Shifting Landscapes: The Role of Institutions of Higher Education as Drivers of Gentrification in Cities

Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with Honors in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences

by

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Abstract

This study explores the role that institutions of higher education play in gentrification in the cities they occupy. I use Northeastern University and the Roxbury neighborhood in the city of Boston as a case study, specifically with the expansion efforts of the institution over the past decade, to examine universities as potential drivers of gentrification. Using publicly available data, Google Street View data, and semi-structured qualitative interviews with long-term Roxbury residents, I find notable neighborhood change occurring in the area in relation to Northeastern University, including changes to racial/ethnic and SES demographics, as well as changes to the neighborhood’s physical environment. Moreover, interviews with the residents of Roxbury revealed the mixed reactions to the university expanding into the neighborhood and the concerns of the community who want a say in the changes occurring.
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**Shifting Landscapes: The Role of Institutions of Higher Education as Drivers of Gentrification in Cities**

Neighborhood change has become an increasingly prevalent issue in urban cities as gentrification in the largest 50 cities in the United States has more than doubled since the 1990s (Smith et al. 2020). Gentrification in neighborhoods has changed the urban landscape of cities as racial, economic, and educational demographics often shift during the process. Some scholars have argued that gentrification has many positive effects on neighborhoods, such as more development, economic investment, and a force of revitalization (Zuk et al. 2018). However, there has also been evidence that demonstrates the detrimental impacts of gentrification in neighborhoods which can spur forced displacement, increased rents, and the exclusion of low-income residents, as well as residents of color (Betancur 2011).

Higher education institutions have played a role in the displacement of long-time residents of disinvested communities. Historically, with the use of eminent domain, which ensures the government’s right to forcibly purchase private land for public use (Legal Information Institute n.d.), there have been universities that have spurred forced displacement in neighborhoods they occupy for the interests and expansion of their institutions in cities. A key example of eminent domain being used by universities and impacting neighborhoods was the 17-acre expansion of Columbia University in West Harlem in 2010 which faced intense backlash from residents which was subsequently ignored as the expansion went ahead as planned (Baldwin 2021). Over the past two decades, eminent domain has been utilized by universities in Miami, Philadelphia, and more than a dozen cities for university research park projects in former Black and Latino communities (Hansen 2023).
This study will examine the relationship between higher education institutions and the neighborhoods they occupy, and to what extent these relationships spur gentrification. Specifically, I will examine Northeastern University, a 4-year university located partially in Roxbury, a neighborhood in the city of Boston. Northeastern University is one of a myriad of universities in Boston and it has set itself apart as a renowned research institution. The university has continued to expand into surrounding areas beyond its inception point in the Fenway-Kenmore/South End border area, including Roxbury. The Roxbury neighborhood in Boston is not a stranger to the ever-changing landscape of urban life with its history of different waves of diverse groups establishing themselves during various time periods. Some Black Americans had previously come from the South and Midwest to Boston in the early decades of the twentieth century, along with an influx of immigrants from the Caribbean, West Indies, and Cape Verde (Wintz and Finkelman 2004). While there were Black people in Boston and Roxbury previously, they became the most prominent racial/ethnic group in the neighborhood by 1970 with the Black Americans who migrated northward from the South in the 1940s and 1950s (Global Boston n.d.).

Roxbury is a vibrant neighborhood with a rich history and strong social fabrics with diversity that has increasingly served as the construction site for various development plans and projects from Northeastern University. In recent years, Northeastern University has been continuously expanding its campus and its student population. Higher education and research institutions are held as markers of innovation and progress that advance neighborhoods forward. As the landscape of urban neighborhoods changes with gentrification, which has been an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in major cities across the United States, the question arises about who is included in the new vision of progress. The questions that this study will seek to
answer are: What is the relationship between Northeastern University and gentrification in the Roxbury neighborhood it occupies? How do universities foment or prevent gentrification in their home cities? What are the socioeconomic and ethnic demographic changes in relation to the gentrification spurred by universities? How do community members respond to a university’s increasing presence in the neighborhood? I aim to answer these questions using Northeastern University and Roxbury as a case study. The study explores the ways in which Northeastern University has expanded within Roxbury and how it has impacted the changing nature of the neighborhood as a potential driver of gentrification. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methodology, this mixed methods approach will more fully capture the changing physical landscape and racial/ethnic and SES demographic changes over the past decade in Roxbury in addition to residents’ perceptions of Northeastern University’s increasing presence in the neighborhood.

