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Berkeley Housing Interview Project

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Cover Letter

Professor Chua,

This project examines the Berkeley Student Cooperative as a case study in non-market housing, arguing that Berkeley's affordability crisis is a problem of landlords' structural power and limited supply, and that cooperative institutions offer a more durable solution than the upzoning currently proposed. To develop this argument, I conducted informal interviews with current BSC members at Lothlórien and Fenwick Weavers' Village, selecting across roles and income levels to capture the cooperative's range of experiences, from longtime directors navigating the austerity crisis to new members encountering BSC governance for the first time. The paper synthesizes these interviews into a cross-sectional analysis of how students relate to housing in Berkeley, why the BSC's model works, and what its current financial crisis reveals about the fragility of non-market alternatives in a city organized around land-value appreciation.

Peer Review Response

My peer reviewer offered several suggestions that I incorporated:

1. **BSC budget cut & austerity program** → I incorporated this by expanding Part 5 to explain the mechanics of the $200,000 wage cut more precisely, including Interviewee 3's account of how student directors were effectively misled about what they were voting on, and Interviewee 4's detailed analysis of the cascading effects that cutting the conduct committee and Central Food and Supplies Service would have on BSC's most vulnerable members.
2. **Tie upzoning more directly to BSC's crisis & ask whether upzoning benefits residents rather than just landowners** → I incorporated this by adding a dedicated paragraph in Part 5 tracing the indirect but real connection between upzoning-driven

land-value inflation and the cost pressures BSC faces, and by incorporating interviewees' views on who actually benefits from upzoning more prominently throughout Part 6.

3. **Draw on historical evidence about coöperatives** → I incorporated BSC's founding history and original mission statement into Part 3, situating the current austerity crisis against the coöperative's ninety-year commitment to affordable, non-discriminatory housing.
4. **Explore tax advantages as an incentive for construction** → This is incorporated in Part 7 through Interviewee 4's account of the excise tax on withheld housing units that the Cal Berkeley Democrats helped lobby for, a targeted fiscal instrument that, unlike upzoning, directly penalizes the speculative behavior driving Berkeley's affordability crisis.

Guiding Question & Interview Questions

Guiding Question

How does the Berkeley Student Cooperative (BSC) provide an affordable and transformative housing option to students, and what ongoing challenges does it face, especially in the contexts of construction, austerity, and upzoning?

Interview Questions

1. Describe your housing situation and what you pay for rent.
2. What do you know about the Berkeley Student Cooperative and what has your experience with them been?
3. As a student, how do you feel about all the housing construction that's going on right now — now that you know more about upzoning, what do you think would really make housing affordable?
4. What has your experience been like, focusing on its costs and benefits to you (financially, personally, socially).
5. Given the context of inflation, a program of austerity has been proposed in BSC, with a budget cutting $200,000 in wages already being approved. This comes after years of no rent increases due to COVID. From what you have heard about the austerity program advocated for by the BSC leadership and Board members, how would this program affect you personally?

Plan

Project Focus

This project investigates how the Berkeley Student Cooperative (BSC) provides housing to UC Berkeley students, and what its ongoing governance and financial crisis reveals about the limits of non-market housing institutions in a city organized around land-value appreciation. Following Option 1b, I will conduct informally-structured interviews with several BSC members, examining how students understand, experience, and relate to the BSC as a housing institution, and how they situate it within Berkeley's upzoning debate. The BSC's austerity crisis, driven by a COVID-era rent freeze and a proposed $200,000 wage cut, is the project's studied case.

Format & Method

I prepared a one-page summary of the Citizens' Guide to Upzoning as an interview primer, then conducted six recorded interviews with current BSC members selected across roles (former Director, current Director, House Health Coordinator, labor coordinator, new member) and economic positions. Questions covered: housing costs and living situation; experience with BSC governance; views on upzoning; personal costs and benefits of BSC membership; and responses to the proposed austerity program. The report is organized in a few sections: BSC's structure and history; individual interview summaries; why students join BSC; BSC's role in Berkeley's housing market; the austerity crisis; cross-interview thematic analysis; and potential policy solutions.

