

Carnegie Mellon University



Graduate Student Housing Handbook

PREPARED BY THE GSA CAMPUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

What is GSA?

The Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) is the branch of student government that represents all graduate students at Carnegie Mellon. GSA consists of an elected executive board and a voting body of representatives from every graduate program at Carnegie Mellon. Funding for the GSA comes from graduate students' [student activities fees](#) and as such, all graduate students are members of GSA.

Our mission: To advocate for and support the diverse needs of all Carnegie Mellon University graduate students in their personal, professional, and public lives.

We accomplish this by:

- Organizing social events throughout the year hosted both on and off campus
- Advocating, both on campus and with local and national government agencies, regarding issues important to graduate students
- Supporting various forms of personal and professional development (including hosting workshops and providing financial support for conference attendance and research)
- Providing funding support for other graduate student organizations

Dear Graduate Student,

Welcome to Pittsburgh! Whether you are considering applying to Carnegie Mellon, accepting an offer to attend, or are currently a student, this guide was created to aid you in finding housing in the greater Pittsburgh region.

In the fall of 2018, it came to the attention of the Graduate Student Assembly's (GSA) Campus Affairs Committee that many graduate students have had difficulty understanding the dynamics of Pittsburgh and its housing market before they arrived, often resulting in making poor choices regarding properties. Especially for our large international student population, who may have never been able to visit the city before arriving during orientation, this posed a problem. GSA had previously invested in [Legal Consultations](#) for students regarding landlord issues. However, this guide is meant to provide information to prevent a bad rental scenario, rather than resolving a problem after one has arisen.

This guide provides general information and tips for searching and selecting a property, as well as an overview of some of the popular residential neighborhoods for CMU current graduate students. While not fully comprehensive, we hope you can use this as a starting point to orient yourself to Pittsburgh and direct your housing rental process.

As always, the GSA Executive Board and Representatives look forward to meeting you at any of our [social events](#) throughout the year and are happy to [hear your concerns](#) so we can better advocate on your behalf.

