

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Serendipity or strategy? The college housing search and inequality

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## Abstract

Housing arrangements provide the foundation for social life and interaction in college. However, we know little about how students locate housing opportunities. This study contributes to the literature on housing, search strategies, and class inequality during college by examining how students search for housing. Based on interviews with 40 undergraduate students across three universities, we find that socioeconomically disadvantaged students primarily pursued formal channels in their housing search, including official websites and requests for tours, which limited their options for locating housing. In contrast, socioeconomically advantaged students relied on informal channels to locate and secure housing, such as help from friends, family, and organizations passing down housing, which provided access to off-campus housing within walking distance of campus. Although socioeconomically advantaged students and students with organizational connections learned about housing search strategies from others in their networks, students who relied on informal channels attributed their housing outcomes to luck. By attributing outcomes like inheriting a house through an organization to serendipity, students underestimated the salience of economic, cultural, and social resources in the housing search. This study adds to existing literature by illuminating the role of divergent housing search strategies in reifying class inequality among undergraduate students during college.

## KEYWORDS

class, cultural resources, housing, inequality, networks, social resources, students

## INTRODUCTION

Housing is central to students' lives in college, providing a place to rest, study, and find privacy while at university (Bozick, 2007). Yet, acquiring a place to live begins with a search. To gather information about housing, college students may utilize formal channels, such as official websites, as well as informal channels, such as help from family members, friends, or organizations. While it is possible that search plans are strategic—or intentionally derived in pursuit of housing—students may also learn about housing in ways that are

serendipitous or unanticipated (McDonald, 2010; Small, 2009). Like other renters, students may discover housing opportunities or narrow their housing options based on information shared within their networks (Krysan & Crowder, 2017; LaBriola, 2023).

Precarity has become a central feature of college life for students (Silver, 2024). With increasing housing costs in recent years, college students may encounter expensive housing markets and use various strategies to search for places to live. However, we know little about how they navigate the housing search. Existing evidence suggests that students' experiences within organizations in college may shape

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decisions about where to live (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2018). Class origin—including whether their parents attended college, how much their families earn, and whether family members provide ongoing financial support to them during college—may inform the housing search as well (e.g., van Stee, 2023).

Young adults from affluent backgrounds benefit from various forms of resource transfers that may shape housing access, such as intergenerational transfers or other financial support (Killewald et al., 2017; Rauscher, 2016). Families with economic resources often finance college tuition, living expenses, and costs associated with extracurricular and social activities, while first-generation students and those living independently from their parents may work during college to finance living expenses (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, college students from affluent families depended on parents for housing support (van Stee, 2023).

Beyond economic resources, continuing-generation family members convey cultural resources to young adults by transmitting knowledge about college processes (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack & Black, 2024; Laemmler et al., 2022; Mullen, 2010; Wright et al., 2023). Transmission of knowledge occurs during college as well. Research suggests that university programs and organizational memberships can shape students' perceptions of support (Stuber, 2009; Thiele & Gillespie, 2017). For instance, after obtaining support from organizations like fraternities or sororities, socioeconomically advantaged students tend to live with others from similar economic backgrounds both on and off campus (Hamilton et al., 2018).

In contrast to socioeconomically advantaged students, disadvantaged college students often experience self-reliance and autonomy in college (Roksa et al., 2020; Roksa & Silver, 2019). This self-reliance may shape their strategies for resource acquisition during college (van Stee, 2023). For instance, working-class students rely on formal channels for identifying internship and employment opportunities and may be less likely to obtain support through social ties (Jack & Bassett, 2024; Stuber, 2011). These class-stratified processes for acquiring work opportunities shape extra-academic life in college.

Housing also reflects an important extra-academic aspect of college life. However, the processes through which students locate housing are unclear. While class-based dynamics may shape the acquisition of housing, as they have for internship and employment opportunities (Jack & Bassett, 2024; Stuber, 2011), few studies directly investigate how college students navigate the housing search and acquire housing (Hamilton et al., 2018; van Stee et al., 2024).

This study examines how college students search for housing and how their approaches are stratified by class. Drawing on interviews with 40 undergraduate students across three universities, we find that reliance on formal channels, such as official websites, was more common among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, most of whom navigated the housing search on their own. In contrast, socioeconomically advantaged students accessed informal channels—including help from family, friends, and organizational affiliates—to

locate and secure housing, often emulating housing decisions among those within their networks. For instance, students learned about door-knocking and acquired houses through personal or organizational ties. Some socioeconomically disadvantaged students with organizational ties also acquired housing information through informal channels. Despite their reliance on networks to acquire housing search strategies, students who used informal channels for locating housing information attributed their housing outcomes to luck. Students who attributed housing outcomes to luck underestimated economic, cultural, and network-based advantages in the housing search.

Contributing to existing knowledge about how class inequalities manifest in college, our findings suggest that cultural and social resources are central to students' housing search strategies. We argue that these resources can be acquired and marshaled to advantage students, most of whom are white and from affluent families, in the housing search. Differences in cultural knowledge and network-based resources create divergent levels of access to housing, with socioeconomically disadvantaged students—who rely on publicly available information—often opting to continue to live on campus. Overall, the study elucidates class-stratified processes through which students access and utilize information about housing, identifying the housing search as a source of class inequality during college.

## The housing search

Acquiring a place to call home begins with a search. Decisions about where to live are economic—based on ability to finance housing—and social—based on interactions with others, media, and institutions, which inform prospective tenants' housing decisions early in the search process (Krysan & Crowder, 2017). The housing options available within tenants' networks can shape perceptions of potential neighborhoods and future treatment in those spaces (Krysan & Crowder, 2017; LaBriola, 2023). Renters navigating expensive housing markets often feel stuck living in structurally inadequate housing or move in with friends or relatives (Luhr, 2025).

With rising housing costs in recent years, college students are also exposed to expensive housing markets that limit opportunities for financing a place to live. In general, precarity has become a central feature of college life for students (Silver, 2024). College housing pathways may reflect existing class stratification given that students tend to live with others from similar economic backgrounds in on-campus dorms and off-campus Greek housing (Hamilton et al., 2018). College students may also decide where to live and how to locate housing differently by socioeconomic background, such as whether their parents attended college, how much their families earn, and whether family members provide ongoing financial support to them during college (e.g., van Stee, 2023). However, few studies have directly examined the housing search among undergraduate students and the extent to which housing pathways and search strategies are class stratified.

## Classed experiences in college

Class shapes various aspects of students' college experiences, beginning with the transition to college. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds often experience an indirect path to college, with interruptions or delays in degree completion, while advantaged students tend to experience a direct and unquestioned path to deciding whether to attend college, what to study, and where to live (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Mullen, 2010). Students from continuing-generation families may experience more streamlined decision-making due to their ability to replicate their parents' decisions (Mullen, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2023).

Reliance on family during college also varies by class (Hamilton et al., 2018). Through providing housing or financing it, affluent families elicit a private safety net for young adults in the transition to college and during uncertain times in college (van Stee et al., 2024). College students from affluent families display greater dependence on parents' financial support, while students from less affluent families experience autonomy as a norm (Roksa & Silver, 2019; van Stee, 2023). For instance, compared to first-generation students with college-educated siblings, those without college-educated siblings were less likely to communicate with parents about academic or social struggles (Roksa et al., 2020). Overall, students from economically marginalized backgrounds often experience self-reliance and navigate college on their own (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021).

