

# Can COVID-19 Reopening Plans Mitigate Cycles of Residential Displacement?

Shawna L. Thomas-EL<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Dental Medicine, University of Pennsylvania

**Cite as:** Thomas-EL, S.L. (2022). Can COVID-19 Reopening Plans Mitigate Cycles of Residential Displacement? *Metropolitan Universities*, 33(1), 13-26. DOI: 10.18060/25466.

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**Editor:** Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

## Abstract

This article uses interviews of long-standing neighborhood residents' sentiments of university expansion into their community. These data provide persuasive empirical evidence for the need of urban anchor institutions to include as an integral component of their campus reopening efforts, intentional plans for reducing the disruption of housing patterns of permanent residents. The term *COVID exposure* has come to signify not only the potential to succumb to the virus, but it also implies the revealing of inequities in systems that impact the effects of the crisis within Black and Brown communities. Every sector of U.S. society has been impacted by COVID-19, and it has required a paradigm shift in our interactions with one another. Academic institutions are enacting robust de-densification efforts which will stimulate dramatic shifts in the off-campus housing needs for students, but they stand the chance of displacing or further disadvantaging the long-standing residents who reside outside of their campus border. Universities must use reopening plans as an instrument to change the trajectory of relationships they hope to cultivate with their long-standing neighbors, through renewed engagement efforts that integrate lessons from the past and that seek to build stronger neighborhoods by challenging housing inequity and housing inequality.

**Keywords:** African American, anchor institutions, COVID-19, gentrification, displacement, housing, town and gown

*It's very distressing to know that people who grew up in this neighborhood have had no access to the new developments. I'm not sure if they're refused rental when they ask or if the policy is for students only. For YEARS. What I do know is that last year during the pandemic was the first time I noticed one family, one Black family with children in one of the multi-unit apartment buildings that rent to students. That was really very different because it's all students all the time. It's annoying.*

- Long-Standing Community Resident

*The expected “de-densifying”—reducing the number of students in each bedroom—of on-campus housing is expected to drive increased demand for off-campus housing.*

- Frederick W. Pierce, Pierce Education Properties

## Introduction

The dynamic existing between urban anchor institutions and the neighborhoods which border their campuses has historically been fraught with tensions. In neighborhoods which consist largely of African American residents possessing low wealth, universities have been perceived by residents as culpable for the displacement of their neighbors who have not been able to maintain possession of their homes, and the gentrification of their neighborhoods where they have lived most of their lives. The 2019 study *In My Neighborhood but Not for Me*, (Thomas-EL, 2019) explores the perceptions residents hold about the expansion of Fourdlet University (pseudonym) into the residential community of Greatland (pseudonym). Some of the more emphatic sentiments expressed surrounded the issue of housing, as they considered inextricable, the connection between the expansion of the university and the displacement of their neighbors. These sentiments defined the theme *Disrespecting the Community* and have shaped their feelings about the local academic institution.

Conducted two-years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study of residents who have lived in Greatland, which borders Fourdlet University, a large private, anchor institution for at least twenty years, details the frustrations they hold concerning their inability to partake of services and amenities which are deemed inaccessible in their midst. Sandy, a recent graduate student, relayed her experience of attempting to rent an apartment close to her family while pursuing her studies. She was not a student of the bordering anchor institution, and that detail created her perceived barrier. She shares:

[T]hey build beautiful apartment buildings, it would say “students only.” You couldn’t apply there if you wanted. You couldn’t live there if you wanted to. It literally had signs saying student only apartments. Student only housing. And you’re like wait a minute, I lived here more than they did.

Sandy was not alone in her experience. Lavon, one of the more senior participants of the study, expressed his offense surrounding exclusion of individuals who are not students. He perceives rejection as that of discrimination:

You could probably rent from a person that own[s] the property who rent to students, but I couldn't. In my own neighborhood...and I say right to this day, that's discrimination. It is discrimination! It is. One hundred percent. It says that you own a property...that you cannot rent from me because (pause). If I'm qualified, what makes me not qualified to rent in those apartments? You try to rent, they say if you don't have a student pass or anything, you cannot rent from me. That's discrimination. That's housing discrimination. Yeah.

