



The Duty of Universities and the Right to the City: Balancing Campus Expansion with Community Impacts

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Learning about a topic like the legacy of slavery can be overwhelming. [Community Care Resources](#) are available for members of the Harvard community seeking support for mental, spiritual, and emotional well-being.

Inadequate housing for college students has recently garnered public attention and concern, from deteriorating and unsafe dorm conditions at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)^{1,2} to a new dorm that would offer housing for thousands of students but place many of them in windowless single rooms³ to the rise in expensive, luxury dorms on various campuses.⁴ The scarcity of affordable housing options, both on and off campus, continues to be a significant source of stress for students across the country.⁵ Students who are unable to find housing near campus may be forced to commute for hours or sleep in their cars on campus.⁶ Federal and institutional policies that underestimate living costs can lead low-income students to struggle and even drop out.⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the housing, food, and economic insecurity that students face.⁸ In a 2021 survey by the Hope Center, 48 percent of college students across the United States reported being affected by housing insecurity, and 14 percent experienced being unhoused.⁹

Housing-related tensions between universities and their surrounding communities made headlines on March 3, 2022, when the Supreme Court of California ordered the University of California, Berkeley, to freeze their student enrollment numbers for the next academic year as a result of a lawsuit brought forth by a group of local residents.¹⁰ The group, Save Berkeley's Neighborhoods, argued that the university had been admitting more students than the school and city can handle and is not providing enough on-campus housing. As a result, they claimed, students had moved into surrounding neighborhoods, increasing housing prices and displacing residents.¹¹ Indeed, UC Berkeley provides housing for only 22 percent of their undergraduate students,¹² and in 2021, 5,000 students who applied for on-campus housing were wait-listed and forced to seek housing elsewhere.¹³

UC Berkeley appealed the ruling, claiming that the enrollment freeze would result in a loss of at least \$57 million, which would have consequences for their “ability to deliver instruction, provide financial aid for low- and middle-income students, adequately fund critical student services, and maintain [their] facilities.”¹⁴ As public universities have increasingly had to rely on tuition fees for revenue following decades of declining state and federal funding,¹⁵ changes in enrollment numbers can negatively impact the entire campus community. As an immediate solution to circumvent cutting enrollment numbers entirely, the university said they would urge a group of incoming undergraduates to defer enrollment for a semester or study remotely in the fall and start in person the following semester.¹⁶

A week after the ruling, the California State Legislature found a way to let UC Berkeley maintain their original enrollment numbers by making an adjustment to a state environmental law.^{17,18} UC Berkeley's enrollment numbers will not be enforced, for now. However, the issues that the lawsuit raises will not be going away, as the university is facing pressures to expand in the name of increasing opportunity and access to education. The UC schools receive a record-breaking number of applications from students around the world each year.¹⁹ Furthermore, with high school graduation rates increasing in California, especially among Latine students, more in-state students are seeking a seat at their public universities.²⁰ In 2021, officials announced that the UC system plans to enroll 20,000 more students by 2030 across its nine campuses, four of which (including UC Berkeley) will reduce out-of-state enrollments in order to enroll

4,500 more in-state students by 2026.²¹ State lawmakers have pledged \$2 billion to build affordable student housing across all of California's public postsecondary institutions,²² but construction will not happen overnight.

Issues surrounding a rapidly growing campus community are not unique to UC Berkeley. What principles and values should guide universities, policymakers, and community members in making decisions about increasing access to universities amid insufficient affordable housing?

University Expansion: Past and Present Impacts on Communities

University expansion has a long history of displacing and gentrifying neighboring communities, especially Black communities.

In the 1950s and '60s, for example, the expansion of the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and University of the Sciences displaced the residents of Black Bottom, a vibrant and close-knit Black community in West Philadelphia.²³ Today, University City Science Center (UCSC) buildings stand where a section of Black Bottom once was.²⁴ The UCSC, a research and innovation hub, was originally built with the goal of recruiting talented scientists, scholars, and corporations to the area.²⁵ The three universities partnered with each other, the Presbyterian Hospital, and Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine to form the West Philadelphia Corporation (WPC) and strengthen efforts to establish the UCSC.²⁶ The City of Philadelphia—Philadelphia's City Planning Commission and the Redevelopment Authority—bolstered the WPC's interests by declaring Black Bottom as blighted, using eminent domain to take over the land and bulldozing the neighborhood.²⁷ Despite protests by neighborhood residents and university students, this destructive effort in the name of urban renewal displaced an estimated total of 5,000 residents.²⁸

