

# Equality and a Built Environment of Differences: Towards More Equitable Residential Life Experiences

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## Executive Summary

In response to an increasingly competitive enrollment landscape, two decades ago college and university leaders began to construct luxury residence halls – and charge students more for the privilege of residing in them. The widespread adoption of these facilities coupled with the diffusion of self-sustaining budget policies resulted in "differentiated pricing" in student housing options. But this phenomenon also exacerbated the challenge of catering to student preferences while creating a diverse and equitable campus environment.

To further understand these changes, our team of researchers partnered with a large university and established three quantitative studies to examine this topic from the vantage points of retention, room change requests, and grade-point average (GPA). The first study (conducted during the pandemic) revealed how on-campus students were racially stratified with respect to first-year student retention rates, which shaped the degree to which all students experience diversity. The second study showed how room change requests in luxury housing promote two-stage stratification, with the price point remaining financially out of reach for many students and room change requests resulting in roommate pairings that become more similar by race and age over time. Our final study looked at first-semester GPA (which has been shown to be a predictor of retention). The results suggest that luxury residence hall designs contribute to stratification by negatively influencing the GPAs of first-year minoritized students.

Our national and institutional ideals emphasize access to education, but our results suggest that colleges and universities must do more to preserve diversity than merely enroll a diverse first-year class. Our recommendations offer suggestions to residence life professionals

**and university leaders for how they might work to “de-stratify” existing residence life approaches to create more equitable access policies.**

## Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, college and university leaders began to construct a new type of residence hall in response to what had become an increasingly competitive enrollment landscape (Reynolds, 2007). This was not just a new residence hall facility that institutions had customarily added over time as a result of expanded campus enrollments (Meyer, 2004; Yanni 2019). Rather, it was a new residence hall type – a stratum best described as “luxury,” “premier,” or “high-end.” In contrast to earlier residence hall types, the new luxury<sup>1</sup> hall stratum possessed two distinct characteristics that set it apart – design and price (Jan, 2009; Lieber, 2021).

Luxury residence halls were designed to include the latest in amenities ranging from granite counters, private kitchens/baths, coffee bars, co-working spaces, rooftop terraces theatres, resident-only fitness studios and even saltwater pools (Fernandes, 2019; Gold, 2019). The combination of increased enrollment competition among institutions and changing customer expectations resulted in an evolutionary understanding of amenities and strata (McClure, et al., 2020). For example, some new early 2000s “premier” features such as wi-fi and air conditioning ultimately became customary norms of collegiate living across all residence hall types (Agron, 2006).

University leaders also developed luxury residence halls with a distinct price point that set them apart from other campus living options. High-end residence halls came with high-end prices making them unaffordable for many students (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). Annual prices for luxury halls were often established by university administrators, but sometimes by private companies contracted to build and manage the luxury halls (McClure et al., 2017). The widespread adoption of luxury hall facilities coupled with the diffusion of self-sustaining budget policies (i.e., responsibility-centered management) resulted in a practice now common to most residence life offices referred to as “differentiated pricing.”<sup>2</sup>

In differentiated pricing, institutions establish a system or structure comprised of gradient levels of fees that vary by design, building, amenities, bedrooms, and number of occupants (Jan, 2009). The price range between the cheapest and most expensive housing options within the differentiated pricing structure could vary considerably. Some institutions like the University of Virginia have relatively small annual differences between their least and most expensive housing options while other institutions have more extreme ranges because they offer options at the high-end like Marymount’s private loft apartments or UC Santa Cruz’s very modest RV camper site without sewage hookup.