Initial Bibliography

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Peer Review

- Give more information on the budget cut and austerity
- Tie it to upzoning → ask about upzoning benefitting Berkeley residents/citizens instead of just landowners
- Does upzoning have anything to do with service cuts in the BSC
- Readings are good: they tie back to the topic
- Tie in historical evidence, providing a good base for what's happening today: history of coops
    - History of University of Oregon coops
- "Bank of Berkeley" public bank and coops funding
- Temporaryness of being in Berkeley
- Tax advantages could be offered to incentivize construction

Summary of the Citizens' Guide to Berkeley Housing:

The State-City Housing Framework California's Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) sets mandatory housing targets for each city in eight-year cycles. Cities respond with a Housing Element outlining how they will meet those targets. Berkeley's current Housing Element emphasizes upzoning, rezoning areas to permit higher-density development, as its primary strategy.

What Is Upzoning and What Does It Do? Upzoning allows taller buildings and more units per parcel. Proponents argue it reduces urban sprawl and preserves open space. Critics counter that it raises land values, increases demands on local infrastructure, and, crucially, does not reliably produce affordable housing.

The Affordability Problem: The guide's argument is that Berkeley faces an affordability crisis, not a supply crisis. Rents in downtown Berkeley average around $4,000/month for a two-bedroom apartment, roughly double the state's Fair Market Rent of $2,000/month. Even that lower figure requires an annual household income of $81,000, well beyond the reach of students and low-wage workers.

Several structural forces keep prices high:

- Some landlords hold units off the market deliberately
- Proposition 13 discourages long-term homeowners from selling or downsizing
- Housing financialization — the growing ownership of residential properties by LLCs and corporations — prioritizes land value appreciation over rental income
- Algorithmic rent-pricing software enables cartel-like coordination among landlords

Why Upzoning Doesn't Fix This Even when upzoning occurs, affordable housing production is weak for two reasons.

First, *developers aren't required to build*. A planned 456-unit downtown Berkeley development lost its financing and left a row of boarded-up storefronts — illustrating that approvals don't guarantee construction.

Second, *affordability mandates are easily circumvented*. California's Density Bonus Law allows developers to exceed height and density limits in exchange for designating some units as affordable — but developers can pay in-lieu fees to reduce that obligation. Berkeley's inclusionary zoning nominally requires 20% affordable units, but this is routinely negotiated down. The income categories themselves are misleading: Berkeley's statutory definition of "low-income" extends to $109,600/year. At 2425 Durant, redevelopment demolished 19 rent-stabilized apartments and replaced them with a 169-unit building containing just 13 units affordable to Extremely Low- and Very Low-Income households.

What the Guide Opposes: The guide specifically opposes the Corridors Zoning Update (CZU) proposal, which would establish a 7-story base height minimum, rising to 14 stories with a density bonus, in the Elmwood, North Shattuck, and Upper Solano commercial districts.

What the Guide Calls For: The guide asks residents to write to City Council demanding a halt to all upzoning until a full impact study of downtown Berkeley’s development experience, covering business displacement, vacancy rates, and market-rate rent levels, is completed, and to oppose the CZU proposal directly.

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Berkeley Student Cooperative Member Interviews & Research Report

"Without the coöps, I would have been homeless." – Interviewee 4

Part 1: What is the Berkeley Student Cooperative?

Berkeley Student Cooperative, Inc. (BSC) is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt federative student housing coöperative nonprofit mutual-benefit corporation founded in 1933 with around 1,250-1,300 member-residents. Originally known as the University Students' Cooperative Association (USCA), it is currently composed of 17 coöperative houses and three coöperative apartment complexes. The BSC is structurally dedicated to affordable housing, and is the cheapest room-and-board all-inclusive options available, and costs significantly less than the comparable rates in the UC Berkeley dorms. For the 2026-2027 academic year, BSC charges $736 per month for rent, utilities, water, internet, garbage, sewer, and electricity, and $372 per month for food and supplies, or $4,986 per semester for BSC coöperative houses.[1] A double at a UC Berkeley-owned dorm costs $11,943 per semester, or 139% of the cost of BSC.[2] BSC members are generally required to work for five hours per week and can take managerial positions or work more for rent credit or wages, generally earning $22 per hour. This labor system especially supports the most marginalized students, especially queer, people of color,

