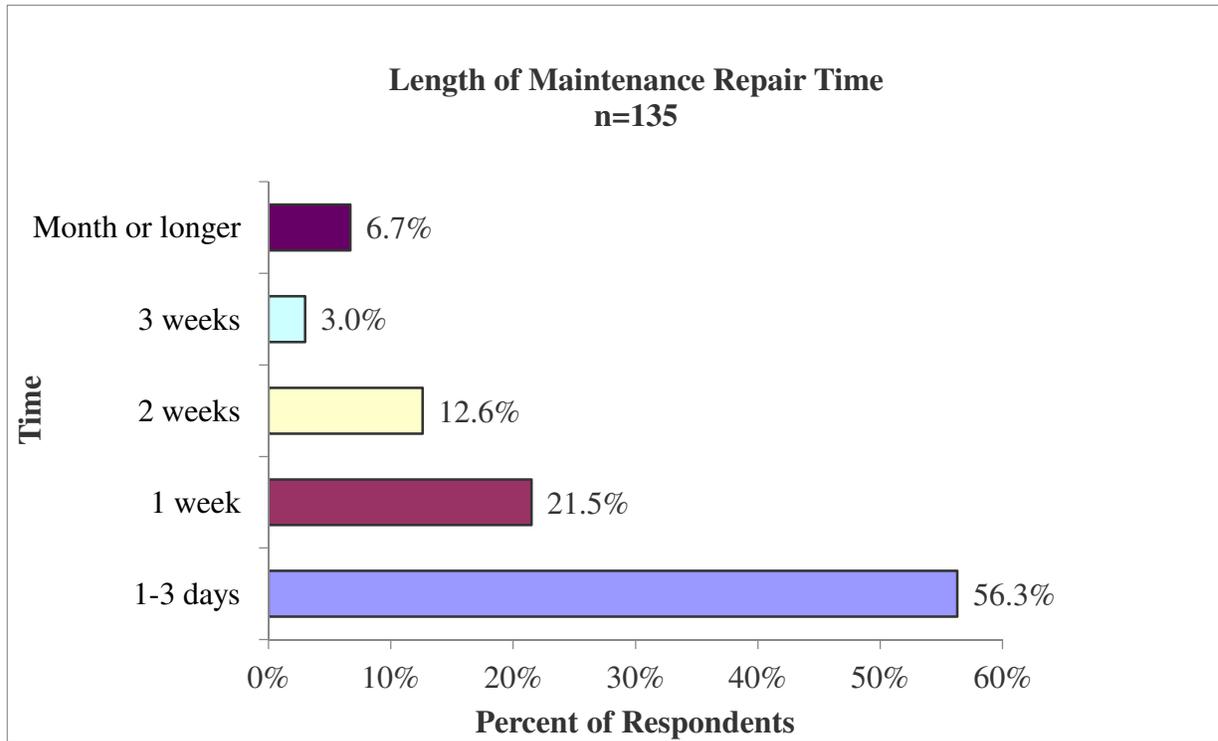


Table 16
Repairs Resulting from Poor Upkeep

Number of Repairs	Too many to count	5-6	3-4	1-2	0
Number of Respondents	16	12	30	48	29

