

## **Near-Campus Student Housing and the Growth of the Town and Gown Movement in Canada**

By Michael Fox

Over 150 communities across Canada, both large and small, are home to colleges and universities with an estimated 645,000 full-time university students and an additional 410,000 full-time college students registered in various programs of study.<sup>1</sup> Universities and colleges are certainly a significant asset to their communities, yet they present a unique set of planning and community development considerations, challenges, and an increasing number of threats and negative perceptions about off-campus behaviour, especially in those near-campus neighbourhoods where students tend to concentrate. With increasing enrolments across the post-secondary sector, universities and colleges have seen higher percentages of their student population living off-campus, where student discipline codes and student activities and behaviour are not supervised or regulated. Each September, local residents brace themselves for the various move-ins, orientation activities and homecoming parties that spill-over into the various near-campus neighbourhoods.

### **There Goes The Neighbourhood**

In recent years, near-campus student housing issues have received national media attention during annual fall orientation and homecoming events. The most infamous case was in a neighbourhood near Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. Estimates of 5,000 – 7,000 revelers took over a two-block student ghetto during Homecoming 2005.<sup>2</sup> National media attention highlighted the drinking, noise, broken glass, an overturned car that was set ablaze, and over 100 police officers ordered into the area with dozens of arrests and hundreds of liquor and by-law violation tickets being issued. "It was a riot. There's no other way of describing it," says Don Rogers, a retired Kingston city councillor.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Kingston is not alone in identifying the growing threat to neighbourhood security being felt by residents. Most communities that are home to a university or residentially-oriented college report incidents of what has been defined as "studentification" of near-campus neighbourhoods. British geographer Darren Smith coined this concept as an analogy with gentrification, where he reports the social and environmental changes caused by large numbers of students invading particular areas of a town or city, thereby causing a displacement of many of the long-time residents of that area.<sup>4</sup> In Britain, The Observer, July 2002 reported that "Students have officially been identified as the new scourge of Britain's towns and cities in a study blaming studentification for a string of social evils... They include destroying respectable neighbourhoods by driving out families, triggering rat infestations, causing vandalism and forcing closure of corner

shops in favour of tatty burger bars and cheap off-licences.” Smith is one of the few researchers investigating this international phenomenon, highlighted in a study he completed for the government and published by the University Vice-Chancellors’ organization of the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

### **Town and Gown Relationships**

Within the various communities across Canada, from small towns such as Sackville, Antigonish, Wolfville and Lennoxville, to larger communities such as Kingston, Guelph, Waterloo, Regina, Calgary, Victoria, Halifax and Fredericton, residents have turned to police, university officials and city governments in addressing these on-going threats to their personal security, the value of their properties and the integrity of their neighbourhoods. Most of these communities have resorted to enhanced by-law enforcement, policing services, property maintenance standards and rooming house and tenancy policies. Universities have, finally, recognized that they have a role to play in the off-campus lives of their students. Over the past several years, “Town and Gown” committees have been created in a number of university/college communities across Canada. These committees have been created to bring together municipal and post-secondary administrators with neighbourhood residents, students and student leaders, landlords and politicians to develop strategies for addressing the conflicts and threats and negative perceptions that exist between the “Town”, being the permanent residents and municipal regulations and infrastructure and the “Gown”, being the post-secondary students and the administrative representatives of the university or college.

One of the most affected communities in terms of Town and Gown relations has been Waterloo, Ontario. Home to two universities and a college, with over 25% of the city’s population being full-time students, the City of Waterloo has hosted Town and Gown Committees since 1989. In 2004, the City and its universities hosted a Town and Gown Symposium on student-community relations where they invited other communities hosting colleges and universities to identify and exchange issues, best-practices, common barriers to improved relations, and possible avenues for improved future relations. The symposium identified a range of coordinated planning efforts, research and best practices in areas such as sustainable housing, student housing demand and supply, community policing and by-law enforcement, and improved communications with provincial ministries and agencies and legal reform to improve housing and community safety.<sup>6</sup> Similar events have now been held in Hamilton and Guelph, Ontario, culminating with a 2005 national forum on Town and Gown Issues at Brock University in St. Catherines.

The growth of the Town and Gown movement is beginning to spread across North America, with international interest from Britain and Australia. The most recent meeting of university, college and community officials took place at the Wilfrid Laurier Brantford Campus, where the Town and Gown Association of Ontario has now been officially incorporated, holding its first Annual Meeting.<sup>7</sup> Already, the Association has close to 100 members, including planners, university and college presidents, deans, community relations and student housing officers, student associations, as well as neighbourhood

associations, landlords, community development officials, local and regional police and fire officials, property standards and construction associations, and civic leaders.

