

# Chapter Two

## **East Campus Block Party**

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**T**he University of Missouri was established in 1839, the first state university west of the Mississippi River. Our enrollment is currently 34,000 students, of which 6,200 reside in the university's on-campus residence halls. The remaining students are responsible for finding their own suitable accommodations off-campus. The East Campus Neighborhood is a residential area that lies directly east of the University of Missouri-Columbia (Mizzou). Figure 1 represents the East Campus neighborhood. As the university has grown over the years, it has directly impacted the need for more accommodations for students and faculty within walking distance to campus. The East Campus neighborhood is strongly defined by its proximity to the Mizzou campus.

The development of this area progressed slowly from the 1870s through the mid-1900s. Throughout its history, East Campus has contained a mixture of large single-family homes and rental properties for students. Over the years, the proportion of these two types of housing has changed significantly. Prior to the late 1950s, this area was dominated by large houses owned by University of Missouri professors and middle-class professionals, with only a few boarding houses for students. Over the next 50 years, the increasing university enrollment numbers coincided with an increasing demand for housing as close to campus as possible. During this half-century, many of those large houses were converted to multi-unit rentals, which has dramatically changed the demographic make-up of this neighborhood. As development continued over the years, Greek organizations also built housing on the edge of the East Campus Neighborhood closest to the campus; properties not owned or operated by the university. Previously inhabited by a stable population of middle-class professionals, the East Campus neighborhood of today is comprised of a large number of university students in rental housing.

Even before this project started, the University of Missouri Wellness Resource Center (WRC) saw the need to hire a Graduate Student to address the behavior of Mizzou students living off-campus. During that time, the WRC created a program called Walk & Talk. Walk & Talk was a door-to-door initiative established to help educate students in the East Campus Neighborhood about their rights and responsibilities as tenants of that area while talking with permanent residents and showing them that the university cared about their concerns related to student behav-

ior. Some of the complaints received were regarding large loud parties, improper disposal of trash, and behaviors consistent with public intoxication, just to name a few. The WRC staff would walk the East Campus Neighborhood and distribute kits containing information on alcohol safety, tenant rights and responsibilities, and how to be a good neighbor. In 2013, the Department of Student Life added the Office of Off-Campus Student Services, with a full time staff member and a graduate assistant who have been wholly dedicated to the mission of this office. After several years of this program, the WRC brainstormed ways to make an even greater impact.

### **Block Party**

During the establishment of the Office of Off-Campus Student Services, we decided to spread the good neighbor message in a different way by hosting the East Campus Block Party each September. Our first steps were to identify the key stakeholders and determine a suitable location to host the activities. Once we confirmed a location, we invited a group of businesses, university departments, and city offices to partner with us in this engagement initiative. The core group included the University of Missouri Campus Activities Department, the MU Wellness Resource Center, the City of Columbia Neighborhood Services, the East Campus Neighborhood Association, the Columbia Police Department (CPD), the Lee Street Deli, and the Columbia Fire Department. We received a significant amount of support from all our partners, ranging from donating time to speak with residents at the event to financial support and items for door prizes donated by the downtown Columbia businesses.

Each year we apply for a street closure permit and set up canopies, tables, chairs, games, food, and activity spaces in front of our host location, the Lee Street Deli where we grill the food on-site. Each person attending the block party receives a bag with the enclosed materials based on whether they are students or non-students. In the student bags, we intentionally provide information about personal safety, good neighbor practices, and student resources available on campus and off campus. Additional donated items from local businesses are placed in the bags for all non-students. During this event, our stakeholders have a unique opportunity to socialize with residents in this neighborhood. Students are able to ask safety questions of the Columbia Police and Fire Departments while interacting with their landlords and other neighbors.

It is our hope that along with the information we place in the bags, the interaction with city officials, neighborhood businesses and permanent residents will bring about a change of behavior. For example, we have heard several complaints from residents in this neighborhood about the improper disposal of trash. To address this issue, we placed information about proper disposal of trash in the bags and provided trash and recycle bags to our students.

One of our goals for this event is for students to increase their sensitivity to the diverse population in the East Campus. A source of concern for the neighborhood residents is the excessively loud noise levels from parties, so we specifically educate the students on the city's nuisance party ordinances. A testament to the beneficial nature of this event came last year, when a group of male students who lived in a fraternity house took the opportunity to ask the Columbia Police Officers for safety advice, since they were planning to host a large party in a few weeks. The primary role of the residents during this block party event is to interact with the students and city officials, to share concerns they may have and also just start getting to know each other. In the upcoming year, we will be inviting the residents to play a more intentional role in the marketing of this event by placing yard signs on their property.

One major success from hosting the East Campus Block Party event has been the strong relationships we have built with most of our stakeholders. The City of Columbia Office of Neighborhood Services and the Columbia Police Department (CPD) continue to work closely with us on our goal to educate the University of Missouri-Columbia students on their rights and responsibilities while living off-campus. Each year we have invited CPD to hold information sessions about factors to consider for hosting a safe party. This event has also been a great opportunity to provide information to these students in a novel setting while spreading awareness about our office.

### **Challenges**

The major challenge we encountered when planning for this event was finding an effective marketing strategy. We explored many marketing ideas and decided to place door hangers a week prior to the event, and display banners on the day of the event. In using these methods, we had 199 students and three permanent residents in attendance. We are continually exploring new ideas for better marketing and are planning to implement another exciting strategy this fall: the use of lawn signs. Our plan is to identify key residents who would allow us to place these signs in their yard or businesses in the days or weeks leading up to the block party event.

