

# Framing Processes as Student Voice in the Movement to Resist University Expansion and Urban Renewal

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Social movements are a critical component to addressing racial and other inequities across overlapping systems and structures of oppression. As Carter and Reardon (2014) have argued, various forms of inequity – and what is done in response to the presence of injustice – are often animating forces that help movements coalesce. Racially minoritized youth – and the inequitable conditions in which they are expected to live, work and learn – are often a galvanizing force for movement work that recognizes the dignity and humanity of young people rendered vulnerable to institutional harm (Ginwright 2016). More specifically, Black youth ‘reengage in civic life by addressing issues that are closely connected to struggles in their everyday life’ (Ginwright 2010: 144).

Within the context of education, civic and political engagement takes many forms to include students’ participation in various dimensions of electoral politics, governance (i.e. local, state and federal) and policy arenas to improve access, opportunity and equitable educational outcomes. However, civic and political engagement are often too narrowly defined by these traditional domains and fail to account for student activism and social movements as legitimate forms of democratic participation (Morgan and Davis 2019). By democratic participation, we are broadly referring to ‘acts that are intended to influence the behavior of those empowered to make decisions’ (Verba 1967: 54), which include the influence of student voice and direct-action undertaken by campus-community organizers to transform educational institutions and their social contexts. Yet, discussion of the organized resistance to university expansion and urban renewal and the resulting macro-level inequities is overwhelmingly absent in the higher education literature. While historians of higher education have documented the presence of anti-gentrification activism on campus (e.g. Baldwin 2021c; Puckett and Lloyd 2015; Wolf-Powers 2022), there are still considerable gaps in student voice research regarding these movements as important examples of how student organizers in collaboration with local communities can alter colleges’ and universities’ decisions in pursuit of their financial and property interests.

We, therefore, aim to address these gaps by delineating the inequities resulting from university expansion and urban renewal and the agentic role of student and community organizers to reduce harm and reimagine higher education as a life-affirming institution (i.e. campus abolition).

In doing so, we take a multidisciplinary approach to frame an understanding of urban higher education's complex relationship to the communities within which it is situated. Specifically, we begin this chapter by conceptualizing US-based higher and post-secondary education's long-standing existence as a racial-colonial project that exacerbates inequities within society, particularly in urban geographic contexts. Next, we discuss existing research evidence on the role of higher education in the current housing crisis and its racial equity implications to frame the macro-level inequities at the centre of our analysis. We continue with a review of the literature on social movements in college to understand the actors, contexts, tactics and strategies of campus-community activism and organizing as geographically dynamic. Lastly, we provide an abridged case analysis of contemporary efforts to resist university expansion and urban renewal in West Philadelphia.

### **Post-Secondary Institutions as Racial-Colonial Projects**

Colleges and universities in the United States have, since their inception, been intertwined with dual legacies of genocide and the enslavement of Indigenous and African peoples. As Wilder (2013) details, stolen land and stolen labour were necessary preconditions that gave rise to higher education in the United States. For instance, the early financing of colonial colleges was linked to broader imperial efforts by the United States to evangelize and indoctrinate Indigenous communities through religious (i.e. Christian) and cultural (i.e. language, behaviours, aesthetics and ideology) education in the establishment of Indian colleges and boarding schools (Wilder 2013). In addition, the American slave economy and the resulting wealth it created directly subsidized US higher education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This not only includes various individuals (e.g. college founders, presidents, trustees, instructors, students and alumni) who enslaved Black and Indigenous people for personal use, but also institutions who enslaved people through purchase or as a gift. Many colleges used slave labour to clear land and construct the grounds, maintain administrative residences and campus buildings, work in food and hospitality services, and to serve as entertainment – and subjects of abhorrent displays of racial violence – for white students (Rodriguez, Deane and Davis 2021). Institutions also sought out patronage from potential benefactors and tuition from prospective students whose families directly benefited from the wealth generated from slavery and dispossession of land (e.g. enslavers, slave traffickers and plantation owners).

