

AUSU CESD 4016/17 FIELD PLACEMENT RESEARCH

A Study on Accessible & Affordable Postsecondary Student Housing
in the Sault Ste. Marie Area

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Executive Summary

Over the past several years limited access to emergency and affordable housing has been identified as a concern among community social services organizations, settlement service agencies, and interested stakeholders working for, or aligned with, the two post-secondary academic institutions (*Algoma University and Sault College*), in Sault Ste Marie Ontario. In particular, finding adequate housing options for newcomers, international students, and students who require additional support, both domestic and international is problematic. This social reality coupled with insufficient campus housing, low vacancy/availability, extortionate off campus housing, amongst a host of barriers for these student demographics has become increasingly difficult for this Northern Ontario community.

This study was commissioned by The Algoma University Students' Union (AUSU) in



order to determine the need and feasibility of developing an off-campus housing facility/project that is family friendly, and will seek to fill the substantial gaps in housing availability for students struggling with housing precarity in all of its iterations within their first two years of higher learning. Furthermore, this report will provide a brief context of housing challenges for these demographics. It will serve to analyze three established housing models, and consider recommendations to determine the feasibility of this potential project.

FIG 1 (above): UTILE QUEBEC Student Housing Survey Jan-22-2021

Access to affordable and adequate housing is essential to promote health and wellbeing for all citizens. For newcomers, the ability of securing core housing is often difficult. According to Enns (2006),

“Housing affordability is the greatest problem for recent immigrants, and their insecure position in the workforce and dependence on government transfers place, along with discrimination in the housing and job markets, place them at a particular and serious disadvantage” (Enns, 2006).

In particular, this is true for international students who face significant barriers and lack accessibility to services more readily available to recent immigrants or refugees. According to Halliday (2020),

“Social services in Sault Ste Marie have nothing specifically set up for international students. The social insurance number that international students receive begins with a “9” and therefore they do not qualify for a lot of the services that are available for permanent residents, landed immigrants and refugees” (S. Halliday, personal communication, 2020, November 17).

Furthermore, international students pay significantly higher fees than domestic students, nearly seven times the amount for tuition (Patterson, 2019). And in the case of Algoma University, on-campus housing plus a mandatory meal plan costs roughly \$10,510.00 for two semesters or 8 months (Algoma University, 2020). This hefty price tag has resulted in students seeking housing off campus resulting in students attaining less than desirable accommodations in unsafe areas and in many cases subjected to discrimination from landlords (S. Anjum, personal communication, 2020, November 11).

While domestic students do not incur the same complex, systemic societal, and intersectional barriers that international and newcomer students face, they too share similar experiences, such as; difficulty navigating the housing market's lack of high quality proximal affordable housing and the financial barriers attributed to student living.

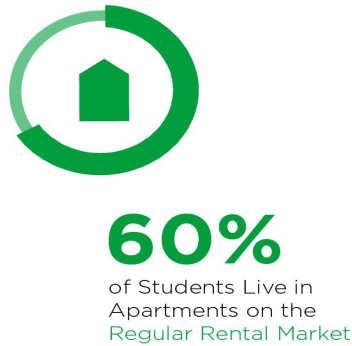
Before the global pandemic reduced international and domestic enrolment, and economic forecasters predicted a 50 percent decline in enrollment (Hagar, 2020), Algoma University was seeing an average of 300 plus international students for the 2019 winter term (Taylor, 2019). According to Sault College Vice President Janice Beatty (2019), "We have our highest ever enrollment and we're almost just over 2900" (Patterson, 2019). Though the pandemic is a major factor in determining the feasibility of this project, it is important to consider that normalcy will resume, and post-secondary institutions (PSI) will continue to recruit. International and domestic students will return to PSI's at the same rate as in pre-pandemic years. Furthermore, the lack of availability for affordable housing will remain a problem that requires a solution.

According to data sourced from the *Sault Ste Marie Poverty Roundtable Report*:

- Between 2011 and 2018, the median rent of rental housing in Sault Ste. Marie increased from \$675 to \$891. This represents a 32% increase during this time period. According to the Conference Board of Canada, personal income per capita in Sault Ste. Marie increased by 14% during this same time period.

- According to CMHC, the average rental housing vacancy rate from 2016 to 2020 was 4.58%. Average rent from these years was \$855 per month and the average median rent was \$847.40 (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2021).

FIG 2 (below): UTILE QUEBEC Student Housing Survey Jan, 22 2021



- A shelter-cost-to-income ratio of less than 30% is a commonly used line to deem housing affordable. In other words, if a household spends less than 30% of its income on housing costs, it is considered affordable. However, if a household spends more than 30% of its income on housing costs, it is not considered affordable. According to the 2016 Census of Canada, 6,945 households (or 21.3% of all households) in Sault Ste. Marie spent 30% or more of their household income on shelter costs. For those that rented their

home, 4,640 (or 45.4% of all rented households) spent 30% or more of their household income on shelter costs. Source: Statistics Canada, Cats. # 98-400-X20162

- In 2018, Sault Ste. Marie had approximately 33,441 households. There were 2,329 households receiving subsidy and a further 1,792 individuals/ families on the waiting list for a total of 4,121 requiring subsidies. This represents approximately 12% of the total households in Sault Ste. Marie (SSM Poverty Round Table - Poverty Indicators Report, 2020).

