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The Ethical Poverty of Dorms for the Rich

Coffee lounges and exclusive fitness studios help attract students. They also stratify the student body.

Joshua Travis Brown

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From 2000 to 2020, higher ed underwent a building boom that has changed the face of campuses across the country. With exceptional regularity, colleges and universities broke ground on expensive construction projects, including for expansive athletics complexes and state-of-the-art research parks. In some ways the boom resembled the physical transformation of campuses in the 1950s and 60s. But there is an important difference. The earlier expansion was driven by a surge in enrollment. The recent expansion was driven by competition — a survival of the fittest.

Dormitories are a perfect example. Institutions have spent hundreds of millions of dollars not only to modernize their existing residence halls but also to build a new stratum of luxury dorms. The upscale buildings might have private suites, resident- only fitness studios, coffee lounges, or swimming pools, all designed to appeal to a shrinking pool of college-age students.

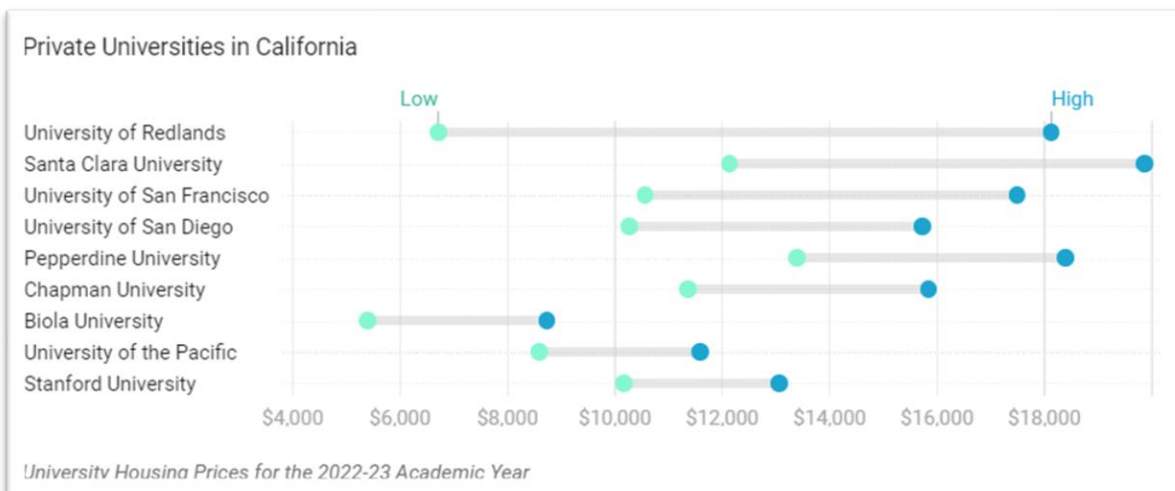
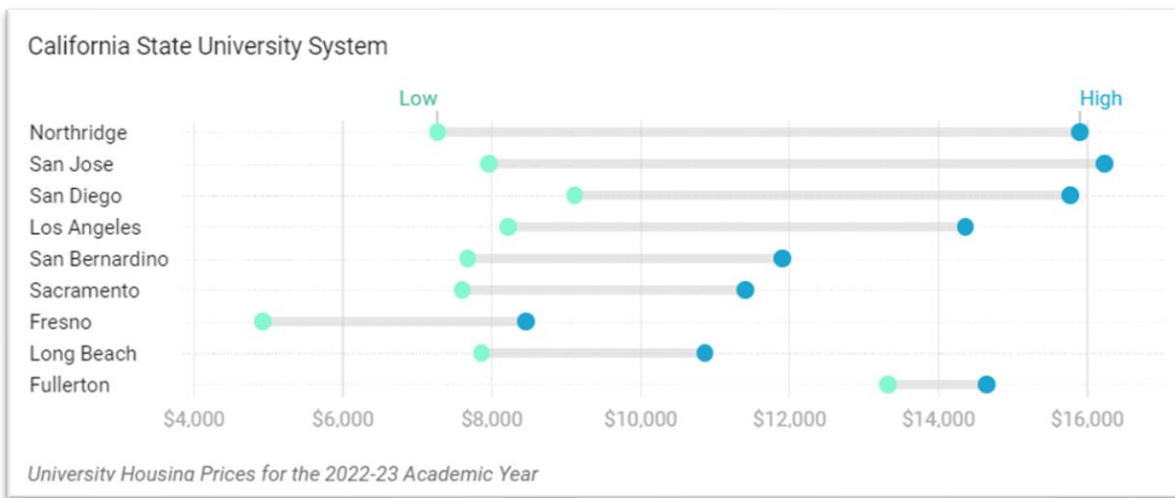
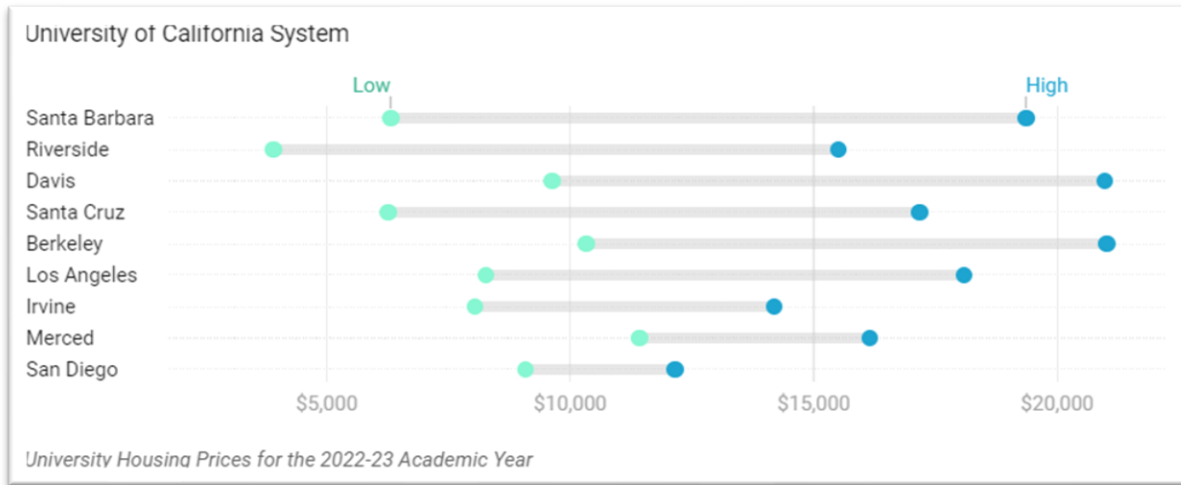
Colleges aren't just using such dorms to attract students, however — they're charging students more money to live there. The University of Maryland at College Park explains that its "differentiated rate structure charges students more for rooms that are more expensive to build, more expensive to maintain, and that include more amenities."