Figure 16

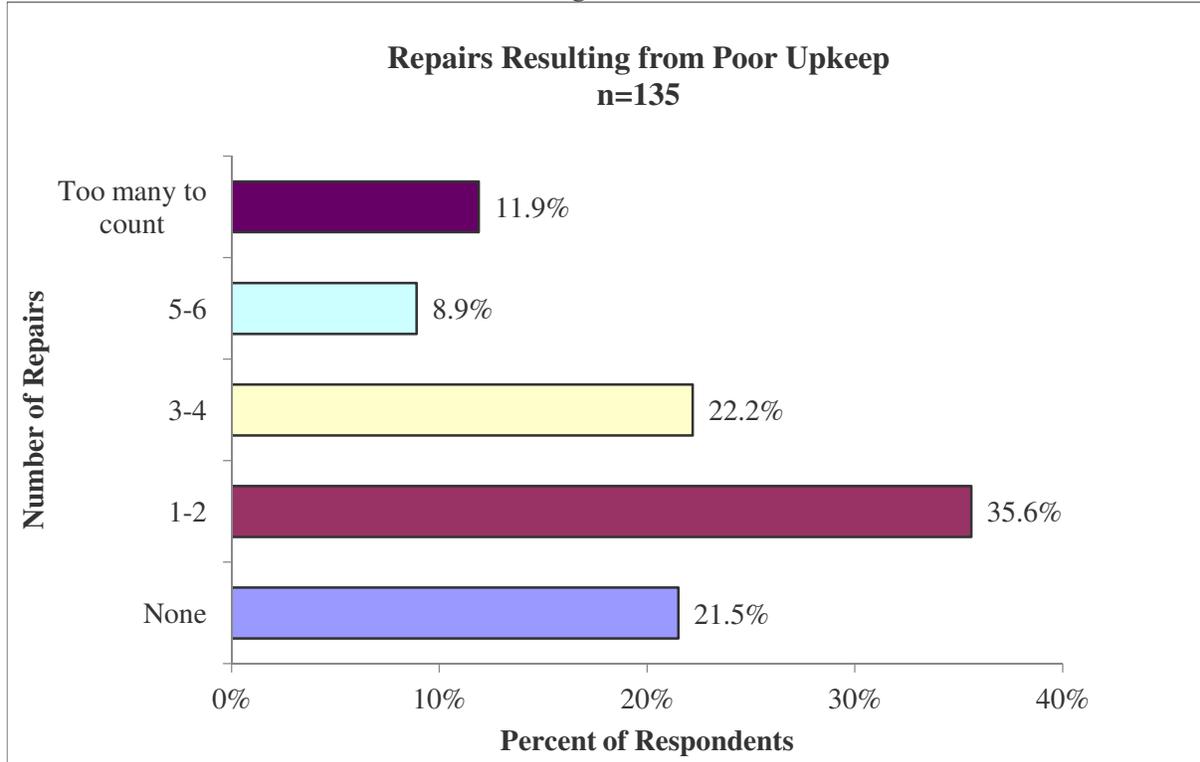


Table 17
Residents Perceptions of Landlord's Willingness to do Maintenance

Level of Willingness	Minimal	Fair	Begrudgingly	Willing	Eager
Number of	15	28	16	55	21