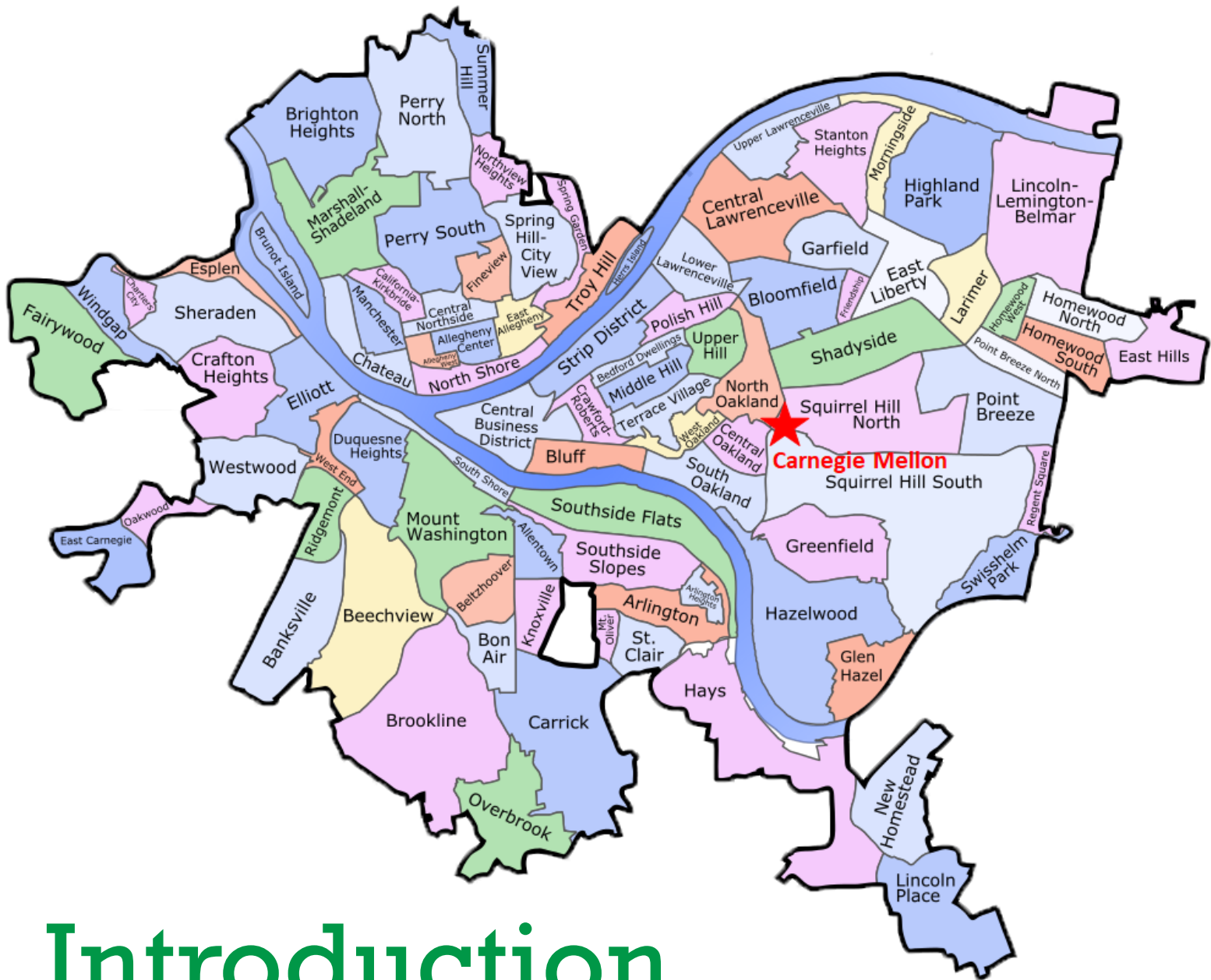
Sincerely,

The Graduate Student Assembly's Campus Affairs Committee
2018-2019

GRADUATE STUDENT HOUSING HANDBOOK

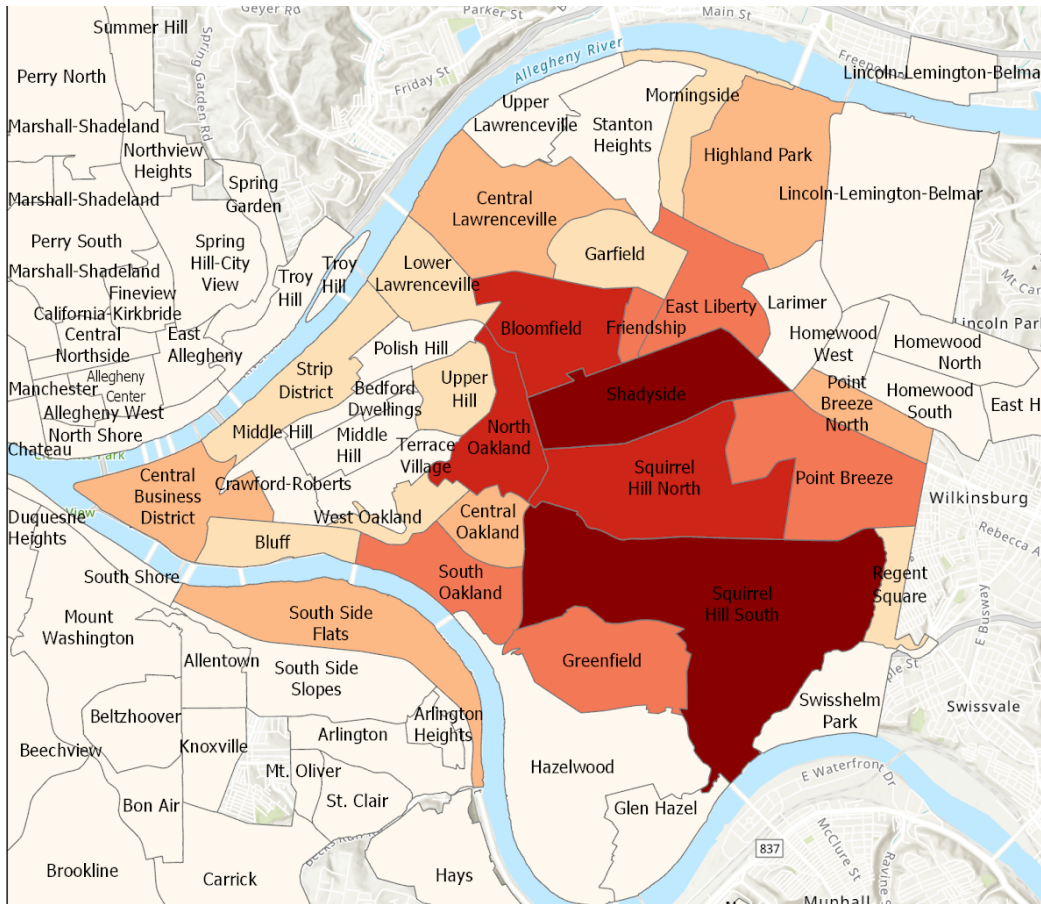
Welcome to Pittsburgh!

The City of Pittsburgh is situated around three rivers: the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the Ohio. Over 300,000 people call the City of Pittsburgh their home, and an additional 2 million reside in the surrounding suburbs, so it is helpful to identify where people live by neighborhood. Downtown Pittsburgh stretches eastward from “the Point”, where all three rivers meet, to the “East End” in Oakland and Shadyside, where the campus of Carnegie Mellon is located. It is connected to the “North Side”, “South Side”, and “West End” by over 400 bridges.

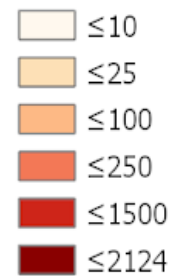


Introduction

WHERE CMU STUDENTS LIVE



Students by Neighborhood
Count of Students



This map was created using the addresses that students reported to the Registrar as their local residence. Darkly shaded areas indicate a higher density of CMU students. While there are students living throughout the city, Oakland, Shadyside, and Squirrel Hill are among the most popular neighborhoods.

So you need some help finding a place to call your own...