Class divisions are evident in other aspects of college life, such as extracurricular activities. Specifically, continuing-generation students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds exhibit a pattern of strategic selection of extracurricular activities and an enduring sense of belonging in extracurricular outlets such as clubs or organizations (Silver, 2020). In contrast, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds display lower levels of engagement in extracurriculars, social scenes, and student-based peer group involvement (Ferguson & Lareau, 2021; Mullen, 2010; Roksa et al., 2020; Stuber, 2011). For first-generation college students, limited integration in extracurricular and social activities may be explained by their higher likelihood of working to pay for tuition, fees, and living expenses and their tendency to work more hours per week compared to continuing-generation students (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Lower levels of engagement with extracurriculars may also reflect different cultural strategies for navigating college life, as economically disadvantaged students utilize a more autonomous approach (Roksa et al., 2020; Roksa & Silver, 2019).

## Cultural resources and help-seeking strategies

Theories about cultural resources provide a lens to explain class differences in students' approaches to educational environments (Bourdieu, 1986). Specifically, cultural capital refers to the knowledge, expertise, and preferences that display our social

class position (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural knowledge, as a form of cultural capital, equips privileged families to engage in help-seeking behaviors that foster entitlement to resources and opportunities (Lareau, 2015).

We know from previous research that cultural knowledge related to help-seeking, including asking for help, can be socialized through an active process of teaching and learning (Calarco, 2014a; Jack, 2016). While students from middle-class backgrounds may feel entitled to request help or accommodations in school, students from working-class backgrounds often express constraint and take responsibility for their outcomes, opting to find answers rather than ask for assistance (Calarco, 2014a). These entitlement and constraint behaviors present in K-12 settings can continue into college. For example, socioeconomically advantaged students use negotiation strategies to benefit their academics (Scherer, 2022).

Families provide a source of cultural knowledge (Lareau, 2011), but other contexts like schools and organizations may play a role in accumulating cultural knowledge as well (Jack, 2016; Mullen, 2010; Stuber, 2009). A plethora of studies acknowledge that students from disadvantaged backgrounds acquire dominant forms of cultural capital through environments outside of family or over time through changing social locations (Curl et al., 2018; Ivemark & Ambrose, 2021; Rivera, 2016). Jack (2016) argues that help-seeking strategies are learned, with high school environments shaping engagement approaches by class.

## Social resources and search strategies

Social resources are central to college life as they form the infrastructure for social interaction (Budhiraja, 2023). Derived through networks, social resources include tools for how to obtain information and how to put information into action (Stuber, 2011), often depending on the contexts in which network connections are embedded (Small, 2009). In the college context, existing studies shed light on how students mobilize social resources when searching for internships and jobs. For example, Stuber (2011) finds that while more affluent students use social resources to access internships, working-class students are more likely to rely on formal channels for identifying internship opportunities.

Other studies indicate socioeconomic differences in job candidates' search strategies that could apply to housing. Economically disadvantaged candidates and candidates of color often rely on formal mechanisms for job and internship acquisition (Royster, 2003; Western & Sirois, 2019). In contrast, privileged job seekers tend to utilize informal channels through which they benefit from unsolicited information and serendipitous encounters (McDonald, 2010). Job seekers often underestimate the impact of social resources and attribute their employment outcomes to luck, which masks the influence of social group membership in the search (McDonald, 2010). This suggests that seemingly random interactions with others can facilitate access to useful information (McDonald, 2010). Moreover, these interactions are often embedded within organizations,

whereby unanticipated connections yield access to various resources (Small, 2009). However, the processes shaping housing search strategies among college students are unclear.

## The current study

Consistent with previous studies, we shift our focus from the possession of capital to the ways in which students exercise their knowledge and networks within the housing search. Specifically, we draw on Calarco's (2014b) concept of interpretive moments, defined as situations in which "ambiguous expectations prompt conscious interpretation" (p. 186). These instances of ambiguity often reveal class differences in behavior because students rely on approaches most comfortable to them when deciding whether to ask for help (Calarco, 2014a). Interpretive moments may be present in the housing search, especially if college students encounter ambiguity in available housing options or information.

Existing evidence suggests that ambiguity surrounding opportunities during college can reinforce class inequality. For example, limited university-led guidance for securing campus employment evokes class-stratified search strategies among students (Jack & Bassett, 2024). Specifically, working-class students rely on formal channels for identifying internship and employment opportunities and may be less likely to obtain support from others compared to affluent students (Jack & Bassett, 2024; Stuber, 2011).

While it is possible that college students employ class-distinctive search strategies in the housing search, few studies directly investigate housing acquisition among undergraduate students. This study seeks to add to existing literature by examining college students' housing search strategies, potential class differences, and implications for inequality. We also explore connections between cultural and social resources, examining the extent to which they may reinforce each other in the housing search (Stuber, 2009). Specifically, this study seeks to answer two research questions: First, how do students search for housing? Second, how do students' housing search strategies differ by class?

## DATA AND METHOD

### Context, recruitment, and data collection

We recruited 40 undergraduate students from three urban flagship universities in the South and Midwest. The universities are situated in three different medium-sized cities with greater than 20,000 undergraduate students. All of the universities are public and considered predominantly white institutions, or PWIs. The universities have socioeconomically diverse student bodies, as approximately 65% of undergraduate students receive some form of need-based financial aid, 20% are eligible for the Pell Grant, and 15%–20% are first-generation. Across the three universities, a majority of students live off campus in non-university housing.

These universities are ideal sites to study housing search strategies among college students. First, since none of the universities are known as commuter schools, most students live on campus or reside within a few miles of campus in a rented apartment, townhouse, house, or Greek housing. Second, the universities offer the same housing pathways available to students. While they require that students live on campus for their first year, students have the option of moving off campus for their second year. With some variation, Greek life is part of the social scene for all campuses, with 11%–22% of undergraduate students becoming members of fraternities or sororities.

Average rental prices ranged from \$1850 to \$2300 per month per unit across the selected cities. Local off-campus rent prices varied depending on the number of roommates, distance to campus, and the age and type of dwellings. For example, fewer roommates generated higher rent amounts per student, especially for apartments, while double occupancy rooms or smaller rooms in rental houses offered opportunities for lower rent prices. With regard to age and distance to campus, compared to older housing units and housing farther from campus, newer housing units and close proximity to campus required higher rent prices.

Participant recruitment began in the spring of 2023 and extended through the spring of 2024. Initially, we recruited via social media posts in student housing groups affiliated with targeted universities. However, this facilitated little participant interest. Thus, we began to recruit students through a randomized collection of undergraduate students' email addresses provided through institutional data requests. We targeted students from various majors and emailed students on a rolling basis. Recruitment emails included details about the study and a link to book a time slot for an interview. Once booked, each participant received a copy of the consent form with the interview confirmation, as well as a Zoom invitation for their selected time.