BACKGROUND

While gentrification has been researched and studied extensively as shown in the robust, expansive literature, the focus has mainly been on the residential and commercial areas with the common image of mom-and-pop shops being replaced by huge chains and multi-story high-rises replacing brownstones (Barton 2016). This image has been well-documented and explored thoroughly in various places around the United States and globally, but gentrification literature has neglected the key role that universities play in gentrification. Even though commercial and residential replacement is centered in the literature, the literature fails to account for the key role that universities play in both of these realms and beyond.

Gentrification
I draw from the theoretical framework(s) used to examine gentrification in order to fully examine the shifting dynamics and neighborhood change in cities in relation to expanding higher education institutions. Gentrification was a term first coined in 1960s London as “the ‘invasion’ of members of the middle and upper classes into traditionally working-class neighbourhoods, resulting in the displacement of incumbent residents and a change of the social character of the neighbourhood” (Glass 1964, 18). While this definition contains key facets of gentrification, the definition, as well as the literature surrounding the topic, has expanded significantly since then, namely as gentrification has begun to be characterized by racial/ethnic demographic changes and new economic interests and developments that extend the definition beyond a housing and cultural phenomenon. Although gentrification has been characterized by a shift in the socioeconomic status of residents and housing, the literature has also revealed new forms of recent gentrification. Aalbers (2019) found, through analysis of influential papers in gentrification literature, that gentrification was no longer just a process of class-residential change, it also extended into the cultural and commercial spheres. The cultural aspect is emphasized in qualitative analysis, with the presence of arts and culture, either implicitly or explicitly, often functioning as a “soft factor” attracting new flows of capital into some neighborhoods (Aalbers 2019). The commercial aspect involves “mom-and-pop” stores and restaurants being turned into chain stores and restaurants and the landscape of urban neighborhoods shifts through these various changes (Barton 2016).

Moreover, residents of gentrifying neighborhoods frequently perceive gentrification as a socioeconomic and racial invasion, oftentimes with White people as the drivers, pushing marginalized, more vulnerable communities out (Rucks-Ahidiana 2022). While racial stratification is not always present in the process, it often forms part of the shifting urban
landscape that signals gentrification. The racial and ethnic dimension is a facet that is captured in quantitative and qualitative data, whether it be through demographic changes or interviews with residents, respectively. Part of changing population composition is changing racial/ethnic demographics which is often a key characteristic of gentrification as race is “consistently employed” in how the process is defined and measured in gentrification studies dating back decades (Fallon 2021). With gentrification, often low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods are valued for their “diversity”, which often either centers symbolic representations of the Black or Latinx community, while ignoring the histories of racial conflict, oppression, and violence or erases the presence and diversity of previous residents by white gentrifiers of those areas (Rucks-Ahidiana 2022).

The nature of gentrification is very dependent on the time and place it occurs. For instance, in Jennings’ (2016) study, the researcher crafted a distinct definition of gentrification based on the neighborhood change in Boston, where the study was conducted, at the time. Their definition was “gentrification is an economic, class, and racial dynamic in areas of the city that have experienced disinvestment –or lack of investment-- or economic distress, but are nevertheless now experiencing significant (and even rapid…) increases in land and real estate values, at the same attracting at relatively significant levels new and wealthier renters and homeowners” (Jennings 2016, 7). This tailored definition encapsulates the nuances of this particular urban area at this time that other definitions of gentrification did not provide, such as taking into account the city’s history of disinvestment and its impacts.

