Town and Gown Dynamics: The Importance of Building Communities in Boston

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Executive Summary:

Students are simultaneously a privileged and vulnerable group when it comes to housing–they are called marginal gentrifiers (Moos et al., 2019). Students are forced into 'student-ghettos' because realtors see them as a high-risk group, and schools may not always provide adequate housing (Gumprecht, 2006; Rosen 2019). Studentification can be especially difficult to discuss because in the long-term, these students can change the socio-economic makeup and culture of a neighborhood. We then turn to look at how in the long-term, studentification can become gentrification.

The effects of gentrification are devastating to lower-income and residents of color. Gentrification displaces long-time residents, and sees shifts the neighborhood culture that favors the dominant groups moving in. A common counterargument is that gentrification can be good because it improves neighborhood infrastructure. However, some of these so-called improvements may not actually help residents.

The Boston Institutional Master Plan must improve, and this involves having an emphasis on community building/addressing systemic inequalities. Truly make these universities and students integrate with their communities. Universities should also donate to community organizations and give back through means of scholarships, funds, etc.

Essay:

For most of my life, I've lived in neighborhoods that were predominantly residents of color. Two neighborhoods that I grew up in, Crown Heights and East New York, were mostly made up of Black and Hispanic residents. I first lived in Crown Heights. I remember being around 12 years old and seeing slow shifts in the neighborhood. The first notable shift I saw was a Starbucks opening on Nostrand Avenue. I vividly remember driving past it with my mom when it first opened. When she saw it, all she said was: "Here they come". Within a few years, my grandmother was priced out of the apartment building that she had lived in before I was born.

In my current neighborhood of East New York, I started to notice the changes immediately– many of them have come in the last year or two. Subway stations are being renovated, multiplexes with more "modern" architecture are being built, there are more urgent care health centers, and I see more people jogging and biking. Not all of these shifts are inherently negative, but due to what I've experienced, I am a bit nervous about it all.

These shifts in a neighborhood are also known as gentrification. Gentrification has been described as a process that starts with a group with low financial capital but high cultural capital moving into a neighborhood, followed by middle class people who like the atmosphere and relatively low prices, until finally, upper-middle class professionals move into the neighborhood (Kohn, 2013 p. 298).

What I am concerned with in this paper is studentification– a process that is very similar to gentrification, and in some cases, said process can be seen as that first step of gentrification. Darren Smith, an urban geography professor, coined studentification, describing it as "the distinct social, cultural, economic, and physical transformations within university towns, which are associated with the season, in-migration of HE [Higher Education] students" (2004, p. 74).

In Article 80 of the Boston Zoning Code, it states that the Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA) must review blueprints of all new real estate developments and

how they impact the neighborhood they will be built in. There is a special review process under this that is specifically for universities and hospitals called the Boston Institutional Master Plan. Although Boston seems to be trying to mitigate the effects of studentification in its neighborhoods, they will never get to the crux of the problem due to the lack of community building between universities, students, and long-term residents. If we want to solve the problem of studentification, universities must not only look at spatial impacts but cultural and economic impacts. To do this, we must look at studentification and how both universities and local real estate markets contribute to it, then we will look at the effects of gentrification as a whole, and finally, we will look at how Article 80 can be revised to include more language around facilitating community bonds.

First, we must look at housing conditions for students. College-aged students are simultaneously a privileged and underprivileged group when it comes to housing. They are called marginal gentrifiers– they are in the margins of a group with power, which are gentrifiers (Moos et al., 2019). Students in Boston and across the nation face poor living conditions, high rents, and housing shortages. Furthermore, it is difficult to talk about these conditions because college students are poised to succeed economically in the future (Moos et al., 2019; Smith, 2004), so even though students may have housing troubles now, this may not always be the case.