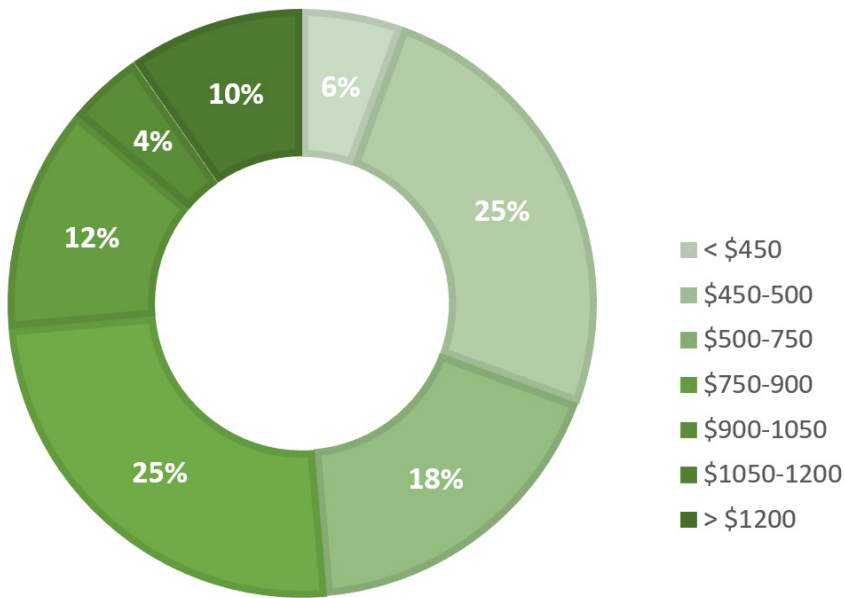
Well, you're in luck! Given its public amenities, cultural attractions, and affordable cost of living, it is no wonder that Pittsburgh consistently ranks among the most liveable cities in the world. Our city boasts job opportunities in a prospering 21st Century economy and is home to world class institutions of research and higher education, including Carnegie Mellon. It is an exciting time to live in Pittsburgh!

Despite this, you might still be questioning if Pittsburgh is the place for you. You may be wondering whether you can afford an apartment in Shadyside, or whether you can walk to campus from Bloomfield. We're here to help.

This guide is designed for current and future CMU students at any stage of their graduate career. Whether you are a prospective student considering whether to apply to or enroll at CMU, an accepted student moving to Pittsburgh for the first time, or a fifth year PhD student looking for a place to finish your dissertation, we hope that this handbook can serve as a resource throughout your housing search.

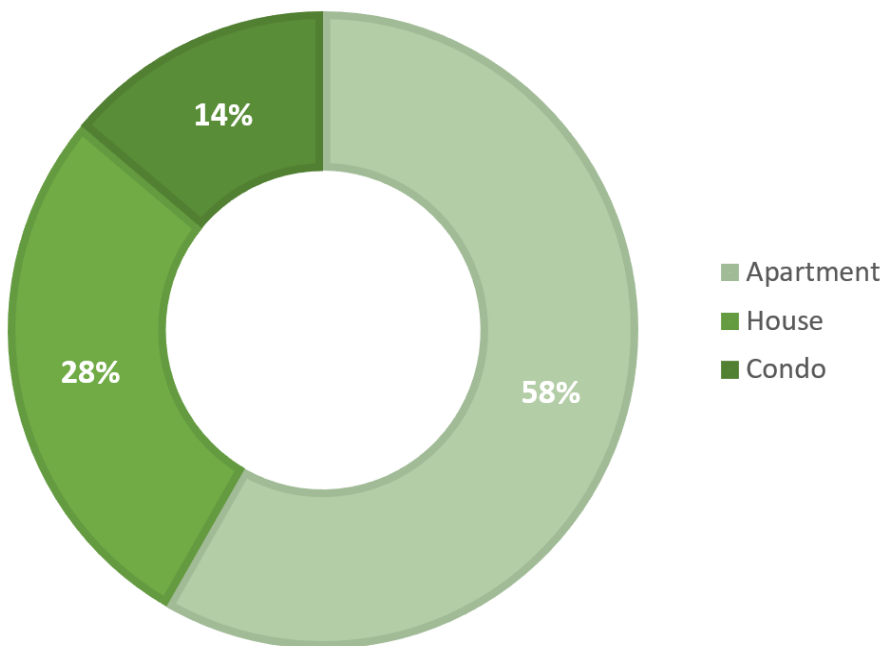
GSA Representative Survey

To get an overview of the living arrangements of current Carnegie Mellon graduate students, we surveyed 72 GSA representatives from departments across the university. The survey findings are provided in the charts below.