The causes of gentrification are similarly not delineated clearly due to the wide range of socioeconomic changes across gentrified and gentrifying neighborhoods. However, Hwang and Lin (2016) identified several causal factors contributing to recent gentrification. First, public
policy has become a key factor as it, along with state actors, has had an increased role in facilitating gentrification recently. Specifically in terms of promoting free market solutions, business-friendliness, and public-private partnerships in arenas that previously relied solely on public funding. Public policy can also impact shifts in amenity value in neighborhoods, which is a central feature in recent gentrification, with programs like historical preservation, business improvement districts, zoning and land use changes, tax-increment financing practices, ordinances imposed on public space, etc. Second, for recent gentrification, new technologies have become a causal factor as in conjunction with new business models, they have reduced access disadvantages and past inconveniences of dense urban living, including same-day delivery services, ride-sharing apps, etc. Third, racial/ethnic changes in neighborhoods may have also contributed to gentrification as the presence of multiethnic neighborhoods has grown and neighborhoods’ diversity and ethnic histories are marketed by developers to attract gentrifiers. Lastly, other causal factors include the changing modern family and demographic structure among millennials, the structure of housing structure, and the housing supply (Hwang and Lin 2016).

**Differing Viewpoints on the Impacts and Study of Gentrification**

An area of divergence in the literature on gentrification is the split between those who define gentrification as a positive force and those who see it as a negative force. While there can be a mix of advantages and detriments caused by gentrification in neighborhoods, many studies in the literature follow this dichotomy. For the defenders of gentrification, Zuk et al. (2018) found that they frame gentrification as a revitalizer of downtrodden, deteriorating urban neighborhoods that benefit from incoming higher-income residents. Conversely, other scholars frame gentrification as a detriment to long-time residents of gentrifying neighborhoods. Betancur
(2011) examined the impacts of gentrification from the perspective of neighborhood-based social fabrics in Chicago, which centered on the perspectives of residents about the effects of gentrification on neighborhoods as the influx of higher-income residents increased housing and living prices, thus displacing native residents, along with completely changing the character of neighborhoods.

**Quantitative methodology & qualitative methodology.** Beyond differing perspectives on the impacts of gentrification, there is also a distinction made between how gentrification is defined depending on the methodology utilized as quantitative and qualitative analysis yields different results in determining the core nature of gentrification. Brown-Saracino (2017) characterizes quantitative research on gentrification as having limited scope and moderate consequences. Quantitative analysis typically relies on census data and defines gentrification through demographic changes, including rising housing rents, rising college-educated residents, displacement rates, etc. (Barton 2016).

Qualitative data analyzes gentrification on a micro-scale that demonstrates the social and cultural dimension that is not typically represented in quantitative data. Qualitative data literature conveys the on-the-ground change in the neighborhood, which often occurs through interviews and surveys with people who are part of the gentrification process. In various studies, including in the Betancur (2011) article, residents felt that there was an invasion and they emphasized the importance of social fabrics, especially as minorities or immigrants. While the voices of old residents were represented, the literature also provides some insight into the thoughts and perceptions of gentrifiers themselves as with the Betancur (2011) study which conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with people in critical positions of leadership, decision-making, or change in the neighborhoods selected, over ten years. These interviews revealed the stark
difference between how old residents perceived gentrification as an encroachment and the significance of social fabrics in the neighborhood and people directly involved in the gentrifying process who see gentrification as “place enhancement” and identifying former residents as threats to “property values, safety and quiet” (Betancur 2011, 392). As Brown-Saracino (2017) found, qualitative data is largely characterized by gentrification as ascendant and broadly consequential. In response to more recent forms of gentrification, the methodology has also adapted in some ways. The Hwang and Sampson (2014) study, focused on the visible physical change caused by gentrification by utilizing Google Street View to observe how and to what degree neighborhoods have changed as they explain that quantitative data neglects the physical change aspect of gentrification which can signal its prevalence.

Neither quantitative nor qualitative research is internally consistent in its definition of gentrification, its scope, or its indicators. In the Barton (2016) study, they compared two census-based strategies for identifying gentrified neighborhoods with a qualitative neighborhood selection strategy derived from The New York Times to New York City neighborhoods for the span of years from 1980 to 2009. They found that not only do the quantitative and qualitative methods differ in identifying which neighborhoods are gentrifiable or gentrified, but the two census-based strategies also identified a different number of gentrified neighborhoods from one another even with their use of similar quantitative strategies. In this study, I will be utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methodology to fully understand and capture the changing neighborhood dynamics and its various features and nuances.