[1] Berkeley Student Cooperative, "Academic Year Rates." Accessed May 2026. https://bsc.coop/housing/academic-year-rates/.
[2] UC Berkeley Student Housing. "Rates, Contracts, and Policies." Accessed May 2026. https://housing.berkeley.edu/rates-contracts-policies/rates/.

feminine-presenting or female-identifying members, students with no or limited family support, and low-income students, providing meaningful income security and job opportunities to students that traditionally have difficulties in the labor market.[3]

Importantly, the BSC's housing affordability is structurally guaranteed by its status as a nonprofit public benefit corporation. Operating through a representative system modeled after government legislatures,[4] each house votes for its representatives to the Board of Directors, which they have in proportion to the size of their house. However, this system of student Board members presents a few challenges for BSC, especially because students are generally members for fewer than three years and it is rare for Directors to serve multiple terms or be members for long after their Directorships. This structure results in a short-term mindset focused on extracting as much value out of BSC for current members as possible, resulting in long-term problems and rent-extraction from future members, and students opportunistically becoming Directors for career-progression as opposed to genuinely contributing to BSC.[5]

Part 2: Interviews

I conducted seven interviews with members of the Berkeley Student Cooperative living in the Lothlórien Student Cooperative, a student housing coöperative founded in 1975, and the Fenwick Weavers' Village, a student coöperative apartment. The experience and identities of the interviewees varies significantly: one is a current Director, one is a former Director, one is a house health manager, and one is a new member. All interviewees are queer and most are transgender, people of color, or both. Most have income insecurity or limited financial support from family.

[3] Interview number 1
[4] Interview number 1
[5] Interview number 1

Due to the sensitive nature of interviews, including identities of interviewees, the potential for retribution, the status of current and former Directors, and in respect of consent practices, the names of interviewees are not shown nor replaced with another name.

Interview 1

"The longer you live in a coöp, the more you cultivate a coöperative mindset."

Interviewee 1 is a queer BSC member and former BSC Director and Labor Coord (Coördinator/Manager) at the Lothlórien Student Cooperative who first found BSC as a first-year student searching for the most affordable housing option available. They major in plant genetics and biology at UC Berkeley, and have experienced extreme housing insecurity, including homelessness, after escaping their family in Los Angeles. Deeply familiar with BSC policy, budgets, and governance, Interviewee 1 emphasized that while BSC remains the cheapest housing option in Berkeley, its value proposition extends well beyond rent: the coöperative trains members in budgeting, workplace skills, and social independence in ways that prepare them for post-college life. Interviewee 1 was particularly critical of the current austerity push, which he attributed to short-term board members who lack institutional knowledge, and argued that the larger threat to BSC is not financial but informational: students simply do not know what BSC is, and BSC has not adequately invested in recruiting. For Interviewee 1, as a radical housing option with a unique value proposition, BSC needs to invest in greater person-to-person recruiting, thus emphasizing the personal contacts, deep connections, social duty, consent practices, reciprocity, and very high density that BSC membership entails and embodies. On upzoning, Interviewee 1 pointed to People's Park as emblematic of Berkeley's *"greed to solve the issue,"* arguing that upzoning redirects resources away from existing coöperative housing stock toward high-rise market-rate development that does nothing for students who actually need affordability.

However, embodied in Interviewee 1's note that upzoning is "greed to solve the issue" is highly emblematic, showing that while it is in the interest of private developers, landowners, the City, and University, it is also not necessarily rent-extraction from the public, but done at least to an extent with the public's interest in mind. As Labor Coord, Interviewee 1 does not currently pay rent.

Interview 2

"Corporate greed gets in the way of students living in the city that they study in."