Data collection involved one-time, remote, audio-only interviews using Zoom, conducted by one of the members of the research team. Semi-structured interview questions explored students' experiences with navigating on- and off-campus housing. Specifically, we asked participants to describe how they gathered information about housing, with probes for friends, family, social media, organizations, and official websites.

At the conclusion of the interviews, students were asked to verbally complete a questionnaire to collect information about their background characteristics. The questionnaire included financial aid status, employment status, monthly income, monthly family support, race, ethnicity, gender, hometown, and preferred geographic region after college, as well as parents' or guardians' gross annual income and highest level of education.

### Sample characteristics

The sample includes undergraduate students from first year through fourth year across a variety of majors. The majority of the sample

**TABLE 1** Sample characteristics.

Gender	
Cisgender women	18 (45.0%)
cisgender men	11 (27.5%)
Transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary	11 (27.5%)
Race	
White	21 (52.5%)
Asian	6 (15.0%)
Middle Eastern or North African	4 (10.0%)
Hispanic	3 (7.50%)
Black	3 (7.50%)
Multiracial	2 (5.00%)
Native American	1 (2.50%)
Ethnicity	
Non-hispanic	35 (87.50%)
Hispanic	5 (12.50%)
Financial aid status	
Receives financial aid	25 (62.50%)
Does not receive financial aid	15 (37.50%)
Socioeconomic status	
Advantaged	18 (45.00%)
Disadvantaged	22 (55.00%)
Employed	25 (62.50%)
Median monthly income from student's employment ( <i>n</i> = 25)	\$850
Median family annual household income ( <i>n</i> = 34)	\$105K

(52.5%) lived off campus, and the remainder of the students (47.5%) lived on campus. Most students who lived on campus at the time of their interview also spoke about their experiences looking for off-campus housing since they anticipated the potential need or desire to move off campus in the coming year. Other on-campus students were included in the sample to gain their perspective on available housing options and strategies used in their on-campus housing search.

**Table 1** presents participants' demographic characteristics. The sample is racially diverse, and more than one-quarter of students in the sample identify as transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary. Parents' gross annual incomes ranged from \$25,000 to \$1,100,000, with a median household income of \$105,000. While most students in the sample were not the first in their family to attend college, 63% of the sample received some form of financial aid, and 20% received the Pell Grant, which is federally based financial aid for students from low-income families. In terms of employment, 58% of students in the sample worked part-time, one student worked full-time, and the remainder of the sample did not have paid employment. Students with employment averaged 8–13 hours of work per week for a median total of \$850 in monthly income. Students worked in a variety of jobs, such as writing consultants, research assistants, restaurant staff, baristas, babysitters, and sales or retail.

To streamline our class categories, we categorized students as either socioeconomically advantaged or socioeconomically disadvantaged based on a combination of factors, including financial aid status, first-generation status, family financial support, employment status, and family's gross annual household income. We prioritized students' financial aid status and first-generation status such that students who received the Pell Grant or identified as first-generation were assigned to the disadvantaged group. In addition to receiving financial aid, the 22 students categorized as disadvantaged often worked part-time and received little or no financial support from family. In contrast, the 18 students categorized as advantaged had comparatively fewer work hours and higher monthly financial allowances from family. From our sample, 60%–66% of the students at two of the universities were considered disadvantaged, while 33% of the students at the third university were considered disadvantaged. Of the three universities in our study, the urban area in which the third is situated has the highest cost of living. Despite socioeconomic variation between universities and cities, our analysis reveals consistent housing search strategies.

### Analytic strategy

We coded and analyzed data using the flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2021). Using this approach, we transformed full interview transcripts into grouped codes. For the first step of analysis, we created an analogous code for each interview question. For example, we indexed students' responses on whether they drew on official websites, friends, family, organizations, and social media as sources for housing information, which we coded as yes or no. For the next round of coding, we created codes with ties to existing literature. To capture search strategies from previous literature, we used codes such as strategic selection (Silver, 2020)—referring to intentionally deriving strategies to choose housing—and experience-motivated replication—referring to emulating housing decisions based on their own or others' experiences (Rhodes et al., 2023).

We used multiple stages of memos to identify emergent themes from the coding process. Initially, we developed respondent-level memos to create context for and organize students' experiences. We created emergent codes, including social ties, relationships with family, partners, ability to pay, and social progression. Then, we initiated a final coding step to capture an additional line of emergent analysis from previous rounds of coding. These codes were (1) formal channels, (2) informal channels, and (3) luck or serendipity.

Finally, we generated NVivo queries based on codes related to formal channels, informal channels, and luck or serendipity. For this analysis, we used these codes to compose analytic memos and check for disconfirming evidence. No university-based differences in housing search strategies emerged during coding. In the analysis that follows, we have redacted identifiable information about participants, universities, and cities. All names are gender-neutral pseudonyms.

## RESULTS

In this analysis, we examine students' formal and informal approaches to searching for housing. While formal channels included official websites and requests for tours, informal channels included help from family, friends, and co-members of organizations. We find that reliance on formal channels was more common among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while socioeconomically advantaged students described greater reliance on informal channels to locate and secure housing. However, a few socioeconomically disadvantaged students with ties to organizations or other networks also used informal channels in the housing search. Despite reliance on friends, family, or organizations for housing insights, students who utilized informal channels in their search attributed their housing outcomes to luck or serendipitous encounters.

Figure 1 summarizes common housing pathways for students across the universities. Students were required to reside on campus

for the first year of college. After the first year, they chose on-campus dorms, off-campus apartments, rental houses, or Greek houses. However, students' housing pathways were stratified by class. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students lived on campus for multiple years or pursued budget apartments with longer commutes to campus. In contrast, most socioeconomically advantaged students moved off campus in their second year, following a distinct path to an apartment or Greek house and eventually a rental house or townhouse, typically within walking distance of campus.

Exceptions to these classed pathways appear shaded in Figure 1. Four socioeconomically disadvantaged students acquired housing information through social networks, and one advantaged student with lacking social and cultural resources relied on formal channels and remained on campus for all years of college. These findings highlight the importance of acquired cultural knowledge and network-based resources for college students' housing acquisition.