Consistent with what Mustaffa (2017) refers to as 'education violence', the aforementioned preface aims to broadly describe the colonial conditions that are foundational to the beginnings and ongoings of US higher education. As Stein (2017) has argued, broader federal efforts to accumulate Indigenous land through violence and fraudulent treaties provided the 'conditions of possibility' for public higher education in the nineteenth century, which relied upon a redistribution of stolen resources through land-grant legislation. Namely, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established public land-grant universities and, subsequently, provided them with regular appropriations to states to finance institutions (Mustaffa 2017; Thelin 2004). The Morrill Act of 1862 specifically 'granted' states federally-held land to distribute to institutions, which they in turn sold for profit to 'constitute a perpetual fund, the capital of which shall remain forever undiminished' (Morrill Act 1862). Resulting in an estimated \$500 million in current dollars and 10.7 million acres of land expropriated through violent land cessions, the Morrill

Act of 1862 is considered one of the greatest wealth transfers into higher education (Lee et al. 2020). Still, decades later, many of the beneficiaries of the 1862 legislation continued to struggle financially and required additional federal subsidies. The Morrill Act of 1890 then provided conditional appropriations to states for previously established land-grant institutions<sup>1</sup>, a policy decision that ultimately entrenched unequal and inequitable funding structures between White-serving institutions and historically Black public colleges and universities (Rodriguez, Deane and Davis 2021).

To be sure, settler-colonial conquest remains ever present in contemporary higher education, especially when considering neoliberal academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). As Tuck and Yang (2012) have enumerated, *internal colonialism* – in which the management of people, land and other natural resources within the domestic borders of an imperial nation – is perpetually prevalent in the US. This includes and is evidenced by its institutions' (i.e. colleges and universities) ongoing inability to fully reckon with their participation in and benefit from racial-colonial terror. Further, scholars have linked the historical investments in colonization by the US as a settler nation and higher education's ongoing efforts to accumulate and privatize material resources (e.g. resources made into property that can be owned) (Stein 2017; Tuck and McKenzie 2014).

Chief among privatized resources, both historically and contemporarily, is land. And, once land is made into property, access to land-based resources by local communities often becomes precarious (e.g. access to safe and affordable housing). For colleges and universities, this has meant an evolving function as community developers for purposes of institutional self-preservation, enrolment marketability and expanding facilities to support the education and research functions of their institutions (Calder and Greenstein 2001). This has been especially visible at urban colleges and universities in cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, all of which have long histories of university expansion and privatization that have irreparably altered local neighbourhoods of mostly low-income, racially minoritized residents (Baldwin 2021a, 2021b, 2021d).

### **Studentification, Housing Insecurity and Racial Inequity in West Philadelphia**

As previously conceptualized, a core function of neoliberal higher education within the settler-colonial paradigm is its acquisition, accumulation and privatization of resources. For urban cities and ethnic enclaves predominated by Black and other racially minoritized residents, many of whom are also low income, the growing housing crisis has been especially consequential. Research on housing markets in major US cities typically attributes housing affordability issues to either high-cost housing or low income. In Philadelphia, for example, which serves as the context for the current study, no other populous city has a higher proportion of cost-burden households (i.e. housing costs are equal to or more than 30 per cent of a household income) with low incomes (less than \$30,000) according to a 2020 housing report by The Pew Charitable Trust. In 2018, more than two-thirds of Philadelphia households reported annual incomes of *less* than \$30,000, which is the highest among the nation's ten most populous cities and the sixth highest among the nation's largest high-poverty cities (Caudell-Feagan et al. 2020). According to 2019 Census data, Black people comprise 40 per cent of the city's population, the largest among

all racial/ethnic groups, and also represent the greatest proportion (41 per cent) of those living below the poverty line at nearly twice the rate of White residents.

These statistical realities stand in sharp contrast to the ever-expanding enterprises of private industry and the higher education industrial complex in Philadelphia. As Daniels's (2020) assessment of the social impact of university expansion and private industry in West Philadelphia details, *studentification*<sup>2</sup> (Ehlenz 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Gibbons, Barton and Reling 2020) has shifted the class and racial demographics and cultural integrity of historically Black, middle-class neighbourhoods. Further, the encroachment of local universities and corporations as developers into these neighbourhoods has severely reduced access to affordable housing for residents with modest and subsidized incomes. This also includes the increasing role of private equity groups in the housing market (e.g. Blackstone and Lone Star Funds) in acquiring and redeveloping disinvested properties to maximize profits, some of which serve the profitable student housing market (Vogell 2022). Not surprisingly, these circumstances and disparities, among others, have also contributed to rising reports of gun violence on and near urban university campuses (Davis 2022). And, as reports of violence against campus stakeholders have increased, so has the racialized policing of local residents, exacerbating existing racial disparities in police interactions, violations of civil rights and use of excessive force by campus police departments (Baldwin 2021e; Jones 2022).