Insufficient data exists to determine the level to which neighborhood residents have been afforded opportunities to assume vacant apartments during the pandemic; however, the leading quote above which details the observation of one family in an apartment traditionally held for students, suggests that this may not be an isolated incident. The observation provoked a conversation about housing in the neighborhood during a recent encounter with a resident who has lived in Greatland for over forty years, giving rise to the consideration of how COVID-19 has transformed the enduring reality residents situated near urban universities. It is important to note that this geographic location like so many other urban areas where African Americans comprised the majority of the population, was one that had been gifted in the late 1940s by the city's Redevelopment Authority to Fourdlet University, to support the university's projected student population increase by 1970. The familiar pattern of disinvestment and decline (Lloyd, 2016; Lucas, 2013; Redfern, 2003) which precedes a gentrifying community prevailed over a forty-year period, as the university sought to develop ways to secure its own financial solvency. One idea for achieving this was to alter the perception of the university as a commuter school to being a predominately residential school, thus increasing the need for more student housing (Gollotti, 2009; Hoffman, 2012; University Archives, n.d.). Prior to 1990, the neighborhood of Greatland was nearly 98% African American, with no documentation of White, undergraduate students residing in the neighborhood. The announcement of image transformation by the university's president in the early 1990s prompted a shift in students' willingness to extend their living boundaries beyond the main campus and into areas that still kept it accessible by walking. Currently, the Greatland neighborhood is deemed an extension of the university, with housing designated for students, bus shuttles with neighborhood routes, and round-the-clock- university security. The imminent return to campus with reduced numbers of students living in the traditional dormitory model give rise to the larger issue of anchor institutions working to ensure that the increased need for off-campus housing in the surrounding communities will not be to the detriment of long-standing community members. Utilization of scholarship surrounding residents' sentiments about expansion, displacement, and town and gown issues can serve to inform urban and metropolitan institutions prior to the development or implementation of campus reopening plans. This scholarship can prove instructive for mitigating gentrification and

displacement cycles while also servicing student populations, given a proactive approach to the issue.

## Background

From its outset, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the persistence of racial disparities that are emblematic (Benfer, Vlahov, Long et al., 2021; Kullar, Marcelin, Swartz et al., 2020) of the United States. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has reported that Black and Brown people experienced a disproportionate burden of COVID-19 deaths, significantly higher rates of infections and hospitalization, and lower levels of care (CDC, 2021; KFF, 2021). The term *COVID exposure* has come to signify not only the potential to succumb to the virus, but also to emphasize the inequity of response in systems that can impact the effects of the crisis within Black and Brown communities. The COVID-19 Tracking Project, a volunteer organization of professionals within the fields of data technology and science, reported on the consistent disproportionate healthcare and economic burden that the virus presented to African American and communities of color. Their studies showed that by January 2021, more Black Americans had “died of COVID-19 since the pandemic began than there are names on the Vietnam Memorial” and “than the number of people commemorated on the AIDS Memorial Quilt” (Goldfarb, 2021). As a nation, we are slowly coming to realize, fully, the economic impact of COVID-19 (Baldwin & Di Mauro, 2020; Chen, Igan, Pierri, & Presbitero, 2020; Gopinath, 2020) through the reporting of job losses, layoffs, shutdowns, work slowdowns and all the implications that stem from population reductions. Increased demands for non-profit services due to high levels of food insecurity (Gundersen, Hake, Dewey & Engelhard, 2021; Wolfson & Leung 2020), mental health and physical and substance abuse counseling (Sarvey, & Welsh, 2021; Taylor, Paluszek, Rachor, McKay & Asmundson, 2021) necessities, compounded by shortages in donation revenue due to cancelations of fundraising events and job loss, demonstrates that there is no sector of the U.S. society that has not been impacted by COVID-19. A paradigm-shift away from previous close-contact, care-free manners is required for the way we must now communicate and engage with each other, and nowhere is this truer than within the U.S. education sector, which struggled initially in determining how to deliver instruction to millions of young people throughout the country.

At the post-secondary level, to manage the outbreak of a global health pandemic caused by COVID-19, academic institutions were forced to take swift action (Fischer, 2020; Leckron, 2020) after shelter-in-place orders were issued nationally in March 2020. Prior to the order, initial responses to COVID-19 looked to extend spring breaks and de-densify campuses. Reducing the number of individuals in close contact areas, including lecture halls, cafeterias, and dormitories, was a necessary immediate measure, and was widely accepted as effective in stopping or reducing the spread of the virus (Freeman, Nguyen, Beliveau et al., 2021; Hamer, White, Jenkins et al., 2021). These were deemed insufficient choices (Vasquez, 2020) for

meeting the magnitude of the moment and ultimately mandates were issued for the full evacuation of dormitories and college campuses. In many urban institutions where student populations rely heavily upon off-campus housing in residential neighborhoods, tensions rose between school administrations and local landlords who also rely on the income of student rentals as landlords perceived the university to be exercising authority outside of their jurisdiction. Communication from one apartment general manager informed their tenants, “This is your home, and you are welcome to stay. No one at the university has a right to require you to leave your apartment, or to move out...” (Cohen, 2020). Thousands of undergraduate and graduate students departed college campuses, and, importantly, students who lived off-campus and would have continued to do so, elected to return and remain home at the termination of their leases. Academia, like many other industries at this time, is contending with financial ravage brought about by COVID-19. The decision to freeze tuition combined with the reduction of international students’ acceptances (Friga, 2021), portends an increase of students to future incoming classes to improve revenues.