### Sample of University Housing Prices for the 2022-2023 Academic Year

| Institution  | Type    | State            | Lowest   | Highest  | Difference      |
|--|---------|------------------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| <a href="#">Univ. of Nevada-Las Vegas</a>          | Public  | Nevada           | \$5,880  | \$7,040  | <b>\$1,160</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Virginia</a>                  | Public  | Virginia         | \$7,080  | \$8,570  | <b>\$1,490</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of North Texas</a>               | Public  | Texas            | \$5,470  | \$7,160  | <b>\$1,690</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Montana</a>                   | Public  | Montana          | \$5,108  | \$7,190  | <b>\$2,082</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Chicago</a>                   | Private | Illinois         | \$10,323 | \$12,579 | <b>\$2,256</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of North Dakota</a>              | Public  | North Dakota     | \$3,510  | \$6,460  | <b>\$2,950</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Cincinnati</a>                | Public  | Ohio             | \$7,642  | \$10,634 | <b>\$2,992</b>  |
| <a href="#">Stony Brook Univ.</a>                  | Public  | New York         | \$10,254 | \$13,330 | <b>\$3,076</b>  |
| <a href="#">College of Idaho</a>                   | Private | Idaho            | \$3,700  | \$6,950  | <b>\$3,250</b>  |
| <a href="#">South Dakota State Univ.</a>           | Public  | South Dakota     | \$3,754  | \$7,288  | <b>\$3,534</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Southern Maine</a>            | Public  | Maine            | \$4,540  | \$8,776  | <b>\$4,236</b>  |
| <a href="#">Chapman Univ.</a>                      | Private | California       | \$11,364 | \$15,844 | <b>\$4,480</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln</a>          | Public  | Nebraska         | \$5,094  | \$9,597  | <b>\$4,503</b>  |
| <a href="#">Colorado College</a>                   | Private | Colorado         | \$7,052  | \$11,632 | <b>\$4,580</b>  |
| <a href="#">St. John's Univ.</a>                   | Private | New York         | \$11,550 | \$16,270 | <b>\$4,720</b>  |
| <a href="#">Pepperdine Univ.</a>                   | Private | California       | \$13,400 | \$18,400 | <b>\$5,000</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Vermont</a>                   | Public  | Vermont          | \$5,870  | \$10,942 | <b>\$5,072</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Maryland</a>                  | Public  | Maryland         | \$7,501  | \$12,639 | <b>\$5,138</b>  |
| <a href="#">Roger Williams Univ.</a>               | Private | Rhode Island     | \$9,138  | \$14,376 | <b>\$5,238</b>  |
| <a href="#">California State Univ.-Los Angeles</a> | Public  | California       | \$8,209  | \$14,353 | <b>\$6,144</b>  |
| <a href="#">Champlain College</a>                  | Private | Vermont          | \$10,152 | \$16,376 | <b>\$6,224</b>  |
| <a href="#">George Mason Univ.</a>                 | Public  | Virginia         | \$6,790  | \$13,440 | <b>\$6,650</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of San Francisco</a>             | Public  | California       | \$10,570 | \$17,500 | <b>\$6,930</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Connecticut</a>               | Public  | Connecticut      | \$7,436  | \$14,518 | <b>\$7,082</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Arizona</a>                   | Public  | Arizona          | \$6,600  | \$13,900 | <b>\$7,300</b>  |
| <a href="#">Pennsylvania State Univ.</a>           | Public  | Pennsylvania     | \$5,526  | \$13,000 | <b>\$7,474</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Massachusetts-Amherst</a>     | Public  | Massachusetts    | \$5,764  | \$14,121 | <b>\$8,357</b>  |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Texas-Austin</a>              | Public  | Texas            | \$12,729 | \$21,294 | <b>\$8,565</b>  |
| <a href="#">Oregon State Univ.</a>                 | Public  | Oregon           | \$7,296  | \$15,960 | <b>\$8,664</b>  |
| <a href="#">Louisiana State Univ.</a>              | Public  | Louisiana        | \$6,330  | \$16,080 | <b>\$9,750</b>  |
| <a href="#">Cleveland State Univ.</a>              | Public  | Ohio             | \$7,863  | \$17,680 | <b>\$9,817</b>  |
| <a href="#">American Univ.</a>                     | Private | Washington, D.C. | \$6,680  | \$16,720 | <b>\$10,040</b> |
| <a href="#">Michigan State Univ.</a>               | Public  | Michigan         | \$2,938  | \$13,504 | <b>\$10,566</b> |
| <a href="#">Univ. of California-Berkely</a>        | Public  | California       | \$10,320 | \$21,020 | <b>\$10,700</b> |
| <a href="#">Univ. of California-Santa Cruz</a>     | Public  | California       | \$6,260  | \$17,168 | <b>\$10,908</b> |
| <a href="#">The New School</a>                     | Private | New York         | \$15,300 | \$27,550 | <b>\$12,250</b> |
| <a href="#">Univ. of Miami</a>                     | Private | Florida          | \$9,080  | \$23,300 | <b>\$14,220</b> |
| <a href="#">New York Univ.</a>                     | Private | New York         | \$9,200  | \$24,644 | <b>\$15,444</b> |
| <a href="#">Old Dominion Univ.</a>                 | Public  | Virginia         | \$1,332  | \$16,778 | <b>\$15,446</b> |
| <a href="#">Marymount Univ.</a>                    | Private | Virginia         | \$7,600  | \$25,000 | <b>\$17,400</b> |

Note: Prices reflect annual housing rates for two undergraduate semesters.