College students often experience poor living conditions, as many live in "student ghettos" (Gumprecht, 2006). These student-ghettos have the stereotypical attributes of what a ghetto would look like. There may be trash in the streets, the houses look old and dilapidated, there's less greenery and trees– but the population is made up (almost) entirely of White, young, well off, undergraduate students. A well-known neighborhood that fits this description in Boston is Mission Hill, and there are fears that neighborhoods such as Allston-Brighton may suffer the same fate.

Boston is not the only city that has experienced the rapid formation of student ghettos. Another well-documented example is Ithaca, New York. Blake Gumprecht has detailed the formation of Collegetown in Ithaca, which has been around since the late 1800's (2006). Gumprecht used to be a professor of geography at the University of New Hampshire for 14 years and has written a book called *The American College Town*. He has done extensive research on the formation of college towns. When Cornell University first opened in 1868, Collegetown did not exist, as students only had a few on campus options to choose to live in. However, these on campus options were hated by both students and teachers– it was ill-ventilated, had outhouses, and gas lighting (Gumprecht, 2006). However, by the 1870's, more and more students were enrolling in Cornell, and more houses were built to accommodate those students (2006). By 1930, most of the houses in Collegetown were built. Business also popped up to start accommodating students (2006). Until the mid 1900's, Collegetown was a mix of students and local families.

But, enrollment at Cornell nearly doubled between 1940 and 1965 (Gumprecht, 2006). Even though Cornell built more student dormitories, a lot of students also moved off campus and slowly but surely, Collegetown had a predominantly student population. By the 70's, Collegetown gained a reputation of having rundown housing and and unruly students– one notable incident in 1972 saw students throwing bottles, cans, and other objects at police for four hours after they tried to break up a party the students were having (Gumprecht, 2006).

Modern Mission Hill is very similar to modern Collegetown, even though the studentification of Mission Hill started to happen in the early 2000's. When walking around the neighborhood, one sees multifamily housing that has been turned into apartments. Many of the houses are older and have not been updated. I have been to friends' homes that have had leaking roofs, holes from mice, and shotty heat and hot water. When these problems are mentioned to landlords, they are

often ignored. My friends would say that they do not think that their landlords and property managers take them seriously.

In an interview with Boston.com, Dave Monheit, a realtor at Encore Realty in Brookline said that "undergrads will trash your place nine out of 10 times. They just don't care. They don't see it as somebody's property, someone's belongings. It's just where they're staying" (Quoted in Rosen, 2019). One Boston University student, Bella Manganello, detailed her troubles of renting from landlords in Boston. She said that once realtors learned that she was a student, she would be rejected (Rosen, 2019). These attitudes towards student renting– landlords not wanting to rent to students and students having a defeatist outlook– makes students more susceptible to landlords that will make them pay high rents for decrepit housing. Not to mention, many landlords to not take care of problems such as pest control or general repairs, in part because they know there will be a steady flow of students that will need housing. In fact, part of how Ithaca's student ghetto formed was due to negligent landlords who had that mindset (Gumprecht, 2006). Yet, the main reason why these student ghettos form is due to schools not providing adequate housing. Overcrowding and lack of housing is a problem plaguing schools across the country, not just in Boston (Rosen, 2019). This forces many students to go off campus. This has also been a growing trend since World War II, indicating that this is a systemic problem and not just a handful of isolated incidents (Gumprecht, 2006).

One reason why studentification can be a difficult topic to discuss is because students can make long-term changes to the socio-economic makeup and culture of a neighborhood, especially since students move in and out of houses throughout the year. Studentification is when a university town undergoes cultural, physical, and economic change due to students who move in and out throughout the year (Smith, 2004, p. 74). For example, students may want to stay up late and party (Smith & Fox, 2019). This rings especially true for Mission Hill, as many

Northeastern fraternity houses are in that neighborhood as well. Additionally, Boston clubs and bars close at just 2AM. This is early compared to other cities in surrounding states, where bars and clubs may close as late as 4 or 5AM. Since students do not have many places to stay out past a certain time, they instead turn to house parties. This may conflict with families and older, more long-time residents who may not want to hear loud music and crowds throughout the night.