Interviewee 2 is a queer BSC member living in a two-bedroom apartment in the Fenwick Weavers' Village and pays around $4,000 per semester plus approximately $300 in utilities, costs the coöperative did not walk them through until after the fact. Interviewee 2's relationship to BSC governance is primarily critical: they describe leadership as immature and cliquish, with accountability mechanisms breaking down along personal loyalties. Despite frustrations, Interviewee 2 feels very lucky to live in BSC as compared to alternatives and acknowledged that the U.S.-wide rise in housing costs makes even BSC's increasing rents understandable in context. On upzoning, Interviewee 2 was direct: new construction in Berkeley is "literally impossible" for them to afford, and they noted that corporate interests systematically displace students from the city they study in, pushing peers to commute from Oakland, Albany, and Hayward. They also noted that BSC leadership prioritizes increasing rents for everyone instead of raising costs that would target higher-income residents, such as increasing parking fees, because those fees would target the middle-class members that are overrepresented in BSC leadership, while rent-increases affect them more disparately. In the context of budget proposals to cut BSC student employment, Interviewee 2 noted that it would disproportionately hurt the worst-off, with losing a job hurting

a student with $1,000 in savings without parent support magnitudes more than a student with $10,000 with parent support.

Interview 3

"I think encouraging smaller living spaces or communal living is more helpful than just building upwards."

Interviewee 3 is a nonbinary BSC member and Health Coord of the Lothlórien Student Cooperative who pays roughly $1,600 three times per semester for combined food and housing. A coworker introduced Interviewee 3 to BSC, and they described their primary motivation as the combination of price and built-in community. Interviewee 3 is sharply critical of the current BSC leadership, stating that those at the top do not have students' interests in mind and that the organization's bureaucracy discourages members from seeking help. On the austerity budget, Interviewee 3 mentioned attending board meetings and witnessing a student-proposed budget that avoided staff cuts being rejected by non-student staff members, and mentioned that BSC Directors were effectively tricked into voting for the current budget that cuts $200,000 of unionized wages because they were "not told what they were voting on". Interviewee 3 noted that the rent increase would directly affect them and that many members planned to leave if it passed. On upzoning, Interviewee 3 argued that encouraging communal living models like BSC is more helpful than simply building upward.

Interview 4

"BSC food is sometimes the only time [members] can get a hot meal. It's a luxury for many at BSC. Some people just don't have a lot of money."

Interviewee 4 is an income-insecure transgender woman who majors in history at UC Berkeley. She lives at the Fenwick Weavers' Village and pays $1,050 per month, which she

described as probably the lowest rent in Berkeley, made possible by resident labor through workshifts. Interviewee 4 had a particularly detailed and emotional account of how BSC's austerity measures would affect her personally: she had used the BSC's conduct committee four times and knew others who had relied on it, and was distressed that it was being targeted for complete elimination, stating that many people would leave in droves if there is no accountability for abusers and bad-actors in BSC. She also emphasized that BSC's Central Food and Supplies Service (CFS) is essential in a food desert where stores artificially inflate prices and students without cars cannot easily access groceries. On upzoning, Interviewee 4 supported construction in principle given housing scarcity but argued that policy should shift toward taxing landlords who withhold units from the market, a policy she supported through her involvement in Cal Berkeley Democrats. She also recounted the story of her best friend from high school and current BSC member who fled an authoritarian régime that persecutes him because of his sexuality and political beliefs. Living on a temporary visa that prohibited him from working, he was forced to couch-surf with her after being kicked out by his parents. She said that without BSC, both of them would have had nowhere else to go and would be homeless. I subtitled my report with her blunt quotation: "Without the coöps, I would have been homeless."

Interview 5

"I would rather my rent increase than have the wages of student workers cut."

Interviewee 5 is a nonbinary UC Berkeley anthropology major and transfer student living at the Lothlórien Student Cooperative and pays approximately $1,100 per month, sharing a double room and eats at the housing coöperative. Originally from a suburb of Los Angeles, Interviewee 5 described their experience at BSC as primarily positive because of the culture and social acceptance of their house, which they credited with helping them adapt to Berkeley life as

a transfer student. Interviewee 5 knew little about BSC's central administration, mostly hearing negative accounts from housemates, particularly about a faction of board members who had made derogatory and racist comments about members using EBT alongside their housing coöperative meals. On austerity, Interviewee 5 said as a middle-class student, they they would rather see rent increase than worker-wages cut, while acknowledging that this opinion reflected financial security not all members share.

Part 3: Why Do People Join BSC?

Based on the interviews, the overwhelming two main reasons to move to BSC are its affordability and social opportunities. In general, low-income students move to take advantage of the most affordable rent in Berkeley, and middle-class students move to take advantage of the built-in social life of BSC. For these reasons, BSC is particularly popular for transfer, international, and non-traditional students, who face particularly difficult times adapting to social and financial life in Berkeley.