With the increased expansion of high-end residence halls on college campuses and the widespread adoption of differentiated pricing, mainstream media increasingly began to ask whether the newly erected facilities contributed to various forms of inequality by stratifying students (Fernandes, 2019; Pinsker, 2019; Selingo, 2017). The emphasis on the new high-end stratum came with the seemingly inherent tension between catering to individual student preferences and creating a diverse and equitable educational environment (Jacob et al., 2018; Mughan et al., 2022)

While students may have been admitted to the institution and been granted access to enrollment, differentiated housing options highlight students may not necessarily have similar access to experiences once admitted (e.g., amenities). Both elements of the luxury strata – price and design – appeared to potentially shape student access during the college experience. Price naturally excluded some students from certain areas of campus, while design influenced patterns of student interaction and isolation (Brandon et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2019).

Our team of researchers set out to further understand this phenomenon, broadly asking, "In what ways are first-year residence life experiences stratified by race and residence hall design?" We established three quantitative studies to examine this question from different vantage points, one of which assessed the topic from the unexpected context of the global COVID pandemic that required administrators and residence life professionals to make dramatic decisions about on-campus student experiences. The findings collectively point to pockets of inequality as well as insights into student retention despite these differences – outcomes to celebrate as well as aspects to remedy. Our recommendations for residence life professionals and university leaders more broadly suggest how they might work to “de-stratify” existing residence life approaches to create equal access to experiences that more readily align with our national and institutional ideals that emphasize access to education.

## Methodology

We partnered with a large university willing to assess the ways in which residence hall design might differentially shape important elements of the student experience. The institution provided de-identified student records for the seven academic years between 2013 and 2020. For each student record, thirty variables were collected for analysis that span data like residence type, age, major, gender, race/ethnicity, enrollment, GPA, SAT/ACT, Federal EFC and home zip code. Three primary studies were conducted using the data, each focusing on a different student outcome – enrollment, room changes, and grade point average. During the period of study, overall room fees for the institution were moderately priced relative to other colleges and universities in the US (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The institution maintained a price difference of approximately \$3,400 between its cheapest campus housing option and its most expensive housing option. The data enabled an examination of student characteristics (race/ethnicity), academic outcomes (GPA and persistence) and stratifying choices (initial campus residence and room change requests).

# Examining Equitable Experiences

Our team of researchers set out to examine the ways in which luxury residence halls may have influenced or stood apart from different aspects of the first-year student experience. Each of three studies focused on a different student outcome: retention, room change requests, and grade-point average. The three studies assessed the experiences of first-year students living in three primary residence hall design types, which included corridor, suite, and luxury. We provide a summary of each study and its notable findings below.

## **Study One: Retention and Residence Life in a Global Pandemic**

College and university campuses across the nation quickly transformed from in-person to online instruction in the spring of 2020 with the emergence of the global COVID pandemic. For the remainder of the spring semester, to be “on-campus” was to be online. Our team of researchers anticipated that residential students might face academic challenges with the rapid shift in instructional modalities during COVID and therefore yield lower retention rates compared to *existing* online students who did not have the same modality shift. We examined fall-to-fall retention of first-year students based on the combination of three potentially differentiating factors: housing (on-campus, off-campus, and online), race (White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian) and pandemic (fall 2017 to fall 2018 (pre-COVID) & fall 2019 to fall 2020 (COVID)). The central findings of the study yielded unexpected results, which include:

- Students during the pandemic were less likely to continue to pursue their degrees, though this impact was strongest for online students.
- On-campus students were 2.38 times more likely to continue to pursue their degrees than online students during the pandemic.
- Off-campus students were less likely to pursue their degrees than on-campus students, but the impact was particularly stark for Black students.
- Compared to pre-COVID students, White (+9.4%) and Hispanic (+11.5%) students who shifted from on-campus to online during pandemic were more likely to return for their second year while Black (-2.5%) and Asian (-6.6%) students’ likelihood of returning decreased.

The most important finding of this study was the discovery of varying rates of retention by race for students returning to campus in the fall of 2020 following the nationwide campus closures in the spring. Despite the strategic efforts of administrators to retain *all* students, the pandemic highlighted how on-campus students were racially stratified with respect to enrollment outcomes. The resulting unequal first-year student retention rates shape the degree to which all students can experience and benefit from engaging with diverse others.