Altogether, affordable housing is a central component when considering the interrelation of inequities in education, labour and workforce development, and criminalization, all of which are disproportionately impacting racially minoritized youth. Whether through their own accumulation or the demands created through enrolments and research expansion, urban colleges and universities are more than culpable in contributing to the housing crisis. This culpability has necessarily resulted in organized direct-action by campus and community organizers who are working in coalition to resist university expansion and its myriad consequences for local communities. As discussed further on, such organization and movement activity are a long-standing dimension of political engagement among youth within and beyond campus contexts.

### **Student Activism, Student Voice and Social Movements in Higher Education**

Scholars from various fields and disciplines have given considerable attention to student activism and social movements in US colleges, including examinations of individual characteristics of movement participation (Anderson 2019; Hope, Durkee and Keels 2016; McAdam 1988a), organizational contexts as predictors of campus activism (Barnhardt 2012; Rhoads 1998a, 2016), inequitable experiences related to campus climate and sense of belonging (Logan, Lightfoot and Contreras 2017; Morgan and Davis 2019), engagement outcomes of activist participation (Davis, Stokes and Morgan 2020; Quaye 2007) and resources used to achieve student movements' goals (Davis 2015; Davis 2019a, 2019b). Typically, research concerning the issues, grievances and demands of student activists has historically focused on a broad range of topics including, but not limited to, student quality of life (Moore 1997; Rudy 1996), conflict between various stakeholder groups (i.e. faculty, staff and students) (Braungart and Braungart 1990; Brax 1981), student autonomy and freedom of speech and expression (Altbach and Peterson 1971; Melear 2003; Wood 1974), mobilizing against participation and institutional support of foreign wars

(Astin et al., 1975) and civil rights and affirmative action on campus (Rhoads 1998a, 1998b; Rogers 2012). More recent research on student activism has focused on student activism related to broader social and political issues, including immigration and deportation (Abrego 2008; Gonzales 2008; Muñoz 2015), anti-Black state and state-sanctioned violence (Davis 2015; Hope, Durkee and Keels 2016) and other social justice issues that permeate college and university campuses in various ways.

While these areas of focus offer meaningful insight into a contextually specific understanding of organizing and movements *in* collegiate environments, there is considerably less empirical evidence on movements resisting higher education's contribution to social, political and economic inequality within broader society. This includes historical and planning research that does not fully attend to the role of how student organizers, in collaboration with others, shape narrative frames (McCarthy 1996) directly related to the consequential decision-making of higher education leaders. A similar dearth in literature is evident in research focused on student voice. Student voice has traditionally been described as 'the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers' (Mitra 2006: 7). The underlying objective of centring student voice is to allow students to collaborate with staff, faculty and administrators in decision-making processes and help identify ways to improve the institutional climate (Mitra and Gross 2009). In principle, student voice actualizes the liberal democratic vision of schools by fostering civic and political participation and promoting active citizenship – traits that will theoretically translate into the broader political context (Mayes 2020). Various scholars have critiqued the concept of student voice, highlighting how (1) its application often does not take into consideration the inequitable power dynamics of students' gender, class and race in determining who is heard and who is dismissed (Mayes 2020; Stokes and Davis 2022); (2) students should never have to carry the full weight of societal reform (Arnot and Reay 2007); and (3) it can be utilized as a mechanism for political suppression by 'defusing [the] potentially disruptive perspectives' of student activists through an illusory demonstration of mutual collaboration (Fielding 2004: 298).

Existing research also does not fully explicate the ways student voice traverses and expands the permeability of formal post-secondary boundaries within which activism is believed to primarily take place. As a result, there is an absence of meaningful explanations for the relationship between student and community organizers as movement actors working collaboratively to challenge the economic and political power of post-secondary institutions. This is consequential given what we are learning about the role of new and digital media technologies in student activism for facilitating organized direct action in lieu of physical presence (see Davis 2019b). Further, it has been an especially important aspect of movement repertoires during a persistent pandemic that has limited in-person collaboration outside of large-scale protests. What is more, Davis, Stokes and Morgan (2020) emphasize how 'contemporary student activists continue to traverse the spatial boundaries of post-secondary life to engage with broader movements', including those aimed at disrupting university expansion and urban renewal (149). In what we will demonstrate through our case analysis, student voice can serve as an amplification tool that legitimizes concerns of communities otherwise disenfranchised, dismissed or disregarded by post-secondary leaders.

Altogether, the campus-centric focus that largely predominates student movement scholarship circumscribes the analytical gaze and thereby restricts what is known about movement activity off and away from campus. For this reason, our case analysis enumerates the ways contemporary

student organizers (and other campus activists) undertake the work of social and political transformation beyond their institutions and in partnership with communities routinely displaced and destroyed by colleges and universities. And, because such work has a long history, we pay particular attention to the antecedents of the contemporary movement in the recurring battle for Black life-making (Mustaffa 2017) in American urban cities.