In terms of BSC's nature for transformation and education, the BSC is effectively the only place in Berkeley where a large number of students gain sustained real-world experience managing a $10 million budget, a portfolio of properties, member policy, and other concerns of a nonprofit serving 1,300 students. Even if students do not serve as Board members or managers, they gain valuable real-world experience through their workshift, giving students the chance to learn how to cook, clean, ensure habitability, stock kitchens, manage waste, manage network infrastructure, and repair. At its founding, one of BSC's founding goals was to: "To engage in a continuous educational program designed to eliminate prejudice and discrimination in housing, and to further the principles of tolerance and cooperation through mutual, self-help living at minimal cost."[6]

[6] Berkeley Student Cooperative. "About Us: Our History." Accessed May 2026.

Part 4: Affordable Housing & BSC

If BSC did not exist and all members moved to dorms, they would have to pay at least $10 million more per year, assuming that all students could afford to continue education without BSC (which is by no means guaranteed). Nonetheless, BSC has faced significant capacity glut issues, with houses generally having the capacity to host up to 30% more students.[7] Interviewee 1 (a former Director) said that this is because BSC has not invested the time or energy into properly advertising itself, because although it does put fliers around Berkeley, the radical lifestyle that BSC proposes cannot be properly explained through a simple flier, but has to be "sold" to students by in-person conversations and relationships. This suggests an interesting element to the Berkeley student housing crisis: a lack of knowledge or inherent interest in exploring non-traditional housing options. Insofar as increased housing supply *could* decrease rent, dispersed information means that generally only units with the highest rent are sufficiently advertised to students. Supply and demand are not laws of nature, but require sufficient negotiating leverage and alternatives. Students effectively have the least structural leverage, because student loans mean that students time-discount their rent, seeing them as future issues that they do not have to deal with today. Similarly, students generally do not have the option to back out of living in a particular market after accepting their university, and housing costs are generally not among the main considerations students make when choosing universities. Strengthening BSC as an alternative to market-provided housing could put pressure on private housing providers to lower their prices.

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https://bsc.coop/about-us/our-history.
[7] Interview 1

Part 5: Recent Changes at BSC

Recently, BSC leadership and certain members of the student-led Board of Directors have effectively proposed a program or budget of austerity measures, including raising rents and cutting services. The BSC Board has already approved a budget that would cut unionized staff wages by $200,000, and was approved because, according to the Health Manager of Lothlórien Cooperative, the student board members "were not properly made aware of what they were voting on, which was likely on purpose".[8] Many BSC members have started organizing against the program, forming intercoöperative networks of resistance, primarily advocating for a new budget that according to the Health Manager would "not require staff cuts or rent increases, but was shut down by mostly shady non-student staff members". To achieve their aims, this group has brought attention to the budget issue, encouraging students to join Board meetings and give member comments against the leadership's budget, and in favor of their own. They argue that the proposed budget would result in "[students] having to pay more rent for worse services" and "many people are planning on moving out if the rent increases".

A former BSC Director made clear that the origin of the current conflict has to do with the 2020-2023 rent freeze, made in consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic impacts. Nonetheless, these rent-freezes have meant that the financial position of BSC is highly diminished, with dual pressures on the organization to raise rents to pay for millions of dollars of outstanding debts to Wells Fargo, and pressures on low-income members to afford living in BSC.

There is an indirect connection between upzoning and BSC's current financial crisis. Upzoning raises land values throughout Berkeley, increasing the overall cost of operating in a city where land becomes more expensive. As the peer review correctly noted, this raises the

[8] Interview number 3

question of whether upzoning has anything to do with service cuts at BSC. While the austerity push is primarily attributable to the COVID rent freeze rather than upzoning *per se*, the broader inflationary pressure and land-value increases that upzoning accelerates compounds the financial difficulties that BSC faces in maintaining affordable rents. As Interviewee 1 observed, BSC owns housing stock from the nineteenth century and from converted millionaire family homes, the kind of land that becomes attractive for redevelopment as upzoning raises surrounding land values. The upzoning debate cannot be separated from BSC's crisis, but are symptoms of the same process, in which land value appreciation benefits private landowners while squeezing the nonprofit and coöperative sector that provides genuinely affordable housing. That notwithstanding, BSC's status as a steward and trustee of immense land portfolios allows it to withstand and hedge against land-price volatility, insuring but not separating its members from land-price speculation and hikes. Instead, land-price hikes generally translate into slightly higher rents, because BSC generally prices itself as a fraction of market-price rent.

