

EPISODE 6: “High Rents and High-Rises” TRANSCRIPT [FINAL] w/ Citations

KACIE LUCCHINI BUTCHER: Hey, it's Kacie. If you haven't listened to the rest of this season, go back and start with episode 1. Things will make a lot more sense.

ALEXANDRA PASQUALONE: I don't know about you, but when I think about my 20s, I'm always reminded of the quote from Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* (2005).

KLB: Mhmm...well it's been a *while* since I read that book so why don't you jog my memory.

AP: Well that's okay because it's actually from the 2005 film adaptation. But you've heard it. She's like **[PRIDE AND PREJUDICE CLIP]** “I'm 27-years-old, I have no money and no prospects. I'm already a burden to my parents. And I'm frightened. Don't you dare judge me.”

KLB: I am definitely judging your British accent!

AP: Rude! ... but fair. Anyway, it reminds me of when I first moved to Madison. I was single, I had *no* savings, already 28 years-old, *god forbid*, and just entered my PhD program. But instead of securing my financial future by marrying a clergyman, I went for cheap rent. I got rid of my car and moved sight-unseen into this 400 sq ft studio apartment. I always joke I could probably flip pancakes from my bed... *that* is how small it was.

KLB: That sounds... less than ideal. How cheap are we talking?

AP: When I moved in Fall 2019, it cost around 775 dollars per month. But I just looked up my old apartment the other day. Guess how much that tiny studio costs now... only six years later.

KLB: Mhmm 875?... Maybe 900?

AP: 1025.

KLB: For a 400 square-foot studio??

AP: Yeah! And that isn't even that high compared to other places downtown.

KLB: Well, as Jane Austen says, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune can't even afford a halfway decent apartment in Madison these days.” That's how it goes, right?

[MUSIC]

AP: Ehh Close enough. From the Rebecca M. Blank Center for Campus History, this is *Reorientation*, a podcast exploring the history of UW–Madison you won't get on your campus welcome tour. I'm Alexandra Pasqualone.

KLB: And I'm Kacie Luchinni Butcher. In the last episode of the season, we've made it up to the present day. We've pretty well covered that finding a place to live in Madison has been hard for a *loooong* time. But what are the specific challenges in 2025?

AP: At a time when college is theoretically more accessible than ever, why is housing still such a problem? In some ways, a bigger problem than ever?

KLB: And since it's an issue that directly affects university students... and faculty and staff... should universities be doing more to fix it?

[MUSIC]

AP: So, if you were to ask an average UW student what makes housing such a challenge, you'd probably hear something like this:

["RENT IS TOO DAMN HIGH"]

KLB: Okay, that's not actually a UW student. That's Jimmy McMillan, who became an internet sensation when he ran for mayor and governor in New York back in the 20-aughts. His main campaign issue:

["RENT IS TOO DAMN HIGH"]

AP: But to address that idea with a bit more nuance... remember *al///* the way back to the last episode, when we talked to Sara Goldrick-Rab? She's a higher ed researcher, and a former education policy professor here at UW:

SGR: So if I think back to the beginning of my career when I was studying students as a researcher and I was teaching students, I didn't hear that much about what was happening with their lives outside of my classroom. We'd hear about, you know, the professor this or the you know, the homework that, or this test was difficult. But over time I learned that a lot of things that I would see in the classroom and that my fellow colleagues would talk about, things like students not being very engaged, students seeming like they might not care. I learned from talking to students and listening to them, that actually what was going on was that life was getting in the way. And as I collected more and more data going beyond personal experience and tried to figure out what it was about life, I kept coming back to this thing, which is rent.

["RENT IS TOO DAMN HIGH"]

SGR: And rent is, for so many people, whether or not you're in college, just this major obstacle. Housing unaffordability is a hallmark of American life now, and that just doesn't go away when you get to college.

KLB: When you think about it, that especially makes sense for college students. Unless you happen to inherit an ancestral country estate through the vagaries of an entail... or you go to school in your hometown and live with your parents... chances are you're gonna be renting. And we're not just talking off-campus apartments. It's everything we've mentioned so far: Greek houses, co-ops, and even in the dorms, the university is basically your landlord.

AP: So, the problems that affect a lot of rental markets—high prices, limited supply, crowding, poor upkeep—those are gonna hit especially hard for a group that's almost entirely renters.

[MUSIC]

AP: Last year, UW-Madison enrolled just under 50,000 students. About 35,000 of those were undergraduates.¹ So, numbers wise, where do all those people live?

KLB: Let's start on campus.

JEFF NOVAK: We house upwards of 9,000 undergraduate students in our residence halls and 24 hundred residents in our university apartments.