Another reason why studentification is hard to discuss is because students are a disadvantaged group in the present, but hold great cultural currency, the potential to climb up the social ladder, and the potential to outearn other groups. (Moos et al., 2019; Smith, 2004). The median income for Black families in Boston is $42,175, and for Latino families it is $34,852 (Jennings, 2021 p. 103). The median income for a NEU graduate is $60,100 (Clauss, 2015). This shows a trend where students go on to make more than the original residents of a neighborhood. However, this does not take race into account. Black and Hispanic college graduates earn less than their White counterparts (Jennings, 2021 p. 103).

Now, the median income for a White household in Boston is over $98,000 (Jennings, 2021 p. 103), nearly double the amount of median income for Black families and just over double the amount for Latino families. High density neighborhoods with young people tend to have higher unemployment rates than low density neighborhoods with young people (Moos et al., 2019). Again, we look to a neighborhood like Mission Hill. Statistically speaking, that neighborhood should the trademarks of a 'ghetto', such as high unemployment rates. But, because most of the young people are getting degrees of higher education and are White (it's no secret the NEU is a predominantly White institution), they have the potential to boost themselves to higher class statuses. Even though they may be in a precocious demographic right now, they hold a lot of potential capital.

This influx of college students into neighboring areas of their institutions lead to a cultural change. Now, there is a population of people who value higher education and made it a part of their life. This is not necessarily negative, as positive attitudes towards college encourages Black and Brown children to apply and attend college (Brummet & Reed, 2019). This in turn can diversify colleges and universities and increase the social capital of Black and Brown families. Likewise, this can integrate the college community with the local community. However, this can be negative and enforce cultural ideas that to be successful, you need a 4-year degree from an accredited college or university (Smith & Fox, 2019; Moos et al., 2019). That can in turn reinforce the idea that certain professions are better than others, such as a doctor being better than a receptionist. This can have negative effects on the mental health of teens and kids who are trying to figure out their futures (Smith & Fox, 2019). This rings especially true for underprivileged and disenfranchised youth who deal with additional barriers.

In order to deepen our understanding of studentification and its impacts on a neighborhood and its communities, we must look back at gentrification and why it happens. As a reminder, gentrification is a gradual change in the makeup, culture, and class status of a neighborhood; it's a process that starts with a group with low financial capital but high cultural capital moving into a neighborhood, followed by middle class people who like the atmosphere and cheap prices, until upper-middle class and upper class professionals move into the neighborhood (Kohn, 2013 p. 298).

Neighborhoods of color such as Chinatown, Roxbury, and Dorchester were formed due to racist housing policies and White flight (Jennings, 2021, p. 97). There have been federal policies that were supposed to help low-income individuals and families with housing that widely excluded people of color. For example, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) would not insure mortgages in neighborhoods that were predominantly of color or in White neighborhoods that

allowed non-White people to move in (Jennings, 2021). Looking to Boston specifically, low-interest loans that were given to Black homebuyers were restricted to areas such as Mattapan or Dorchester, thus creating de facto segregated neighborhoods (Jennings, 2021). These housing policies were enforced by preventing integration in other ways, such as schooling. Some suggest that Boston schools are more segregated today than they were when it was legal to segregate (Jennings, 2021).

Even though integration is an admirable thing to strive for, the truth is that gentrification can be devastating to lower-income residents, especially those of color. These areas that Black and brown people were essentially forced into are now booming in land value (Jennings, 2021). Predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods like Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan are seeing major demographic shifts; there is an uptick in Whiter and wealthier residents because of this (Jennings, 2016). Long-term residents are being forced to move due to developers and landlords increasing rent, enforcing more evictions, and putting previously subsidized housing back at market value (Jennings, 2021).

