

Constructed Pathways: How Multiply-Marginalized Students Navigate Food Insecurity at Selective Universities

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Studies about collegiate food insecurity show its prevalence as a national issue that disproportionately affects students from marginalized groups. This study further contextualizes this work, examining the ways that multiply-marginalized students navigate systems of privilege and opportunity at selective, normatively affluent universities to meet food needs and pursue personal goals. Findings from this multi-institutional qualitative study highlight asset-based approaches by which students leverage institutional interest in their marginal identities as navigational strategies. Conclusions point to the value of “student pathways navigation” as a conceptual and analytic approach to understanding how students manage collegiate environments.

KEYWORDS: food insecurity, pathways, low income students, multiply-marginalized, selective universities

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Marginality is much more than a site of deprivation . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. . . . It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.

— bell hooks (1990, p. 150)

The recent proliferation of scholarship on collegiate “food insecurity” frequently focuses on the range of negative effects that result from of a lack of food access (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life (S. A. Anderson, 1990), although expanded definitions emphasize the anxiety and risky behavior, such as theft, that also can result (Ellison et al., 2021). Students experiencing food insecurity often are unable to focus academically (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017; Phillips et al., 2018) and participate socially (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019). Anxiety, depression, and even increased suicidal tendencies (Stebbleton et al., 2020) are among the range of detrimental physiological, social, and psychological effects that researchers have associated with food insecurity in college.

For many scholars in the field, demonstrating the damaging consequences of food insecurity, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, is a means to the larger end of holding social, political, and organizational structures and entities accountable for these inequitable experiences and outcomes (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; hooks, 1990; Jack, 2019). These include K–12 state funding policies that create unequal college preparation for low-income families and Communities of Color (Weathers & Sosina, 2022), university financial aid policies that fail to address the full cost of college (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), admissions processes that privilege upper-income families (Stevens, 2007), and on-campus food aid and emergency assistance programs that undercut full engagement in the campus experience (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019). However, the hidden and unintended danger of this emphasis on negative outcomes, even in the service of prosecuting inequitable systems, is the potential for marginalized communities to be defined by their “damage” only (hooks, 1990; Tuck, 2009).

Thus, rather than only describing the harm that accompanies food insecurity experiences, scholars have recently turned toward anti-deficit and asset-based perspectives to highlight student agency in managing systems not structured around their particular forms of preparation, capital, and aspirations (Ardoin, 2018; Perez Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005). This paper similarly pivots the focus of food insecurity research from one of only *proving negative student effects and outcomes* as a function of holding systems accountable, to *highlighting students’ strategic, opportunistic navigation* in ways that pair structural accountability with an expanded imagination for alternative resources and navigational approaches. As such, in this qualitative study we analyze

the ways 35 multiply-marginalized participants met their food needs while they pursued their educational goals at three selective universities with high median family incomes.

Literature

Food insecurity has, over the past decade, come to the fore as a disruptive and prevalent problem born of increased cultural expectancy for college access and the concomitant rise in higher education prices (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). The first national-level, representative survey of college students shows that 22.6% of undergraduates experience food insecurity, with another 11.9% experiencing marginal food security (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The combination of this national survey data and individual campus-level studies (e.g., Henry, 2017) is sufficient to demonstrate the need for attention and intervention (Landry et al., 2021).

Statistics alone, however, miss the dire effects of food insecurity. Scholars have explored the negative ramifications of experiencing food insecurity on students' academics, including an association with lower grade point average (GPA), more frequent course withdrawal, or not purchasing the necessary textbooks (A. Anderson et al., 2022; Dubick et al., 2016). In addition to academic and social barriers, students experiencing food insecurity are more likely to also experience depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts, all of which are likely to negatively affect the quality of student engagement and outcomes (Broton et al., 2014; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). Food insecurity is also more prevalent among groups systemically marginalized by racism, classism, sexism, and other structural prejudices, as well as within institutions, such as community colleges, that serve the most students from these groups (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Larin, 2018).

Although the preponderance of research on food insecurity has focused on establishing prevalence and academic effects generally, recent research has shown that food insecurity experiences vary by context in ways that alter the costs and demands of managing the tension between finding food and engaging as a student. For example, studies of food insecurity in the community college context often focus on the accessibility of resources rather than the social barriers encountered in four-year contexts (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Ilieva et al., 2018). Examinations of students' food insecurity experiences in the four-year university context frequently emphasize social avoidance and feelings of stigma reflective of campus cultural expectations (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020; Zein et al., 2018).

Within the scholarship focused on four-year environments, food insecurity researchers tend to lump selective and non-selective contexts together (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018), despite considerable evidence of important differences between them, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds (Aries &

Alleman et al.

Seider, 2005; Lee, 2016; Martin, 2012; Mullen, 2010). Researchers who examine these differential campus contexts emphasize the social and economic stratification of selective university environments where many students are financially well-off. In these competitive contexts, status signaling through material goods, such as clothes and technology, and experiences, such as dining out and spring break trips, bifurcate the student body and reinforce class-based identities and identification (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lee, 2016).

Food Insecurity at Selective Universities

Despite this evidence that campus type, public/private control, and culture significantly alter the experience of struggling to pay for food, few researchers have focused on the selective university environment. Among them, surveys of the University of California system point to the overrepresentation of food insecurity among populations already marginalized by race, gender, and socio-economic status (University of California Global Food Initiative, 2017). Although not focused specifically on the topic of food, Jack (2019) highlighted the additional burden that food-seeking can be at an Ivy League university. Focusing explicitly on students experiencing food insecurity in a selective university environment, Cliburn Allen and Alleman (2019) concluded that the logistical encumbrance of finding food and the social stigma of hiding it robbed participants of the full experience for which they paid a considerable price in terms of anxiety, effort, and money.

Studies of elite institutions, whether focused on food or class, tend to highlight barriers to engagement and constraints that hinder students' full participation in college life (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Lee, 2016). Sociological concepts such as social stratification applied to these contexts and populations emphasize the ways already-marginalized students are further disadvantaged by systems and cultures not made for or by them, or are kept out of these places of higher learning entirely (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011; Tough, 2019). These important structural critiques implicate administrators, universities, and broader social and economic systems that reinforce differential access and experience, exacerbating student marginalization. In the realm of food insecurity, this emphasis has been understandable, given the need for evidence to make the case for institutional, state, and national policy change (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

Student Pathways Navigation

In the past decade, scholars have focused on the idea of “pathways” in an attempt to illuminate why college students make the decisions they do (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Cockle, 2021; Stevens et al., 2018). Pathways are the mechanisms constructed by universities intended to aid and promote students' movement through and experience of higher education via

opportunities, resources, and beneficial structures (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Within these structures, “class projects” express the class-based agendas students tend to follow that result in associated experiences and outcomes, such as the “party pathway” and the “professional pathway” (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Chambliss and Takacs’ (2014) decade-long analysis of student navigation at a highly selective liberal arts college focused on student decision-making as serendipitous, “based on immediate conditions, often idiosyncratic” because student preferences were “neither fixed nor always decisive” (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014, p. 65). Nevertheless, these authors emphasize how student identities and early choices in college can create “path dependencies” or settle a student into a predictable sequence of choices. In this study, we take student background, experiences, and socialization to be elements of the starting location of students entering pathways intentionally constructed. However, our emphasis here is on *pathways navigation* as the ongoing agential management of resources, opportunities, and purposes by which multiply-marginalized students move and assist others in moving.

Existing scholarship on student pathways highlights, directly and indirectly, the important role that environmental context plays in the options, resources, constraints, and opportunities available (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). The recent proliferation of scholarship on prestigious colleges and universities illuminates a particular sub-set of pathways literature. Here, researchers emphasize the advantages of resources and opportunities that top universities provide for students regardless of background as well as highlight elite higher education as the site of social status reproduction and stratification (Gable, 2021; Mullen, 2010; Tough, 2019). In sum, although elite universities may benefit most students who gain admission, the most advantageous pathways that harness faculty relationships, campus leadership roles, study abroad, unpaid internships, and other opportunities are typically most available to those who are already socially and economically primed to access them, reflecting historic and inequitable structures of privilege and status (Jack, 2019; Lee, 2016; Stevens, 2007; Walpole, 2003). In this study, pathways navigation conceptually represents a way to understand the aggregated navigational decisions of multiply-marginalized students struggling to pay for food as they attempt to maximize the opportunities of their selective university.