KLB: You might recognize the voice of Jeff Novak from back in episode 1. He's the Director of University Housing at UW-Madison.

JN: Primarily we provide a great place for students to live. We hope... you know.

AP: So about 11,000 people are living in university housing. That's a lot. But by all accounts there's a demand for more. From 2010 to 2023, residence halls at UW have consistently maintained an average occupancy rate of 104 percent.²

KLB: That's led Jeff and the housing staff to come up with some "creative" workarounds in recent years: tripling up dorm rooms, converting lounge spaces to fit more beds.³ Basically fitting folks wherever they can. So, if there's a lack of housing in Madison in general... And more than enough people want to live on campus, the university building more student housing seems like an obvious solution, right?

¹ "About UW-Madison: Facts," University of Wisconsin-Madison (2025), <https://www.wisc.edu/about/facts/>. See also Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin, Jones Lang LaSalle Americas, August 26, 2024, pg.4.

² "Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin," Jones Lang LaSalle Americas, pg. 7.

³ "Interview with Jeff Novak," May 20, 2025.

AP: You would think so, but it's complicated. For one thing, the Division of Housing is what's called an auxiliary unit, which means it's totally self-funded.⁴

JN: So we receive no funding from the university, the state, or beyond. Our budget is derived by those that use our services—our students.

AP: That means Jeff can't just go ask the chancellor for a few hundred million dollars to build a new dorm. On top of paying for staff, utilities, maintenance, and dining hall food, the Housing Division has to find the budget for anything new they want to build. Usually that means borrowing money and paying it off.

KLB: Finding the money isn't the only hurdle though. Jeff and the university are all in on taking out those loans to build more housing. They have a plan mapped out to drop 300 million dollars on a new dorm with two thousands beds. But weirdly they need permission from state lawmakers to borrow any money at all. And during the most recent budget cycle this summer, they didn't get it. That means they have to wait another two years to try again. That's Wisconsin politics.

AP: So all this is to say that new on-campus housing isn't going to take any pressure off of Madison's housing squeeze anytime soon. Tens of thousands of students will have to keep fighting it out in the private rental market.

KLB: So what does that market look like? A 2024 Madison housing study found that within a 2.5 mile-radius of campus, there are about 40,000 total housing units. Over 30,000 of them are renter-occupied and primarily consist of one- and two-bedroom units.⁵ That's actually a pretty high percentage of rentals compared to some cities. So it's not like there's *nowhere* to rent. But between students and other Madison residents, it's *very* crowded.

AP: And not to sound like a broken record... but the other major problem persists... pricing.

[“RENT IS TOO DAMN HIGH”]

AP: “The City of Madison's housing needs reflect a fundamental mismatch between household incomes and housing costs.”⁶ That's a quote from the city itself in a recent housing report *they* put out. Another study from this year showed Madison rents rose 47 percent from 2020 to 2025.⁷

⁴ “Interview with Jeff Novak,” May 20, 2025.

⁵ “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 8.

⁶ “Report Final 2024 Strategy Recommendations Prepared by Madison's Housing Strategy Committee,” City of Wisconsin, Madison (Oct 2024), pg 4.

⁷ Liam Beran, “Madison Rents up 47% Over the Last Five Years, But Vacancy Rates Are Improving,” *Isthmus*, Aug 11, 2025.

<https://isthmus.com/news/news/madison-rents-up-47-percent-over-the-last-five-years/>

KLB: In that 2.5 mile area around campus, the average monthly rent is just under thirteen-hundred dollars per BED. Not per apartment... PER BED.⁸ And thirteen-hundred dollars is the average. If a student wants to live in new or renovated property the per bed price jumps to over fifteen-hundred dollars. For those seeking cheaper options, older properties average out to an “affordable” 986 dollars a month.⁹

AP: And if you’re wondering, why would they break down the numbers by beds? Well, just like the dorms are seeing more people crowded into rooms and common areas, many students are squeezing into smaller apartments and sharing bedrooms. A 2024 survey of UW students found that 77% of those living off campus were splitting their two-bedroom apartments between three roommates.¹⁰ Twenty-seven percent said they shared bedrooms.¹¹ That’s a significantly higher percentage than the rental markets around most other universities.¹²

KLB: To put it simply... students are cohabitating in tighter spaces to afford Madison rent prices.

[MUSIC]

AP: So all that makes a pretty good case to say that Madison is an especially tough place to find housing as a college student. But what makes it distinct? It turns out it’s a lot of things. Historically low vacancy rates in the rental market, UW enrollment increases, a rapidly growing non-student population.¹³ And also, just the way the city is laid out.