LIVING EXPENSES

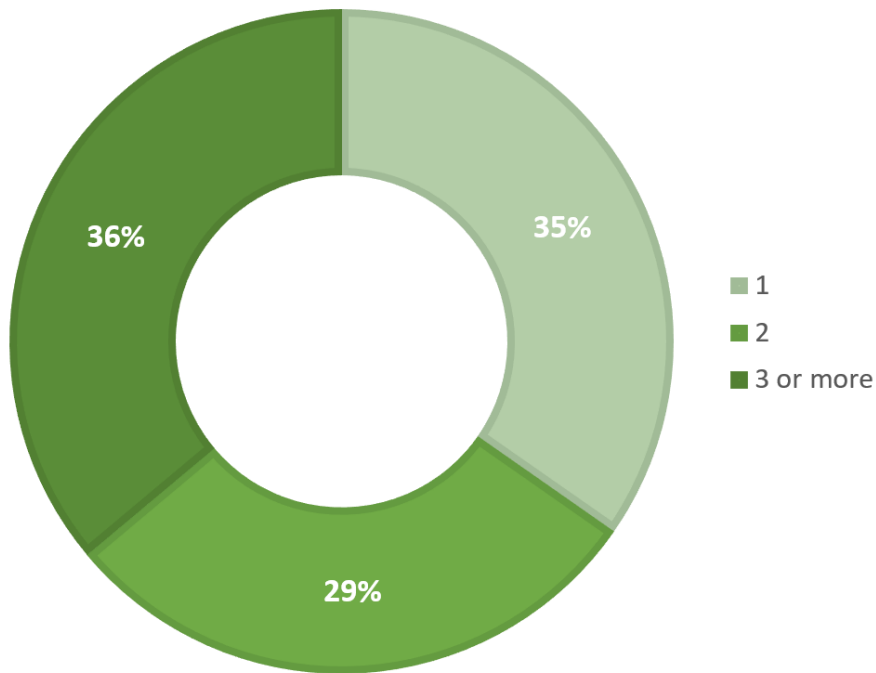
Nearly 74% of GSA Representatives surveyed reported paying less than \$900 per month on rent and utilities.



HOUSING TYPE

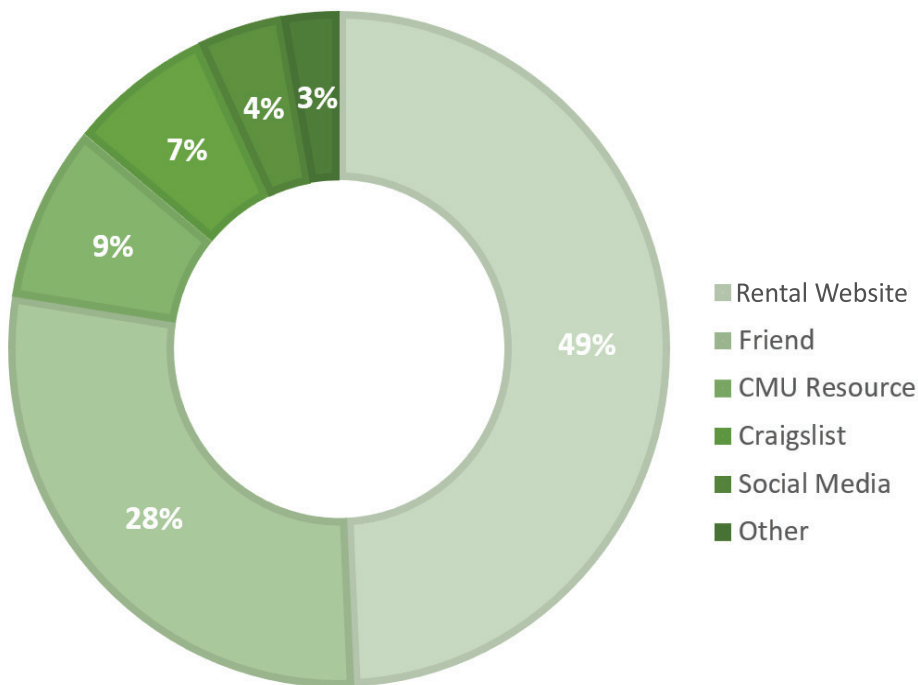
Over 58% of Representatives surveyed lived in an Apartment.

GSA REPRESENTATIVE SURVEY RESULTS



LIVING SITUATION

Respondents were asked to report their household size, including themselves. 65% reported having at least 1 cohabitant.



SEARCH METHODS

Respondents were asked how they discovered their current housing. Nearly 50% relied on rental websites, while 28% found their living arrangements through a friend.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

These survey results provide a glimpse of the diverse housing arrangements among Carnegie Mellon's graduate student body. Data from the University Registrar shows that the majority of graduate students live in Shadyside, Squirrel Hill, or Oakland. These neighborhoods are closest in proximity to CMU's campus and offer amenities such as direct bus routes to campus, restaurants, and grocery stores. However, this convenience comes at a price, and many residents report higher costs of living compared to other neighborhoods.

This guide focuses primarily on these three neighborhoods and briefly highlights other popular areas among graduate students, including Southside, Highland Park, and Lawrenceville. It should be noted that there are CMU graduate students residing throughout the City of Pittsburgh and its suburbs, and that each student makes arrangements based on individual factors, including financial constraints and transportation needs.

As you have seen, our survey results reveal a wide range in reported cost of living. This is due to several factors, including number of roommates, distance from campus, and the general quality of the residence.

Throughout your housing search, it may be useful to remind yourself of the old saying: "You get what you pay for." While it can be tempting to base your housing decision on cost alone, there are a number of factors that you should consider before signing a lease. Among these are safety, access to transportation, and the availability of basic amenities, including fresh food and healthcare.

Graduate school is a highly rewarding, yet highly demanding experience. As a student, your time is your most valuable commodity. Any unnecessary energy or stress spent on your daily commute to campus or haggling with your landlord over a utility bill could detract from your academic responsibilities. It is important to keep this in mind as you make your living arrangements. We hope that this handbook will serve as a valuable resource throughout your housing search.