Conceptual Orientations

Understanding student pathways navigation requires attentiveness to the options students have, or believe that they have, at any given point in college. With limited exceptions (e.g., military academies), a hallmark of the contemporary college student experience is *choice*: choice of major, choice of who and what to affiliate with, choice of how to spend time. These choices are

“bounded” in the sense that not every student has every choice available or perceives that every choice is available to them. Choices are bounded in at least three ways. First, not every choice is open to every student for personal and circumstantial reasons. That is, choices are limited simply as a result of the serendipity of meetings, connections, and relationships and by virtue of the interests and motivations of any given student. However, the “personal and circumstantial” cannot be understood apart from the second form of boundedness, namely, that not every choice is available because selective universities implicitly assume by their organizational structures a certain level of financial surplus (Jack, 2019). This expected monetary flexibility is reflected in costs related to organizational memberships, unpaid internships, parking, textbooks, studying abroad, and on or near-campus food and housing.

Perceptions of college cost and what is worth paying for are closely linked to the third sense of boundedness. Not every choice is open to every student for social and cultural reasons related to student background and the institutional structures that privilege some backgrounds over others (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Because of the historical cultural expectations of what a “normal” student looks like, knows, and has experienced before college, campuses are “classed” environments (Lee, 2016; Stevens, 2007). This “classed-ness” is not only present in terms of financial opportunity costs but also in messages embedded in traditional campus structures, such as Greek Life, that narrowly define belonging and participation. As a result, these traditional campus structures limit access to social and cultural “goods” that produce connections with faculty, staff, and peers (Walpole, 2003). The awareness of and response to these forms of boundedness by organizational agents in terms of targeted programs, such as first-generation student transition organizations and scholarships, and resources, such as emergency or supplemental aid programs, also significantly shape the pathways choices of a given student.

In the context of this study, a college pathways navigation approach pieces together a macro view of the college experience from manifold micro choices and influences that unfold over the total time of matriculation. Further, in this study a “pathways navigation” focus centers student agency within a field of social, cultural, and organizational opportunity and boundedness, including the range of negative effects scholars have connected to food insecurity. As such, our analysis of pathways decisions examines situations in which students identify and appropriate resources in response to personal and environmental factors, including opportunities and constraints, in their simultaneous pursuit of food and educational goals. Beyond mere random opportunity or a particular student’s navigational savvy, we point back to the bell hooks (1990) quote that began the paper: that some individuals, as a consequence and condition of their marginality, are thus positioned to “see . . . and create” (p. 150) new modes of being and operating in spaces that “other” them. In this paper, we focus on students whose combined social identities position them for new imagination and potentially new forms of

organizational and resource navigation not merely despite but *through* their marginalization.

From Damage-Centered to Agency-Centered Research

The preponderance of evidence in the literature demonstrates the pressing reality of collegiate food insecurity and the associated range of undesirable social, psychological, physiological, academic, and other effects (Stebleton et al, 2020; Henry, 2017). This essential and foundational research has played a key role in inspiring stakeholders to action in the form of structured campus resources such as food pantries and policy-level advocacy and increased access to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—although few would argue that the need for change has been adequately met. Still, the confluence of statistics suggesting alarming food insecurity prevalence and individual accounts of incredible hardship has implicitly and explicitly called to account administrators, financial aid systems, and other social structures (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Jack, 2019).

However, nativist scholar Eve Tuck (2009) offers caution about this approach to systemic critique and the evidentiary base that supports it. Tuck describes the accumulation of scholarship emphasizing negative effects on marginalized individuals as “damage-centered research” (p. 413). Positively, damage-centered research draws attention to those who have been socially marginalized in order to create change. This research “looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy” (2009, p. 413). The desired outcome, Tuck explains, is “that persecutors will be forced to be accountable” (p. 415). Despite this noble aim, her concern is for the long-term consequences:

Many communities engage, allow, and participate in damage-centered research and in the construction of damage narratives as a strategy for correcting oppression . . . but does it actually work? Do the material and political wins come through? And, most importantly, are the wins worth the long-term costs of thinking of ourselves as damaged? (Tuck, 2009, p. 415)

Although Tuck is speaking from the context of Native communities, she extends her interrogation of damage-centered research to other marginalized groups. As such, her injunction undergirds the project at hand which seeks to move beyond “exploiting” students who experience food insecurity for the sake of advocacy and policy leverage, which might thereby reduce their experiences—and their identities—to their damaged effects and outcomes.

In her letter, Tuck (2009) is clear that using scholarship to illuminate systemic inequality is an important first, but not final, step in the process. Her pivot and encouragement is to move away from damage-centered scholarship and toward that which centers the desires of communities in ways that

preserve the tensions of complex personhood. Although Tuck does not use the language of “assets” explicitly, her “desire-based” emphasis on contradiction and complexity aligns with scholars such as Yosso (2005) and Perez Huber (2009), whose work highlights resources that create navigational abilities and opportunities in marginalizing spaces, such as universities. As such, our use of “assets” and “resources” to talk about students’ college navigation points toward positive ways to conceptualize—without reductionism—how students attempt to both maximize opportunities and manage an environment that marginalizes them.

Imagination for the potential navigational abilities of historically and systemically excluded student populations requires an understanding of the assets and resources that are operationalized in and emerge out of their marginalization as a “space of resistance” (hooks, 1990, p. 150). Fortunately, anti-deficit and asset-based approaches are already present (Perez Huber, 2009; Yosso, 2005), often focusing on the importance of imagining other forms of capital (e.g., Yosso’s [2005] “navigational capital”). Such studies shift the focus and emphasis toward generative agency-based perspectives that re-conceptualize those “marginalized” in terms of resources unknown or unvalued by traditional organizational structures. For example, in a study about Chicana undocumented students, Perez Huber (2009) contributed the concept of “spiritual capital” as a resource for challenging racist nativist framing. These and other studies demonstrate the imperative for questioning and reconceptualizing the experiences and management of educational environments that are sources of marginalization.

Despite our shared focus on systemic critique through re-imagining resources and strategies with studies rooted in critical race theory (CRT), our study is not expressly critical. Instead, we examine the intersection of institutional marginalization, environmental opportunity, and organizational resource management by a sub-set of students who struggle to afford food and who are part of multiple historically marginalized groups at selective universities. Although these students are underrepresented in elite institutions due to structural barriers to access and engagement (Bastedo & Jacquette, 2011; Stevens, 2007; Tough, 2019), the exploration of their navigation of such environments ultimately expands the field’s scholarly and practical knowledge of the contexts of and responses to collegiate food insecurity.

Situating Multiply-Marginalized Identities

For a study of multiply-marginalized students, the particulars of identity are notably peripheral. “Marginality” in this study is not concerned with the specifics of any given social category—gender, class, race, and so forth—although all are important and importantly different, both individually and in combination. A related area of theorizing, intersectionality research, also focuses on multiple marginalized identities but emphasizes the function of

oppressive social systems that attempt to isolate identities rather than view them as inextricable wholes (see Crenshaw, 2017; Nash, 2008). Similarly, that participants are multiply-marginalized means that they likely have experienced various forms of social exclusion and disadvantage resulting from their particular combination of social identities, and these identities cannot be disaggregated. Participants also benefit from multiple forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). Yet, these students enter collegiate environments that are both sensitive to them as tokens of organizational status and challenged by them as places that historically have served social and economic majority individuals (Lee, 2016; Stevens, 2007). In this sense, and of interest to this study, being “multiply-marginalized” means being *particularly* estranged from the traditional campus “normal,” and yet being the target of interest and concern by entities (e.g., offices, foundations) designed to promote their success. As such, in this study, bounded opportunity, unique forms of capital and modes of seeing that result from social and organizational marginality, and universities’ contradictory attraction to and marginalization of diverse students converge in the following research question: *How do multiply-marginalized students navigate food needs in selective, affluent university environments?*

Methods and Methodology

To analyze multiply-marginalized students’ navigational strategies in university spaces of privilege, we adopted narrative inquiry as our methodological approach. The roots of narrative inquiry originated in the 1960s with efforts to better hear the voices of systemically marginalized persons in more detail than the aggregations of positivist quantitative data offered (Spector-Mersel, 2010). The particular philosophical assumptions of narrative inquiry are thus oriented toward the narrative construction of people and their worlds (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As such, narrative is understood as an iterative process through which an individual constructs and conveys meaning, and that meaning is necessarily place-bound and contingent (Spector-Mersel, 2010). For the purposes of this study, we solicited and co-constructed the narratives of multiply-marginalized students’ experiences related to food and food insecurity at selective, affluent institutions to reveal their historical and ongoing navigation of food needs within systems that simultaneously offer resources and perpetuate marginalization.