Respondents					
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Figure 17

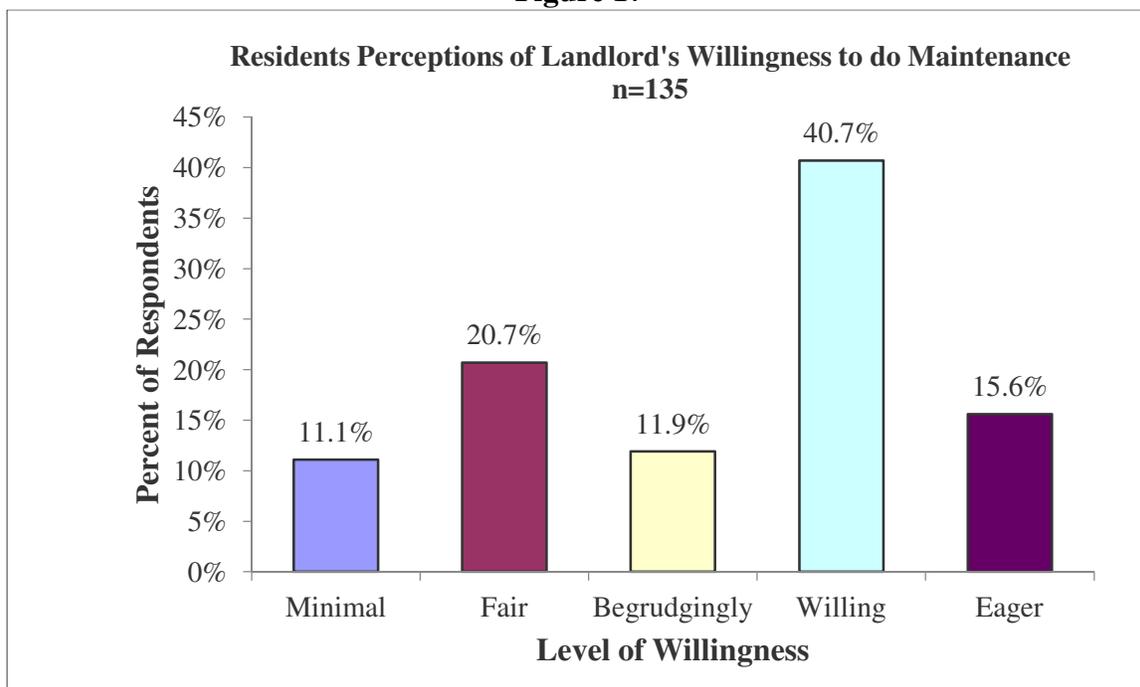


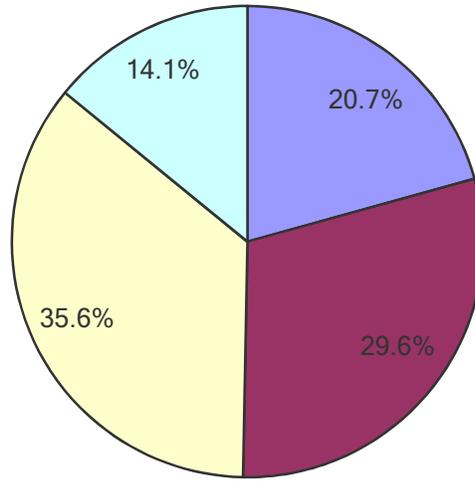
Table 18

Respondents Reported Comfort Level with Landlord

Level of Comfort	Not comfortable at all	Sort of comfortable	Comfortable	Very comfortable
Number of Respondents	28	40	48	19