This guide begins with generally applicable information to consider when looking for an apartment and outlines what you need to know before signing a lease. We then provide profiles of some of the most popular residential neighborhoods among CMU graduate students.

Lease Basics

Lease Start Dates

Lease dates normally start on the first of the month, although some may start mid-month (normally the 15th). Given the large population of college students in Pittsburgh, many landlords and management companies offer leases beginning on August 1st, but it is possible to find a lease in any month.

Lease Durations

Leases are most commonly available for 12 months though some shorter term leases may be posted as well. Typically, a lease will end in the following year on the day prior to its signing (i.e. if the lease was signed on August 1, 2018, it will end on July 31, 2019). Again, it is easiest to find a lease that coincides with the school year. If you know you will not need an apartment for the full 12 months, be sure to discuss this with your landlord or management company ahead of time to try to negotiate a deal. If you terminate a lease before the end date, there will likely be a penalty, up to and including paying out the remainder of the rent owed.

Lease Capacity

Per law in Pittsburgh, no more than three (3) unrelated individuals can be a listed tenants on a lease agreement.

Scams

While the housing market in Pittsburgh is generally fair and safe, GSA has heard reports of scams that students have witnessed or fallen victim to. Here are some common signs of fraudulent behavior:

- If you are asked to sign a lease or make a down payment before seeing the apartment.
- If you are asked to provide down payment or security deposit that is larger than the advertised amount. (Note: if you are told to pay an international student fee, this is illegal and is a form of housing discrimination.)
- If you are required to make payments in "cash only."
- If you are not provided with a written lease agreement or are asked to make a verbal commitment in exchange for payment.

Basic Apartment Information

Utilities

An important aspect of any rental agreement is the responsibility for utilities payments (which may include heat, water, electricity, garbage, and internet). Every landlord and management company is different. Some leases include the cost of utilities in the monthly rent. Others hold tenants responsible for all utility bills. Some may cover the cost of certain utilities (such as water and garbage pick up), but not others (such as electricity and internet). Still, others may set a limit on the amount of utilities used in a given month, and charge tenants a premium on excessive use. It is important to understand your responsibility for utilities payments prior to signing a lease, and to factor these costs into your monthly budget. The [average cost](#) of utilities for a 915 square foot apartment in Pittsburgh is about \$169 a month. Internet service costs an average of \$74 a month.

One of the biggest utility costs results from cooling or heating an apartment, meaning that you can expect higher bills in the winter and summer months. In warmer weeks, you can cool your home with air conditioning from a window unit or a central air system. Central air conditioning is more energy efficient and thus more affordable, however, most buildings do not have central air unless they are newly built or recently renovated. If you use a window unit and are responsible for paying your electric bill, you will want to limit the number of hours that you operate the unit to keep costs low.

Heating an apartment during the winter can also be expensive. Typically homes in Pittsburgh are warmed through radiators, which may operate on electricity or natural gas. Natural gas is cheaper than electricity in Pittsburgh, so it is a good idea to ask you landlord how the house is heated, if you are responsible for paying the heating bill. Central heating is also offered in some units, but is much less common.

Payment of Rent

It is important to determine how and when you will be required to pay your rent. While some companies offer direct deposit or online payment options, many require a paper check either mailed or hand delivered to their office. Be sure to ask how payment needs to be made before you miss one!

You should also determine two dates: (1) When the rent is due and (2) when it is considered late. Many companies require rent due by the first of the month and it is considered late a day or two after. If your rent is late, you may be subject to additional fees, or lose standing with the company which may affect your ability to renew a lease.

BASIC APARTMENT INFORMATION

Laundry

Clothes washers and dryers are not a guaranteed amenity in Pittsburgh. Most apartments have a washer and dryer on the premises, though they may not be in the unit itself. Some apartments have coin operated washers. These costs are variable but may be around \$3.50- \$4.50 to wash and dry a load of laundry. If the washer is in the unit and the tenant is responsible for the water and electric bills, this can be a major source of utilities costs.

If no washer and dryer are available on the premise, Pittsburgh has laundromats in every neighborhood. These laundromats cost about the same as a coin operated unit. Proximity to laundromats should be considered when choosing an apartment.

Parking

Having a car in Pittsburgh can be very useful, but free, off-street parking is not guaranteed in most places. It is important to know your options before potentially having to spend a great deal of money on parking fees. Most housing advertisements will include information about parking availability (whether there is garage, private lot, driveway, street parking, etc.) There may be a monthly cost for private parking and you may have to sign a lease for a spot, so it is important to discuss this with the landlord or rental company.

Depending on the neighborhood, you may be required to purchase a permit to park on the street during certain hours. It is important to check with the [Pittsburgh Parking Authority Portal](#) to see whether your neighborhood is subject to a small \$25 yearly fee. Most neighborhoods (with the exception of Squirrel Hill) require you to register your vehicle through the PPA. Also, being experienced in parallel parking is a necessary skill if you are planning to park on residential streets.