As a methodology, narrative inquiry does not prescribe specific methods but sets forth a particular posture and attentiveness for the researcher. As such, we engaged in semi-structured interviewing as a channel to elicit the storied experiences and navigation of multiply-marginalized students. Through a narrative inquiry lens, the researcher approaches this interview setting as a real context of interaction and as a space of interplay between persons in which the interviewee is empowered to craft their own stories through interactions with the interviewer (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). Further, narrative inquiry

emphasizes temporal, interactive, and spatial dimensions as contexts for and aspects of participant storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this reason, we used multiple interviews within different campus spaces in conjunction with flexible interview guides that invited first descriptive storytelling and then analytic reflection. These processes fomented increased trust, familiarity, and engagement in the world of the participant, vital to narrative inquiry (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012).

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants for this study were 35 full-time degree seeking students (Table 1) solicited through social media posts, referrals from administrators who shared our recruitment flyer with students, and snowball sampling. Prospective participants completed the 12-month USDA six-item food insecurity survey to measure their food insecurity experiences during enrollment in the university. Qualifying participants scored “very low food security” on the measure, indicating that their eating patterns were disrupted due to the inability to afford food.

Although we set no demographic criteria for inclusion, our initial analysis showed that nearly all our participants were multiply-marginalized, experiencing more than one form of social marginalization based on factors such as race and ethnicity, gender/sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, immigrant origin, and familial makeup. Additionally, many participants had experienced some form of personal or family trauma pre-college, including childhood hunger, homelessness, abuse, neglect, or chronic mental health issues that complicated or added texture to their social identities and their experiences in college.

Participants attended one of three selective, normatively affluent university campuses: 12 participants attended Flagship University (large, public research extensive), 15 participants attended Lib Arts University (small, private, baccalaureate), and eight participants attended Private Research University (PRU; medium sized, private, research intensive). In these contexts, “normatively affluent” reflects the cultural press and expectations of the campus environment. Quantitatively, this descriptor is based on median household income data. Qualitatively, it is best understood through the prevalence of campus material markers of upper-middle class lifestyle displayed by students and by the institutions through the goods and services (e.g., tanning pools, upscale coffee shops, locally sourced foods) that align with affluent lifestyle expectations. Site selection was based on each university’s admissions selectivity rate (Barron’s College Division Staff, 2018), median household income and income distribution (based on Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS, 2021] data, blinded for confidentiality), and other institutional factors compelling to the study, such as the university’s social mobility index.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race and Ethnicity	Gender and Sexuality*	College Attendance	Status	Socio-Economic Status (SES)	Other
Alec	Asian American Pacific Islander	Non-binary, gay	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Migrant farm worker family
Alejandra	Hispanic	Cis gender female	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Alfredo	Hispanic; Black; Caucasian	Man, gay	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Anali	Hispanic	Woman,	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Undocumented
Ariel	Asian American Pacific Islander	Woman, gay	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Beth	Multiracial	Woman, female	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Brooke	Caucasian	Non-binary, queer	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Cadence	Black or African American	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Camila	Hispanic, Latina	Female, Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Migrant farm worker family
Carli	Hispanic; Native American	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Transfer student
Chelsea	Black or African American	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Single mother; transfer student
Corbett	Caucasian	Man	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
DeShauna	Black or African American	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Second-gen immigrant family
Gabriela	Hispanic	Female, Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Gavin	Hispanic	Male, Man	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Second-gen immigrant family
Gina	Hispanic	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Jill	Hispanic, Latina	Female, Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Transfer student; previously homeless
Jules	Black or African American	Male, Man	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Second-gen immigrant family
Kelsy	Caucasian, Romani	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Lacey	Caucasian	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	
Layla	Caucasian	Female, Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	Previously homeless
Leah	Black; Caucasian	Woman	First-generation	Low SES	Low SES	

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Race and Ethnicity	Gender and Sexuality*	College Attendance Status	Socio-Economic Status (SES)		Other
				SES	SES	
Lucas	Caucasian	Man		Low SES		Transfer student; cultural outsider
Mandy	Hispanic	Female, Woman	First-generation	Low SES		
Margaret	Mexican-Irish	Woman	First-generation	Low SES		
Miranda	Hispanic, Latina	Woman, queer female	First-generation	Low SES		
Nicole	Hispanic	Woman	First-generation	Low SES		Undocumented family
Paloma	Hispanic, Latina	Woman		Low SES		
Philip	Black or African American	Man		Low SES		Second-gen immigrant family
Selina	Hispanic	Woman	First-generation	Low SES		Migrant farm worker family
Terrence	Black or African American	Man		Low SES		
Tia	Black or African American	Woman, gay		Low SES		
Valeria	Hispanic	Woman, bi-sexual	First-generation	Low SES		
Vera	Hispanic; Mexican-American	Woman	First-generation	Low SES		Migrant farm worker family
William	Caucasian; Native American	Man	First-generation	Low SES		

Note. *In a demographic survey prior to interviewing, students had the option to select “woman,” “man,” or to write in a gender descriptor. During the interviews students were invited to complete an activity where they articulated important identity categories. Some participants named additional gender or sexual orientation descriptors in that context that we also include. Consequently, this column, while indicating student self-identification, is incomplete.

Administrators at all three study institutions had an awareness of food insecurity among college students and had initiated programmatic responses, although none of the sites had university-wide data on campus food insecurity rates. Flagship had recently added two food-related questions to a health survey that had been distributed to a sub-set of students, with one in four students noting food access hardships. All three institutions had emergency aid students could apply to receive. Moreover, Flagship and PRU had university-run food pantries, and Lib Arts University had a small food pantry run by a student organization. None of the institutions were actively supporting students' enrollment in SNAP.

In this study, we used a three-part interview process that honors the narrative inquiry emphasis on interaction, context, and continuity (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007). In the first part, we explored the students' pre-college backgrounds and college experiences relating to food and identity, asking open-ended questions such as "tell me about the role of food in your family growing up" and "describe a week where you struggled with accessing food." The second interview took the form of an "alternative" campus tour, guided by the student, to instigate and contextualize their narrative recollection and construction through co-exposure to place and the rituals of campus life (Flint, 2019; Magolda, 2000). The third step of the interview process, often occurring weeks or months later, returned to the traditional interview context and offered space for participants to update us on their college experiences and to reflectively explore the sense they made of the narratives shared in the first two interviews. Cumulative time across three interviews ranged from 4 to 7 hours per student participant, with a total of 95 total interviews and approximately 175 hours of student interview time. Following a narrative inquiry approach, this deep engagement with study participants made possible the co-construction of rich stories of students' lives, including their navigation of food needs at selective, affluent universities (Gubrim & Holstein, 2012). Students were financially compensated for their time via a gift card prior to each interview.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into Nvivo ethnographic software for analysis. Reflective of the emphases of narrative inquiry, our analysis process focused on maintaining the authenticity of students' stories (Spector-Mersel, 2010). To do so, we coded in larger sections, resisting the tendency to over-fragment interview narratives (Spector-Mersel, 2010), and coded into multiple descriptive "bins" to preserve as many facets of interpretation as possible.