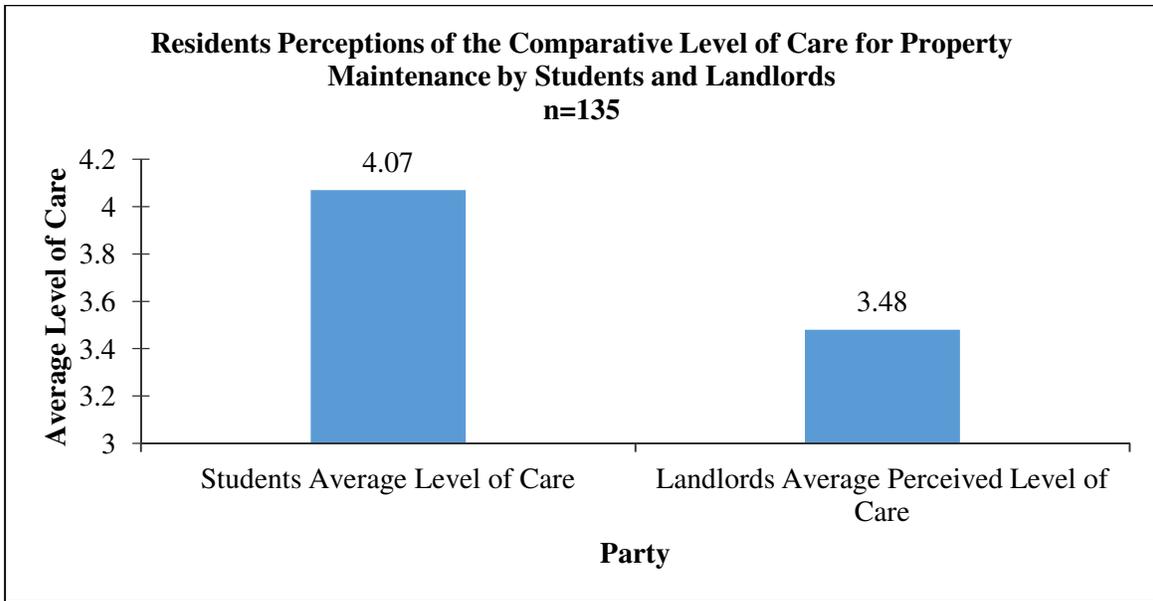
Figure 18

**Respondents Reported Comfor Level with Landlord
n=135**



■ Not comfortable at all ■ Sort of comfortable ■ Comfortable ■ Very comfortable

Figure 19



Comment: Respondents were asked to rate their level of care and their landlords level of care for maintaining the quality of the home or apartment, with 1 being “low” and 5 being “high.”

Figure 20

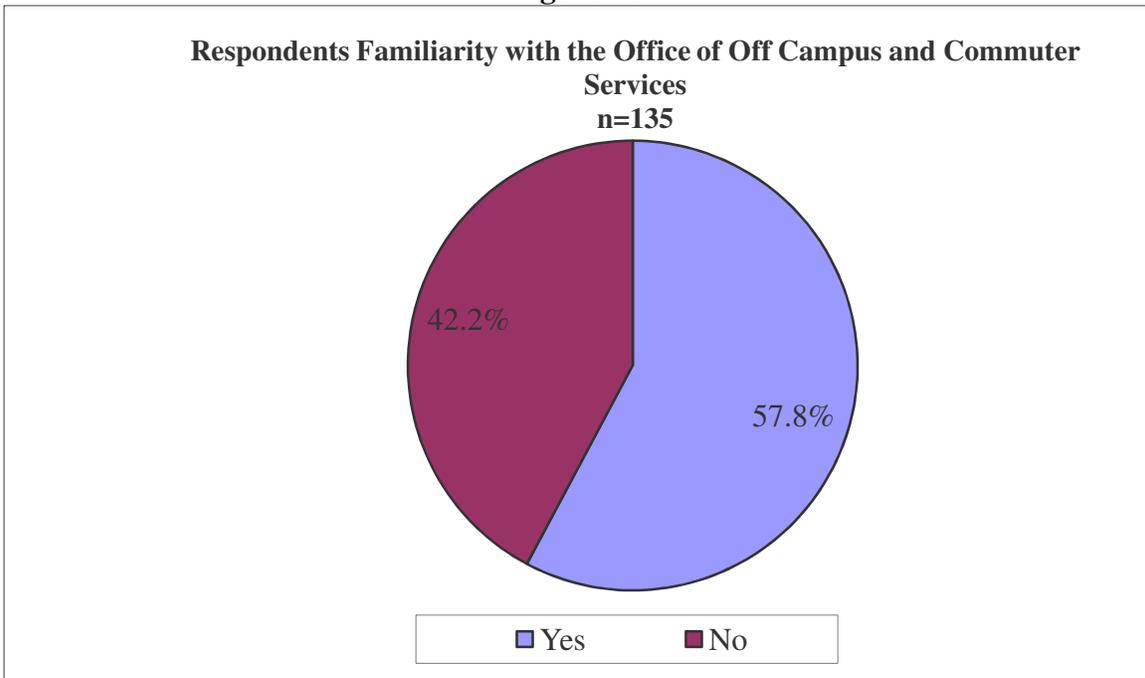
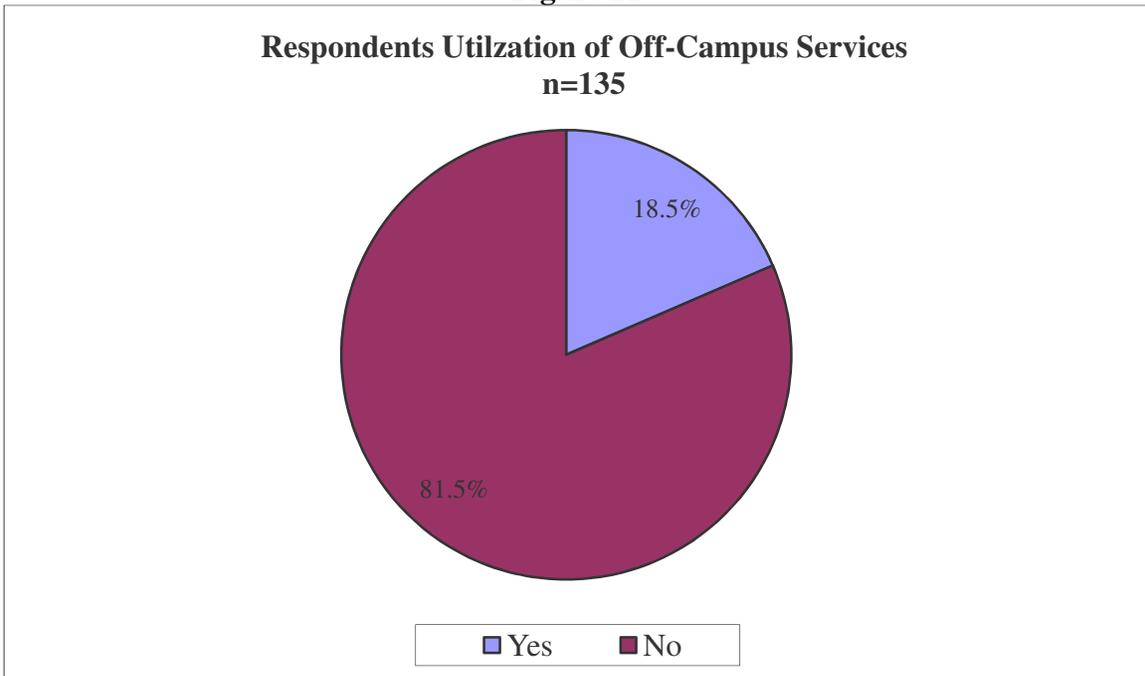