### **The Impact of De-Densifying**

The de-densifying of campus dormitories (Diep, 2021) incites a shift in the traditional housing model (Mosher, 2020; Pierce, 2020; Zalaznik, 2020) of double or triple occupancy rooms to single rooms where students have no roommates. Further extrapolation of this plan implies an increase of students seeking off-campus housing in neighboring communities that are repeatedly encroached upon, giving rise to a central issue for residents, “[N]ow they pushing us out again, where we gon go?” (p. 133, Thomas-EL, 2019).

Out of necessity, fewer students will be housed in the dormitories for the purpose of de-densification. Resultantly, students who are not housed by the university will seek housing within the outlying community (Hoffman, 2012; Mosher, 2020). This has been the consensus of university officials, realtors, and property managers across the nation (Marcut, 2020; Pierce, 2021; Tracy & Perman, 2021). Unlike previous decades which were absent of Community Benefits Agreements (Gross, 2007; Wolf-Powers, 2010) designed to incorporate community input into negotiations surrounding development, or Civic Missions or Anchor Missions (Checkoway, 2001; Kantanen, 2005; Norris, & Weiss, 2019) that detail the guiding postures that institutions should display towards that neighbors, urban universities are now in possession of or have access to scholarship which details the sentiments and perceptions their neighbors hold in relation to the increased expansion into their communities. They have the tools available to change the trajectory of historical town and gown issues (O’Mara, 2012) that have proven detrimental to low-wealth neighboring communities. Prescient comments from one study participant relays her understanding of the phenomenon. She asserts:

So now, you ain’t gonna charge, um five hundred dollars that you was charging these people that’s less fortunate. Now to live in a one-bedroom apartment, it’s twelve hundred

dollars. And you saying that's okay. Because you know why? You got the Fourdlet students here, and they doggone PHEAA money and everything is paying it. *They* not paying it, the money that they get for their grants and stuff is paying it. So now, of course, the landlord gonna say, 'oh, ok they payin' twelve hundred dollars here, I'm gonna go up here', so now you got [them] pushing the people that lived down [here] all their life, you're pushing them out of this. Out of [CITY].

Anchor institutions play a significant role in how residents will experience the impact of COVID-19 on college campuses. There are opportunities to mitigate damages that may arise from neglecting or disregarding the needs of their neighbors prior to residents experiencing an increase of students seeking more housing. Failure to foreground residents' concerns of increased expansion and prohibitive housing creates the potential to increase the town and gown tensions that are representative of gentrification and displacement. These long-held notions about who deserves to occupy a space are enveloped by white supremacy and privilege and defined by race and class (McGhee, 2020; O'Mara, 2012; Reed, 2004; Rothstein, 2018). Principle tenets of anchor missions reflect the institutions' desire to engage with and support the goals (Birch, Perry, & Taylor, 2013; Norris & Weiss, 2019; Sladek, 2019) of the community, and can work to thwart the deep-seated issues of feeling "pushed-out" or discriminated against. In this regard, urban and metropolitan academic institutions must include residential concerns within the structure of reopening plans, which assume the movement of their students into bordering neighborhoods in greater numbers as well as how the increase will affect housing for long-standing residents.

## **The New Normal**

In the 2021-22 academic year when campuses resume new regular operations, the temptation for landlords and realtors will be towards recouping income that was lost as housing investments sat dormant. At the national level, landlords have expressed dismay over the loss of rental receipt income (Greenspan, 2021; Khouri, 2021). Though data are insufficient in detailing student experiences for satisfying rental agreements, Pierce (2021) reports an increase of new off-campus apartment leases that will begin in summer 2021 in anticipation of plans by colleges to maintain the single dormitory room model. Brian Pearl is a developer whose company was hired in the summer of 2020 to build 886 units to house students after the first wave of the COVID crisis. He supports the assertion that the future demand for student off-campus housing will remain high as the nation continues to grapple with the effects of the pandemic:

The need for student housing throughout the nation is nothing short of compelling. In some universities, due to the inability to share rooms during the pandemic, the demand for off-campus housing has temporarily increased, even above its already high level. As we move past COVID-19, we will continue to see a robust need for housing. (Marcut, 2020)