Informal data analysis preceded the formal elements of the process, occurring through post-interview debriefing and memoing, regular audio recorded reflective meetings among the team, and anticipatory mapping of emerging concepts. Coding joined and echoed this iterative process of reading, reflection, and recombination (Saldaña, 2016). In the first cycle we employed provisional coding using focal areas of the study, such as college expectations, effects of hunger, managing food and finances, and supportive

places and people. Concurrent with the initial coding process we created an individual profile memo or “biographical account” (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007) for each student, with memo links back to specific stories and narrative descriptions of students’ demographic characteristics, pre-college experiences, and college navigation. From this coding and memoing process, we jointly identified and discussed the emergent focus on student pathways navigation through a resource-rich environment. We also realized the complex layers of marginality experienced by our participants. We then engaged in a second cycle of coding that focused on issues related to students’ understanding of their campus environment, their identities within this environment, and their navigation—strategic and opportunistic—of the resources they found. Through these formal and informal steps, we began to recognize not merely *experiences* but also particular forms of *agency* and *outcomes* in student actions. Pursuing these concepts further in the data through additional pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016) led us to identify five thematic categories, two of which are the focus of this paper:

1. Leveraging the resource-rich environment to meet basic needs toward personal goals.
2. Experiencing the opportunity costs of leveraging marginality.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

Given the vulnerability of student participants, protecting their identities and agency in the research process was paramount to us. At the start of each interview, students were reminded that they were free to decline to answer specific questions or opt out entirely at any point. We endeavored to protect students’ confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms, keeping the identification key in a single, password-protected cloud-based file, limiting access to the key to the research team, and carefully generalizing personal details and descriptions in ways that preserved student voices while not compromising their identities (Hesse-Bieber, 2016). We pursued trustworthiness on four fronts to ensure that we represented the participants’ multiple constructions of reality with fidelity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, credibility, or congruence of findings with reality of participants, was pursued by debriefing interviews during data collection as well as in weekly meetings during analysis to ensure findings aligned with students’ narratives. We also conducted member-checks where we shared transcripts with participants to ensure their words and meaning was adequately represented. Our description of methods and findings contribute to our pursuit of transferability (local and conceptual generalizability) and dependability (reproducibility) by providing the means by which others can evaluate our research process and analyses. We pursued confirmability, or an external audit of findings, through extensive memoing during data collection. Taking extensive notes self-exposed our assumptions

and emergent ideas of what we thought we were seeing for peer scrutiny. Finally, to ensure our research team had a shared interpretation of reality during coding, we agreed upon definitions of codes before analysis and conducted an initial round of coding together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Positionality

The co-authors of this paper recognize the privilege and power nested in the role of “researcher,” particularly when studying marginalized populations. We are three White, cisgender individuals who benefitted from the college-going experiences of family and friends and yet recognize our own challenging journeys of collegiate navigation. Our experiences interviewing and relating to individuals from diverse demographic backgrounds informs our sensitivity to their experiences and our desire to make visible both their struggles and their intrepid navigational abilities. However, we also acknowledge the limitations and biases that our backgrounds place upon us, some that are evident that we endeavor to resist; some that are invisible that we seek to uncover. Toward these ends, member checking through the solicitation of participants’ review of co-constructed narratives (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), conversations with diverse peers, and extensive engagement in the literature, help us to pursue and expose our positional assumptions, but we acknowledge that these efforts are unavoidably incomplete.

Findings

Preamble to these findings are two essential and unequivocal points present in the accounts of all our participants: first, that struggling to afford food in college is an awful experience and particularly so in a campus environment where most students appear to be financially stable. Second, that systemic issues of class, privilege, and culture embedded in universities are an endemic part of why students experience food insecurity in college (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Jack, 2019). That is, prestigious universities historically have played an important function as mechanisms for preserving upper-middle class social status (Stevens, 2007), and as such have built into them expectations of financial security and abundance necessary to fully participate in campus life, such as upscale coffee shops and expensive meal plans. Given these cultural expectations of material surplus, programmatic supports and resources for students struggling to access food are often stigmatized and underutilized (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Larin, 2018; Zein et al., 2018). However, in the spirit of understanding students through their actions rather than their oppression (Tuck, 2009), our findings focus on the strategic navigation of multiply-marginalized students and the ways they find and leverage resources in an environment of privilege and opportunity.

Student Use of Structured Food Insecurity Resources

Administrative solutions often receive attention as the first expected sources of aid for students who struggle with the cost of food. Nationally, SNAP provides financial help toward the cost of healthy foods. Despite pandemic-era allowances that expanded access (Larin, 2018; Hagedorn et al., 2022), none of the students in our study reported using SNAP benefits, despite many likely qualifying.

Over the past decade, the campus food pantry has become the college food insecurity solution *de jure*, reflective of national-level organizing and publicity (e.g. the College and University Food Bank Alliance). All three of the study universities had food pantries of some type: two were run by the institution; one was led by a student organization. On all three campuses the food pantry represented the primary—although not the only—form of food assistance available. Each campus also had some sort of emergency financial aid that could be used for food. For example, one campus had a local meal swipe exchange program. Awareness and utilization of the food pantry varied widely among our participants: 15 students said they were unaware of the campus food pantry, six reported they were aware of it but had not used it, and 11 both knew about it and had used it at least once. Of the students who used the on-campus food pantry, most expressed appreciation for the resource generally. DeShauna's experience in the food pantry, echoed by other users, was positive: "It was really nice. I walked in and they greeted me warmly, and they were just like 'Take whatever you need, we have tons of stuff.'"

Despite this generally positive assessment, critiques of the food pantries provide insight into why the variety of other strategies discussed in the forthcoming findings were typically a more central aspect of finding food. Students at all three universities criticized some aspect of the location, typically how difficult it was to reach due to proximity to the center of campus and to transportation hubs, such as bus stops, or due to how hard it was to locate navigationaly. Lacey, who confessed that seeing all the food available at her first visit "brought tears to my eyes," commented on the costs and benefits of location: "no one is really over there. So, that's kind of nice, I guess. But then if you don't know about it then it's like how do you find out about it?" Students also expressed frustration with open hours limited to 9 to 5 Monday to Friday, which did not dovetail with the times they had available due to class and employment schedules, or required them to carry a box of food around campus until they headed home in the evening. Students also critiqued the lack of variety of items available as well as inconsistent stocking, which made the time commitment to stop in more costly.

Multiply-Marginalized Students Leveraged a Resource-Rich Environment

On these selective, affluent campuses where food access was an expectation and abundance was a cultural norm, individuals who were in a position

to share food resources shaped participants' pathways navigation through altered patterns of time use and social interaction. More than half of our participants described benefitting from the meal plan "swipes" of others, and nearly all recalled a friend buying food or a meal for them when that did not have money. Ariel reflected on her strategy for securing lunch:

You know, if I was eating on campus, I literally had a rotation of people that would feed me lunch so that I could buy groceries to feed myself for breakfast and dinner. And if I didn't have . . . I literally don't know how I would have survived if I didn't have friends that [sic] were RAs.

Alfredo laughed as he talked about his university's "oral tradition" of upper-class students cultivating relationships with first-year students to use their extra meal plan money: "it's like, find a classmate, find a freshman, to sustain your wellbeing." Vera described her assigned roommate as "privileged": "her mom is actually a pediatrician in a hospital in [major city]. Yeah, so she was able to take us out to dinner a lot of the time." Although many participants also described turning down offers of generosity, not wanting to be dependent on any one person, and lying to friends to conceal food needs, relationships with classmates with abundant financial resources were also a key strategy for sustainable food access.

Organizationally-Situated Individuals

Individuals also benefitted from supervisors, mentors, faculty, and staff who used their discretion and discretionary funds to include them in working lunches, meals out, or even just adding them to a morning coffee run. Layla interned at a public policy organization engaged in voting rights activism that aligned with her aspirations for future employment: "We do a lot of networking events, which helps me with future jobs. . . ." A side benefit was the generosity of her supervisors. Layla recounted: My bosses will be like, "Will you get Starbucks for us?" And I'll be like 'Yeah.' And then they'll just be like, 'Put one of yours on our card.'" In addition to intermittent morning coffee runs, evening lobbying events often became opportunities for a free meal: "We all go to [restaurant] downtown and they will pay 'cause it's on the company credit card, which is great." Layla's pursuit of her professional goals also became avenues for meeting food needs, both as a paid internship and through the food perks of the position.