Danielle Mulligan, a policy consultant in Boston, detailed how high school students and their families were affected by gentrification in East Boston (2022). She writes about how high school students see new high rises and condos in their neighborhoods and become quite aware of the class distinctions between their families and those who live in those buildings. She also discusses how students long for the East Boston that they grew up in. Finally, Mulligan goes more in depth with these students, asking them about their current living situations. One student said that rent hikes were used as a tactic to force her and her family out, and she had to complete the rest of her seventh-grade school year in Lynn (p. 51).

Due to changing demographics, one sees a shift in the culture of these neighborhoods that favor the dominating groups. Local institutions such as small businesses and recreational

services shut down (Mulligan, 2022, p. 50; Jennings, 2021; Kohn, 2013). Many of these

institutions may get replaced by a bigger chain, such as Whole Foods or Starbucks (Kohn, 2013;

Jennings, 2021; Jennings, 2016). Likewise, discount chains, such as Payless and Rainbow, close

up shop (Mulligan, 2022). This can lead to residents feeling polarized and unwelcome in their

neighborhood (Kohn, 2013). They may feel under attack– much of the institutions that they

know, and love are gone.

However, there is one argument in favor of gentrification that may benefit long-time

residents: improved infrastructure. Those who remain in the neighborhood can see improved

access to healthcare, public transportation, and grocery stores, to name a few (Brummet & Reed,

2019). But this counter argument raises an important question: Can those long-term residents

afford the new doctors or grocery stores opening up in their neighborhoods? Just because there is

physical access does not mean there is social or economic access (Moos et al., 2019; Kohn

2013). Speaking from experience, Black and brown residents may be racially profiled in the new

store or doctor's office that opened nearby. They also may simply not feel comfortable

interacting with the new infrastructure either, especially if they had little to no input about it.

This also underscores the importance of taking a holistic approach that encompasses community

building and true accessibility (Jennings, 2021; Kohn, 2013).

Community building is an important concept that would help battle studentification as well.

Addressing systemic inequalities is another way that the negative effects of studentification can

be combated. The Boston Institutional Master Plan does not address either adequately. The

Boston Institutional Master Plan is a vetting process for hospitals and universities that want to

create new buildings (Boston Redevelopment Authority, 2014). They look at how these buildings

will impact the communities around them. However, it does not take a holistic view and does not

factor in how people may react to each other. The plan seems to want to mitigate the negative

effects of studentification and gentrification by seeing how a physical building can impact the community in terms of things like vehicular and foot traffic (BRA, 2014). There is also a 45-day period for community members to make comments and public hearings about these developments. But, if we do not address how different communities can coexist as well as address the disenfranchisement of certain groups, the negative effects will still be felt whether new construction happens or not.

Firstly, community liaisons should be made and appointed by universities to help bridge the gap between students and locals. These liaisons would also educate students about where they are living and how to be good neighbors. For many students, this is their first time living on their own and they may not behave accordingly (Smith & Fox, 2019). For example, students may be used to their parents taking out the trash and so they are unfamiliar with trash disposal schedules. Going back to an earlier example with students partying, students may lack self-awareness and don't realize how disruptive they are to other folks in their community. Furthermore, college towns and cities like Boston are seen as transient areas. Many students come to Boston with the expectation that they will only stay here for a few years to study. Perhaps they will stay for a few more years if they get a job or continue with schooling. They do not see Boston as a place to call home. By demonstrating to students that people do live in Boston long-term, perhaps their perceptions of the city would change (Smith, 2004; Smith & Fox, 2019).

Another way for students to get more involved in the Boston community and for others to know what is going on with colleges is for both groups to talk to each other. One of the biggest criticisms of gentrification is that it does not take long-term residents' thoughts and feelings into account (Mulligan, 2022; Smith & Fox, 2019). By showing long-term residents that students take their communities seriously, community bonds could be built. Likewise, this could further show

students the importance of community building and that their university does not exist in a bubble.