**Shifting Urban Landscapes**

Gentrification is often seen as an invasion of the high-income class, but not all cases of gentrification are spearheaded by high-income new residents. There have been cases of
gentrification where young, college-educated professionals are the drivers of neighborhood change. The Ding, Hwang, and Divringi (2016) study examined mobility rates and residential destinations of residents in gentrifying neighborhoods during the recent housing boom and bust in Philadelphia for various strata of residents and different types of gentrification. One of their indicators measured an increase in college-educated professionals, rather than income, because in some cases, young professionals were not earning the high income of typical wealthier gentrifiers, but were still contributing to the gentrification of neighborhoods. Taking into account the different types of gentrification, some scholars use educational attainment as an indicator of gentrification rather than income.

As shown through the literature, extensive research has been conducted about gentrification and it is continuously changing and adapting to the complex and evolving nature of the phenomenon. However, further study into the relationship between universities and neighborhood change has been neglected in the literature on gentrification. Higher education institutions do not typically come to mind when considering leading actors in the gentrifying process. Nonetheless, universities shape their home cities and the neighborhoods they occupy in significant ways. Examining universities as new actors in the literature on gentrification will provide a deeper understanding of the topic and further expand the ever-changing definition of gentrification.

Higher Education Institutions as Agents of Gentrification

Academic institutions are increasingly prominent agents of gentrification in the urban areas they occupy. Universities are continuously expanding, especially in recent years as certain universities are aspiring to become “global in their reach and nimble in how they produce knowledge, service students, and finance their operations” (Etienne 2012). There are several
higher education institutions, driven by globalization, that have the visibility, financial resources, and desire to expand their universities (Hill 2023). Academic institutions continue to expand to accommodate their growing student populations and showcase their new, innovative buildings that center expansion as great progress.

As universities continue to expand, long-time residents of neighborhoods may experience significant neighborhood change. In recent years, gentrification literature has increasingly studied academic institutions as agents that potentially spur gentrification. Specific terminology has been utilized to describe the neighborhood changes in connection to universities, including “youthification” and “studentification” that delineate arising demographic changes, often linked to academic institutions and overlapping with the process of gentrification (Moos et al. 2019). These new terms assist in capturing the full picture of gentrification and the role of academic institutions, especially as universities have “centralizing tendencies” that can change population composition in terms of demographics, and consequently, housing markets and neighborhood dynamics (Moos et al. 2019). The histories of urban areas and their marginalized populations serve as important considerations when researching gentrification. This necessary consideration becomes evident with studies, such as the Kahler and Harrison (2020) study that examined the role of the University of South Carolina in urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s and its connection with modern gentrification of the same area (Kahler and Harrison 2020). They concluded that university-led urban development can have positive impacts on the communities they occupy, but has also been a tool of racial oppression and exclusion. Not all higher education institutions were involved in urban renewal, but it is critical to understand the legacies of past efforts to alter the urban landscape as a new attempt is made to reshape the urban space with gentrification.
Central to a significant amount of gentrification research are the case studies linking universities’ expansion into urban areas and the corresponding neighborhood change in different cities. A prime example is Etienne (2012) who examined the role the University of Pennsylvania played in the changing urban landscape in West Philadelphia, along with the mix of positive and negative impacts it had in the area. This text also spoke to the major challenge that arises between universities and the neighborhoods they occupy which is a consensus of “accessible and mutually agreeable goals, direction, and metrics of progress and impacts” (Etienne 2012, x). An agreement on all of these criteria as universities continue to expand more and more as their student populations grow is not easily, or often, achieved. This discord can be at least partially attributed to the changes occurring in urban neighborhoods that can detrimentally impact the existing residents of the area, specifically more marginalized and vulnerable populations. The effects often linked to gentrification can have major implications for existing populations in areas of university expansion, such as increased housing costs, which may contribute to displacement more than violent eviction (Etienne 2012). Many of the impacts interlock with one another, so the change is not reserved solely for the economic sphere of urban life as shifts occur in the cultural landscape of urban areas as well due to expanding academic institutions. For instance, there are serious economic consequences for poor populations that experience neighborhood change as it can diminish social networks and resources that various marginalized groups depend on for support (Etienne 2012).

