

# Leaving campus or sheltering in place? Student housing amid COVID-19

By JO ANN DEASY

*In an April 2020 survey of ATS schools about their responses to the COVID-19 crisis, 54 schools indicated that one of their immediate actions was to close residence halls or ask students to leave campus. (For more on the survey, see Deborah Gin's article in the April 2020 Colloquy Online). That same month, ATS hosted a conversation with housing coordinators from four different theological schools. The conversation provided insight into the issues around campus housing during the crisis and initial thoughts on potential considerations, should a second wave of the pandemic impact campus housing.*

## **Financial implications**

For most schools, asking students to leave campus was not an easy decision. Campus housing represents a steady revenue stream for some theological schools. As students moved out, schools lost rental income. Some schools provided refunds for students who moved out before the end of the month while others waived rent for a month or two as students figured out next steps. One school is considering keeping their residences closed through the fall semester. Several were contemplating what role housing would play if courses were offered primarily online. In addition to loss of rent, building renovations and property sales were delayed, which impacted both income and housing availability on campuses.

While the financial implications were significant, the foremost concern of the housing coordinators was the care



of their students. For many students, being asked to leave campus housing was a significant hardship. This was their permanent home and, in many cases, the permanent home of their families as well. There was no other home to go to. Some students, particularly international students, relied on residential living not only for housing but for food as well.

## **Social distancing in campus housing**

As a result, many schools had a small percentage of students who remained on campus. Schools complied with the social distancing policies in place within their states. They closed lounge areas, set up rotating schedules for shared kitchens and bathrooms, regularly sanitized common areas, wore masks and gloves in public spaces, asked students to limit their travel, and banned visitors on campus. Schools also worked on contingency plans in case one of their students tested positive for COVID-19. One school prepared empty apartments to serve as a quarantine area for dormitory students who tested positive. They posted signs, sent emails, and monitored common areas and parking lots but, for the most part,

they simply had to trust that the community of students would do their part.

In order to meet the needs of students remaining on campus, housing coordinators continued to work from home or, in one case, move into a campus apartment. Maintenance workers and cleaning crews remained on call. Schools worked with cafeterias to continue to provide one hot meal a day and take-away meals for residential students. Food pantries remained open, though there were challenges to their food supplies. At one school, student workers alternated days working in the pantry. Food was ordered online, packed up, and left outside the door for contact-less pick-up.

### ***Moving in the midst of a pandemic***

Some schools began asking students to leave in mid-March. In some cases, students left not realizing that they would not be returning. Housing coordinators were left trying to figure out what to do with belongings that were left behind. Items were packed up and shipped or stored to be retrieved at a later date.

Students who were moving out of homes or apartments faced the challenge of packing up in the midst of a pandemic. Social distancing restrictions meant they had little help from their communities. On one campus, help was limited to two outside visitors, both of whom had their temperature checked before coming on campus.

Some schools asked graduates to move out early. Others delayed move out dates for a month. Both were trying to respond to the broader needs of their student bodies.

Graduates faced particular challenges. Students were fearful of moving, especially long-distances, during the pandemic. At times, the housing or job they had secured was delayed. At other times, housing or jobs fell through altogether. Those who had not yet secured housing or work faced the challenge of having to do so in the midst of an uncertain future and often without ever being able to physically see the places where they might be living or working. Some schools provided moving funds to help with the transition.

### ***Responding to anxiety in crisis***

Not surprising, several housing coordinators spoke about the heightened anxiety level of students—students who were upset that they have to move out of housing, students who were upset that they can't move into housing, students who were worried about getting sick, students who were worried about their future, etc. Many students had extreme reactions to changes in policies, whether large or small. Now, more than ever, student personnel are being asked to serve as a non-anxious presence on campus to help students cope with this uncertainty. They are often the ones who have to deliver the policies and decisions—or lack of decisions—being made by senior leadership. And they are often the ones who take the first hits as students lash out, seeking clarity in the midst of the chaos. Housing coordinators, student personnel, faculty, and administrators are all leaders who are modeling for students what it means to lead a community through a crisis—a skill many of them are either currently or will soon be exercising in their own leadership roles.



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