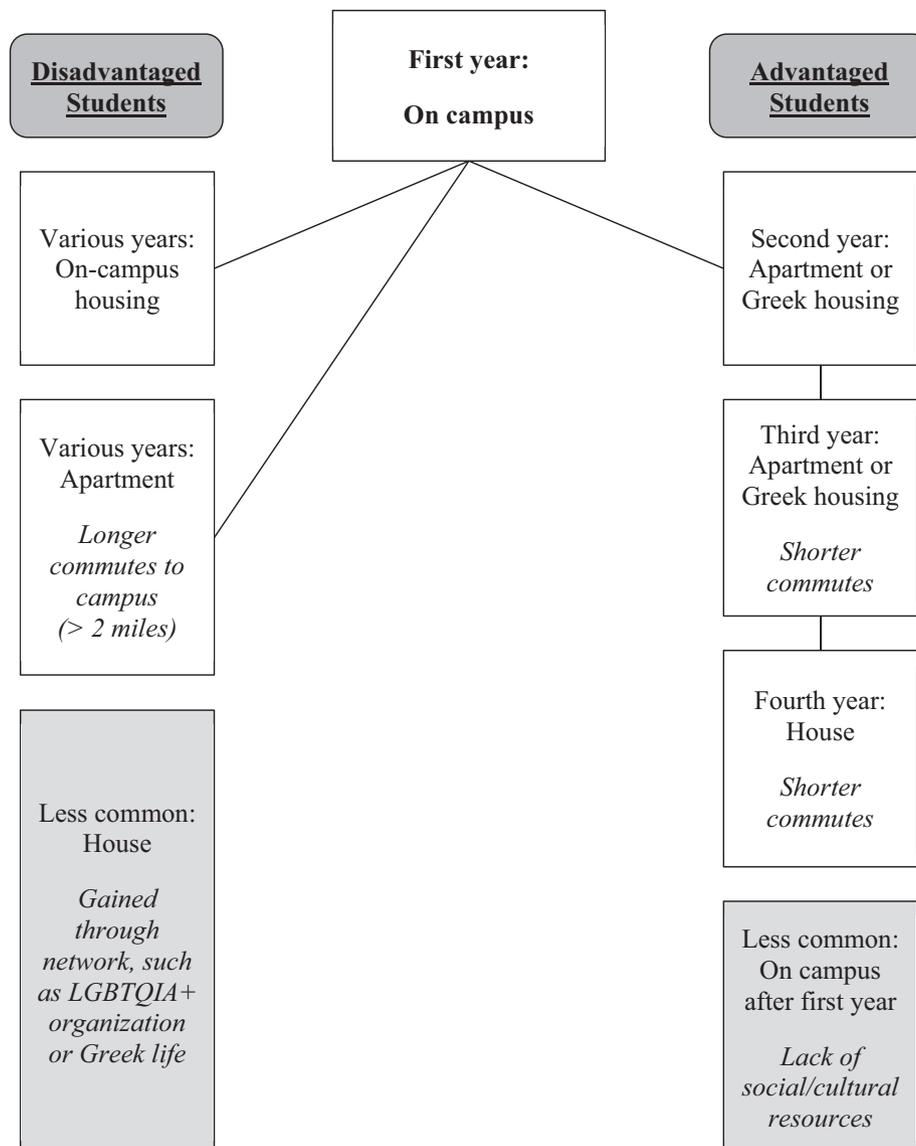


FIGURE 1 Students' housing pathways by socioeconomic background.

In the following section, we begin with a discussion of students' use of formal channels in the housing search. Next, we examine students' use of informal channels and, finally, their emphasis on luck, serendipity, or randomness in explaining outcomes of the housing search.

### **“I will get more information from a website”: Students' formal search for housing**

In their housing search, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds relied on formal channels such as websites or direct contact with landlords. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students conveyed self-reliance in the housing search, noting a lack of university guidance regarding off-campus housing. They described the need to strategically search for housing by mapping various residences and mitigating concerns about quality through tours. Students also emphasized the limitations of formal channels alone for locating housing.

### **“It was up to me”: Self-reliance and use of official websites to locate housing**

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students drew on formal websites for housing support. When asked whether they contacted friends for information about housing, Scout described reliance on official websites:

Scout [socioeconomically disadvantaged, Hispanic, and non-binary]: No, I didn't really talk to them to get information. There's no particular reason as to why. I don't know why. *I just felt like I will get more information from a website*, because they can tell me specifics. I have to see if it's within my budget and everything.

Interviewer: Okay, what about family members? Did you gather information about housing through family members?

Scout: No ... I'm not really close to my family. I don't really have much contact with them. [...] *I'm just an adult. And like I was able to decide for myself where I wanted to live and make these decisions based on my financial situation and all the preferences I would like in housing. It was up to me*, basically.

Scout attributed their reliance on formal channels to their adult status. Without help from family or friends, Scout navigated housing on their own by relying on official websites. They acknowledged the need to take into account their financial situation as well.

Other students, like Skylar, perceived self-reliance as necessary in the housing search and used a web-based search for housing. He explained the experience of having to “Google housing [...] just search through” to gather housing information:

Skylar [socioeconomically disadvantaged white man]: The biggest issue was we felt like *we were just kind of thrown to the side. We have to figure it out ourselves*. As far as I noticed, there weren't a lot of great resources from [the university] or finding other alternative housing options. So we had to find those options ourselves. [...] We mostly just had to go to Google housing close to campus apartments and just search through those, and hope that we found one that met our needs, which really I wouldn't say necessarily did, at least on the financial side. [...] We didn't feel like we had much choice.

Referring to housing, Sylar described having “to figure it out ourselves.” Other students attributed their autonomous approach to lacking university-based support regarding off-campus housing. For example, Dani described the lack of university support that contributed to her need for self-reliance:

Dani [socioeconomically disadvantaged Hispanic woman]: [The university] didn't really give us anything. I guess when they opened up their own housing application for the next school year—it's basically recommended to find another sort of living [off campus]. And yeah, like, they don't really give us the resources on what websites to trust and whatnot. How do we know it's real? How do we know it's false? But they just, I guess, in a way, *let us fend for ourselves*.

Dani discussed the autonomy with which she navigated housing on her own, considering the lack of information about trustworthy websites when searching for off-campus housing.

### **“I started making plans”: Strategically searching and mitigating concerns about quality**

Searching for housing was a time-intensive process for students, including identifying listings, calling potential properties, and requesting tours. Various students noted the intensity and attention to detail involved with self-searching, but disadvantaged students approached the housing search by strategically comparing prices and locations for available units. Reese described the process of documenting housing units based on information available online:

Reese [socioeconomically disadvantaged white woman]: *I started making plans, writing down prices*

before the school year even started, because I knew how fast units were going to be taken out.

Other students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds used formal channels for finding information about on-campus housing, such as comparing various housing locations. For instance, Jesse detailed her process of mapping housing locations:

Jesse [socioeconomically disadvantaged Multiracial woman]: So I had to locate the campus map, and I had to write down all of my classes and those addresses, and then I would put it into Apple Maps, and I'd see the walking distance. And then I had to see, like all of the residence halls and where I was likely to be put. And then I kind of just worked from there.

In some cases, the act of touring a residence helped to mitigate concerns about quality. For instance, Jordan wanted to see a house in person to quell concerns about misleading pictures and potential odors:

Jordan [socioeconomically disadvantaged Native American man]: Sometimes the pictures are deceiving—and like to see that everything's working right—to see if there's anything wrong with the house, like the smell. And you get to ask the landlord more questions about the house.

These students' attention to housing quality suggests that they could not take photos for granted and sought opportunities to obtain information directly from landlords. This approach to housing is consistent with scholarship indicating that disadvantaged college students strategically approach decisions regarding college attendance, cost, and course of study (Mullen, 2010).