Free food was a benefit as well for Valeria, who found that her student teaching school provided a free meal for interns and employees. Ariel described the various administrators who kept snacks in their offices. Phillip recalled a professor who encouraged office hours attendance by offering to buy meals: "My freshman year chemistry professor, like she did this thing, she called it 'lunch bunch.' And it's just office hours but she was like, 'I'm going to be at the café, I'll buy you food, whoever comes.' She'll buy

you lunch if you come to her office hours.” Individuals in these students’ lives were conduits to free food that helped to meet basic needs, whether they were aware of these needs or were simply a resource that students capitalized upon.

Connecting with food service employees who were sometimes themselves from marginalized groups offered participants both solidarity and access to free or extra food. Phillip reflected on this practice as one that linked individuals who know what it is like to struggle:

A lot of times, the people working there are really nice, like the Black and brown people that [sic] recognize, they know how it is, so I can get food on my plate and they’ll scan the cheapest item and I’ll have four or five things on my plate. So, I get a \$10 or \$12 meal for like \$2—so that’s really helpful when they do stuff like that.

Miranda, too, perceived that a sense of socio-economic and cultural solidarity was behind the un-authorized generosity she received when food service workers undercharged her:

And a lot of the times, they’re just women of color who usually speak Spanish or they understand the struggle, and I think they see other students who probably remind them of themselves or of their kids. And it’s understandable because I know that when some of my friends and I, when we see them, like they just remind us of our parents and our relatives in a way, ‘cause we grew up around this kind of just situation of working in service industry and just having to do it.

William, Chelsea, Jill, and Gavin were among those who also recollected receiving this off-the-books benefit. This shared sense of struggle and background bent student pathways navigation toward engagement and mutual support with employees frequently overlooked (Magolda, 2016) while also easing the food costs of marginalized students.

Campus-Based Clubs and Organizations

Abundant financial resources at the organizational level meant that these campuses used food as a mechanism for inducing student engagement and as a medium for entertainment. Recognition of these pockets of strategic surplus created opportunities for students to meet food needs, shaping their patterns of campus engagement and experience. From the start of the school year, organizations “tabled” along walking thoroughfares to garner attention and new members. Miranda recalled: “Especially the beginning of the year. Everything is free. They give out so much.” Miranda further capitalized by collecting coupon books given out at the bookstore: “So, I get a bunch of those and I use the coupons, and it’s really helpful and they’re for a bunch of different places that are on campus or nearby.” Many of our participants enthused

about the temporary gold rush of free food, shirts, and other giveaways quickly hoarded, but short-lived.

Once the school year began, student organizations were hubs for free food and a well-known opportunity for a kind of mutual exploitation, as Selina explained:

Like, if I knew there was an event on campus and they were . . . I feel like they bribe us with it. Like, 'if you come we'll have food,' and it's like 'I'll be there.' . . . Normally that will replace me having to buy lunch on campus or something.

Although many students took to regularly scanning social media and university email blasts, Phillip was more proactive:

The things I would do is like if I see a group of students walking with a bunch of pizza boxes, they're going to some meeting. So, I'd be like, "Hey what are y'all doing with that food?" and they'd be like, "Oh it's our meeting, do you want to come?" Everyone invites you to their meeting.

Lucas, who typically would pick up food at meetings but not stay, still admitted to developing new relationships and perspectives as a result of attendance:

Actually, I met some minister though the other day, she was offering cider and donuts. I'm very anti-established religions, for the most part. She was really cool though. She is running the only accepting LGBT ministry on campus. She does a lot of work focused on anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, and I was like, "The fuck? Y'all are like a religious organization that's anticolonialism? I've never heard of that in my life." . . . She's actually a genuinely cool person.

Even though building relationships was not their primary motivation for engagement, food-seeking behaviors further altered participants' collegiate pathways navigation by connecting them to people and groups that sometimes expanded and even challenged their perspectives.

Leveraging Marginality

In addition to the opportunities for food through clubs, organizations, employment, and faculty and staff generally, a sub-set of food access opportunities were available specifically because students' marginalized social and economic statuses were recognized organizationally, resulting in resources that these students learned to leverage. Alec connected their new job to their marginal gender status and relationships in the LGBT/Women's Center:

I got that job through my LGBT center mentor. She was like, "yeah, I know this kid, she's my mentee and she's great." So, they brought me in, and they were like, "We don't need to do an interview, just sign the papers and you'll start working second semester." And I

Alleman et al.

was like “thank you.” . . . I feel great. I can actually put money in savings. I can put money towards my parents, if they need it. That kind of thing. It’s very helpful.

Like Alec, Mandy and Miranda found advantageous work in part because of their marginalized social identities. During their first year both students participated in a university leadership program for first generation, low-income students. The following year, Mandy and Miranda were hired as mentors in the same program because of their backgrounds and life experiences. Miranda reflected about the frequent presentations she sat in on from various university offices that described resources available to students:

So that’s how I learned a lot of resources, and that’s how I learned a lot of places that were actually helpful that a lot of people didn’t know about. So that helped me a lot and I was given the opportunity to learn more about that, and now I share it with other people who I think might be struggling or who might need it.

Because this program was geared toward historically marginalized students, Miranda’s background and identity alignment with its focus created pathways opportunities for paid employment and for information that connected her with food and other resources. Similarly, savvy students such as Layla and Phillip who could not afford unpaid internships found ways to get paid for forms of involvement important to them. Phillip, who considered the Multicultural Affairs Office (MAO) to be a kind of second home, reflected that

I spend most of my time there [the MAO]. I get paid for the work that I’m doing there, and that’s stuff I want to do. I can maximize my time in there and do a lot of different things in there while I’m getting paid.

By getting paid to work in the MAO, Phillip doubled his capitalization, making money to pay for food and spending more time in a space where food was frequently free. Participants leveraged their marginality as part of their opportunistic navigation of campus when they found ways to create financial and resource access due to organizational interest in their success.

Food, Marginality, and Social Solidarity

Although leveraged marginality was frequently a mechanism of individual benefit, many participants developed campus food resource strategies that increased their sense of social solidarity and community with others in similar challenging positions. Phillip found the MAO to be a place of support and mentorship, as well as a kind of hub for getting—and sharing—food: “The MAO, that’s kind of intersected by helping me get increased access to food. So, that’s kind [of] a big thing.” He described a recent lunch paid for

by his research internship across campus that he used to benefit himself and those who frequent the MAO:

I was like “you all want pizza . . . I’m not going to stop you, take what you need.” But what did anyone take? No one took anything, so I took the boxes back to my office and they’re sitting in the MAO right now. I sent a picture to my friends to say, “Hey, there’s pizza here!”

As Miranda (above) and Phillip’s examples also highlight, some participants saw beyond their own needs and recognized that they were in a position to benefit others like them. Vera lived in a university-sponsored community house that was attractive to low-income students who wanted to live on campus due to its low cost and camaraderie. Vera outlined how she spent several hours each week identifying campus resources and planning how to gather them for herself and others in her themed housing unity:

What we do is we let each other know, “Hey, we can’t go to this event, but this other friend can go for us and she can bring food for everybody” so we can share food. All of us can share food here.

Like Vera, Gavin learned to work together with friends who also struggled with the cost of food to share both resources and expertise:

The way me and my roommates did it is we all would buy groceries for all of us, and we would all pitch in evenly. Because one of my roommates is a great cook, so we were like, “Yeah, let’s have this guy cook and then the rest of us do dishes.”

Gavin’s efforts at organizing created both improved food access and solidarity, something that Vera also attempted to generate. Responding to our question about what she would like to convey to her university’s administration, Vera emphasized the communal focus she and others maintained despite her personal difficulties:

Just any help that we get, we appreciate it. And we try to use that appreciation to help others who are in the same situation as we are. That’s what I would like to let them know: that we’re not asking for too much, but we’re just appreciative of what we get. [We’re] appreciative to help others as well, since we know that the struggles of food insecurities here on campus, especially here at [Private Research University], is [sic] real.

For many of our participants, the severity of their personal struggle had the effect of heightening awareness of the similar struggles other students faced, further shaping their patterns of campus navigation across their collegiate careers.