KLB: Campus, downtown and the state capitol are all within walking distance, smack dab in the middle of an isthmus between two lakes. So space is finite. And with everything so close together, apartments near campus and downtown attract both students and young professionals.

AP: [COUGH] EPIC [COUGH]

KLB: Yeah. Dane County is the place to be. Healthcare tech company EPIC and a bunch of others have exploded in recent years, bringing tens of thousands more young workers to the area.¹⁴ A lot of them want to live in the same parts of town as students. And they usually have vastly different budgets when it comes to housing. According to city data, a median renter household in Madison with an income of about 46,000 dollars can “afford” to spend a little over

⁸ Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 8-9.

⁹ “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 9.

¹⁰ “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 12-13.

¹¹ “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 13.

¹² “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 13. The report does not specify the average cost at other institutions.

¹³ “Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin,” pg. 3.

¹⁴ Doug Moe, “An Epic Impact on Madison,” University Research Park, <https://universityresearchpark.org/an-epic-impact-on-madison/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CExcept%20in%20Dane%20County%2C%E2%80%9D.to%20find%20another%20opportunity%20here.%E2%80%9D>.

eleven-hundred dollars per month before rent becomes a cost burden.¹⁵ Now remember the average price per-bed near campus is just under thirteen-hundred dollars.¹⁶ I don't know about you but I don't think most undergraduate students are earning anywhere close to 50k.

AP: No. Definitely not. I never earned that as a college student. I *still* don't... Some students do have family support, but for those who don't, part-time jobs can only help out so much. Wisconsin's basic minimum wage is still only \$7.25 an hour.¹⁷ ZipRecruiter reports that most hourly workers in Madison earn more—between roughly 15 and 30 dollars. But basic math says that even if you work 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year for 15 dollars an hour, your salary is still only going to add up to a little over 30,000.¹⁸

AP: And while students do work multiple jobs and many hours, how many successfully balance a 40-hour work week and a full-course load? Add in work restrictions for international students and you can see how some end up in dire financial situations.

KLB: Yeah it's definitely not ideal. And sometimes finding a place you can afford is just the first hurdle. While less dire than homelessness, like we covered in our last episode, poor housing conditions can be just as stressful for students. Here's researcher Sara Goldrick-Rab again:

SGR: **And these places are sometimes just really overpriced, sometimes just run by really lousy landlords who don't, you know, don't deal with health and safety issues, sometimes genuinely unsafe because they're overcrowded. Or you have to live with people who don't respect your boundaries. And students are spending a lot of their time and money and energy on sorting out housing.**

KLB: And often these challenges mean students are forced into situations that are... not good.

SGR: **The other thing is staying in dangerous situations, you know places that the landlord has not made repairs, right. Holes in the floor, you know, unsecured wiring, utilities that don't work, places that don't have real heat would be a good example in Madison.**

AP: We could keep talking about these housing challenges for hours. Putting together this season of the podcast, we have. Housing is a pain that we can all relate to. But we don't want to lose sight of why it matters in this context.

¹⁵ "Housing Snapshot Report," City of Madison, Wisconsin (2023), pg. 5.

¹⁶ "Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin," pg. 9.

¹⁷ "State Minimum Wage Laws," Department of Labor (Jan 2025).

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/state#wi>.

¹⁸ "Hourly Salary in Madison, WI," ZipRecruiter (2025).

<https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Hourly-Salary-in-Madison.WI>. The exact wage would total to \$31,200.

KLB: The whole point of universities is to foster students intellectually... to help them develop the knowledge and the skills they need to be successful in their lives. But focusing on those things becomes *waaay* harder if you're worried about basic things like a place to live.

KS: **If you're a student and you go to class and you're hungry or you are couch surfing and you haven't slept, you're not gonna be a great student. You're going to be, showing up as not your best self.**

KLB: That's another voice you'll recognize from earlier in the season. Kasie Strahl is the Assistant Director for Student Engagement in the UW Office of Student Financial Aid. Part of her job is finding ways the university can help students meet those basic needs.

KS: **And so it is the institution's, part of their role is to help students meet their basic needs. As I was thinking about this piece, I looked at the institution's mission, specifically UW's to kind of just reflect on that. And so part of our institution's mission is to—we seek to attract and serve students from diverse social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds, and to be sensitive and responsive to those students which have been underserved by higher education. So our goal is to educate students, right, for their social mobility, for their economic stability, but is, it is the university's responsibility to do that in a way that we can also help them be a whole human and to meet their basic needs while they're, they're reaching that goal.**

KLB: Sara Goldrick-Rab takes it one step further and links housing directly to institutional success.