### “It was either not good or too expensive”: Limitations of formal channels

When drawing on formal channels for locating housing, some socioeconomically disadvantaged students described difficulty with finding affordable housing that met their basic needs. For example, Jude found options that were “either not good or too expensive”:

Jude [socioeconomically disadvantaged, white, and transgender]: We toured a lot of places, and not very good. *It was either not good or too expensive for our budget.* [Housing company with various apartment complexes] advertise to students a lot. There's like a ten percent student discount, which is insane and pretty good. But I think they're kind of known, at least to the people that I'm friends with, for being not great—*budget friendly, but not super high quality.* [...] It flooded the first night we moved in, which was pretty

bad. And there's like random maintenance issues that they can't seem to fix. When it rains a lot, bugs come in through the windows. There's some maintenance issues that are kind of significant, but it isn't enough to make us want to immediately move out.

Jude's experience conveyed that budget-friendly apartments like theirs may carry maintenance issues, such as flood or pest concerns.

Other students with significant financial aid often opted to live on campus due to the perceived lack of options and the ambiguous nature of locating off-campus housing. As Sam noted:

Sam [socioeconomically disadvantaged biracial Asian man]: They were just easier resources for me to go onto—the official housing website. I thought I found that *a lot easier to digest than the various random off-campus listings.* Honestly, I had a more difficult time trying to begin looking at the off-campus than the on-campus stuff. [...] You can get the price of the dorm, for example, like just directly on [the website]. They'll have, like the different rates and like per room, [you] can basically get a good sense of what the dorm looks like.

When asked whether he talked to friends to gather information about housing, he asserted “not really ... I just kind of did it myself.” This also suggests limits of self-searching for students.

Other students also chose to live on campus due to access to streamlined information about cost and availability. One socioeconomically advantaged student, Finn, described her experience navigating housing within a Chinese immigrant family who lacked knowledge about local off-campus housing. Since information about on-campus housing was more readily available, Finn opted to reside in an on-campus dorm throughout college.

Finn [socioeconomically advantaged Asian woman]: So my parents, like my family, are from China, so my parents kind of don't understand the entire American college culture. [...] A lot of people, like parents, really help [other students] out to navigate that process. I know a lot of friends—apparently, their parents own the houses they live in. [...] They just figure it out together. *I never really had a connection like that. My parents never really knew to look ahead of time. They were not involved in my housing search at all.* [...] And when you're figuring out yourself, I think it's really, really appealing when something like on-campus housing just hands you all of the information at once.

Despite her family's affluence, Finn's approach to housing is similar to that of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, as she described the autonomy with which she navigated housing on her own in lieu of family resources. These experiences highlight the limits of both formal and economic resources alone for navigating the housing search.

## “Information you cannot find from Google”: Students' informal search for housing

Socioeconomically advantaged students relied on informal channels for locating housing. They described the informal processes through which they learned about housing pathways, including interaction with others from organizations, classes, previous dorms, or hometown connections, as well as through observations of social media. Students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds drew primarily on informal channels, such as trusting friends to provide advice about housing. For example, Cameron drew on her network of friends from a private high school from which various students matriculated to her university, relying on their insights for “some of the smaller things that the website doesn't really tell you.”

Cameron [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *Well, I have a lot of older friends that were freshmen last year that lived on campus. And so I did get a lot of information from them in regard to what certain residence halls are like and what they're near, and what kind of amenities they have, and all that kind of stuff. Also, [social media groups] tell you about [...] like some of the smaller things that the [University] website doesn't really tell you much about.*

Cameron noted the difference between information obtained through official websites and social networks. For example, official websites may not give details about atmosphere or amenities, while social media and advice from friends provide the chance to learn more about those details for on-campus housing options.

Socioeconomically advantaged students also trusted family members for housing advice. For example, Rory described a housing progression informed by interactions with parents:

Rory [socioeconomically advantaged Middle Eastern man]: *Most kids, they end up moving out of the dorms after freshman year and living off campus in houses or apartments with friends, and I don't know. It seems like a fun thing to do, and it's kind of like a staple college experience. Like when you talk to your parents [...] They always talk about living in a house with their friends, or whatever.*

In contrast to disadvantaged students' experiences of self-reliance in the housing search, Rory noted the reliance on parents for housing advice. He sought to emulate the common housing pathway among those in his network, moving from dorms to off-campus living.

Another student, James, noted how conversing with older students and observing established housing patterns on social media generated a “seemingly set path” from a dorm to an apartment to a house, without having to weigh the costs associated with different housing types:

James [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *It's like a seemingly set path for at least me and the people that I knew who were older. It's like you live in a dorm freshman year, a sorority sophomore year, if you join a sorority. I didn't. And then, if you don't join a sorority apartment, and then an apartment, and then a house senior year. So it's kind of like what is commonly done, and I sort of followed that. And so did all of my friends. [...] Before I even got here, like I knew people from my high school who were older and went here. [...] I would have conversations with them, but also seeing on social media what they would do. So like when I was younger, and then I could see, Oh, this girl, who's two years older than me, was in this dorm, and this was what her dorm looked like. And now she's in this sorority house or whatever. So you can kind of get that information and follow the path, without even having to talk to them.*

James observed the common housing pathway through social media. Thus, she was able to “follow the path” without any direct communication. Another student, Lou, also learned about housing through “seeing what other girls were doing,” staying with someone in an apartment complex before starting at the university, and emulating their choices:

Lou [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *It was what I had heard other students had done [living in residential buildings], and they had success with it. [...] Sophomore year is typically, if you're going to do off-campus, you do an apartment, and they're the other two popular apartment complexes that are in good locations. [...] So I'd say the biggest factor in choosing was seeing what other girls were doing. [...] When I visited [university], I stayed with somebody who lived at [apartment]. So it's kind of like people from my home also took this path, too.*

Learning about other students' housing decisions shaped Lou's approach to housing, too. This suggests that housing search strategies are acquired or learned through social networks. Another student, Luca, described the unwritten phenomenon of “progressive housing,” whereby students begin in a dorm and eventually reside in an off-campus house based on custom:

Luca [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *Most people tend to move into houses and apartments [after their first year]. So, just also what my friends were looking into—it's kind of just like a progressive housing, like step by step each year, like you always start in the dorm, and then you go to an apartment, and you go into a house. [...] It's not like it's a rule or anything. But I think it's just like what a lot of people do. So it's more of just like the social aspect.*

Luca conveyed the common housing pathway among socioeconomically advantaged students as a normative practice rather than a rule. This perspective compares to Rhodes et al. (2023)'s concept of experience-motivated replication among privileged families who reproduce positive school experiences through decisions about their children's education.

Some socioeconomically advantaged students inquired with a multitude of students, including classmates, to learn about housing options. For example, Parker described the process of acquiring information about potential residences as they learned to pursue informal channels over time:

Parker [socioeconomically advantaged, Asian, and gender-fluid]: I would ask, like almost everyone I met, Where do you live? How much do you pay in rent? [...] And I ended up learning the names of the complexes that they lived in. [...] So I asked them, Hey, how do you feel about living there? And they would tell me about the landlord, how the laundry didn't work, or whatever. *It is like this kind of information you cannot find from Google.* [...] You have to kind of just ask people who live there.

Parker's experience reflects an active process of learning about housing. From locations to landlords, asking questions about housing provided helpful information for their search.

