

**OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING
HANDBOOK
SPRING 2024**

ADVOCATE

CELEBRATE

EDUCATE

SERVE



CONTEMPORARY
STUDENT SERVICES

CONTEMPORARY

STUDENTS ARE

OFF-CAMPUS STUDENTS ONLINE LEARNERS
ADULT LEARNERS ACTIVE DUTY & VETERANS
TRANSFER STUDENTS PREGNANT OR PARENTING
ONLINE LEARNERS FORMERLY INCARCERATED
FOSTER CARE ALUMNI MARRIED, WIDOWED OR DIVORCED

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?



Meet with a Contemporary Student Mentor



Student support spaces for transfer students, parenting students, and adult learners



Contemporary Student Lounge located in the HUB 1012 with space to hang out, have refreshments, and relax between classes



Mason's Official Off-Campus Housing Finder at och.gmu.edu



Events and engagement opportunities for students to connect with faculty, staff, and each other



Website with tailored resources by student population located at contemporary.gmu.edu



AVOIDING HOUSING SCAMS

Housing scams are far too common today. Before you find yourself out thousands of dollars or without a place to live, take this advice to keep yourself safe.

1 KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

Remember that you have rights as a renter. There are multiple resources that can help you learn what is and is not legal when attempting to rent in the Commonwealth of Virginia, but remember that certain municipalities also have separate renter's rights regulations. You can find some of these in the resource section of och.gmu.edu.

2 KNOW YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES

Renters have responsibilities as well. You and any roommates need to maintain a clean and safe dwelling, follow the rules as outlined in the lease, and be good neighbors in your community. You can find some of these in the resource section of och.gmu.edu.

3 USE RELIABLE SERVICES

Avoid using sites like Facebook and Craigslist to find housing and/or roommates! Use verified search services, such as Mason's housing and roommate finder at och.gmu.edu.

4 GET EVERYTHING IN WRITING

While it is very rare, if you should find yourself in a dispute with your landlord, it will be beneficial to have proof of what the terms of the lease outline. This should include items like names, dates of move-in and move-out, the amount of the rent and fees, pet allowance/prohibitions, termination notice requirements, access to premises allowances, security deposits, and maintenance duties and responsibilities, among other items.

5 DON'T SIGN SOMETHING YOU HAVEN'T READ

Do not sign a lease if you have not read and fully understand the document. If something feels like it is excessive, overly prohibitive, or just wrong, check with an unbiased third party (such as Contemporary Student Services) to make sure you are not being taken advantage of or putting yourself in a bad situation.

6 REMEMBER A LEASE IS A LEGAL CONTRACT

While a lease cannot break the law, you can agree to situations that are legal but outside of what is considered normal. It is important that prior to signing anything, you: 1. agree with what you are signing, and 2. check with an unbiased third party to ensure that what you are signing is normal. Fairfax County's lease Checklist at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/cableconsumer/csd/lease-checklist provides an idea of what can be found in a standard lease.

7 BE CAREFUL WITH MONEY

Avoid wiring money, especially overseas. Once you wire funds they are gone. Large apartment companies will often have a formal payment portal or process. With individual landlords, it is important to verify the property and that they in-fact manage the property. Additionally, it is a good idea to utilize a traceable form of payment (such as a check). Additionally, do not pay for a residence until you have a signed lease. Finally, do not send money to a third party who is not listed on the lease as a formal payment processor.

HOUSING TIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Use these helpful tips when searching for housing in Northern Virginia

1 UTILIZE THE HOUSING FINDER

Use och.gmu.edu to look for apartments, condos, and room rentals in the area. Housing options can be filtered by price, distance from campus, etc.

2 SEARCHING FOR ROOMMATES

Find roommates using Mason's roommate finder at och.gmu.edu. This safe and secure website is only available to George Mason University students, staff, and faculty.

3 USE RELIABLE SERVICES

Avoid using sites like Facebook and Craigslist to find housing and/or roommates! Use verified search services, such as Mason's housing and roommate finder at och.gmu.edu.