### **Campus-Community Organizing and the Long Movement to Stop ‘Black Removal’**

As eviction moratoriums during the Covid-19 pandemic expired, rental assistance programmes faltered and federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) contracts failed to be renewed, the concern around housing security for Black residents in Philadelphia proximal to university campuses has increased. And, as has been the case historically, communities have organized to fight for affordable housing in resistance to rent hikes, property sales and further industrial expansion into residential neighbourhoods. In West Philadelphia specifically, a group of campus and community organizers known as the Coalition to Save the UC Townhomes (#savetheuctownhomes) coalesced in the Fall of 2021 to collectively resist the sale of the reported last affordable housing complex for Black residents in an area historically known as the Black Bottom. The coalition is a resident-led organization working in conjunction with more than fifty allied organizations, which includes seven campus-based student groups from the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University and Haverford University (see <https://savetheuctownhomes.com/allies/>).

Formerly known as Greenville,<sup>3</sup> the Black Bottom was a residential area for Black families in West Philadelphia that migrated north in the early twentieth century. However, following the displacement of residents due to urban renewal programmes during the late 1950s, the Black Bottom was all but destroyed and subsequently renamed as ‘University City’. As Puckett and Lloyd (2015) have documented, the development of University City was a strategic undertaking between the Philadelphia City Planning Commission and the West Philadelphia Corporation (WPC), a multilateral coalition of higher education and medical institutions to include the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) as majority shareholder and senior partner and Drexel University (then Drexel Institute of Technology), Presbyterian Hospital (now Penn Presbyterian Medical Center) and Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine as junior partners. Together, the boundaries of University City were constructed, as well as the development of the University City Science Center (UCSC) to redevelop residential and commercial property. This ultimately led to the displacement of *six hundred* low-income and Black families and demolished local schools and small businesses throughout the 1960s (Baldwin 2021c). This particular period of urban renewal, which was deeply damaging to Penn’s community reputation (Puckett and Lloyd 2015), has long been referred to as ‘Black removal’ by residents and organizers, a powerful diagnostic frame<sup>4</sup> (Bendford and Snow 2000; McCarthy 1996) aimed to draw attention to the racialized destruction, dislocation and displacement caused by urban redevelopment projects.

The use of narrative framing by campus-community organizers was an important strategy undergirding the subsequent tactics employed to address ‘Penetration’ during the late 1960s. This included organizing efforts by the well-known radical US movement organization Students for Democratic Society (SDS), whose members at universities in the greater Philadelphia area

co-organized a protest with the Community Involvement Council (CIC), a Penn student group that worked with local communities (Fowler 1969). Beginning 18 February 1969, student protestors from Penn, Temple University and Swarthmore College marched against the UCSC's displacement of Black Bottom residents as well as its Department of Defence contracts and classified research programme. A procession from campus marched to the vacant lot designated for UCSC construction where they hosted political theatre, speeches and pickets. According to reports from the student newspaper, the *Daily Pennsylvanian* (1969, as cited in Wolf-Powers 2022: 19), Reverend Edward Sims, a community activist, implored the students to be vocal advocates for community interests beyond the boundaries of the university. Steven Fraser, a member of SDS at Temple University responded to Sims call to action with a statement of solidarity: 'The administrators of the University City Science Center think we students are a bunch of children. We will force them to use their wealth to help this community'.

The following day, students returned to campus and proceeded to College Hall (i.e. Penn's central administration building) where Penn SDS members re-presented their December 1968 demands to University president Gaylord P. Harnwell; Harnwell also served as president for the WPC. Following an all but complete dismissal of senior SDS member Joseph Mukiliak's recitation, students debated possible next steps. This included Mukiliak raising the question: 'Do we want a takeover or have we made our point' (Fowler 1969: 9). Ira Harkavy, CIC co-chairman, suggested students request trustees of the University of Pennsylvania meet to consider the demands before vacating the building. To facilitate the decision-making process, a steering committee composed of CIC, SDS and SDS Labor Committee members was organized and operated within a 'participatory democracy' framework to allow for open participation in discussion. By the early evening, participating students voted to keep the protest open-ended and designated thirty-seven students to serve as marshals to manage the ensuing occupation of the building.