Urban campuses around the country continue to expand, resulting in displacement of people and alterations in the urban landscape. Columbia University is building their new Manhattanville campus as part of a plan to “revitalize the four former industrial blocks ... into an environmentally sustainable and publicly accessible center for academic and civic life woven into the fabric of the West Harlem community.”²⁹ Manhattanville's minority-owned businesses and historic structures—gas stations, auto shops, laundromats, dairy plants—have been replaced by towering glass buildings.³⁰ Although Columbia has committed funds toward numerous benefits for West Harlem residents, such as housing, relocation payments, and access to facilities and services, among others,³¹ the university expansion forced the relocation of community members.³²

Harvard is planning a similar and much larger campus expansion in the Allston area of Boston. Here, the University owns 140 acres of land³³ and has a long-term goal of transforming “obsolete and mostly impermeable industrial properties into new, vibrant, equitable and welcoming districts.”³⁴ Like Columbia, Harvard offers opportunities to engage with Allston residents through the Harvard Ed Portal. This initiative connects Harvard's resources to students in Boston Public Schools, funds local organizations, and offers programming in workforce development, wellness, and the arts, among others.³⁵ The University has also pledged to set aside 25 percent of housing as affordable housing and 25 percent of retail space for minority-owned businesses as well as created a \$25 million housing fund for residents of Allston and neighboring Brighton.³⁶ While the first phase of campus development received unanimous approval from the Boston Planning and Development Agency in July 2022,³⁷ neighborhood groups and residents have expressed concerns that Harvard's expansion has contributed to increased rental prices and gentrification in Allston, as the area has become a more desirable place to live, especially for Harvard students, staff, and faculty.^{38, 39}

These community tensions persist across the greater Boston area, which is home to numerous universities and their students. For instance, residents in East Boston, a historically working-class and immigrant neighborhood, have noticed changes in the community's housing and economic infrastructure with an increase in students and young professionals living in the area.⁴⁰ Knowing that students are willing to—and often must—pay higher rent for a short amount of time, landlords have been increasing rent and altering lease terms for long-term residents, as well.⁴¹ Residents argue that universities should take responsibility. City leadership has agreed; former Mayor Marty Walsh urged universities to create housing for 18,500 students and reduce the number of undergraduates living off-campus by 50 percent by 2030.⁴² However, implementation has not been so easy. For example, Northeastern University's plan to build a new student dorm in Roxbury, the “heart of Black culture in Boston,”⁴³ has been met with concerns from local residents about displacement and gentrification.⁴⁴

Campus Expansion for Student Housing at UC Berkeley

One could argue that universities should be restricted to building new structures on land that they already own to avoid expansion into the community, but this does not eliminate potential problems. UC Berkeley is currently building two student dorms on land they own, although they are destroying a rent-controlled building and a historic park in the process.

The first dorm, which will house 772 transfer students, came at the cost of the eviction of residents in eight rent-controlled units in 2021.⁴⁵ On one hand, increased support for transfer students, especially those transferring from community colleges, is crucial. In addition, the university has pledged that rental revenue from the dorm will support scholarships for 100 first generation, low-income students.⁴⁶ On the other hand, eviction and destruction have severe consequences.⁴⁷ Students and community members fought against this development for months.⁴⁸ UC Berkeley explored relocating the rent-controlled building but ultimately did not do so, citing time constraints.⁴⁹ Instead, they offered each renter a relocation package that included a six-figure payout and assistance finding new housing.⁵⁰

The second dorm will house 1,100 students but would be located atop People's Park, a historic site for Berkeley's counterculture movement in the 1960s.⁵¹ In 1967, UC Berkeley and the city used eminent domain to purchase the land in People's Park for the purpose of building new dorms, which was met with protests and resulted in a violent clash between students, residents, police, and the National Guard.⁵² The park has been a contested space since then, and the university has pledged to leave half of the park as an open space to honor its history, while the other half will be used for the dorm.⁵³ In response to community concerns about unhoused people currently living in an encampment in the park who will be displaced, the university is working with the state to provide funding for temporary housing during the construction period, and they will also donate a part of the land to a nonprofit to build a housing complex with on-site supportive services for more than 100 unhoused individuals.⁵⁴ Despite these commitments, the planned dorm continues to draw fierce opposition. In August 2022, students and community members protested, clashing with construction crews. The university temporarily halted construction of the dorm,⁵⁵ and its future remains uncertain.⁵⁶

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Universities have immense potential to positively impact their communities. They employ local residents, offer public spaces such as libraries and outdoor grounds, produce knowledge, and, above all, provide educational opportunities. However, university expansion—at times sanctioned by local governments and other private entities—can result in harm. How should we consider these tradeoffs so that universities can balance their duty to their students and their communities? How can we ensure universities are living up to their promise and potential as a public good? ■

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