4 THINK ABOUT TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING

Transportation and parking can be a challenge in Northern Virginia. If you do not have a car, look for a place to live close to public transportation. Be sure to look into the local bus, Metro, and Mason Shuttle schedules. For information about Mason Shuttle, visit transportation.gmu.edu/shuttle-services.

5 OBEY ALL APPLICABLE LAWS

Remember to obey all laws while in the United States. If you plan on driving, please look up all regulations and rules at www.dmv.state.va.us/webdoc/pdf/dmv39.pdf. Additionally, obey all city, county, and state regulations related to maximum occupancy in a residence (Fairfax City and Fairfax County legally limit the number of residents to four).

6 SECURITY DEPOSIT

Be prepared to pay the first month's rent and security deposit, which is often equal to a whole month's rent. If you don't have a U.S. Social Security Number or credit history, the security deposit may be larger. You may also need to pay deposits for utilities, such as telephones and electricity. If you are asked to pay too much more than this, act with caution.

7 ASK US IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have questions or concerns please feel free to contact Contemporary Student Services. We can help you determine if something is out of the ordinary. Our contact information can be found at the bottom of this handout.

8 FURNITURE RENTALS ARE AVAILABLE

CORT furniture rental is a strong supporter of Contemporary Student Services at George Mason University. They offer international students rentals and services to help international students settle into the United States. Please refer to their website (<https://www.cort.com/>)

COMMON QUESTIONS TO ASK A LANDLORD

The questions provided are examples of what you should be asking, but they are not a holistic set for every person. We encourage all students to think hard about their lifestyle and ask all appropriate questions.

QUESTIONS:

- **WHAT ARE THE TERMS OF THE LEASE?**
- **HOW LONG IS THE LEASE?**
- **ARE THERE ADDITIONAL FEES ON TOP OF RENT?**
- **ARE THERE RULES ABOUT HANGING UP PICTURES, PAINTING THE WALLS, ETC?**
- **ARE PETS ALLOWED? IF SO, IS THERE AN ADDITIONAL FEE? DO I GET THE SECURITY DEPOSIT BACK AT THE END OF THE LEASE? WHAT MAINTENANCE AM I RESPONSIBLE FOR?**
- **IS THERE PARKING AVAILABLE, OR IS THERE NEARBY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION?**
- **IS THERE AN ONSITE MANAGER I CAN CONTACT?**
- **HOW DO I CONTACT THE LANDLORD AND/OR PROPERTY MANAGER?**
- **WHEN IS THE RENT DUE?**
- **WHAT HAPPENS IF THE RENT IS LATE?**
- **IS THIS A FURNISHED APARTMENT?**
- **WHAT IS YOUR POLICY ABOUT HAVING GUESTS OVERNIGHT?**
- **WHAT KIND OF HEATING IS IN THE UNIT AND WHERE IS THE THERMOSTAT LOCATED?**
- **WHO IS IN CONTROL OF THE TEMPERATURE SETTING? WHEN IS THE HEAT TURNED ON?**
- **DO OTHER TENANTS HAVE ACCESS TO THE THERMOSTAT?**
- **WHAT IS THE CLEANING EXPECTATION WHEN I MOVE OUT?**
- **DOES THE APARTMENT/HOME NEED TO BE CLEANED BEFORE I LEAVE?**

COMMON RENTAL TERMS

These are common rental terms you may see. It's important that you understand these terms when looking for a rental property.