The full study may be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.55504/0884-9153.1777>, or retrieved using its full citation: Brown, J. T., Kush, J., & Volk, F. (2022). Centering the Marginalized: The Impact of the Pandemic on Online Student Retention. *Journal of Student Financial Aid*, 51(1), 3.

## Study Two: Subtly Stratified through Room Change Requests

One of the higher ideals of the university experience is broadening the diversity of student experiences across race, class, gender, and culture (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). The opportunity for this ideal to be realized occurs when students are exposed to others different than themselves (i.e., mismatch), leading to the greater possibility of inclusive experiences. The residence hall environment is one of the primary areas on any college or university campus that facilitates opportunities for diverse and inclusive experiences (Shook & Fazio, 2008). We used a statistical technique known as Classification Tree Analysis to explore room change requests, a process that enables students to change rooms mid-term. We examined residence hall design, student characteristics and similarities with their roommate (age, race, and socioeconomic status), and GPA to determine their relationship with room change requests. The primary findings report that there are different rates of room change requests based on type of residence hall:

- The highest room change requests occurred in “suite” residence halls and a set of corridor residence halls that were priced in the mid-range of housing options and centrally located to campus (4%).
- The lowest room change requests occurred in the lowest-priced corridor residence halls (1.6%).
- Luxury residence halls had a room change request rate of 2.9%, relatively consistent with the campus-wide rate (3.1%).
- 19 and 20-year-old first-year students with high GPAs were more likely to request room changes than 18-year-old students in luxury residence halls.
- Same-race roommates were significantly less likely to request room changes than different race roommates in the luxury residence halls.

In the luxury residence halls, room change requests facilitate roommate pairings that become more similar by race and age over time. As a result, we contend that luxury residence halls may promote a two-stage stratification: the price point for the high-end design and amenities remain financially out of reach for many students and room change requests result in fewer interracial roommate pairs.

The full study may be accessed online at [https://www.nxtbook.com/acuho-i/acuho-journal\\_vol49no2/index.php#/p/51](https://www.nxtbook.com/acuho-i/acuho-journal_vol49no2/index.php#/p/51), or retrieved using its full citation: Volk, F., Brown, J. T., Gibson, D. J. & Kush, J. (2022). The Anatomy of Roommate Change: Residence Hall Design, Academic Performance, and Differences in Race and Socioeconomic Status. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 49(2) 48-65.

## Study Three: Modeling the Multiple Facets of Luxury Design

On-campus residential living experiences are comprised of many factors that shape student social and academic outcomes. Building upon prior knowledge gleaned from earlier studies and prior residence (Brown et al., 2019), we incorporated new factors into the analytical models for this third and final study that were unaccounted for in previous work – multiple racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic status, and multiple design types. Using regression techniques on two analytical models, we assessed whether luxury designs might be associated with academic outcomes and if these outcomes differed in other forms of residence hall designs. We expected that the corridor



residence hall design for minoritized student groups would be related to better academic performance when same-race peers lived in the same residence hall (*homophily opportunity*). The opportunity to relate to others of the same race generally increases minoritized students' sense-of belonging and academic performance. The primary findings of this study include:

- High-school GPA and Federal EFC were both positively related to first semester GPA.
- Academic performance did not vary by residence hall design or the opportunity to relate to same-race peers for Hispanic, Asian, or White students.
- In the suite-style residence halls, Black students' academic performance did not vary with more opportunities to relate with other Black students.
- In corridor and luxury residence halls, Black students' academic performance suffered as the opportunity to relate to other Black students increased.

Meaningfully, our findings were contrary to what was expected (Bronkema & Bowman, 2017; Brown et al. 2019). Socializing design elements found in corridor and luxury residence halls failed to emerge as beneficial for minoritized students. First semester-GPA for all students, particularly minoritized students, is evidence of student engagement and a predictor of retention. The results suggest that luxury residence hall designs contribute to stratification by negatively influencing first-year-minoritized students' GPAs.

The full study may be accessed online at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/884293> or retrieved using its full citation: Brown, J. T., Volk, F., & Kush, J. M. (2023). Racial and Economic Stratification on Campus: The Relationship between Luxury Residence Halls, Race, and Academic Outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 64(1), 108-113.

## Recommendations for the Profession

Provided with choice, students will be naturally attracted to various types of residence hall designs, amenities, and price points that lead to different experiences and outcomes. We offer three recommendations for residence life professionals and student affairs leaders more broadly to consider in their efforts to "de-stratify" the residence hall environment: establish equality assessments, include Greek Life in equality assessments, and develop contingency programming.