### "A lot of options are off-market": Passing down houses

Socioeconomically advantaged students highlighted the role of informal channels in facilitating off-market housing arrangements. For instance, Robin conveyed how sorority members pass down houses or families purchase property and rent it to others in their network:

Robin [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: I think a lot of the housing market is—it's like passed down to people, so like sororities will have a house, and then they'll pass it down to their sorority friends to rent it instead of it going back out onto the market. *And so I think part of it is also that a lot of the options are off-market here, because people are just passing it down.* People, like their parents, just buy a place, and then they just pass it down.

Other affluent students also described the "off-market" practice of passing down off-campus houses. When asked what prompted another socioeconomically advantaged student to live off campus, Drew responded that it "just gets passed down":

Drew [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: That's just like the way it goes in my experience—like

I followed girls in my sorority in what they had done previously. [...] A lot of the houses are passed down through sororities. So my friend found out about this house because one of her Bigs had lived here previously. *And it just gets passed down.* [...] I definitely don't know what I would have done if my friends didn't have connections—like [if] my Big wouldn't have given me her house or anything. *It's because I was with these people who have connections that, like, I knew where to go.*

Drew noted that being a member of a sorority eased the housing search by providing a passed-down house. Specifically, her friend knew someone who could pass down the house to their group.

Other campus-based organizations had similar practices. For example, Bobbie noted the phenomenon of students passing down housing to other members of a campus society, which he also experienced:

Bobbie [socioeconomically advantaged white man]: So I'm part of an organization on campus that's like a society, I guess—mirrors a fraternity—[that] does maintain two house locations off campus. It's been offered to me to live there. [...] Since the society tends to be, like I said, older kids, they're always giving out free advice on, you know, what apartments to take off campus, and *there's also a very strong network of like house-passing-down.* [...] Like where a senior has a house, and instead of rejecting the lease, he'll refer to a friend or a group of friends from the same organization. And although the house isn't like owned by the society, or maintained in perpetuity by it, it remains inhabited by people of the society.

Bobbie highlighted the prevalence of informal "house-passing-down" though his organization did not own the house. Beyond organizational support, Bobbie discussed his parents' financial support for housing:

So I think this year it was really easy for me to decide where to go, because I had friends in every major apartment. So a lot of it was focused on just having my friends in the right places to go and just do impromptu tours. [...] *I'm very fortunate to come from a family who is willing and able to support my housing options.* So fortunately, I was able to kind of pick one of the better, if not one of the best, apartments. [...] *So I think that I have a lot of leeway given by my family and their money basically.* Now, if I didn't have that cushion, I think that I would have a much harder time because of how unaffordable everything is. [...] They put more units out on the market so fast that it's very hard to make a decision if you don't know exactly what you're doing when you go into it.

In addition to being a member of a campus organization and knowing friends in apartments, which allowed for information gathering, Bobbie acknowledged the benefits of his parents' financial support for easing housing selection.

### “Like stalking people's houses”: Wandering and door-knocking as search strategies

After acquiring housing knowledge, socioeconomically advantaged students described the process of implementing various search strategies. For example, students mentioned driving or walking in areas close to the university to identify for-rent signs or potential apartment complexes. Aubrey described the process of “wandering” as a search strategy:

Aubrey [socioeconomically advantaged white man]: *There's definitely some wandering for sure. It can either be online searching or just physically driving around until you see an apartment complex or a townhome place, and then just walking in.*

Robin also conveyed a similar process of driving or walking in search of housing.

Robin [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *My aunt is a real estate agent. I used to work for her, so I asked her what platform she used. She said, “Honestly, most of them are on Zillow.” And then, when Zillow stopped working because they were all expensive, I drove around [city], and I looked for realtor signs outside of the buildings that they rent, like [redacted] Company. [...] And I would just look up the address and like, go on their website and try and see what they had available based on their website. So I did a lot of things like stalking people's houses. One time, I did like a really long walk, and I just waited and watched college students walk inside a house and then look up the address online.*

As an active learning process (Calarco, 2014a), James gathered cultural knowledge to pursue door-knocking from coworkers at a local restaurant:

James [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *I work at a restaurant right now, and there are a lot of older girls who work there, and so I've talked to them about my housing for senior year, just in terms of finding a house.*

Interviewer: *Okay, any specific tips that they gave for looking?*

James: *Yeah, like, to go knock on people's doors and find out if they are planning to release so that you can gauge if it's even worth going on a waitlist for that house. [...] So just kind of getting a sense of that. And then also, some of them gave me a few names of landlords, and housing like people in the area.*

This suggests that door-knocking was an acquired search practice among socioeconomically advantaged students (Calarco, 2014a). While wandering around potential neighborhoods may appear to facilitate accidental identification of housing (McDonald, 2010), this approach to housing among socioeconomically advantaged students allowed them to locate and secure housing options closer to campus.

### “I had to take that into consideration”: Disadvantaged students' use of informal channels

Using informal search strategies to acquire housing information from others was not exclusive to privileged students. Some students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds also drew on existing relationships with coworkers, community-based organizations, and friends or acquaintances from high school to find housing. For instance, two students from disadvantaged backgrounds acquired housing information through organizational group membership predating college. Marley described how a friend with whom she attended a community center provided information about on-campus housing:

Marley [socioeconomically disadvantaged Black woman]: *So I know, like one of my friends. We attended a local community center. He had gotten into [the university], and I would ask him, “Hey, did you stay in [this dorm] hall? Or do you know anybody that stayed in [that dorm]?” And he was like, “Oh, yeah, I know a couple of people.” So he really persuaded my opinion on that. And when he told me about what the atmosphere was like on different sides of campus and those types of things.*

Even though Marley learned about the housing landscape from organizational memberships in high school, she opted to live on campus because it seemed more streamlined, given a direct relationship between the university-based housing office and the financial aid office.

Another student, Jesse, also drew on information from former high school classmates and a Beta Club tour:

Jesse [socioeconomically disadvantaged Multiracial woman]: *Yeah, I do have a friend [from high school] that goes here. She's a sophomore. I did message her a lot asking about whether or not these residence*

*halls were, you know, good, if they were around things and things like that. [...] I did take a tour back my junior year with my Beta Club, and they discussed how most freshmen usually go into the specific residence hall.*

Both Marley and Jesse drew on information through organizations predating college. Ultimately, they both chose to continue to live on campus.

Two other socioeconomically disadvantaged students noted that university-based organizations benefited their housing search. After learning about housing options through Greek life, Tate pursued the advantaged housing pathway off campus:

Tate [socioeconomically disadvantaged white woman]: I didn't have any family members that went here. I knew, like a couple of older people, but not really, so I didn't really know what the situation was, like as far as what people did after freshman year. *I don't even know how to explain it, but I guess it was just like the pipeline of like girls in Greek life always went to [redacted dorm], and then to an apartment complex, and then most of us, including myself, live in the house, our sorority house, our junior year. [...] I guess, like my group of people weren't really wanting to go back onto campus at this point.*

Unlike affluent students in the sample who pursued the common housing pathway with little hesitation, Tate did not automatically replicate the housing experiences of others in Greek life. Her choice of where to live involved strategic consideration of debt accumulation:

Tate: So affordability was actually a really big factor for me, because I pay for my own school and my own housing. I do get some support from my parents. [...] *A good amount of people, especially in Greek life and things like that, their parents pay for everything. So I had to take that into consideration, because for me it was more [about] How much debt do I want to accumulate over the course of four years?* On-campus living tends to be more affordable. But I was kind of stuck in this situation of wanting to live with my friends. [...] So I was like, Yeah, I want to do this lease with you guys. But I'm doing a shared room with no window, because it's the cheapest. I'm now in the house, and we all pay a different amount based on the size of our room and stuff.