Importantly, unlike other co-living in Berkeley, such as fraternities or International House, BSC's main selling point is pricing, making its demand highly elastic. Low-income students find BSC *because of* its price, and will leave (and possibly also drop out of school or become unhoused or housing insecure) if BSC raises rents. Students I talked with mentioned that they receive fixed amounts from parents, the University, employment, or financial aid that cannot plausibly be scaled up, especially under the current administration. Any increase in BSC rent or cuts in BSC student hiring will require students to ask serious questions about the plausibility of being a student. BSC's financial position is highly concerning because rent increases could also lower total revenue, because if BSC is no longer the most affordable option, it will lose its appeal as the absolute cheapest option in Berkeley. This is because if that happens, it loses almost all of

its appeal, and will see a large exodus of low-income students dropping out of school or living in more precarious housing, and middle-income students living in non-coöperative housing.

Part 6: Cross-Interview Analysis: Common Themes and Divergences

Throughout each interview, each interviewee mentioned that BSC's primary value is its price, and that any increase in costs threatens not just individual members but the coöperative's identity, mission, and *raison d'être*. Whether interviewees came from low-income backgrounds and saw BSC as their only viable option, or from middle-income backgrounds and chose BSC for community, all agree that affordability is BSC's uniqueness and offering to Berkeley's student population. The consequences of losing that affordability are consistently described as catastrophic for the most vulnerable members, threatening to further cut low-income, marginalized, and vulnerable students of all types from higher education.

A second common theme was incredulity towards BSC's current leadership. Interviewees from across the spectrum of involvement, from former and current directors to new members, described the Board as captured by a short-term, middle-class faction that does not reflect the interests of the most economically marginal members.[9] This connects with David Harvey's analysis of how institutions built to serve working and marginalized communities can be captured by interests that prioritize cost-cutting over their foundational missions.[10] Neil Smith's rent gap theory further explains why BSC's aging stock, priced below market, is precisely the land capital seeks to recapture through redevelopment. BSC lacks the profit motive that drives private landlords, but it is not immune to replicating and internalizing class dynamics that replicate similar outcomes and effects.

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[9] Harvey, David. "The Spatial Fix: Hegel, Von Thunen, and Marx." Antipode 13, no. 3 (1981): 1–12.
[10] Smith, Neil. "Gentrification and the Rent Gap." Annals of the Association of American Geographers 77, no. 3 (1987): 462–465.

The most significant divergence across interviews was on upzoning. Interviewees who engaged most directly with upzoning, including Interviewees 1, 2, and 5, were skeptical of it, arguing that market-rate construction does not help students who cannot afford market rates, but described construction almost as a necessary evil. For me, this is best represented by Interviewee 1's remark that upzoning is Berkeley's "greed to solve the issue." Interviewee 2 noted that despite abundant construction, new structures are "literally impossible" to afford for students on fixed-incomes, whether those be jobs, parental support, stipends, savings, financial aid, scholarships, or otherwise, without significantly disrupting their lifestyles and academic and social success. Interviewee 3 offered a middle-road view, arguing upzoning could help in principle, but only if Berkeley's authorities actually cared about people's financial stability, which doubt. They also argued that communal living models like BSC are more effective at producing structural affordability than simply building upward. Interviewee 5, by contrast, was largely disengaged from the local debate, arguing the housing crisis could be solved by the federal government. While there is skepticism about the motivations and reasons for upzoning, most interviewees describe it almost as a necessary evil, writing about how the lack of Berkeley housing stock, not just cost, has required many of their friends and acquaintances to have to do long commutes from surrounding cities. Overall, this seems to be the best student-focused benefit of upzoning: rather than a one-size-fits-all affordability solution, it may slightly lower market rent from which many affordable options (such as BSC) price themselves, as well as expanding the total stock, allowing more students to live within walking distance of their university.