According to an official account published in March 1969 by the *Pennsylvania Gazette*,<sup>5</sup> more than 1,000 people, mostly students, but also supportive faculty and community members, participated in daily plenary sessions across the six-day sit-in of College Hall (Fowler 1969). These sessions functioned as teach-ins about specific socio-economic and political issues for which the coalition of student organizers believed Penn was institutionally responsible for addressing. Among them were the displacement of local Black and low-income residents in West Philadelphia and the lack of affordable alternative housing that directly resulted from the Penn-led WPC's redevelopment programme. Emerging from the caucus, and in conjunction with other declarations, was the formal demand from students that the university return the land to displaced Black Bottom residents and relinquish control to a Black community group (i.e. Renewal Housing, Inc.) (Fowler 1969; Puckett and Lloyd 2015). At the insistence of local Black community leaders – including Philadelphia members of the Black Panther Party<sup>6</sup> – the aforementioned demand was augmented to ultimately include an expanded agenda to increase community participation in university governance and codify community approval for institutional expansions that may affect area residents. Following receipt, the board of trustees drafted a counter-proposal including their intention to ask the trustees of the executive board for authorization to negotiate with Renewal Housing, Inc. in determining 'low-cost housing requirements for persons displaced by UCSC and [who] would like to return to the area' (Fowler 1969: 11). If an agreement between the parties could be reached, the trustees committed the university to make every attempt to secure land for low-cost housing.

With the support of the faculty senate and a delegation of West Philadelphia's Black community leaders, the trustees and students released a statement with a six-point plan that included, among other commitments, establishing a quadripartite commission comprised of an equal representation of community members and university stakeholders (i.e. students, faculty and trustees) to align community and university development. Additionally, the trustees agreed to raise \$10 million through 'corporations, businesses, institutions and agencies to which they have access' to support community renewal programmes and the establishment of a community redevelopment fund.

On 24 February, the day following the conclusion of the sit-in, a formal resolution was adopted that supported the aforementioned agreement. In response to the agreement, a student involved in the negotiations was quoted by the student newspaper stating, 'We changed the decision-making process and priorities of this institution.' And, in many respects, the student was exactly right. The role of students in advocating for a radical redistribution of university resources as well as shared decision-making power between Black West Philadelphians and the university directly shaped the institution's favourable response. In part, this was made possible by the ways in which students undertook a civil disruption of university operations that starkly contrasted with a particularly volatile period of college student activism. More importantly, however, the principle demands at the heart of students' activism were rooted in the concerns previously voiced by Black community members years earlier. Not surprisingly, university leaders and the WPC had summarily dismissed and made great efforts to publicly undermine the legitimacy of community leaders and their claims prior to the 1969 sit-in (Wolf-Powers 2022). However, given the unique constituency (i.e. students) to which the university was compelled to answer, student voice and its structural location *within* the university became a powerful legitimization tool in the fight against unfettered university expansion.

## Conclusion

In consideration of how student voice is defined as a matter of 'legitimate perspective' (Cook-Sather 2006), framing processes (Bendford and Snow 2000) in campus-community movements are an important phenomenon to understand the relationship between institutional rhetoric and the efficacy of institutional commitments to the public good. And, while student perspectives are often delegitimized with regard to campus-centric issues tied to students' socio-academic experiences, student voice can provide legitimacy as an important resource for movements at the intersection of campuses and communities to mobilize efforts to achieve their goals. As evidenced in this historical case, upon which contemporary organizers resisting to university expansion continue to draw, student voice can frame issues that implicate post-secondary institutions in ways from which those deemed as outsiders are commonly prevented.

## Notes

- 1 A condition of receiving federal aid was that the money would only be distributed to states whose institutions either enrolled or otherwise established separate institutions for non-White students, which provided an additional gateway for furthering segregationist practices in higher education.
- 2 The term 'studentification' broadly refers to the gentrification of neighbourhoods through the specific development and expansion of housing and amenities to service students enrolled in urban colleges and universities.



- 3 In the late-1800s, Greenville was home to Philadelphia's Black residents, many of whose families had been in Philadelphia since enslaver William Penn imported enslaved Africans in 1685.
- 4 A diagnostic frame refers to perspectives advanced by movements that identify social and political problems and attribute responsibility for their existence (and remediation) to individual and/or institutional sources.
- 5 *The Pennsylvania Gazette* is a bimonthly magazine published by the University of Pennsylvania and written about, for and often by alumni.
- 6 The Black Panther Party, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was a Black revolutionary socialist organization founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California, during the late-1960s. At its height, the Black Panther Party would operate in forty-eight US states with support groups internationally in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America.

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