These statistics, coupled with the current vacancy rate of 5.8 % for rentals and the average price of a two-bedroom apartment at \$950.00 (welcometossm.com, 2021) it becomes clear that there is a substantial need for affordable and available housing for international students and students in need of additional supports. Lastly, Algoma University's Sault Ste. Marie Campus currently has an enrollment of 1580 students, (985 are domestic and 595 are international) and with the projected future enrollment target of 3,000 students by 2023, (Krmpotich, 2021) it can be confirmed that the current on campus student housing structure that includes a total of 208 dormitory style rooms is insufficient and only available on the main Sault Ste. Marie campus. Therefore, due to the lack of accessibility for short term rentals the Algoma University Students' Union has reported a need for an alternative housing model that would help international and domestic students in crisis with providing affordable and suitable housing options for this demographic during their first two years of study. Furthermore, there is a significant drought in research pertaining to the geographic location of Northern and rural Ontario,

specifically the city of Sault Ste Marie. This is why AUSU has decided to partner with Quebec based student housing non-profit agency UTILE, a pioneer research agency for affordable student units who recently launched the Flash2021 (Fostering Learning and Awareness on Student Housing) survey.

The Flash2021 survey is a partnership between UTILE and higher educational institutions across Canada that holds three primary objectives:

- Survey over 200,000 Canadian students about their living conditions, in close collaboration with student societies and unions.
- Publish a national report on student housing to bridge the knowledge gap that is currently accelerating the current housing crisis in Canada.
- Leverage this new information to raise awareness about student housing and put pressure on every level of government to take action.

The goal of the Flash 2021 survey is to share expertise with student unions and groups that want to tackle the issue of affordable student housing in other provinces. Its ultimate goal is to support the creation of a Canadian network of nonprofits developing innovative and affordable housing options for students at scale in every province and territory (UTILE Communications Package, 2021).

AUSU has signed a partnership agreement with UTILE and is asking Algoma University students to participate in the Flash2021 survey to help source data that will seek to provide sufficient, equitable and affordable student housing for our student community. As a part of this partnership, AUSU intends to take part in the local and national housing survey, host a feasibility study, apply for funding, and take action on the construction of said housing projects.

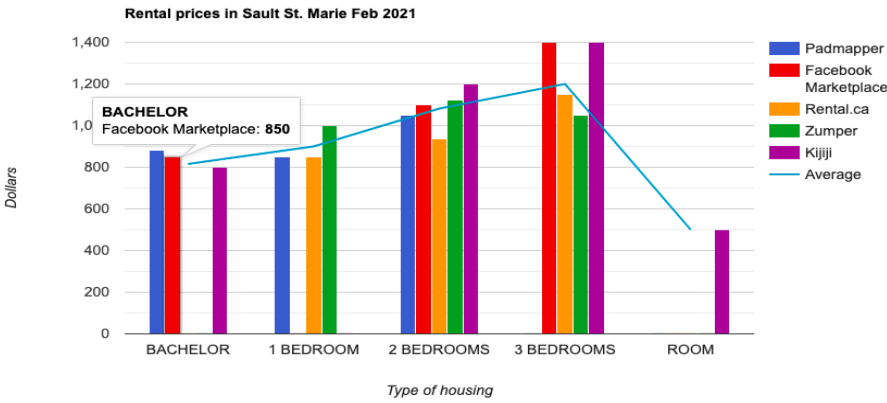


FIG 3: Avg. Rental Price by unit type in SSM, (Sample size 4-15 listings, per online search engine as of February 2021).

Housing Models:

There are a variety of different housing models available outside of; traditional on-campus housing, fraternities, sororities, or allocated emergency housing funds for students in need. For the purposes of selecting a model that would best suit this particular project, three have been chosen and measured by addressing the pros and cons of co-operative housing, dormitory & temporary rooms, and transitional housing.

Co-operatives:

Student housing co-ops are often non-profit communal organizations operating with a self-governance structure. Co-operative student housing facilities are owned and operated democratically by the student residents, who through annual memberships fees become the owners of their living spaces (Lafontaine, 2016; housinginternaioal.coop, n.d;).