This consideration of debt compares similarly to economically disadvantaged students in Mullen's (2010) study who made strategic decisions about whether to attend college, how much it would cost, and which programs to pursue during college.

Another student, Taylor, drew on an LGBTQIA+ organization to access information about housing. At first, Taylor could not

locate in-budget housing when using formal channels, but they were able to locate a townhouse lease through an LGBTQIA+ group on campus:

Taylor [socioeconomically disadvantaged, white, and non-binary]: My search is primarily through different websites like Zillow or [Apartments.com](#) and just looking through places that were within my price point, which was maxing out at about \$800 a month. [...] *I was only able to find, like, maybe five total places that were four bedrooms within that price range. [...] Eventually, looking on a roommate board within a queer group on campus, I was able to find someone who had posted something asking to see if anyone was available to fill in a roommate slot for a townhouse with three other people already there for \$430 rent, which I ended up taking and moving into.*

When relying on formal channels, Taylor was unable to find many housing options within their price range. However, by seeking information through a campus group, Taylor located a townhouse with trans-friendly roommates that also fit their budget. This is consistent with findings that marginalized students who participate in targeted programs or organizations find social support through those ties (Thiele & Gillespie, 2017). The findings also support Small's (2009) theorizing about the unanticipated benefits of networks, such that organizational settings without any direct relation to housing may still yield insights gained through association. Through access to these organization-based ties, these four socioeconomically disadvantaged students were connected to information about housing.

### “That was just very lucky”: Students' explanations of housing outcomes

Despite their reliance on friends, family, and social organizations, 14 students in the study—35% of the sample—attributed their housing outcomes to luck, highlighting a conflation between having the advantage of close social networks and experiencing serendipity. With the exception of one student who relied solely on formal channels, all other students who emphasized luck or serendipity drew on informal channels to locate housing information.

Students emphasized the role of luck in on-campus housing arrangements. Despite reliance on social and economic resources related to his family, Bobbie attributed his eventual housing decision to luck.

Bobbie [socioeconomically advantaged white man]: I do know that my parents talked to other parents. And their friends, network of friends, social groups, and stuff who would have sent kids to [university]. And they kind of derived the best couple of dorms.

Interviewer: Yeah, were you able to follow that advice [from social networks] and put it into action with your housing decision?

Bobbie: Definitely. *Actually, I got lucky. And I ended up living in [that dorm], which is awesome.* I think that using that information was awesome, like I benefited to the nth degree from that and multiple ways more than one to not just like saving time, like I met my girlfriend in that dorm.

While Bobbie acknowledged the information obtained through family networks, he attributed the eventual on-campus housing outcome to luck.

Students also emphasized the role of luck regarding off-campus housing arrangements. Alex described her housing acquisition as lucky because another student transferred to a different university, which allowed her to take over the student's lease:

Alex [socioeconomically advantaged Asian woman]: I got the house because one transfer student, she went to [university] in the beginning. So she signed the contract, but later she got accepted [elsewhere]. So she gave the house to someone else. *That's how I just very luckily got the space I live in now.*

Other socioeconomically advantaged students attributed outcomes to serendipity or having worked out in their favor. Arden lived in a house that had been passed down through a campus-based organization, which she described as just having worked out for members of her club who planned to live together:

Arden [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: The house I'm living in next year is just known as a very affordable house. *So it just worked out really well, the house I'm living in next year is kind of known as a house for the club I'm in, so it's been passed down by people in the club.* So the people are like graduating. So then I'm just moving in. [...] And it worked out, and *then the pricing being affordable, was like a very much added bonus.*

Like others who relied on informal channels, Arden alluded to the serendipity of housing having “just worked out.” By locating a house through a club, passing it down through the club's lineage, Arden found affordable housing close to campus.

Several affluent students framed social resources as luck. When describing the process of obtaining priority within an apartment building through a roommate, Luca framed the housing priority gained through her friend as lucky:

Luca [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: There's just like a ton of wait lists. *And luckily, actually,*

*one of the people I lived with last year worked at the apartment building that I'm in now.* So I also just had an advantage with her being able to help us. I guess we got priority through her.

James, another socioeconomically advantaged student, conveyed a connection to a friend who worked in an apartment building and a friend who could re-sign a lease. This allowed James to directly acquire housing through friends, but she attributed the housing outcome to luck:

James [socioeconomically advantaged white woman]: *I, again, got lucky because I had that girl who could just re-sign her lease.* And then I also had a roommate who worked in the building, so it was pretty easy for us. But I know in general like you have to get on the sign-up pretty really early on into the year. [...] But at least for me personally, like *I ended up having connections for both of them. So that was just very lucky.*

Other students attributed the acquisition of cultural knowledge about the housing search to luck. Rory alluded to the acquisition of cultural knowledge about housing as well, and he attributed the outcome to luck, given his roommate's sister possessed knowledge about housing:

Rory [socioeconomically advantaged Middle Eastern man]: *The housing search, it's so random.* And it's all about kind of like who you know, where you could potentially get a house. But honestly, I felt pretty in the dark about it. I wasn't really sure—I didn't know how the whole process worked. Going into university, *I was lucky that my roommate, his older sister, went here, so she knew how it worked, and so he knew how it worked.*

Though emphasis on luck was more common among affluent students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students who used informal channels also attributed housing outcomes to good fortune or happenstance. For example, Jamie secured housing through a roommate's mother's friend who owned property in the area:

Jamie [socioeconomically disadvantaged, white, and non-binary]: My roommate—her mother's best friend was acquaintances with the man whose house we're renting. They had been discussing housing or something, and the man had mentioned that he had an extra house that he wished he would have sold when the market was hot, and now he just has it sitting around. [...] *And so basically, the only reason we got the housing we got was because it was a very freakish situation. Right place, right time, kind of thing.*

Jamie attributed housing access to a “freakish situation” of being in the right place at the right time. Another disadvantaged student, Tate,

emphasized luck in her housing search. After learning about the common housing path in Greek life, Tate attributed housing outcomes to luck:

Tate [socioeconomically disadvantaged white woman]: Through older girls and older friends that I've made like, there's a lot of like passing along information and kind of reaching out. [...] When I was looking, I reached out to people I knew who were currently living in houses as seniors when I was a junior, and being like, Is someone taking over your lease yet, or like, can I get your landlord's number? Just cause a lot of landlords around here like to own multiple properties. *The house I live in now, actually, has been passed down through my sorority, for like, I wanna say four or five, maybe even more years now, which is really lucky.*