SGR: **Housing is an integral part of the student's experience and success at your institution. And cash follows students. So if you don't make housing affordable for students, they are not going to enroll and succeed and graduate and go beyond and be successful in their lives. And that means that you failed as an institution. So, you know, this isn't an optional side project. This is part of the central effort. And if, if you're not thinking about making housing affordable as a matter of enrollment management and as a matter of your teaching and learning strategy, and as a matter of creating well-adjusted healthy graduates who are ready for the workforce and their lives, you're gonna get left behind. That's the truth.**

[MUSIC]

AP: If the stakes are so high... If student success and the university's core mission are being hamstrung by housing... What can we do about it?

KLB: Well...a lot. Urban planning heads and policy-type people have plenty of practical solutions to ease housing issues in cities like Madison. Some options include zoning changes to remove height limits, prioritizing new area plans, and other efforts to add more housing

density.¹⁹ For students specifically, more on-campus housing (if it can ever get passed by state lawmakers) would be a start. There are also options like city density bonuses and tax incentives to encourage more affordable units, a delayed leasing season, and more efficient three-, four-, and even five-bedroom units in the private sector.²⁰

AP: There are also some more outside-the-box solutions. Sara Goldrick-Rab talked about ways to offset rent costs by providing other services to students. What would it look like if universities copied K-through-12 schools and had free lunch programs? How about connecting students to more federal benefits and social workers? Investment in better transit? Or exploring existing housing that's underutilized? Could students live alongside older folks in retirement facilities? Empty nesters' spare bedrooms?²¹

KLB: But all of this requires buy-in from the people in positions of power who are making policy decisions. In city and state government... and at the university. You know the saying, 'the first step to change is admitting you have a problem'? Well... part of making real progress may be getting leaders to see that these housing challenges exist, and getting them to reassess their idea of what it means to be a college student in 2025.

SGR: You know, if you close your eyes and picture a college student and you're running an institution and that student you picture is at a kegger on State Street and not a student who's running over to class and then maybe going to try to call a parent and then going to work and then going to the library and then going back to work and then getting up and doing it all over again, who maybe goes to one party a month. And by the way, it's at a friend's place 'cause they can't afford even to go to the bar. If, if the first one's your image, you are gonna make decisions for that image... If you've so misunderstood that problem, if you are living through cliches as administrators, that really does explain a lot.

AP: This season on *Reorientation* we've tried to untangle the mess that is housing in Madison by going back and looking at how we got here. From the early days of the university to the huge changes in the 20th century, all the way up to today.

KLB: And if you've made it this far, you've likely come to an obvious conclusion... housing is a mess now. And in one way or another, it has been a mess for a *looong* time. Whether it's high rents, or discrimination, or high rents, or space shortages, or high rents.

AP: And we haven't even discussed the impacts of the current presidential administration and the gutting of the federal government will have on social services, homelessness, rent, education funding, and other basic needs.

¹⁹ "Report Final 2024 Strategy Recommendations Prepared by Madison's Housing Strategy Committee," City of Wisconsin, Madison (Oct 2024), pg 10-11.

²⁰ "Student Housing Market and Affordability Analysis—Madison, Wisconsin," pg. 5.

²¹ Interview with Sara Goldrick-Rab, March 31, 2025.

KLB: Now this is where you might expect us to say ‘don’t worry, here’s why everything will be ok.’ But we’re a history podcast. We can’t predict the future. *But...* There is a famous quote you’ll hear historians say, “history doesn’t repeat, but it rhymes.” If we don’t confront Madison’s housing problems, history may not repeat itself exactly but we will continue to see these problems rhyming throughout the decades.

AP: If we as a society believe in the mission of higher education, then we need to accept that surviving college is impossible without a decent place to live.

[MUSIC]

AP: But it’s also bigger than that. We’ve been talking about these housing problems with a focus on the university... how they affect students, faculty, and staff. But they don’t *just* affect the university. They affect the city of Madison too.

KLB: The history of housing is very complex, so the solutions probably will be too. It’s not just the responsibility of the university or policymakers or housing developers or students or residents. It’s everyone’s. But we *do* need solutions. The housing problem isn’t going anywhere if we don’t fix it. If you leave this podcast with anything, we hope it’s with a clear understanding that the prices are high, the stakes are high, and the consequences are clear. Ultimately, surviving, living, and thriving in Madison is unaffordable without affordable housing.

[MUSIC]

NAMA PANDEY: You can find a full teaching guide for this episode on our website at campushistory.wisc.edu.

Reorientation is written by Kacie Lucchini Butcher, Alexandra Pasqualone, Nama Pandey, Taylor Dickson, and John K. Wilson. He also produced and edited this episode.

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