Although academic institutions propel a common narrative of universities as a key sign of progress, agents of innovation, and institutions of higher education as a public good, their significant expansion is directly connected to “UniverCities”, which is identified as the new common model for urban universities that have an inflated role in shaping urban policy,
planning, and economic development (Baldwin 2017). While higher education is highly lauded, Baldwin recognizes that the advertisement of universities as an inherently public good creates a “public-good paradox”, which points to the non-profit status of universities which exempts them from paying taxes and helps generate significant private profit for the universities themselves, with little public benefit to its surrounding areas (Baldwin 2017).

Another aspect of the narrative pushed by academic institutions as agents of progress and innovation is the recent push toward sustainability and environmental justice. While there is very little literature linking gentrification, academic institutions, and environmental justice, there have been various studies relating gentrification to environmental justice with an identification of a new form of gentrification — environmental, climate, or “green” gentrification, which “builds on the material and discursive successes of the environmental justice movement and appropriates them to serve high-end development” (Checker 2011, 1). Universities, as agents of gentrification, can potentially be fomenting environmental gentrification as the models for sustainability are reserved for university spaces and are not reflected in the urban neighborhoods they occupy. While sustainability is often seen as a positive change, urban greening interventions have increasingly constructed new forms and dynamics of polarization as the interventions can be detrimental to the most socially and racially marginalized urban populations whose “land and landscapes are appropriated” (Anguelovski, Connolly, and Brand 2018, 1). Environmental gentrification further cements the disparities and inequities between previous residents and entering gentrifiers, which in this case would be universities, as patterns of gentrification create new patterns of environmental insecurity and injustice according to class and race in urban landscapes (Shokry, Connolly, and Anguelovski 2020).
While various scholars have written about the topic of gentrification, especially in recent decades, there is no consensus on the definition of gentrification or a definitive list of determining indicators of gentrification. However, for the purposes of this research study, I will be defining gentrification as “the process in which an area experiences socioeconomic, physical, and racial/ethnic demographic changes, impacting the character and landscape of the neighborhood, in connection to prominent, nearby institutions of higher education”.

**The Case of Roxbury**

Roxbury is a historic neighborhood near the center of Boston bordering the South End, Jamaica Plain, Mission Hill, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roslindale with a population of 54,161 (BPDA Research Division 2021). The neighborhood has a rich history since its inception as a city in 1848 and its later annexation into Boston in 1868. Throughout the 19th century, waves of different populations moved into Roxbury, from the Irish in the mid-19th century to Germans soon after, and then a prominent Jewish community settling in the area. The most significant wave of the neighborhood’s history occurred in the 1940s with the influx of African American migrants from the South during the Second Great Migration. By 1970, Roxbury was a predominantly Black neighborhood, which has been maintained until today with its majority Black population of 27,243 which is 50.3% of the overall population (BPDA Research Division 2021). During the 1960s and early 1970s, Roxbury experienced various urban renewal projects, including canceled highway plans, that left behind vacant land previously filled with homes and businesses and displaced thousands of families (Trickey 2017).

The neighborhood has become more heterogeneous with the steady increase of Latinos since the 1970s and most recently, White people. The Latino population now makes up 30.7% of the population with 16,637 and White people make up 11.0% of the population with 5,937
As compared to 2010, the White population has increased by about 5 percent as it was 6.5% in 2010 and the Latino population has increased a bit more as it was 29.8% in 2010, meanwhile, the Black population decreased by about 5 percent as it made up 55.6% in 2010 (Department of Neighborhood Development n.d.).

