

TOP PROFESSIONAL VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



RACHEL OLSEN

General Manager Community and Partnerships Journal Student Living

Rachel Olsen is the General Manager - Community and Partnerships at Journal Student Living. With strong leadership and strategic planning skills, Rachel has built her career around enhancing and supporting the student experience. She is passionate about creating meaningful, connected experiences that empower students to thrive both personally and academically.



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How did your personal and professional journey lead you to your current role in student engagement?

I moved from Central Victoria to Melbourne in 2008 to study at Australian Catholic University, and the transition both surprised and challenged me. At first, I struggled to put myself out there and meet other students. Even though I went to Orientation Camp and attended events, it took a few months before I found my group of friends. Once I did, I came to love the smaller campus community and got involved with the Student Association, where I was elected Secretary (2009) and then Vice President (2010).

Motivated by my own experience, I threw myself into creating events that built community, fostered friendships, and gave students memorable experiences. Along the way, I took part in professional and leadership development opportunities and represented the student body in campus-wide meetings with the university executive.

After graduating, I joined the Student Enrichment team, supporting Orientation & Transition, Student Leadership, and Clubs & Societies. A move back home to Bendigo followed, where I began my first student accommodation role at La Trobe. There, I worked with 600 residents—many from regional and rural Australia—studying everything from education to engineering and dentistry.



A Note from the Founder

Over the past six years, I've been lucky to work alongside Rachel through new chapters of life — from starting families to moving homes — and she's been nothing short of inspiring. Her talent, resilience, and genuine care for students at Journal has been evident throughout all our workshops and events together.



I loved being able to focus on a defined cohort, building strong relationships with residents and Residential Advisors while expanding my skills in academic and wellbeing programming.

I joined Journal Student Living in 2018 ahead of opening its first facility in 2019. My challenge was to create the Journal Life program with the brief: “more than just free pizza.” In the seven years since, we've opened three facilities, welcomed thousands of residents, hosted hundreds of events, and set new standards for student experience in PBSA.

Today, as General Manager – Community & Partnerships, I design the Journal Life program, provide wellbeing support and referrals, oversee our Student Leadership program, and collaborate with universities, colleges, and community partners. I'm based at our newest facility, Campus House, where I get to see firsthand the impact our community programming has on residents every day.



Students enjoying the Campus House Launch Party, July 2025

Could you tell us about a specific project or initiative you led that significantly boosted student engagement?

One of our ongoing challenges is building community and engaging young people in an increasingly digital world. We're constantly balancing the need to encourage real-life connection while ensuring our messaging cuts through the noise and holds students' attention. Since I started university in 2008, I've already seen four social media platforms rise and fall, and students now communicate across multiple platforms for both formal and informal purposes.

While many believe students don't read emails, our cohort has proven the opposite. During COVID-19, email became our most reliable channel for restriction updates and online programming, and the strategy we developed then still underpins our approach today.

Residents now receive a weekly newsletter with building updates, event details, and registration links, plus "just-in-time" emails tailored to the semester cycle—from study stress and exams to mental health and vacate preparations. Each message reflects Journal's strong brand identity, with assets adapted for email, posters, signage, and in-room messaging.

This consistent, branded approach has been highly effective. Our Semester 2 newsletters averaged a 60% open rate and remain the second most popular way residents learn about events—after our digital elevator screens.

“HEARING THESE STORIES OF ALUMNI SUCCESS AND FOND MEMORIES GIVES ME THE MOST JOY—AND MAKES ME PROUD AND GRATEFUL TO DO WHAT I DO.”

What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of, and why does it stand out to you?

The Journal Life program enhances what already sets Journal apart: enviable locations, modern spaces, and supportive staff. When residents build genuine connections and feel part of a community, they're more likely to stay longer or recommend Journal to friends. Beyond the commercial benefit, it means young people—who are far more than just customers—are living in safe, inspiring environments that foster happiness, wellbeing, and success.

Ahead of opening Campus House, I reconnected with alumni for our Success Starts Here page. It was a proud moment to see the incredible careers they're building and to recognise the role Journal played in supporting their growth. Three out of four had been Student Leaders, and all spoke of the confidence and friendships they gained—stepping outside their comfort zones and leaving with memories that extended well beyond events. Rooftop nights, late-night Maccas runs, and long study sessions were just as meaningful as the big milestones.

Hearing these stories of alumni success and fond memories gives me the most joy—and makes me proud and grateful to do what I do.

What advice would you give to someone new to this field?

I've grown (and grown up!) tremendously across my 15 years in higher education, student engagement, and student accommodation. Reflecting on that journey, I've narrowed my advice to three areas:

Be present and have presence.

Students in accommodation aren't around 9–5. Ahead of opening Campus House, I committed to personally working at two evening events each week, along with a weekly breakfast. This gave me the chance not only to support guest speakers and workshops, but also to spend time in social spaces after hours and genuinely get to know residents. I've shared meals, chatted about weekend plans, recommended the best gelato in Carlton (Pidapipo!), and in return answered questions, promoted events, introduced new friends, and connected students with support services. If you're student-facing, students need to see you and know who you are.

Work collaboratively.

Student experience isn't defined by a single transaction—it's shaped by every interaction, whether through enrolment, bookings, customer service, or events. By working collaboratively and taking an active interest in other departments or business units, you help create a well-rounded experience for students while also expanding your own knowledge and skills.



Campus House boasts light-filled, inspiring study spaces

Care about who is behind the email or door.

It can be frustrating when the fire alarm goes off, when you have to explain the same process for the third time, or when another intake or vacate rolls around. The cyclical nature of higher education can sometimes feel like Groundhog Day. But behind every student email or resident door is a young person navigating independence and higher education for the very first time. Universities and accommodation should be safe spaces to try new things, make mistakes, and find support when things don't go to plan. I think back to what I was like at that age—young, self-centred, making plenty of mistakes—and I know that small moments of empathy and support can build capacity, confidence, and trust.



Juggling work life and Mum life, April 2024