In adjoining residential communities that have experienced campus expansions into their neighborhoods, the ripple effect of the national lockdown punctuated a defining feature in gentrification of low-wealth, marginalized communities by anchor institutions: the availability of affordable rental housing in their neighborhoods. Residents have expressed strong sentiments about the practices of developers in their community who have been intentional in their preference of tenants. One participant remarks:

I actually still feel some type of way, um, with some of the things, far as them building up all of these nice apartments, but they're not for us. And they are overly priced...just out of curiosity, I've called about apartments in the, in the um, area. And, um, there was a two-bedroom apartment, and it was like, oh it's um, twelve hundred a month. And I'm like, 'for what?' And they're like, 'oh, um, cuz we charge six hundred per room.' (p. 133, Thomas-EL, 2019)

Over the course of the national shut-down and throughout the partial reopening of college campuses, it has been difficult for landlords to salvage incomes through their rentals. To protect their investments, not only were they willing to forgo the “students only” requirement, but many entered into agreements with community members in the form of abatements, waivers, and deferrals (Meyerowitz, 2021) to remain afloat. Importantly, community residents have had the benefit of remaining in their neighborhoods; however, they “remain in the precarious position of being pushed out of the community due to the increasing expansion of the university” (Thomas-EL, 2019). The anticipated full return of students in fall 2021 back to city campuses is what will present anchor institutions with the conundrum: how will they continue nurturing the fragile relationships with communities whose residents maintain the feeling of being pushed-out of their homes because of student preference while also maintaining the number of students needed for their business model to survive? According to Paul Friga of the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill:

“Higher ed is hurting. Our entire operating model is under siege, the revenue losses are unprecedented, and campus leaders are beginning to respond to the historic challenges. They are realizing that cost cutting alone is not the answer, and that this is a time to clarify their institution’s unique value to their students and communities.” (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2021)

Rather than venture that landlords or realtors will protect the interests of the residents, proactive use by anchor institutions of economic and political resources (Bowen, 1953) could ensure that residents remain anchored in their locations. This may mean drafting agreements with housing representatives, working with municipal agencies that would help tenants remain where they are, or advocating on their behalf of their lease agreement. Neglecting to openly and proactively engage with the neighboring community poses significant risks to urban institutions where housing is concerned as adverse impacts to residents which benefit students are perceived

sanctioned by the institutions (Thomas-EL, 2019), and will reopen wounds that gentrification and displacement have caused.

## **Discussion**

The COVID-19 global health crisis has collided with the quintessential urban crisis; however, scholarship surrounding the town and gown vacuum exists now, more abundantly than in decades past. Urban academic institutions can benefit from understanding how they can interact with communities to bring about fruitful outcomes, and this scholarship positions them to be instrumental in bringing about a more equitable conclusion to positive community engagement. March 2020 introduced an unprecedented event for higher education. The impending return to campus for all students with fewer vacancies in campus dormitories gives rise to the question of how the influx of students into bordering neighborhoods will be addressed.

Anchor institutions that place as a priority engaging with this eventuality of student expansion into residential neighborhoods rather than disregarding it as a by-product of normal institutional operations (Bergen & Sladek, 2019), gain possibilities of improving community engagement efforts. Bowen (1953), in his discussion of corporate social responsibility (CSR), supports this assertion. Regarding the responsibilities of businesses, he states that they are obligated, “to pursue those policies, make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objective and values of our society” (p. 6). By contrast, failure to lead in this area of housing/residents/students, hazards the erasure of prior efforts towards improvement of community relations, as the new iteration of expansion and potential displacement could be viewed as an expected recurrence at the hands of the institution.

## **Conclusion**

It is possible, given the unprecedented nature of a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic, that there is nothing that can be done except to make a public acknowledgement to the neighbors of an impending increase of student residents. Nevertheless, even this would be better than the traditional silence from the university to which the community has become accustomed. Communication from the institution demonstrates that long-standing residents are a part of the reimagining process for campus reopening. Prior community engagement efforts from urban anchor institutions must shift towards recognizing the familiar patterns of displacement which exist throughout the town and gown dynamic. The current president of Fourdlet is quoted as having the goal of being “the most civically engaged university in the nation.” A proactive approach could serve to establish a new normal that will account for the residents who have emerged as consistent placeholders in their communities especially during the time of the pandemic crisis. Campus reopening plans must include measures that would not further



disadvantage low-wealth residents in their neighboring communities by instigating unwelcoming environments, cost-prohibitive housing, or displacement.

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