Accessibility

Before signing a lease, it is important to consider the routes of access to your apartment. Many apartment buildings are converted homes, in which case they most likely will not have an elevator. This is the same for some of the smaller or older apartment block buildings. Given the Pittsburgh's geography, many homes are built on a slope and can have several steps leading up to the entrance. When visiting your potential apartment, you may want to consider how easily you will be able to move in your boxes and large furniture or if its inaccessibility will prevent you from accomplishing daily tasks, such as transporting groceries.

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE SIGNING A LEASE

There are a number of important factors to consider before signing a lease to ensure that you can be happy with your living arrangements and work well with your potential landlord or management company. The following lists are meant to provide some general questions to consider when inquiring about a listing or touring an apartment. While the relative importance of each question and answer may differ from renter to renter, it is important to take some time to consider your priorities before signing a rental agreement.

Financial

- Request information on utilities: who pays for them?
- Are utilities paid separately? Are they metered or pro-rated?
- When is the rent due and how should it be paid?
- Is subletting allowed?
- What kind of verification of your income do they accept and under what circumstances do they accept a guarantor instead? Is a credit check required?
- What happens if multiple people sign the lease and one moves out? (i.e. If you rent an apartment with another CMU student and they want to move out while you wish to stay in the unit).
- What are options for breaking the lease early? Note: this often has a financial penalty.
- Is renter's insurance necessary? How much do you need?
- What is the policy on rent increases? (Rents will often increase a bit for each subsequent year you renew a lease due to inflation alone.)
- What are the inspection criteria for the security deposit? What damages will I be penalized for?

Security

- How are packages and mail received/protected from theft? Is the mailroom only accessible to residents or employees, or can anyone access your packages when they are delivered?
- Are there outdoor lights which will get you safely in and out at night?
- Is there a fire extinguisher accessible? Check the location and batteries on smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.
- Is the apartment in a secure-access building? Are there separate keys to get into the building and your unit, or is only the unit locked?
- When and for what reasons can the landlord enter the unit? How much notice is given?

Amenities

- What additional amenities are located in the building: gym or pool in building, meeting/social rooms, etc? (Note that much of this may be available for free on campus anyhow)
- Does the rental company assist with transportation? (e.g. some companies run shuttles that pass by CMU)
- What kind of heating/AC is there?
- Are there window A/C units? If so, who takes care of installment and repair? If not, what is the policy for installing more?
- When and where is garbage and recycling collected?
- Is there additional storage available in the building?

Maintenance

- Who is responsible for making repairs? Will you be reimbursed for costs of repairs?
- If there is a maintenance emergency, what is the number of the on-call maintenance person? What is their response time?
- What kind of fuses does the apartment use and is the resident responsible for replacing them if one blows?
- Who is responsible for replacing bulbs in permanent light fixtures? (If they are unusual, you may need to ask where they can be found)
- Can the resident paint the walls?
- Is there regular pest control?
- What are the rules about hanging pictures and making holes in the walls?
- Can the landlord make modifications to the unit without renter approval?

Apartment Inspection

- Check the windows, doors, and around kitchen/bathroom sinks to make sure there are not cracks where pests can get in.
- Check around the bathroom fixtures and kitchen sinks for water damage.
- Look at the ceilings and walls for water damage.
- Check the locks on the doors and windows - Are they secure?
- What does the basement look like? Is it secure?
- How should you document and report damages that occurred before you moved in? (Be sure to take pictures of any damage to your apartment when moving in, or else you could be penalized).

Miscellaneous

- Are the walls thin?
- Who are the residents in the other units in the building (i.e. college students, working adults, elderly)?
- Is there a noise restriction for the building/neighborhood?
- What are the rules about pets? Is there a pet rent?

Your Rights as a Tenant

As a tenant, you are legally protected to have a quiet, habitable place to live and to be protected from undue imposition or eviction by your landlord. A more exact list of Landlord-Tenant Laws in Pennsylvania can be found [here](#). For more easy to read and access guidance on your rights as a tenant, check out any of the following resources:

- Attend an in-person session on the topic (workshops are funded in part by GSA and your graduate student activities fee). See the schedule [here](#).
- [Here](#) is a great website (provided by the University of Pittsburgh) about what you should expect in your apartment and in your dealings with your landlord.
- This [online resource](#) provides context from a legal perspective.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR AN APARTMENT

Some resources that can be helpful in your housing search include [Craigslist](#), [Zillow](#), [ForRent](#), and the Facebook groups [CMU Housing, Sublets, & Roommates](#) and [Renting/Subletting@CMU](#). These sites show listings from rental companies as well as individual property owners who rent out a small number of units. Rental listings from companies can also be found on the rental companies' websites. Several are listed on the following page.

Beyond considering just the rent, we highly suggest that you investigate transportation routes to and from campus. A good site to use is [WalkScore](#). CMU also operates its own [Shuttle and Escort Service](#) so be sure see if the residence is close to those routes as well. Be aware that [parking](#) on campus during business hours is very costly (\$138.50 monthly at East Campus Garage in [2018-2019](#)) and limited (not all students who request a permit will be able to receive one).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- If you find you need legal advice in dealing with a landlord: CMU offers free 20 minute legal consultations to students. Information can be found [here](#).
- If you need help finding roommates: some facebook groups such as [this one](#) can help you connect with people in Pittsburgh (though not all are CMU students). CMU also has a portal for finding roommates and off campus housing, accessible [here](#).
- If you need help figuring out how to set up utilities: you can find details [here](#).
- If you need help with moving expenses: Graduate Student Transition (GST) Loan (up to 75% of your gross monthly salary/stipend) for first-semester graduate students to assist with moving/transitional expenses. Contact your department for a Transition Loan form. More info [here](#).

