When Covid-19 cases spiked during the spring of 2020, college students across the country were abruptly sent back to their childhood homes. What initially seemed like a two week period quickly turned into six months of quarantine, and the likelihood of returning to campus in the fall diminished rapidly. Instead, students found themselves scrambling for alternative learning environments, including off-campus housing. We interviewed three undergraduate students attending colleges in New York City to understand their experiences finding apartments and the pros and cons that came with it.

*1)What made you decide to live off campus?*

Rachael: Aside from Covid-related health and safety concerns, I was motivated to live off campus because I wanted a more long-term living situation than living in a dorm. It became frustrating having to move in and out of housing so frequently. It was expensive and tedious dealing with summer storage and shipping belongings back and forth between NYU and California. I wanted to find a place in the city to call home base for the rest of my undergrad experience.

Lauren: I decided to live off campus because I wanted a new and different experience living in New York. After living on campus for the first few years of my undergraduate experience, I felt that I needed a change. I craved the independence of having my own apartment, and the freedom of not having to abide by any rules in my personal living space.

Sam: COVID-19 made living on-campus a complicated prospect. As early as May, my two friends and I decided it would be prudent to explore other options, predicting (correctly) that in such a tumultuous time, we couldn't be sure about the future of on-campus life. The fact that we’re juniors—now over half-way through college—made the transition feel natural.

*2)What surprised you about the process?*

Rachael: I didn’t expect it to be easy, but I was still surprised how difficult it is to get approved as a tenant in most buildings. My roommate and I had to compile about sixty pages worth of documents, including tax returns and other personal information, along with our application for our current apartment. If I didn’t have my roommate’s parent as a guarantor, it’s unlikely I would have been approved to rent anywhere in Manhattan. With that being said, I can’t imagine how difficult this process must be for international students, for example, and students who deal with a multitude of other complications.

Lauren: I was surprised how many options I would have while looking for a place to live. Furthermore, the prices in New York are much higher than other areas, so while the amount of options and varying price points was overwhelming, I was thankful that there were affordable options. Overall, there are so many wonderful choices in New York, and finding off campus housing can be a challenging and overwhelming process. Thankfully, it ended up successful for my roommates and I.

Sam: I did not realize how many buildings near (and even not so near) my university were regularly rented out to students. I live ten blocks from my university, outside of its immediate neighborhood, and it seems like my entire building is occupied by my peers. This reality made the process easier than it would have been if, say, I was truly outside of the university's bubble looking for an apartment completely on my own.

*3)What were you looking for in an off-campus home?*

Rachael: I was looking for a little more space, privacy, and freedom than dorms are able to afford. It was important to me to have a kitchen, a living area, and a space to do schoolwork that wasn’t my bedroom. I also wanted to be able to have guests over without having to jump through hoops with campus security.

Lauren: They say that “location, location, location” is the key to pursuing good real estate opportunities. It applied to my experience as well, as it was the primary goal within my apartment search process. I wanted to live in an area that I could see myself living in after graduation, as this would give me a better sense of what I was looking for long term. Additionally, having a secure apartment was very important to my roommates and I.

Sam: With COVID restrictions front and center in our minds, my roommates and I needed a comfortable common space and proximity to green space in addition to three bedrooms. An in-unit washer-dryer was a major plus, and we got it!

*4)What benefits does off-campus housing provide that you couldn’t get through your college?*

Rachael: Basically everything I mentioned in my previous answer. I wanted to start feeling like I lived in the city instead of a student in a dorm.

Lauren: Columbia is relatively distant from some of the most popular, socially inclined, and job-opportunistic areas in New York. Off campus housing provides an independent experience that allows the student to fully immerse themselves into New York’s culture, without having to take the subway to get there.

Sam: I appreciate the independence; I'm no longer subject to my university's whims. I'm also grateful that I'm on a non-academic living timeline now; that will make the transition to post-college adulthood smoother, I think.

*5) If you could change one thing about your living situation or the process, what would it be?*

Rachael: I ended up finding a space I’m very happy with, and I was lucky the process worked out. I found my apartment on StreetEasy and I have a great relationship with the owner. I just wish NYU were doing more to support students who don’t have the resources to apply for an apartment but want a more long-term option than living in a dorm.

Lauren: If there was a network that provided opportunities for students to connect about finding roommates and off campus housing opportunities, it would have been a much more convenient process. Furthermore, upon assessing my current situation, it would have in my best interest to explore living with a smaller group of people. The trivial complications of living with multiple people during the COVID-19 pandemic is a truly fear inducing experience, especially while living with young adults in an amazing city.

Sam: Instead of one big thing, can I name two small things? First, landlords should be better emailers. And second, they should accept Venmo.

It's no surprise that just three students had very diverse experiences during their hunt for off-campus housing. Now more than ever, students are trying to find stability in their off-campus homes, and that means addressing millions of students’ personal needs. While it's no easy feat, this is the exact challenge that Smarta was designed to tackle.