A notable dimension cutting across all interviews was the temporariness of student life in Berkeley. As Interviewee 1 observed, students cycle through BSC in fewer than three years on

average, making it difficult to build institutional knowledge or political leverage. This temporariness is structural: students are in Berkeley by virtue of their enrollment, not their economic ties to the city. They generally do not own property, do not vote in local elections in significant numbers, and are culturally positioned as transient. This creates a central paradox: students are the explicit justification for upzoning (UC Berkeley's enrollment growth is routinely cited as the reason Berkeley needs more housing), yet students are systematically excluded from the affordable housing that upzoning is supposed to produce. The BSC's financial crisis illustrates this clearly: rent increases at BSC are driven partly by the same broader inflationary pressures that upzoning is meant to address, but neither upzoning nor the BSC's austerity program was designed with student input or student interests as the primary constraint.

This dynamic resonates with Rosenberg's "UniverCity" analysis in Jacobin: universities expand as economic engines and justify development decisions through their student populations, while students bear the costs through rising rents and displacement. Universities increasingly function as real estate actors whose interests align more closely with developers than with students whose tuition funds their operations.[11] Research on coöperative housing confirms that BSC-style institutions consistently deliver costs well below market alternatives.[12] Students are posed as the problem to be solved, the enrollment growth that strains city infrastructure, but are not meaningfully included in the solutions. The upzoning proposal, which permits high-rise market-rate development without mandating affordability, is the clearest example: it uses the student housing crisis as its political rationale while producing housing that students cannot afford.

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[11] Rosenberg, Eli. "When the Public University Is the Corporate Landlord." Jacobin, March 4, 2022. https://jacobin.com/2022/03/university-housing-landlord-student-rent-crisis.
[12] Cook, Christopher C. "Housing Cooperatives and Low-Income Residents." Journal of Urban Affairs 18, no. 4 (1996): 401–424.

Part 7: Potential Solutions

The Berkeley Student Cooperative offers a uniquely and structurally affordable alternative to private or dormitory housing in Berkeley, offering more perks, benefits, and "bang for your buck" than most other options. This is primarily due to the fact that all the rent paid to BSC goes *directly* to funding housing costs, food, and resident-services, as well as the fact that no money goes to landlords as extracted surplus or to taxes. Nonetheless, BSC is in the midst of a financial crisis due to three years of rent freeze from 2020 to 2023. Many students were attracted to BSC during these years, because it meant that BSC was consistently the cheapest option in Berkeley. However, the recent changes could make BSC the same price as lower market-rate options, so while it will still be relatively affordable and competitive, it could diminish its uniqueness.[13]

One potential solution for BSC's problems could be to offer means-tested housing-vouchers or income-based pricing. That said, this solution would definitely be divisive, because several students noted that they like that BSC offers a "unifying" experience, where all students have the same experience regardless of income or background. As the interviews made clear, BSC's policy of promoting a single, universal experience on the basis of promoting its coöperative identity is diminishing its ability to support its most vulnerable members. One interviewee mentioned that a $5 per hour wage cut hurts everyone, but is exponentially more impactful for students with, say, $1,000 in savings, than one with a $10,000 cushion or parent backing. It is clear that higher-income students move to BSC to save some money as compared to private housing and not because it's the only option they can plausibly afford, and because of the convenience of sharing meals, and for social scenes. This means middle class members are

[13] Interview number 1

less sensitive to price increases than their lower-income peers, and thus have a relatively lower price elasticity.

Interviewees critiqued BSC leadership's approach to raise rents and cut food and the conduct committee and ambivalence with raising voluntary costs, such as parking fees. One interviewee noted that this is because of the middle-class nature of leadership, especially of pro-austerity Directors, who own cars and would be disproportionately disadvantaged by dramatic increases in car rent, as opposed to general rent increases, which are more distributed among all members.[14] Another proposal mentioned by an interviewee that is a member of the Cal Berkeley Democrats was extending recent efforts by the City of Berkeley to penalize withholding supply from the market through targeted excise taxes, a policy the Cal Berkeley Democrats helped successfully lobby for.[15]

[14] Interview number 4
[15] Interview number 4

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