The pursuit of food resources placed some participants in an additional and often unexpected role: as advocate and knowledge source. Alejandra volunteered for a panel about college-going for three high schools from the low-income serving school district where she grew up because “I identify with them and so, it’s one thing to talk about these things with them. And two, I don’t want them to go through the same things.” Her advice focused on budgeting, understanding loans, transportation, living expenses, and food. Vera, too, had the role of advocate. At a dinner with a professor of African Studies she turned the discussion of food access in Africa, where she had recently studied abroad, toward the plight of students on their campus:

[The professor] had no clue about the [campus] food pantry. So I kind of told him about it, and a few students there were also able to pitch in since they also go to the food pantry. And they were just very surprised.

Vera was one of several students who unexpectedly found that they were, by virtue of their struggles to pay for food, more informed on the subject than some faculty and administrators. Educating others is often a burden placed on marginalized persons (Tatum, 2017). Some participants found that their struggles with food added an additional layer of knowledge and sense of responsibility to their experience as a college student. Anali and Alec both used their positions on student government to advocate for marginalized students, including those who were food insecure. In other cases, students like Layla, who tried unsuccessfully to volunteer at her campus food pantry, could not find outlets for the influence they wished to enact. However, this complicated relationship with agency was not the only burden of food marginality.

Multiply-Marginalized Students Experienced Opportunity Costs to Food-Access Strategies

Attendance at a competitive university brought with it the opportunities of targeted and excess food linked to clubs, organizations, university events, internships, and the generosity of mentors, employers, staff, and friends. Although this web of serendipity and strategic navigation often yielded regular—albeit time consuming and inconvenient—access to food, it also required these multiply-marginalized students to take risks and make priorities that sometimes came with the consequence of hunger. Here, we highlight three such undesirable outcomes.

First, the extraordinary opportunities provided for multiply-marginalized students sometimes resulted in a boom-and-bust cycle of resources and gaps. Often, this experience occurred through the contrast between specific opportunities related to student marginality and “real” life beyond them. Gavin was selected to speak at a prestigious national education foundation event where

he met a variety of celebrities and political leaders. He described returning to campus “on this high” after a weekend of hotel stays and free food: “Then I came back and . . . I’m still like, ‘Damn, am I still worrying about my next meal?’” Despite this incredible opportunity for networking, Gavin was thrust back into a world of struggle afterward.

Similarly, Gina earned a 4-year scholarship with attached leadership development retreats from a professional athlete’s education foundation. At the airport she mistakenly checked her bag incurring a \$30 fee, nearly all of her available funds:

And when I was [at the retreat] I was getting fed. It was all good and I wasn’t paying anything. And then when I got here on Sunday, I was really hungry, but I was really tired. And I was like, “I only have a dollar. It’s fine.” And so then I just went to sleep hungry.

Although Gina’s crisis was an indirect result of this opportunity, others like her found that their marginal social identities aligned them with the goals of foundations and organizations, creating networking and professional development opportunities in which basic needs were an afterthought both in terms of abundance while in their care and the sudden end of support realized when they were not. As a result, students were sometimes left without resources when programs ended. Consequently, participants did not romanticize the opportunities that came with social marginalization and leveraged marginality. Leah articulated her dedication to maximizing any resources connected to her marginal identities, as well as her frustration with it:

I have to capitalize on [being low income], especially when I’m applying to medical school. “I am a poor student from a low income family, help!” . . . It is strange that, you know, it feels like it’s advantageous to be poor when I meet a demographic. But everywhere else it sucks. When I meet the demographic that they need I will exploit it as much as I can. But in every other aspect of life, and every other aspect of life it sucks.

According to student accounts, the episodic and inconsistent resources available due to their social and economic marginalization did not make up for the ongoing costs of their peripherality.

Second, in the pursuit of maximizing the selective university experience, sometimes students chose to sacrifice meals for opportunities as a strategic decision. The multiply-marginalized individuals in this study were also high-achieving students with ambitious career aspirations. Many participants interpreted that their future success depended on their strategic use of resources now. As well, the rich university experience—academically and socially—was part of what made the sacrifices worth enduring. In contrast to their financially stable peers who could afford flexible convenience food, these students often maximized their college experience by minimizing their

food needs. Camila described the press of the environment in this regard when we asked what caused her to prioritize involvement over eating:

Oh, it's experiences. You're never going to get that back. You can always be like "oh, I'll try to be healthier next year. I'll focus more on health and I'll try to eat better." But these experiences are *now*, and they're never going to come back, and you won't remember the fact that you had to eat a tortilla with cheese instead of a chicken burrito. That's just . . . nobody cares about that.

Similarly, Layla reflected on her implicit ordering of needs:

I guess I'd never looked at food and/or food insecurity as a priority or as, like, a priority in myself and a priority in the decisions that I make. . . . Like, I would probably make more money just serving at a restaurant near campus, but that's not best to get vocational practice. But then that contributes to food insecurity. So I never really thought about the syllogism of that or the way that I didn't prioritize [food] access.

For our participants like Layla and Camila, opportunities that arose from their compelling personal narratives, identities, and aspirations, pressed them further into roles and involvement that benefited them socially and professionally while potentially harming them physiologically due to the inconsistent food access that sometimes resulted.

Discussion

Struggling to afford food in any context is stressful and difficult. Focusing on food insecurity at normatively affluent university campuses can seem like a less urgent task in comparison to community colleges and regional state universities where a higher percentage of students are likely to struggle to afford food (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). However, we argue that food insecurity at selective universities requires scholarly analysis *because* the particular features of social and economic expectancy on these campuses intensifies marginalization and the psychological burden of food insecurity, as scholars have previously suggested (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Jack, 2019). Gourmet food trucks lining the campus drive, name brand clothing in the campus bookstore, and expensive social and pre-professional clubs and organizations symbolically imply that basic needs struggles do not occur in these spaces, increasing students' sense of marginalization. As such, this study contributes a needed perspective that expands the field's imagination for how and why educational contexts matter.

Pathways Navigation as Bricolage

Although understanding the burden and strain brought on by collegiate food insecurity is an essential starting point, in this paper we followed the

directive of Eve Tuck (2009) and others that researchers shift focus from damage-centered inquiry of marginalized communities toward desire-centered research that adds both dignity and complexity to ways that the lives of these individuals are characterized. To do so, we have illustrated how educational environments of status become spaces of both intended and unwitting opportunity (e.g., leveraged marginality) when combined with the agency of students who are multiply-marginalized. The standard pathways navigation food insecurity narrative is that students try to make their way through college but hit points of resource crises and are harmed by them in terms of decreased academic performance, social and organizational engagement, mental and physical wellness, and persistence (Henry, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2020). This narrative, although often employed toward the virtuous ends of holding systems accountable, often over-simplifies student pathways navigation through college. By drawing the attention of scholars and practitioners only to the struggles of marginalized students, this approach misses the ways that students employ the assets of their social and cultural backgrounds *from* these spaces of marginality to manage resources and opportunities toward their desired ends (hooks, 1990).

Further, prior pathways research often emphasizes the “ruts” or predictable channels that students fall into that align pre-college demographics and experiences with in-college decisions and outcomes (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Jack, 2019). Although highlighting these predictable pathways is valuable, it can also suggest that demographics are social destiny, where pre-college social strata align students with nearly inevitable collegiate social groupings and professional outcomes. We do not contest that demographic factors often do encourage students to follow cultural expectations indicative of pre-college socialization (such as the “party pathway” noted by Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). However, our research also suggests that in college environments flush with resources and engagement expectancy the sorts of bright and motivated students these universities admit are often opportunistic when it comes to merging the physiological press of basic needs, the contextual pressure for extensive involvement, and their own ways of navigating environments as marginalized persons.

The role of the *bricoleur* and its verb form *bricolage* offer concepts for understanding the intersection of marginalization, assets, and environmental navigation in ways that maintain the complexity of student decision-making. Anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (1962) employed these terms to explain how individuals in one setting appropriate cultural meaning and artifacts toward other ends. A bricoleur is a kind of handy person, but one recognized for their ability to take the materials available and repurpose them for alternative ends: “His [sic] universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’ . . .” (1962, p. 11). The bricoleur is contrasted with the engineer, who has the full set of specialized tools and materials available for any task. In comparison, the bricoleur is “pre-

constrained” (p. 12), always working in reference to the limitations of what can be accessed.