Student housing co-ops can be financed through:

- **Debt Financing:** *Community investors, financial institutions, crowdsourcing*
- **Grants through non-profit or charitable status:** *Ontario Trillium Foundation*
- **Government subsidies:** *Co-operatives providing a social service (Ontario Co-operative Association, n.d).*
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Examples: Kingston Student Housing Co-op, The Woodnote (Utile; Concordia University Student Union), Campus Co-operative Residence Inc, Guelph Campus Co-operative

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Permanently affordable, isolated from the housing market, and offers lower rents compared to the private sector● Rent is used to cover essentials of living (maintenance, repairs, various bills, lease, WIFI, etc.) not to profit landlords● Equity centered and accessible● Teaches life skills (collaboration, finance management, democratic decision making● More social connectivity (which is beneficial for first- and second-year	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Fees (paying property management, maintenance personal, and annual membership)● Board meetings and other responsibilities that may interfere with studies● Communal living may interfere with different personality types and may negatively affect students● Some examples of student housing co-operatives are only marginally less

<p>students both domestic and international)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location is often close to campus and amenities • Sublets, visitors, and different variations in room sizes (flexibility is beneficial for mature students) • Co-op model can work for a new facility or a retrofitted building (Lafontaine, et al.,2016) 	<p>than on-campus housing (<i>Kingston Student Housing Co-op</i>)</p>
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Short-Term Student Accommodation:

Short term housing options are offered on and off campuses across Canada. They follow a variety of durations from one day, to one month, to a year and are similar to a hostel model. This option has potential for students who are in an emergency situation, such as: failure to secure accommodation before the start of semesters, unsafe or unlivable housing conditions, house fire or other calamity, eviction, short-term homelessness, personal crisis, or students commuting from rural areas. They are usually private sector owned and operated.

Examples: Carey Accommodation (UBC campus) Commuter Student Hostel (UBC), Olivia’s Housing (UofT)

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work within students’ budget and cheaper than hotels • Furnished rooms • Amenities such as internet, hydro, electric are included with daily, weekly, or monthly rate • Variations of room and bed sizes • Family friendly • Ideal for temporary and crisis situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on examples, rooms can be costly if they are for a prolonged time period • Not sustainable or ideal for students looking to complete first and second academic years

Transitional Housing:

Transitional housing is supportive yet temporary accommodation meant to bridge the gap from homelessness to permanent housing by offering structure, supervision, support, life skills, education and training; and are often a transition from the shelter system. Most transitional housing units are similar to common hotel accommodations; a large room, shared bathroom facilities and a shared kitchen space. Transitional housing programs may offer more units for short term.

Transitional housing facilities and programs are usually part of larger non-profits, registered charities, or social service agencies funded by private donors, government grants & funding, religious denominations, corporations/foundations, and other community-based agencies (Aleman, 2017).

Examples: Phoenix Rising Non-Profit Homes (Sault Ste Marie), Pauline’s Place (Sault Ste Marie, Fred Victor Centre (Toronto)

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Peer and mentorship supports for at risk students● Life skills development opportunities● Amenities such as laundry, utilities, career skills training, and meals● Gives participants support in securing temporary housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Restrictive setting, rules, and curfew● Environment has the likelihood of stresses due to other peers potentially being in crisis; potential for conflict● Difficulty focusing on studies and pressure● Communal living, lack of privacy● Not family friendly● No guest policy● Program requirements and responsibilities may be distracting for studies● Stigma

One of the major challenges across Canada for determining the feasibility of this type of housing development is the fact that the student population is often excluded from federal census data. Therefore, there is a gap in research that not-for-profit organizations such as UTILE and AUSU are seeking to address through participation in this study. Due to this, students are often excluded from programs, consultations, and studies because they have intersecting identities, such as being a part-time worker, etc., which does not necessarily or accurately reflect their economic and social situations.

Based on the preliminary available data, we have identified that independent living style apartment rentals are inaccessible to various student demographics within the Sault Ste. Marie area due to limited availability or affordability. Current on campus dormitory style housing is restrictive, unaffordable and unsuitable for some mature students (especially those with families), and other students that may prefer living alone. Therefore we recommend that postsecondary institutions explore the feasibility of investing in a cooperative-independent living style housing similar to the Woodnote Cooperative, a modern multi-unit building with independent bathrooms and kitchens per dwelling that offers students various options for square footage and number of bedrooms based on their needs.

AUSU PLAN OF ACTION FOR ADEQUATE STUDENT HOUSING:

- Fill in the gaps in the research by assessing the need for additional student housing first by establishing partnerships with initiatives such as UTILE and participating in the national FLASH study to obtain primary research data
- Obtaining grant funding to undergo a regional housing study specifically geared toward post secondary students in Northern Ontario and the Algoma district demographics
- Undergoing a feasibility analysis to determine the appropriate housing type, number of units, location, cost, ownership/partnership, design, permits and engineering, operations and maintenance, legal and financing costs
- Securing financing for the construction and development costs to execute the said project
- Continuous evaluation to determine whether the project was suitable to address the student housing accessibility needs

FIG 4: The Woodnote Concordia-UTILE Concept Studio Apartment



How students can get involved and support this project:

We invite all alumni, current and prospective Algoma University students to participate in the national UTILE FLASH survey so that we can better understand and capture your needs for more equitable and accessible housing within your region.

Access the survey in ENGLISH:

<http://utile.org/lime/index.php/732115?lang=en>

Access the survey in FRENCH:

<http://utile.org/lime/index.php/732115?lang=fr>

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY:



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