Attributing housing outcomes to luck when organizationally embedded connections are largely responsible suggests that students perceive their housing in terms of random chance or good fortune rather than the relationships fostered before and during college. This indicates that students with social ties to housing support may conflate network-based advantages with luck. The finding that socioeconomically advantaged students and students with acquired social and cultural resources attributed their outcomes to luck, rather than to advantages within networks, may also reflect the importance of luck as an ideology to justify disparate housing pathways.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is well documented that young people benefit from family assistance in the transition to adulthood (Killewald et al., 2017; Rauscher, 2016; van Stee, 2023). Beyond financial reliance, cultural knowledge and social resources derived from networks shape students' college experiences and opportunities (Jack & Black, 2024; Mullen, 2010; Wright et al., 2023). We extend this literature by focusing on the housing search during college. To acquire housing, socioeconomically advantaged students in this study relied on cultural knowledge and social resources from family, friends, classmates, and organizations. This allowed affluent students to share information about both on-campus dorms and off-campus dwellings, with houses passed down within organizations. Students who utilized informal housing channels described a "bonus" of accessing housing with lower rents and shorter commutes to campus.

Acquiring search strategies also enabled students to emulate housing experiences among others in their networks, such as Greek life or family friends. This pattern of emulation suggests that experience-motivated replication may be prevalent in the college housing search, especially for white students from socioeconomically advantaged households (Rhodes et al., 2023). This supports assertions that help-seeking behavior as a form of cultural knowledge is actively acquired through interaction with others, specifically peers,

family, and organizational networks (Calarco, 2014a; Jack, 2016). Consistent with recent theorizing about network inequality, our findings specify contexts, like campus-based organizations, through which network connections may yield unanticipated housing benefits for students (Small, 2009).

In contrast to informal help-seeking behaviors among privileged students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students primarily pursued formal channels, such as studying official websites, to gather information. Formal channels enabled students from disadvantaged backgrounds to assess concerns about housing quality while carefully comparing properties by location and price. Disadvantaged students deliberated the costs associated with housing, such as debt accumulation and commute duration, often struggling to find housing that met their needs or budgets. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and one advantaged student who lacked access to social and cultural capital, opted to live on campus due to the streamlined information available to them compared to the ambiguous nature of information about off-campus housing. The observed autonomy among socioeconomically disadvantaged students in our study builds on existing literature about college students, class-related dependence, and housing support (van Stee, 2023).

We find exceptions to classed patterns as well. For example, some students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds utilized informal channels within their housing search. In these cases, marginalized students obtained housing advice through group memberships, such as community, Greek, or LGBTQIA+ organizations. These findings indicate that disadvantaged students may acquire help-seeking strategies typically associated with privileged students through organizations (Jack, 2016). Just as campus-based resources shape disadvantaged students' involvement with extracurriculars (Stuber, 2009), campus-based organizations and the social resources derived from those relationships play a role in easing students' housing search and acquiring a place to live that meets their needs.

Strategies for locating housing were not acquired automatically. Students described the process of learning about how to search for housing from those within their networks. In the often-ambiguous landscape of housing choices for college students, they found clarity in interpretive moments, such as calling on family or friends for advice or learning about driving, walking, or door-knocking in neighborhoods with potential vacancies, through which they acquired and exercised knowledge about housing in order to secure a place to live (Calarco, 2014a, 2014b). While wandering around potential neighborhoods may appear to facilitate "happy accidents" of identifying housing (McDonald, 2010), this consistent behavior among socioeconomically advantaged students allowed them to locate and secure housing.

Despite reliance on knowledge and support from their networks, students who used informal channels in the housing search attributed their housing outcomes to luck, randomness, or serendipitous encounters. This finding builds on existing studies of search strategies. Previous literature demonstrates that, despite receipt of unsolicited information related to opportunities, job seekers underestimate the impact of social connections and attribute their

employment outcomes to luck (McDonald, 2010). By emphasizing luck, students in our study also underacknowledged class background and organizational networks in their housing search. Only two disadvantaged students—both of whom possessed network-based resources—relied on luck as an explanation for their housing search outcomes. This suggests that luck ideology was more prevalent among socioeconomically advantaged students, yet disadvantaged students with ties to organizations or family friends display some similarities to advantaged students in terms of their explanations of housing outcomes.

While our findings indicate that class-stratified cultural knowledge and social networks informed housing search experiences and outcomes, serendipity is a potential factor in housing acquisition. As McDonald (2010, 311) argues, “serendipity is a fundamental social process facilitated by personal contacts that provide assistance at opportune times.” Several students discovered serendipitous situations in which a last-minute transfer to a different university or a friend of a friend provided access to housing based on random availability. The recurrence of serendipity as an explanation in both housing and employment searches suggests that it deserves further inquiry (Streib, 2023). Future research could investigate how perceptions of serendipity play a role in other valued opportunities or outcomes.

## Implications and future directions

This study's findings suggest that marginalized students who participate in targeted university programs or organizations may find housing support through those ties (Thiele & Gillespie, 2017). By seeking information through campus groups, such as Greek or LGBTQIA+ organizations, socioeconomically disadvantaged students located budget-friendly housing with roommates with whom they felt safe. These findings imply that organization-based support may be consequential for students at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, such as gender nonconforming students with financial precarity or first-generation students of color. While perceiving more accessible information about on-campus housing compared to off-campus housing, socioeconomically disadvantaged students in this study described a lack of university-based resources for off-campus housing, often resorting to self-reliance and autonomy. Continued focus on marginalized students' perceptions of support should inform not only scholarly inquiry but also university-targeted approaches to meeting students' needs (Lee, 2024).

With universities enrolling larger proportions of historically underrepresented students (Silver, 2024), this study points to the role of universities in supporting students' finding and maintaining housing as a foundation of the rest of their college experiences. We envision two main steps that universities could take to address class inequalities in the housing search for students. First, they could provide more information about off-campus housing for students. Second, they could expand access to on-campus housing so that students

may continue to reside on campus rather than be forced or pressured to move off-campus to substandard housing with extended commutes and reduced access to student-directed resources.

By focusing on housing acquisition during college, this study centers housing as a source of socioeconomic inequality for students. However, it does not inform about how housing arrangements shape other patterns of student networks, such as job acquisition. It is possible that housing arrangements play a role in other opportunities and may shape cumulative advantage or disadvantage, but that discussion is also beyond the scope of this study. Since informal strategies for curating employment opportunities among socioeconomically advantaged students can promote personal, academic, and career interests (Jack & Bassett, 2024), future research could investigate the long-term consequences of housing acquisition for marshaling network-based resources. Future research could also investigate how students' experiences with housing vary across other dimensions of inequality, such as race, gender, and ability status.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We report no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available in a repository and are original to this study. Due to the sensitive nature of the data regarding basic needs insecurity, socioeconomic precarity, and risk of re-identification for student participants or their family members, we do not have IRB permission to share data with others outside the research team. The study's questionnaire, interview guide, and list of codes are available upon request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

We report compliance with ethical principles for human subjects research. This research was approved by the North Carolina State University IRB (#25716).

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