The other challenge we had was getting the buy-in from members of the neighborhood association. This was not accomplished until the second year. In our first year, we wrote letters to the executive members of the association inviting them to collaborate with us on this venture. The association was skeptical that this event would produce the kind of change they wanted to see in the neighborhood. In preparation for the second year's party, we were much more direct in our approach, sharing the successes we experienced with the previous event. Consequently, we did have more association members in attendance in 2014.

Another concern is how difficult it is to measure the direct long-term impact of this event. Students usually live in East Campus housing for one or two years and then move on. Each year we try to collect data on the likelihood of students being more responsible after this event. We have found that approximately 80% of our respondents are more likely to socialize with their East Campus neighbors and notify them before hosting a party, call the police if the party got out of control, and properly dispose of their trash. This year, we have seen an additional reduction in complaints about certain behaviors in this neighborhood, namely fireworks and trash.

### **The Future of the East Campus Block Party**

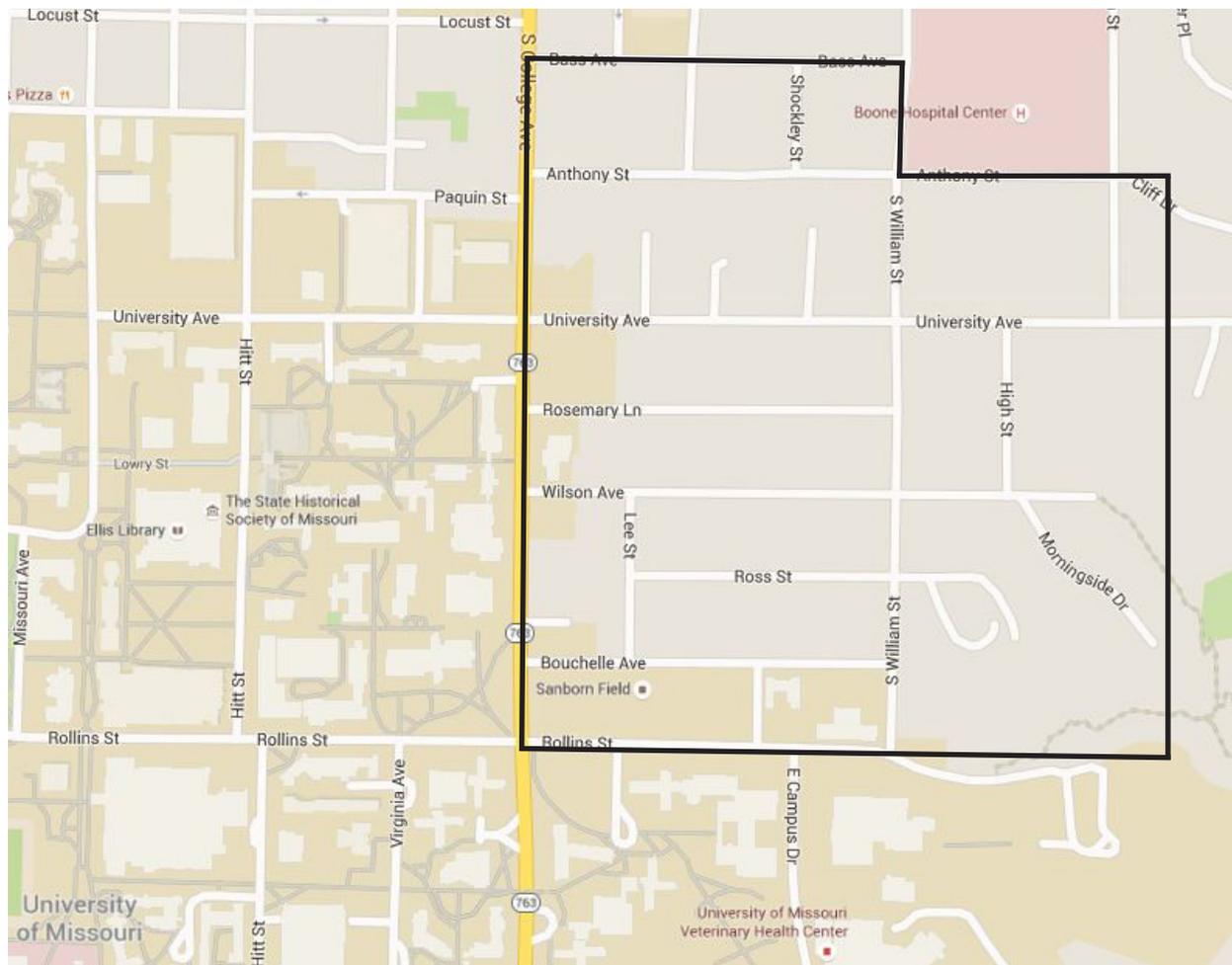
Lessons learned from this program:

- In order to effectively change the culture and behavior in the East Campus community, on-going education is needed due to the fact that each year we have a high turnover of students who reside in this neighborhood
- The community and institutions will buy into a proven product
- Ongoing partnerships with businesses in the area, the City of Columbia and the University of Missouri will have a positive impact on this event

Next steps:

- Finding ways to make this event bigger and better while still providing all the necessary educational components
- Ensuring reinforcement of tenant and landlord responsibilities
- Augmenting funding and donations from area businesses and the University of Missouri

Figure 1. Map of East Campus



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### Author

**Dionne George, M.Ed.**, has been Coordinator for Off-Campus Student Services at the University of Missouri-Columbia for the past 3 years. She is dedicated towards providing resources for students to make educated decisions while living off-campus. She has a passion for student success beyond the classroom. Additionally, she has successfully built and maintained relationships that positively impact the Columbia community.