As a mode of campus navigation, multiply-marginalized students in this study engaged in bricolage in response to the resources and constraints of their environment to meet their food needs. The boundedness of possible pathways management strategies that participants faced as persons who were estranged from various social, cultural, and financial aspects of the “typical” experience of their campus environments had the largely unintended effect of also facilitating imagination for otherwise unseen possibilities. That is, like the bricoleur, their field of possible choices was constrained but yet offered them intended and unintended resources out of which they strategically and serendipitously pieced together food solutions. Herein, we again point to hooks’ (1990) injunction that marginality offers a space of resistance and imagination. In other words, the vision and capacity to redeploy resources are themselves the assets of the bricoleur, seen in the behavior of multiply-marginalized participants. Two particular expressions of bricolage as pathways construction are noteworthy: leveraged marginality as navigational capital and harnessing intended and unintended resources.

Leveraging Marginality

All the students in this study experienced multiple forms of marginality (Table 1) as part of their socio-demographic and cultural identities generally and as a result of tacit institutional history, culture, policies, and practice. Viewed from the confluence of pathways navigation and an asset-based orientation, some of these students (i.e., Jill, Leah, Layla, Phillip, Valeria, Alec) used the positive attention gained by their social and organizational marginalization to access food and other resources. Through the adaptive strategy of leveraging marginality, students revealed and exploited the contradiction of their institutional desirability as part of a demographic prestige marker of diversity on one hand, and their peripherality as a demographic category subject to continued social, cultural, and financial exclusion by traditional systems of educational privilege on the other (Jack, 2019; Tough, 2019).

In the language of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) theory, leveraged marginality represents an innovative form of “navigational capital” (Yosso, 2005), or the “skills of maneuvering through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind” (p. 80). Students using leveraged marginality strategies recognized the contradiction that their systemic marginalization within higher education was also, at least situationally, a valued organizational commodity. In some cases, students deliberately capitalized on the experience of being simultaneously “othered” and valued, such as Alec’s job in student recruitment. This adaptive strategy points to the resourcefulness of marginalized students and indicates problematic systemic elements of normative privilege that make such navigational behaviors necessary.

Table 2
**The Campus Resource Landscape of Intended, Unintended,
 and Macro, Micro Systems**

	Macro Systems	Micro Systems
Intended Resources	Field-wide emphasis on increasing diverse student access to higher education.	Mentorship, scholarship, research, and internship programs for students from historically underrepresented groups.
Unintended Resources	Market emphases on retention and on-time graduation as prestige metrics.	Student organizations, programs, internships, and events that students use to access food.

Harnessing Intended and Unintended Resources

A focus on ways that navigational capital is used to leverage marginality by participants is particularly germane given the emphasis on pathways navigation in this study. Our application of the concept here highlights the dynamic tension between *macro systems* (elite higher education) imbued with structures of historic privilege and exclusion and *micro systems* (particular individuals, programs, or initiatives) where support and resources are provided. These two analytic levels can be further parsed through the categories of *intended resources*, or those meant to benefit students experiencing campus marginalization, and *unintended resources*, or those that were part of a resource rich environment meant to stimulate student engagement and involvement that our multiply-marginalized student participants learned to capitalize upon to meet food needs.

Navigational capital, in the context of this matrix of factors (Table 2), represents students' capacity to seize upon field-level trends toward access and equity (regardless of motivation) that manifest in particular programmatic ways, while also making use of resources intended to increase student involvement generally to meet educational and food needs. For example, Phillip made use of the MAO, founded for the advancement of racially marginalized students, to access mentorship, a work-study job, social connections, and free food. This matrix also offers an analytic tool to further investigate how particular student sub-populations enter and navigate through higher education institutions using pathways as designed and adapted to meet their particular goals.

Challenging Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Our emphasis on the ways that systemically marginalized students navigate pathways through an environment of opportunity as bricoleurs also

questions the preconceptions of stakeholders about the linear primacy of meeting basic needs before other needs. Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs (1943, 1971) is often invoked as a self-evident truism by scholars and activists (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 1996). Although scholars have recently questioned Maslow's original intentions and influences (Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020) his theory is commonly employed to assert human needs as a pyramid of sequential necessities, placing "lower level" basic needs (food, shelter) before "higher level" growth and self-actualization needs that are positioned at the top of the pyramid. Our study, however, challenges and complicates this assumption. For example, in some cases, students' pursuit of free food led to unintended educational benefits, suggesting that Maslow's hierarchical strata are permeable and interactive.

In other situations, students' strategic use of programmatic learning and development opportunities (e.g., organizations, internships, meeting with faculty and administrators) provided *for* their food needs *through* their marginalization, reflecting hooks' injunction about marginality as a "space of resistance . . . and imagination (1990, p. 150). These advantageous situations also occurred when participants engaged the opportunity-laden environment, such as joining student organization meetings (e.g., exposure to new cultures and foods), engaging with academics (e.g., symposia that included food), and pursuing pre-professional opportunities (e.g., internships where coffee, snacks, and meals were provided). As such, pathways to meeting basic needs occurred as a result of meeting personal and academic self-actualization goals, often as those systemically marginalized. These strategies functionally flipped the Maslowian pyramid, placing activities of self-actualization at the bottom as the priority and basic needs toward the top, either met in the process or ignored for the sake of maximizing the college experience. The widespread manifestation of opportunity seeking leading to food and food seeking leading to educational engagement across our diverse participants suggests that this finding is more than an isolated outlier experience. Although from an administrative perspective meeting students' basic needs should be viewed as an urgent priority, from a student perspective, engaging in the "goods" of the educational environment was not forestalled by a lack of food. The complexity of student decision-making and navigation from the organizational cultural periphery, then, in addition to being "idiosyncratic" (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014), may in some cases reflect the impossible confluence of systemic factors that simultaneously provide for and deny resources, and marginalized students' oscillation between meeting basic needs and seizing on opportunities.

Navigational Hazards

Despite these moments of opportunistic and strategic navigation, engaging in bricolage came with costs and liabilities, producing critical questions for

universities generally and competitive universities specifically. The piecemeal navigation employed by our participants was attached to the occasional cost of gaps between extraordinary opportunities for personal and professional development and the thin margins of everyday life. This phenomenon was reflected in Gina's and Gavin's stories of "boom and bust" between conference and retreat experiences followed quickly by a return to campus and the daily struggle for food. In other, more mundane moments, strategic navigation attempts were thwarted by organizations that failed to deliver, as Phillip described, leaving students to scramble.

The aim of this paper is neither to simply valorize university administrators for creating programs to support marginalized students, nor to demonize them for their complicity in perpetuating campus environments where gaps between resources jeopardize students' potential success, however students define it. Still, this study does suggest that aspects of both assessments are valid and raises questions about the boundedness of pathways and forced decision points that result. Targeted support programs may undermine student goals if not accompanied by resources that meet food, social, academic, and other needs. At a macro level, the proliferation of targeted but largely isolated programs or centers for identity sub-populations may indicate expanded access to advantageous "preferred pathways" through college (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). However, they might instead create cultural "work-arounds" that keep marginalized students at the periphery and largely preserve mechanisms of privilege. Universities eager to expand access would do well to reflect on whether new programs result in structural changes that increase access to the opportunities of the environment or segment the resources—and thus the potential pathways—available for historically underrepresented populations in ways that exacerbate marginality, just in a new form. In other words, bricolage may be a beneficial strategic student behavior in a space of opportunity and constraint, but, from an administrative perspective, it represents a failure of resource distribution and structural accessibility.

Insights About Asset-Based Approaches and Collegiate Food Insecurity

Our findings supplement and suggest directions for the development of the sub-genre of asset-based research. Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) studies, in particular, highlight forms of "capital" or internal personal and community-based resources of Students of Color, including aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005). CCW resists framing Communities of Color as deficient and points to resources Student of Color bring with them to the college environment that may be otherwise unrecognized.