Rental Management Companies

There are many management companies, both large and small, in neighborhoods around the CMU campus. Below we have listed some of the names of the largest companies that students or their peers report using. They are listed alphabetically, you can click on the company's name to access their website. We have also included links to reviews of the company on Google and Yelp that may be useful to review and help guide your apartment search. (The scores posted were current at the time of this document's publication in early 2019.)

DELTA PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

GOOGLE ★★☆☆
YELP ★★★★★

FORBES MANAGEMENT

GOOGLE ★★★★★★
YELP ★★★

FORWARD MANAGEMENT

GOOGLE ★★
YELP ★★★

JOHN CR KELLY REALTY

GOOGLE ★★★☆
YELP ★★

LOBOS MANAGEMENT

GOOGLE ★★★
YELP ★★

MOZART MANAGEMENT

GOOGLE ★★★
YELP ★★

ROCKWEL REALTY

GOOGLE ★★★☆
YELP ★★★★★

STERLING LAND COMPANY

GOOGLE ★★★
YELP ★★★★★

UNION REAL ESTATE

GOOGLE ★★★☆
YELP ★★★

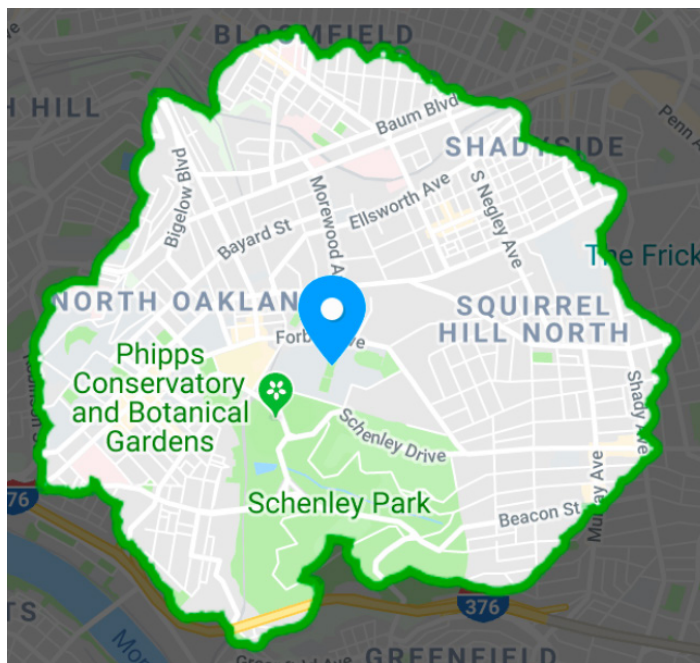
WALNUT CAPITAL

GOOGLE ★★★★★☆
YELP ★★★★★

Disclaimer: GSA does not endorse any rental company. These are listed for reference.

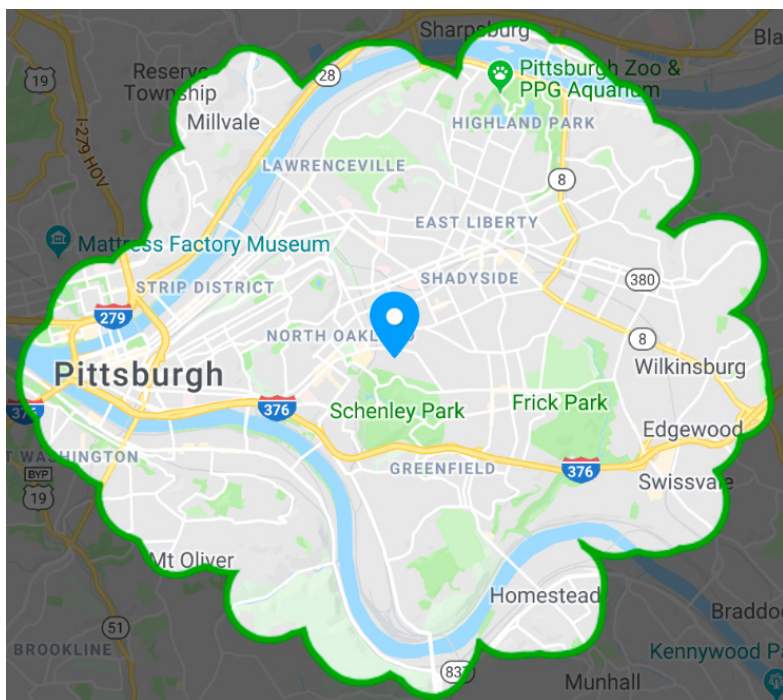
Transportation Availability

Here we present maps taken from [WalkScore](#) showing the accessibility of CMU's campus using different transportation routes. If you want more specific data for the property you are considering, you can look it up online.