Figure 21



Discussion

Findings were clustered into three major areas: landlord-student relations, housing quality maintenance and repairs, and miscommunication of the parties.

1. Landlord Student Relations
2. Housing Quality, Maintenance and Repairs
3. Miscommunication of the Parties

The first major finding from the survey results was the students who responded. The majority of them rented a house or apartment off-campus, as opposed to living in an apartment complex. Although this information is not completely relevant to any conclusions about the quality of the students' off-campus living experiences, it does suggest that students chose a house or apartment because it meant that they could have greater privacy. As presented in Figure 5, students indicate that the most important reason for choosing to move off-campus is to seek greater independence. The fact that 71.9% of respondents listed greater independence was the core reason for moving off-campus after their sophomore year at Syracuse University is consistent with the literature that states students want to experience their first opportunity to live without the supervision of an adult. Figure 5 highlights some of the factors considered in where students choose to live off campus. The three most important factors were cost of rent, proximity to campus and quality of facilities. Although quality of services was listed as the third most important consideration, only 47.4% of respondents considered it important. This information suggests that either students are overwhelmingly disappointed or pleased with the quality of available housing options that they do not even bother to consider quality a factor. It also may indicate that students are willing to sacrifice the quality of the place in which they live for lower rent and a shorter walk to campus. Students also care very little about the quality of the landlord. Only 17% reported considering the reputation of the landlord in where they chose to live. What

is intriguing about this statistic is that when respondents were asked to elaborate upon any positive or negative experiences with living off-campus, most of them voiced being seriously disappointed with the quality of their landlord. Some students even mentioned their landlord by name, warning others against renting from him or her.