Despite Yosso's (2005) original emphasis on both community resources and community outcomes and benefits, the rich variety of subsequent CCW scholarship has tended to emphasize the individual benefits of these forms

Table 3

Examples of Community cultural Wealth as Individual and Community Benefits

	Individual Benefits	Community Benefits
Familial Capital	Met own food needs through cooking skills gained from family socialization. (Miranda)	Learned frugal cooking skills from family, shared food with roommates and friends. (Miranda, Gavin)
Social Capital	Built relationships with marginalized food service workers, yielded access to free and reduced cost food. (Chelsea, Phillip)	Built relationships with admins and students running diversity-focused events with free food, shared with community. (Vera)
Navigational Capital	Leveraged social identities to gain access to scholarships, graduate admissions, and organizations that provide food. (Phillip, Leah, Gavin, Miranda, Valeria)	Attended meetings, created group schedules to gather free food to share with community. (Phillip; Vera)

of capital (Liou et al., 2016; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Whitehead, 2019). Our findings reveal how multiply-marginalized students leveraged forms of capital not only to the benefit of their own food needs but also for the good of others similarly situated. Consequently, we propose that CCW researchers extend their conceptualization of capital to focus not only on *forms* but also on *benefactors*. Thought of in this way, bricolage is often a community-oriented activity. Visually, such an approach creates a matrix with categories that highlight outcomes for the individual as well as for a student’s communities and families, be they biological or fictive (Table 3). Given the centrality of a collective orientation of many Communities of Color (Garcia, 2018), such a shift would more fully acknowledge the ways in which both the process and outcomes of higher education are directed toward the benefit of the “we” as well as the “me.” Table 3 suggests how such an emphasis might look visually. In the context of this study, students such as Vera and Phillip used their navigational and social capital to gain access to surplus food that they enthusiastically shared with other multiply-marginalized students in need. We encourage researchers to consider this additional lens as they develop scholarship using CCW frameworks.

Marginality, Advocacy, and Resistance

Several participants found that an unexpected product of their intersecting basic needs and social marginality was that they became unintended

experts and advocates. Prior research critiques predominantly White organizations and majority individuals for relying on individuals who are oppressed and marginalized to function as their “teachers” (Tatum, 2017). In some cases, participants actively sought out these roles (e.g., Alejandra speaking at her high school); in other cases they occurred serendipitously (e.g., Vera’s conversation with an African Studies professor). In many situations, the complexity of advocacy as a multiply-marginalized person, as Alec pointed out, was that it produced both opportunities for additional visibility and potential “othering” by majority individuals.

In another sense, these situations of advocacy can be characterized as forms of *resistance capital* (Yosso, 2005) within a normatively affluent and aspirational university environment. As individuals who identified with multiple forms of marginality—including basic food needs—in a campus space of abundance, advocacy functioned as an act of rejecting the normative presumption that all students have their basic needs met. Solorzano and Bernal (2001), advance the concept of “transformational resistance.” Transformational resistance, in contrast to self-defeating and conformist resistance, engages in a critique of oppression and dominant normative systems out of a desire for social justice and structural change. Students such as Anali, Layla, Vera, Lucas, and Gavin used their pathways navigation through college to advocate for just access to food on campus. However, their strategic and selective management decisions—using resources in ways not intended (e.g., collecting and redistributing food from organization meetings) while pursuing personal goals—represent a form of resistance to the normative campus expectations of the debt-burdened room/board college construct. Further, participants’ willingness to speak from their experiential knowledge of campus resources that may not be widely publicized due to institutional misgivings about image both highlights their plight as antithetical to university aims of student equity and success and de-stigmatizes student use of food resources.

Conclusions and Implications

This study of students who are both multiply-marginalized based on demographic social categories and by their struggle with the cost of food draws attention to previously undocumented methods for navigating campus environments of privilege and affluence. By focusing on “pathways navigation” as strategic decision points where opportunity and resource management take place, we emphasize an anti-deficit approach that points to ways that these students leverage relationships with peers, faculty, administrators, and hourly employees of similar backgrounds, to meet their basic food needs while pursuing their social, academic, and professional goals.

This study also draws attention to the larger systemic question of whether increased efforts at student access and equity, from a student pathways

navigation perspective, actually expands the range of possible “mainstream” routes through college, or simply creates cultural “work-arounds” via supportive but peripheral minority-serving organizations. The piecemeal nature of these offices and helpful persons may, as a result, keep these students at the institutional fringes, placing them at risk due to gaps in resources and supports, as we observed with Gavin and Gina. Students such as Phillip, Anali, Vera, and others found these programs to be essential points of solidarity and anchors of belonging in a campus environment that did not otherwise feel “for” them. However, such efforts may also serve to isolate and functionally “track” students rather than engaging them in a multitude of “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) that expand valuable social network connections that are not typically produced by involvement in identity-focused organizations (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014). Lee and LaDousa (2015) emphasize that power and marginality are not simply functions of one’s historic marginality but also the mechanisms of the privilege to which one has access in college. The ways our participants experienced and navigated their universities as locations of opportunity and exclusion, specifically for them, affirms this observation, challenging practitioners to continue the hard work of problematizing the “normal” of their campuses from a lens of power and privilege.

Finally, this study points to the value of “student pathways” and “pathways navigation” as concepts that facilitate a focus on the ways that students make advantageous use of environmental opportunities as they pursue individually-defined goals despite obstacles. Beginning with a pathways focus can forestall the centering of institutional priorities (e.g., “success metrics”) in favor of a deeper understanding of the processes through which students make sense of, prioritize, and assemble their own steps through higher education, despite, or even because of, the constraints faced.

Returning to the quote that opened the paper, the multiply-marginalized students in this study exemplify bell hooks’ entreaty to see marginality as a space of “radical possibility . . . resistance . . . from which to create, to imagine alternatives. . .” (1990, p. 150). The creation of new navigational possibilities is precisely the outcome of multiply-marginalized students as bricoleurs: harnessing non-traditional forms of capital in combination with traditional organizational structures and resources to respond to the environmental constraints in ways that provide both food and educational opportunity.

Recommendations

Given the insights about campus navigation and food access from this study, practical, structural, and cultural recommendations are important to consider. Practically, the demands of campus navigation and involvement make prioritizing student convenience over administrative convenience paramount. Although food pantries have become the solution both *de facto* and *de jure* on college campuses, unless they are positioned where students can


easily reach them geographically—such as central to campus and near bus routes—are stocked sufficiently, and are open during hours that dovetail with student schedules, the goal of promoting equal access to the benefits of the university will be hampered. In terms of forming a suite of food supports, students experiencing food insecurity seldom have a voice in these structures or processes (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019). Learning from and about the campus navigation tactics of students is essential to designing aid that students will actually utilize. Part of the bricolage of campus food navigation is the savvy ways students solved their own access issues by harnessing social media, such as GroupMe and Twitter (X), to alert peers about situational free food. Promoting and facilitating what students are already doing is an easy and important step for administrators.

Structural barriers also shape students' experiences with food insecurity. Food and housing prices and logistical challenges are intertwined (Brotton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Housing costs create barriers to easy and frequent access to campus, altering available opportunities for campus engagement and food. Reducing reliance on residence and dining halls as a source of university revenue would increase both student access to campus engagement opportunities and student presence on campus. Although not a financial option for many colleges, selective affluent universities can make this an attainable goal, at least for the housing costs of low-income students. Working with local authorities to place bus stops at grocery stores for students who live away from campus would also reduce the housing "poor tax" of inconvenience.

Because opportunity is so important to the desirability of these universities, barriers to participation in research, internships, and study abroad need to be reduced by making sure on-campus student worker positions pay a competitive wage and offer flexible hours. Additionally, creating low-income student organizations or food insecurity-specific organizations would help anchor students' low-income identities with administrative support and mentorship.

Although food and structural interventions are necessary, competitive universities must also engage in the hard work of increasing socio-economic diversity and valuing student strengths from working-class backgrounds (Ardoin, 2018), rather than viewing them primarily in terms of an economic liability. Universities of this type sometimes struggle to move beyond the rhetoric of inclusion and diversity, in part due to long histories of entrenched upper-middle class socio-economic normativity (Tough, 2019), reflected in part by the predominance of a Maslowian orientation that defines low-income students in damage-centric ways rather than as imaginative creators capable of pursuing their goals despite basic needs obstacles. Valuing and increasing student socio-economic diversity requires difficult and ongoing cultural work at diversifying staff hiring (Museus & Mueller, 2018), reforming admissions practices that focus mostly on high-yield college prep schools (Stevens, 2007), and student life structures that assume abundant financial resources (Ardoin, 2018), if meaningful change is to occur.

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Alleman et al.

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