More specifically, the City of Boston and local universities such as Northeastern should encourage students to attend hearings about new developments. The BRA holds meetings about new developments, as outlined in Article 80. This provides a space where students and local residents can voice their concerns and get to know each other. Additionally, the City of Boston and local universities and colleges can create cross-community meetings for students and residents. This would also help both groups voice their concerns to each other in productive ways. A similar technique was used in Portland, Oregon to help facilitate dialogue between older residents and newcomers (Drew, 2016). It's called the Restorative Listening Project (RLP) and it allows for the new, mostly White, residents to learn about systemic racism, gentrification, and its impacts from the residents who have been there longer, who tend to be Black (Drew, 2016). The idea would be that through listening to each other, hostility and aggression from both groups would diminish (Drew, 2016). This is exactly the type of community engagement that places like Boston need. However, it would be amiss to not mention that this sort of dialogue cannot and will not fix systemic issues (Drew, 2016). Talking about inequality, more specifically racism, is not enough.

Universities should also donate to community organizations and 'give back'. They should be mandated to do so by their local government. I recently attended a keynote that my club hosted by Mariangely Solis Cervera. She is the head of Equity and Inclusion in Mayor Wu's office. Cervera said that many of Boston's colleges do not have high attendance from Black and Brown folks, even though many of these schools are in neighborhoods and areas that are easily accessible to them. Even though I argue that college isn't for everyone, it is barely accessible to those who wish to go (Moos et al., 2019; Kohn, 2013). My college tuition steadily increased

throughout my academic career, and I cannot imagine knowing that I had the potential to go to college but had financial barriers that I could not overcome.

Furthermore, residents did not choose to be gentrified or to have these so called 'upgrades', therefore, they deserve resources that help them access it, such as donations, formation of community orgs, scholarships, etc. (Kohn, 2013). Imagine seeing a college or university get numerous upgrades such as new student housing, dining halls, and libraries, meanwhile your local library barely has enough funding and the housing in your neighborhood is not so great. It can be like rubbing salt into a wound. People from these neighborhoods deserve the same access to mobility that the college students in their areas have.

To conclude, studentification explains the housing challenges faced by students by revealing a complex interplay of privilege and vulnerability. Students are considered an underprivileged group at first, as they often are unemployed and fall prey to opportunist landlords; conversely landlords may refuse to rent to them because of their student status. The creation of student-ghettos underscores how students are treated. Overcrowding and insufficient on-campus housing dates back to post-World War II trends and is a systemic issue. This forces students into neighborhoods near their institutions, thus starting the cycle of studentification. This brings both cultural shifts and potential positive impacts.

However, these so-called positive impacts, such as encouraging minorities to attend college, can reinforce certain hegemonic ideals. Furthermore, there is a question about access: not all underprivileged kids will be able to access college. Even if they do, it's likely that they will not make as much as their White peers.

When studentification is contextualized as a gateway for gentrification to happen, another layer of the conversation is added. Displacement due to gentrification, which is rooted in racist polices, leads to demographic and cultural shifts that favor the newer, more affluent groups.

While gentrification may bring improvement to infrastructure, those improvements can alienate long-term residents. Many of these improvements may come at the expense of neighborhood institutions.

This paper argued that these problems can be addressed by reevaluating improvements in Article 80 of the Boston Institutional Master Plan. A holistic approach entails community building, genuine accessibility, and allowing locals and students to interact to decrease hostility and aggression. Moreover, universities and colleges in Boston should donate to local charities and create more opportunities for locals of color to attend their colleges. This shows that higher learning institutions also have a responsibility to bear to help mitigate the negative effects of studentification and gentrification.

In essence, the housing problems that students face is indicative of larger societal problems including housing equality and rapidly changing demographics of the United States. These problems need nuanced solutions that focus on community building and inclusivity.