Those amenities might include “singles, in-room bathrooms, air conditioning, and new construction.” The differentiated approach has allowed institutions to both offset building costs and emphasize student choice.

Just as airlines charge more for such preferred features as more legroom, window seats, or an upgrade to first class, many colleges have come to do the same with rooms in residence halls. Some colleges provide an online tool for would-be students to explore a digital map of campus and peruse visual renderings of each hall to determine the right balance of location, conveniences, roommates, and price. Through the combination of differentiated pricing and housing design, what has emerged from the building boom are campuses where the gap between the highest and lowest housing options varies considerably.

For undergraduates on several University of California campuses, for example, the gap is more than \$10,000 per year. On the more-affordable California State University campuses, the gap is still as high as \$8,000. In California, as in many other states, the commitment to offering an affordable education has taken on a new meaning, depending on which side of campus you reside on.

The Housing-Price Gap



And those sides are often defined by not only income but also race. I recently led a research team that took a closer look at the practice of differential pricing. We worked with a large, predominantly white university that provided us with seven years of student-housing data, from 2013 to 2020. The institution offered its students three primary types of housing (basic, enhanced, and luxury), with a relatively low price difference (approximately \$3,400) between its cheapest and most expensive options.

We discovered, not surprisingly, that the neediest students chose to live in the cheapest housing available (mean estimated family contribution of \$29,033), and the wealthiest students chose to live in the most expensive luxury halls (mean estimated family contribution of \$53,174). But our research also indicated that more than half of all Black students (51.5 percent) chose the cheapest campus housing available at rates that far surpassed their white (29.4 percent), Hispanic (37.2 percent), and Asian (33.5 percent) peers. Only one in five Black students (20.1 percent) chose to live in luxury residence halls.

But the impact on diversity did not end with living arrangements. There were also academic consequences. My previous research has shown that when students have more opportunities to interact with others from similar racial and economic backgrounds, they get better grades. In our recent study, however, we found that the grade-point average for Black students in luxury housing actually suffered when the concentration of Black students increased — a trend that did not occur among Asian, Hispanic, and white students. In fact, only Black students in the midrange dorms saw the expected increase in grade-point average when the concentration of Black students increased.

As our data revealed, the academic experience for students at one end of campus can be radically different from those at the other end of the same campus. Just as the neighborhood people choose to live in provides them with educational and economic opportunities that differ from those of other neighborhoods, physical campuses shape students' academic experiences in very different ways and with very different financial costs.

How, then, to bring the goal of educational equity in line with the economic challenges of today? To begin with, college leaders should shift their focus from the starting line of admissions and enrollment to each mile marker of the collegiate marathon. If colleges rightly hesitate to sort incoming students by variables like the SAT, why should they sort students by income throughout their college experience?

The changes cannot stop there. Institutions must work strategically to de-stratify what they have built. They could do that by considerably narrowing the price range in housing options, subsidizing high-end residence halls to diversify the campus housing experience by class and race, or eliminating differentiated pricing entirely. At a minimum, residence-life professionals should make equality assessments that aim to identify unequal patterns of distribution in residence halls by race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

The tension that colleges routinely face between catering to individual student preferences and creating a diverse educational environment is not likely to pass anytime soon. The anticipated demographic cliff will be a long-term challenge, and colleges will have to continue to find ways to stand out in a competitive environment. But they must do it in a way that doesn't pass inequitable sorting policies down to the next generation of students.

Joshua Travis Brown

Joshua Travis Brown is a fellow in residence at the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford and a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and an instructor of leadership, foundations, and policy at the University of Virginia.