WALKING COMMUTE

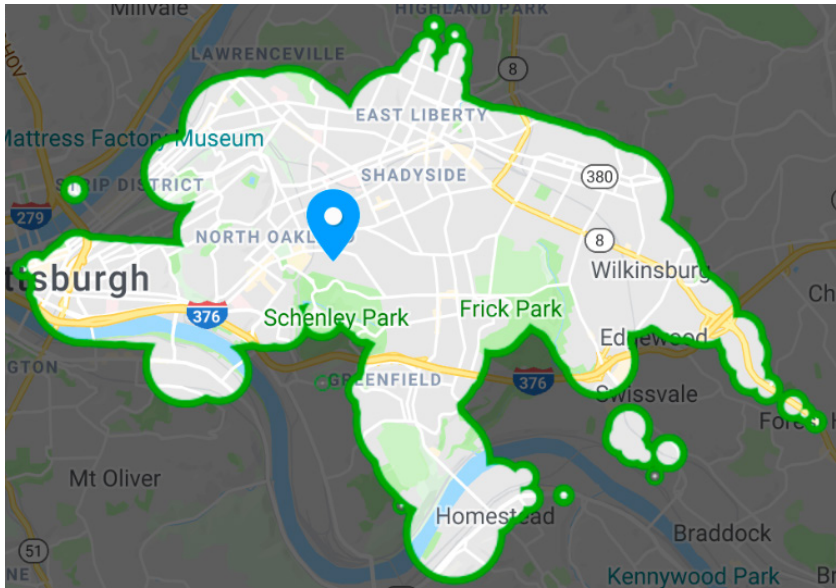
The areas accessible from CMU's campus by a 30 walking commute and include parts of the neighborhoods of North Oakland, Squirrel Hill and Shadyside and includes areas around Schenley Park. These neighborhoods are relatively safe to walk however Pittsburgh is a city like any other. Be mindful of walking alone at night and always stay aware of your surroundings.



BIKING COMMUTE

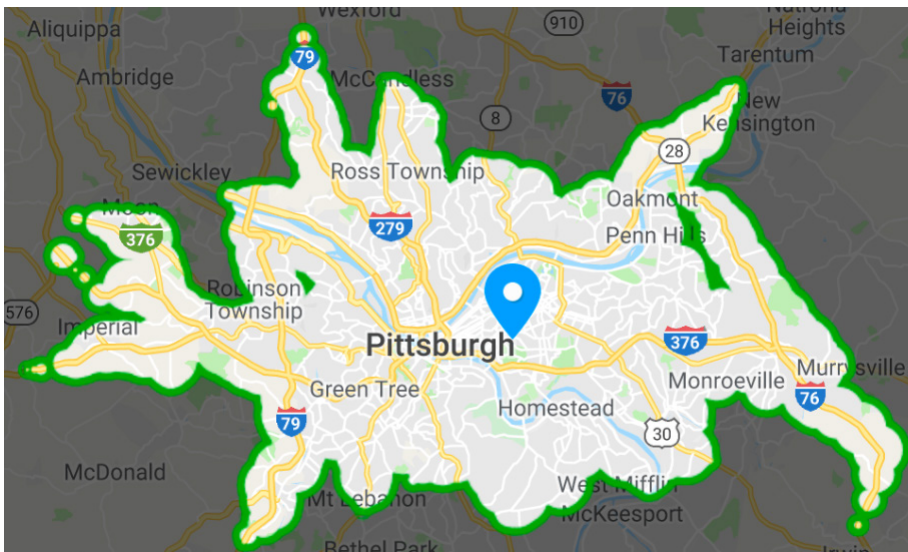
By a 30 minute biking commute, the accessible neighborhoods extend to downtown Pittsburgh, the Strip District, parts of Mt. Oliver and Mt. Washington, Wilkinsburg, Highland Park, Lawrenceville and parts of the North Side. Pittsburgh has been slowly becoming a more bike friendly city, with bicycle shops in Lawrenceville, South Side, and Shadyside, and many trails and parks. [Bikepgh](#) has a few good resources on biking in Pittsburgh. Be sure to consider foul weather routes though as Pittsburgh is a cloudy, rainy city that sees it fair share of cold and snowy weather in winter.

TRANSPORTATION AVAILABILITY



BUS COMMUTE

The [Pittsburgh Port Authority Transit \(PAT\)](#) has pretty extensive coverage of the city and the areas around CMU. Students can ride the bus by tapping their CMU ID. By a 30 minute bus commute, the accessible neighborhoods include those accessible by walking, as well as Homestead, Wilkinsburg, East Liberty, and Downtown Pittsburgh. A bus live-tracking app such as [Transit](#) or [TrueTime](#) would also be helpful to plan your commute, and find nearby bus stops. Though not included in this map, CMU also hosts its own [transportation services](#) in the form of the Shuttle and Escort Services that supplement PAT routes in Oakland, Shadyside, and Squirrel Hill.



DRIVING COMMUTE

By a 30 minute drive, the neighborhoods accessible from CMU includes most of the city of Pittsburgh and extends into parts of the nearby townships of Ross, Penn Hills, Rowinson, Monroeville, West Mifflin and Mt. Lebanon. Additionally, rush hour in Pittsburgh can often be exacerbated by the weather, road construction, or sporting events. If you cross a river, expect to face bottlenecks due to the bridges and tunnels that allow access to the city center. Although convenient, please note that CMU has very limited [parking options on campus](#).