- **Lease**: a contract by which one party conveys land, property, services, etc. to another for a specified time, usually in return for a periodic payment.
- **Sub-Lease**: a lease of a property by a tenant to a subtenant.
- **Property Manager**: a person or firm (company) charged with operating a real estate property for a fee, when the owner is unable to personally attend to such details, or is not interested in doing so.
- **Landlord**: a person who rents land, a building, or an apartment to a tenant.
- **Tenant**: a person who occupies land or property rented from a landlord.
- **Apartment**: a large building containing residential suites; an apartment building.
- **Studio Apartment**: a small apartment which combines, many times but not always, the living room, bedroom, and kitchen into a single room.
- **House**: a building for human habitation, especially one that is lived in by a family or small group of people.
- **Townhouse**: a tall, narrow, traditional row house, generally having three or more floors.
- **Condominium/Condo**: a type of living space similar to an apartment but independently sellable and therefore regarded as real estate.
- **Security Deposit**: an amount of money that a renter pays when beginning to rent property (such as an apartment) and that can be used to pay for any damage that the renter causes to the property
- **Rent (noun)**: a tenant's regular payment to a landlord for the use of property or land.
- **Rent (verb)**: to pay someone for the use of property, land, or an item.
- **Utilities**: an organization supplying the community with electricity, gas, water, or sewage.
- **Amenities**: any feature that provides comfort, convenience, or pleasure.
- **Furnished Apartment**: an apartment available to be rented with furniture.
- **Roommate**: a person occupying the same apartment or house as another.
- **Ordinance**: a piece of legislation enacted by a municipal authority.
- **Public Transportation**: buses, trains, subways, and other forms of transportation that charge set fares, run on fixed routes, and are available to the public.

LIVING AFFORDABLY OFF-CAMPUS

Yes, it is possible to live affordably as an off-campus student in Northern Virginia! Use these helpful tips to cut your living costs:

- **Find Roommates.** In Fairfax County, only four unrelated people can live together. Living with the maximum number of roommates can offer great financial benefits, including splitting rent, utilities, and other personal expenses. Some students find that sharing a large master bedroom in a townhouse or apartment gives them plenty of room while simultaneously cutting costs in half.
- **Take the Shuttle or CUE Bus.** The Mason Shuttles and Fairfax CUE Bus are both free for Mason students and constantly run throughout the day to provide free, reliable transportation to and from campus. Track the shuttles in real-time using the Ride Systems app.
- **Bring your meals to campus.** The Contemporary Student Lounge in The Hub 1012 has a refrigerator available to students who wish to bring their meals and a microwave for heating them up. The Johnson Center also has microwaves available for student use.
- **Make (and stick to) your budget.** Living off campus comes with different costs than a residence hall. Use the budgeting resources available from Contemporary Student Services and the Student Support and Advocacy Center to help you understand and manage your income and expenses.
- **Shop around.** Starting your search early and comparing properties will help you to find the best deal and avoid scams. Give yourself plenty of time to gather your information, create a pros and cons list based on your individual needs, and speak with a Contemporary Student Advisor before you sign a lease.

FINANCIAL AID FOR OFF-CAMPUS HOUSING

Did you know that you can use your Financial Aid for off-campus housing and living costs? Follow these steps below to help pay for your education at Mason while living on your own!

- Fill out your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by January 15th
 - You can find more information at www.fafsa.ed.gov.
- Estimate your off-campus living expenses using the Cost of Attendance for Mason. This estimate helps determine the maximum amount of financial aid that you may be eligible to receive for Fall and Spring semesters with full-time enrollment. Your cost of attendance includes:
 - Tuition and Fees
 - Off-Campus Housing
 - Meal Plans or Grocery Expenses
 - Childcare Expenses
 - Research Travel Expenses
 - Transportation
 - Books and Supplies
 - Estimated Personal Expenses and Additional Costs
- Once you receive your financial aid package, accept or decline it via PatriotWeb.
- The university will bill you for tuition, fees, and selected meal plans, but will not bill you for off-campus housing, meals, transportation, books, etc. Your financial aid will automatically be applied to your Mason bill for tuition, fees, and meal plans; the rest will be distributed to you after these costs are covered. Please note that this money will not be available until after the semester has started, so plan ahead to cover security deposits, rent, or other expenses, that need to be paid ahead of time.
- Stick to your budget! You will receive your aid in one lump sum as a refund after it has been applied to the tuition and fees you owe. Think about how you will distribute these funds over the course of an entire semester to manage monthly costs.
- Should you need additional funding to help cover these expenses, you should review a Parent PLUS loan, a Graduate PLUS loan, or Private loan options via the Office of Student Financial Aid website.
 - Remember that Summer Financial Aid is available. For more information go to <https://www2.gmu.edu/admissions-aid/financial-aid/summer-aid>

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN LOOKING FOR A ROOMMATE

When searching for a place to rent or roommates to live with, you should ask yourself, and the other parties involved some tough questions. Below is a list of topics to help you get started, but they are not comprehensive for every person or situation. We encourage all students to think hard about their lifestyles and ask questions relevant to them and appropriate for the situation.