### **Adequate Housing and Improved Behaviour as the Key to Improved Community Relations**

The impact of near-campus student housing cannot be ignored by planners, universities/colleges and civic officials. Numerous studies have highlighted the substantial economic impact that universities and colleges have on the civic economies, housing markets, the arts, and tourism.<sup>8</sup> Smith (2006) argues that, with appropriate planning strategies, studentification need not always be a negative housing phenomenon. It can be a catalyst for urban renewal in communities where downtowns and surrounding neighbourhoods are in decline. An excellent Canadian example is occurring in the inner-city of Winnipeg, where the University of Winnipeg has worked with city and provincial governments to convert abandoned housing into student residences. Likewise, the City of Brantford has partnered with Wilfrid Laurier University, Nipissing University and Mohawk College to position post-secondary education as the catalyst for the re-birth of Brantford's decline in the wake of massive industry closures and abandonment of the central business district. The Laurier Brantford Campus is now restoring and converting heritage buildings, abandoned structures, old theatres and churches. This has sparked a multi-million dollar building trend in the downtown, associated with student housing, arts and culture and retail establishments.

While the provision of economic stability and growth, as well as adequate and safe student housing are important aspects of the Town and Gown approach to planning, its more immediate impact has been the development of a shared responsibility for harmonious relations between off-campus students, landlords, local residents and civic officials. More and more communities are taking a pro-active approach to the perceived threat of student housing and an associated lack of civility that may arise in these enclaves. While still a rather under-researched area of study, the early results in communities with Town and Gown Committees is quite impressive. Some of the innovative approaches being taken in these Town and Gown Communities include:

- Student foot patrols that work with police, neighbourhood groups and by-law enforcement officers in being visible, pro-active, helpful neighbourhood citizens. These often include "safe-walk" programs, as well as litter patrols and noise and unsightly premise reminders.
- Height and density studies, as well as student rental accommodation review programs. Such programs often include a Code of Standards for landlords and student tenants, housing registries, proactive lot maintenance enforcement, and licensing lodging houses with local governments.
- A September "door knocker" program where university/college officials, student government representatives, neighbourhood associations and police go door-to-door in near-campus housing areas to provide both students and non-student

households information addressing past issues and perceptions and what it takes to make a good neighbourhood work. Such programs allow for a friendly, non-threatening approach to student occupied dwellings, as well as allowing local residents the opportunity to express their fears and concerns, as well as getting to know the various members of the Town and Gown Committee and their student neighbours.

- Various publications on encouraging neighbourhood associations and residents, both student and permanent, to work together in making a safe and liveable environment. Access to student newspapers and radio stations for education on housing issues and concerns, as well as local “neighbourhood spirit builder” get togethers have been positive approaches to the housing mix found in near-campus neighbourhoods.
- Landlord information sessions and landlord inventories have been developed in some communities, with instruction and assistance on such matters as provincial regulations, local by-laws, legal assistance with tenants, planning and zoning information, etc.
- The development of university/college and student government administrative portfolios specifically designed to address the Town and Gown issues that may develop over the year. These are positive, outward signs that universities and colleges are serious about the overall impact of post-secondary educational institutions on the lives and well-being of the community.

### **Developing a Community Vision**

Town and Gown issues highlight the symbiotic relationship between colleges and universities, their students, and the communities that surround them and provide many of the essential services needed in their unique daily coexistence. Post-secondary education has always had a mission to prepare students to be “citizens of the world”. Certainly, community concerns regarding a lack of civility on the part of some of these same students needs to be part of the educational experience. As more and more communities raise fears and concerns about noise, parties, late night vandalism and even rioting in the streets, the Town and Gown Committee concept stands as a strategy whose time has come.

The Town and Gown concept is an ideal model for identifying and dealing with community issues associated with spatial concentrations of student housing. The role of post-secondary institutions in dealing with off-campus student behaviour, as well as student welfare and the right to safe housing, is the other important part of the equation. Working with student residents, both Town and Gown representatives can move the issues of resident rights and responsibilities, inappropriate behaviour, as well as adequate and safe housing, towards an overall community vision and a climate of civility for all.

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## References

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## Summary

Close to 150 Canadian communities are home to one or more colleges or universities, providing an enormous social and economic impact from over 1 million full-time students. Yet a growing number of off-campus incidents concerning student housing and behavioural issues have caused local residents and public officials to raise concerns about neighbourhood safety and community security. This article explores the complexities of so-called "Town and Gown" relations and the growing body of research and professional associations aimed at reducing the disruptive nature of student housing enclaves through enhanced cooperation by all parties involved in the provision of education, student housing and neighbourhood security.

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