When it comes to the off-campus housing search, results of the survey indicate that it is a fairly stressful process that requires students to rush into signing a lease due to the competitive and fast-paced nature of the market. Before students even finish moving into the house or apartment they are living in during their junior year, they are starting to look for where they are going to live next year. Figure 7 shows that 39.23% of respondents reported it being a negative experience. The process is complicated because there is not one interface where students can search for available housing and there are so many different landlords.

Figures 11 and 18 depict the relationship that students have with landlords. Figure 11 shows that the majority of students 49.6% classify the relationship with their landlord as civil and 6.7% consider it toxic. Without a friendly relationship, students may feel powerless and intimidated by their landlord. This idea is supported by Figure 18 that shows nearly 50% of respondents reported being uncomfortable or sort of comfortable communicating with their landlord. When the lines of communication between the student and the landlord are strained, it often results in a passive-aggressive relationship and a more miserable off-campus living experience, particularly when problems with the home or apartment arise.

Finally, it was clear from the survey that students have serious problems with the places in which they are living. Problems that are serious health and safety concerns. When asked about some of their experiences living off campus, students responded with the following:

- “Squirrel in our attic- not dealt with. Inherited the house with all the previous tenants trash and things- not dealt with”

- “Apartment was not cleaned despite telling me it would be before moving in. Found dried up cat poop, stained furniture, dried up cat vomit, bloody boogers on the bedroom walls, cat hair everywhere (even in refrigerator), and a pair of girls blue and white underwear with poop on them wadded up in a bathroom cupboard. Seriously not kidding about ANY of those. **“Leaking ceiling, told we were getting out of shower too wet. Leaking water heater, changed subject.”**”
- “Mold in the bathroom was just painted over.”
- “Gas leak (still being handled)”
- Furnace BLEW out!!!!!!!! ASAP SNOW = cant EVEN get the whip out the driveway The FURNACE BLEW OUT!!!! it was freezing inside and out from 730am to 900p when fixed. ALL DAY.

The above responses highlight some of the more heinous offenses, but overall many students had similar sentiments and felt that their landlords generally did not care about anything other than collecting the rent. A few students mentioned that they would not even know who their landlord was if they saw him on the street. Figures 14-17 in the Findings section of this paper address some of the problems students had with housing.

Conclusion

There is a serious problem that exists in the Syracuse off-campus housing market. Tuition at Syracuse is outrageously high and so is the room and board. Once students have the chance to move off-campus, many do in an effort to reduce the overall cost of earning a degree from the school. With many students eager to find off-campus housing, there is a high demand for places in close proximity to campus. Many landlords, or “slumlords” as they should more appropriately be called, take advantage of student inexperience and naivety by charging rent that is more than the house or apartment is worth. Though students are paying far less to live off campus, the sacrifice they make in quality and safety far exceeds the relative savings. The entire culture of off-campus housing needs to change. For many, it is a contractual relationship between college students and adult, money hungry, landlords. The inexperience of college students leaves them unknowingly vulnerable to unfair housing practices. The relationship unfairly benefits the more experienced landlords. To help give students a fighting chance at not being completely and totally exploited by their landlords, the Office of Off-Campus and Commuter Services (OOCCS) needs to reassert their presence and make their services more known to students. They should be the referees that help mitigate the difficulties that arise in the off-campus community between students and landlords, but right now they simply act as a passive bystander. They should become “housing consultants,” in a sense. Any student who wants to live off-campus should be required to meet with a housing officer who will offer support. Requiring that students meet with OOCCS administrators promotes the department and provides a venue for students to discuss persistent problems between them and their landlords. The OOCCS may even want to begin holding seminars about how to navigate the off-campus housing process with as little difficulty as possible. At the end of the day, both students and landlords need to be held more accountable. Students need to regain an attitude of trust in the landlords’ ability to act fairly, and

landlords need to make a greater effort to maintain the properties they rent out if they are going to continually raise prices each year. The OOCCS could be instrumental in making this change happen.

Appendix

Survey for Off Campus Students

Please see next page for a copy of the survey printed out from SurveyMonkey.