- **Age** – Are you looking for roommates who are the same age as you?
- **Chores** – Will there be designated chores/responsibilities for the upkeep of the homes? How frequently do you expect your roommate to participate in household cleaning? How much do you care about cleanliness/maintenance? Are you concerned about household clothing in common areas?
- **Drinking** – What are your views on the consumption of alcohol and/or other substances?
- **Family and friends (guests)** – Will guests be stopping by? How frequently and for what length of time? Is there a “significant other(s)” that will be stopping over? How often? Will they be staying the night? How often? Are there out of town friends/family that will be visiting? Would you prefer them to stay in a hotel or at the household?
- **Lengths of Time** – How long are you planning on living in this home? How long are you planning on living with the same roommates?
- **Responsibility** – Are you willing to put your name on the utilities bill, lease, and/or security deposit?
- **Lifestyle** – What kind of lifestyle do you plan to lead in your new home? What are your study habits? What is your attitude toward overnight guests, parties, etc? Will conflicts occur with your roommate because of different personal schedules, diets, pets, smoking, drinking, noise levels, or parties?
- **Number** – How many people do you want to share your home with? How many people do you realistically think you can comfortably live with in the space you are looking at?
- **Rent** – What are you willing to pay as your share of the rent? How are you willing to divide the rent cost (evenly, by room depending on if shared/size)?
- **Security** – What is your level of importance in household and personal security? Do you lock the doors while at home? Are you concerned if your roommate has not been heard from in over 48 hours?
- **Sharing** – Would you rather buy food and supplies (laundry detergent, toiletries) separately or together? What is your policy for sharing possessions; including those in common areas like a computer, TV, couch? What are you willing to contribute (furniture/appliances) to furnish the home?
- **Smoking** – Is smoking an issue? Would certain areas of your residence be off-limits or designated for smoking?
- **Parking** – How important is your future parking situation? How much parking is available compared to how many potential roommates have cars?
- **Personal Relationship** – What type of relationship are you looking for with your new roommate? Are you looking for someone to hang out with or someone to just share the bills? Are political or religious outlooks important to you?
- **Pets** – Would you like to have a pet? Would you share responsibility for its care? How many pets are you comfortable living with?
- **Privacy** – How will you determine boundaries with your roommates, your space, and your time?

ROOMMATE AGREEMENT

Below are questions designed to help off-campus roommates navigate the expectation and boundary-setting process. This is intended to be a conversation starter for creating a roommate agreement. Contemporary Student Services DOES NOT enforce roommate agreements between off-campus students in any way. This document DOES NOT fully encompass every topical area that may need to be discussed but instead is a base set of topics.

Communication:

- Where and how will we relay messages to each other (examples: verbally, writing, both)?
- Where and how will we relay concerns to each other?
- How quickly will we relay messages or concerns?

Guests:

- Are guests welcome?
- Are guests of a different gender allowed over?
 - When are guests welcome?
- How much advanced notice should be given before guests come over?
- Are guests welcome overnight?
- Are there specific times guests are not welcome (example: studying or sleeping)?

Environment:

- What should the environment be like when trying to study?
- If one person is sleeping, what activities are acceptable?
- Windows should be (left closed, left open, left open/closed under what circumstances)?
- What temperature should the thermostat be set at during what seasons?
- When should the front door be locked ?

Belongings (food, t.v., microwave, couch, etc.):

- What belongings are okay to be shared?
- What belongings are not okay to be shared without asking?
- What should never be touched at all?
- How will we share the agreed upon items (example: when to use them, who's purchasing it, who replaces it, etc)?