1. *Establish equality assessments.* Residence life professionals should partner with institutional effectiveness offices to establish "equality assessments" and business intelligence offices to create "equality key performance indicators" (e-KPIs) for room assignment processes and differentiated housing fees. These annual data collection and evaluation efforts would allow administrators to systematically review whether specific student groups are over- or under-represented in certain residence halls or residence types based on student characteristics including race/ethnicity, international, and socioeconomic status. The evaluation efforts would also permit an examination of whether differentiated residential policies may be undermining broader institutional ideals of equality and inclusion.
2. *Include Greek Life in equality assessments.* College and university leaders should incorporate Greek Life as a focal comparative group in equality assessments that review

the over- or under-representation of student groups by building and residence type. Some institutions may wish to take the added step of making their equality assessments available to the university community or broader public in a manner that other student affairs assessment reports already posted in this format (see [DePaul](#), [University of Alaska, Colorado State](#), or cases provided by [NILOA](#) that could be adapted for residence life.)

3. *Develop contingency programming.* Once leaders have reviewed equality assessments or e-KPIs at the onset of the semester, they should seek to modify existing elements of student programming. Just as financial administrators often establish "contingency budgets" to address changing elements of the market, residence life professionals must consider establishing "contingency programming" to address changing elements of the student body. Leaders should strategically create programming to mirror suite-level connections and bring diversity to pockets of homogeneity that persist on campus (i.e., "that's the white dorm," Foste, 2021).

## Recommendations for Research

Our research and others point to a stratified residence hall experience associated with unequal outcomes for minoritized students. Nevertheless, residence halls remain a vital element of the university experience, one that shapes students' day-to-day engagement with their peers. Researchers can support efforts to thoughtfully de-stratify the residence hall environment in three ways: examine hall selection behaviors over time, develop collaborative action research relationships, and assess changes throughout the residence hall's "lifespan."

1. *Examine hall selection behaviors over time.* University leaders design residence halls and amenities to attract students. However, little work has focused on how residence hall design and amenities drive student housing choices over time. Researchers can build on McClure's (2019) working definition of amenities and assess how amenities become prioritized in residence hall design, how their influence might wane over time, and how amenities may facilitate different student outcomes longitudinally.
2. *Develop collaborative action research relationships.* Researchers can partner with residence life professionals and students to evaluate differences in student outcomes. Collaborative approaches that involve students as participatory researchers as well as participants serve four purposes: 1) increase student engagement in the learning community, 2) increase student ownership of the environment, 3) promote student learning, and 4) strengthen student, faculty, and administrative efforts toward diversity and inclusion (Radtke, 2018).
3. *Assess changes throughout the residence hall "lifespan".* The residence hall lifespan refers to the multiple stages of design and uses that include conceptualization, funding, construction, use, refurbishment, and end of use. For example, researchers have examined how differences in student experience are shaped by racializing processes in the present use stage (Foste, 2021). Still, few works have assessed how new residence halls may become racialized at their inception or when older residence halls are renovated or repurposed. Examining decision processes over the lifespan of a building will assist campus planners in ensuring that design and policies are made with an understanding of the implications for racial and socioeconomic stratification.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The terms “amenity-filled,” “luxury,” “premier,” and “high-end” have been used by senior administrators, student affairs and residence life professionals, scholars, policymakers, and journalists to describe the new upper stratum of residence hall type. Rather than use multiple descriptors interchangeably, we chose to use a single term (luxury) throughout the report for purposes of consistency as well as communicating across diverse audiences.

<sup>2</sup> For example, regarding its differentiated fee structure the University of Maryland states “The Departments of Resident Life and Residential Facilities are self-support departments. Housing fees are charged based on what the departments need annually to cover the expenses of operating the residence halls. Housing fees are charged based on what the departments need annually to cover the expenses of operating the residence halls. A differentiated rate structure charges students more for rooms that are more expensive to build, more expensive to maintain, and that include more amenities.” (Excerpt from: <http://reslife.umd.edu/housing/fees/>)

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*ACUHO-I is committed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge about campus housing and residence life as well as the broader issues that affect the post-secondary experience. To further this understanding and cultivate knowledge resources for the profession, a funded research grant program was created. The program encourages scholars and practitioners to conduct high-quality research in support of priority research areas identified by the association.*

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