Cleanliness:

- How often will we clean the common/shared spaces?
 - Dusting?
 - Vacuuming/Mopping?
 - Emptying trash?
 - Bathroom/s (sink, shower, toilet)
 - Kitchen (counter tops, dishes, refrigerator, oven, microwave, etc.)
- Create a cleaning schedule/chore rotation?

Notes:

BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR AND A GOOD CITEZEN

Living on your own or with roommates can definitely be an exciting part of your college life, but it also entails certain responsibilities on your part.

Apart from knowing how to establish good rapport with your roommates, attempt to be a courteous neighbor and be aware that wherever you live there are local regulations you need to abide by.

- **Try getting to know your neighbors.**
- **Clean up after any pets.**
- **Show neighborhood pride. Keep it neat!**
 - **Grass and weeds cannot exceed a height of 6 inches.**
 - **Trash cans should be stored out of sight by evening on the day of pick up.**
 - **Sidewalks must be cleared 24 hours after a snowfall.**
- **Parked cars belong on the street – not on your lawn.**
 - **Inoperable vehicles must be screened from public view.**
 - **Parking your car in Fairfax County? A valid VA state inspection sticker and license plate are required.**
 - **Parking your car in the City of Fairfax? You may need a City sticker.**
 - **It is illegal to park against the flow of traffic.**
 - **It is illegal to park within 10 feet of a driveway entrance.**
- **Collect any trash in your neighborhood that may have resulted from your party within 24 hours.**
- **Respect your neighbors' right to quiet.**
 - **Noise violations can result in up to a \$1000 fine or 30 days in jail.**
- **All students must abide by Mason's Code of Student Conduct and applicable laws.**
 - **You can have no more than four unrelated people living together.**
 - **It is illegal to drink under the age of 21 in Virginia.**

PARKING AND TRANSPORTATION

The Parking and Transportation office has a number of options available for you to get to campus. Visit parking.gmu.edu for information on where and how to park on our different campuses.

Methods of Transportation

- Shuttle services: shuttle.gmu.edu
- Fairfax CUE Bus: www.fairfaxva.gov/government/public-works/transportation-division/cue-bus-system
- Bike to Mason: bike.gmu.edu
- Carpool: <https://transportation.gmu.edu/transportation-services/carpool-programs/>

When Thinking About Your Transportation

- Is the home close to a bus stop?
- Is the home close to the metro?
- All Mason students can take the CUE bus for free.
- A Mason Shuttle picks students up at the Vienna metro stop and the Burke VRE stop.
- Remember, there are other, non-Mason affiliated forms of public transportation in Northern Virginia.

Parking And Transportation Contact Information

Phone: (703) 993-2828

Contact Information: <https://transportation.gmu.edu/about/#inquiry-form>

Website: transportation.gmu.edu

SAFETY AND POLICE

Here are some suggestions from George Mason University's Police Department to help you stay safe.

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE: 911

George Mason University Police: 703-993-2810

Fairfax City Police: 703 385-7924

Fairfax County Police: 703-691-2131

Arlington County Police: 703-558-2222

Manassas City Police: 703-257-8000

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- Lock the doors in your house at all times, even when you are home. Landlords are required to provide effective locks for residences.
 - Contact your landlord immediately if you have any concerns about security at your home.
 - Keep your windows locked at all times.
 - Leave an exterior light on at night. Never allow strangers to come into your home.
 - Check the identification of sales and service people before letting them inside.
 - Keep your valuables out of sight at all times to discourage theft.
 - Record information about your electronics including make, model, and any serial numbers in the event they are stolen or missing.
 - Purchase a lock for your laptop and keep it locked as often as possible.
 - Buy two quality locks for your bikes to protect against theft.
 - If you come home and see an open door or broken window, do not go in; call 911 and wait for the police in a safe place outside of your home.
 - Mason Alert is the university's official emergency notification system. Visit Alert.gmu.edu to receive text messages from Mason Alert.
 - Download the "Rave Guardian" app.
 - Remember, George Mason University Police Department provides a 24/7 escort service for anyone who feels unsafe when walking across campus. Call 703-993-2810 for the service.



Register your bike at
bike.gmu.edu to receive a
free U-Lock.