Recently, Boston has been ranked as the third-most gentrified city in the United States, and in the 2019 study, Roxbury was reported as particularly vulnerable, due to the 81 percent of its residents who are renters rather than owners who make them more vulnerable to displacement (Smith 2020). Comparatively, in the city of Boston, 65% of homes are renter-occupied (Walsh 2017). The neighborhood has multiple “opportunity zones”, particularly near Roxbury Crossing and Ruggles, the latter of which is extremely close to the Northeastern University Campus. These areas are classified as “opportunity zones” due to the many areas in dire need of investments and usually have greater economic inequality, more Black residents, and lower median household income, home value, and college educational levels (Smith 2020). The large percentage of residents who are renters also prevents the creation of generational wealth building for the majority of residents who cannot afford to own homes. There is also the issue of the generational wealth gap between races in Boston as White people have $247,500, compared to $8 for African Americans in the city (Walsh 2017).

The median household income in Roxbury is $30,534, compared to $71,259 in the city of Boston overall. It is significantly lower than its neighboring neighborhoods and those that Northeastern also occupies. 31.9% of Roxbury's population has a median household income of $14,999 and under (BPDA Research Division 2021). Related to household income, median housing costs have increased 36% citywide in Boston between 2010 and 2015. The rising
housing costs hit low-income neighborhoods particularly hard, including Roxbury which saw a 70% increase between those same years (Walsh 2017).

Educational attainment levels are also different in the neighborhood, compared to the city of Boston overall. 23% of the population in Roxbury have an educational attainment level of Less than High School, which is significantly higher than Boston’s 12.8%. Those with a High School Diploma make up 24.5% of the population, and 5% have a GED or an Alternative Credential. 18.9% of residents have the educational attainment level of Some College, with 5.7% with an Associate’s degree. Compared to Boston’s 27%, 15% of Roxbury residents have a Bachelor’s degree. The disparity in educational attainment levels is also clear with the 7.8% of residents that have a Master’s degree or more when compared to 22.7% citywide (BPDA Research Division 2021).

Roxbury’s relationship with Northeastern University is complex, especially in recent years as the institution has constructed several buildings in the neighborhood that are easily spotted within the area. The significant increase in development was proposed by Northeastern University’s 2013 Institutional Master Plan, and many new buildings have been completed in the past decade. The Institutional Master Plan was submitted with the input of Roxbury residents and approved by the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) in 2013. However, throughout the decade, Northeastern University put forth various amendments that were approved by the BPDA without the input of residents. While there had been public meetings about the amendments, they had been poorly publicized (Sasani 2018). There has been sporadic transparency and community involvement and consideration in the development plans of Northeastern University. The difference between the original plans in the 2013 Institutional Master Plan and its subsequent amendments and the end product can be seen prominently with
the Lightview building that was completed in 2019. Originally, this construction was supposed to be a roughly 10-story building with about 350 to 600 beds (Sasani 2018), but the project ended up being a 21-story building. The development plans of this building were also deceptive in how Northeastern University found a loophole in Article 50 of the Boston zoning code that prohibited any buildings in Roxbury from being over 65 feet, and the Lightview building towers in Roxbury at 230 feet tall (Cronin 2018).

Roxbury residents have expressed concern over the expansion of Northeastern University into the neighborhood and how it has changed the area’s character and landscape (Sasani 2018). While Northeastern University presents all its new buildings as symbols of progress and a boon for the community, residents see an increasing encroachment by the institution. There are some residents actively trying to mitigate the impact of Northeastern University on the neighborhood, with organizations, such as Reclaim Roxbury, that advocate for development without displacement. While residents are skeptical about the benefits that Northeastern University affirms that they are providing the community, most of them express that they are seeking a partnership with Northeastern University that would take into account residents’ input throughout the entire process of development plans rather than the institution that dominates over the neighborhood (Cotter 2020). Northeastern University assures that the institution is taking the community into account, but even their positive additions to the neighborhood showcase how the plans were developed without the Roxbury community. As shown by the university’s renovation of Carter Park near the institution as they took out all of the basketball courts and replaced them with tennis courts (Cotter 2020) that speaks to how they are adapting Roxbury to fit their own needs and demographics, rather than properly integrating into the community.

*The Case of Northeastern University*
Northeastern University is a private academic institution in Boston that spans 73 acres across the South End, Fenway, Back Bay, and Roxbury neighborhoods. It boasts some of the highest enrollment numbers in the city of Boston with 44,000 total students (Northeastern University n.d.). Similar to various universities, Northeastern University has experienced an increase in student enrollment in recent years. In the city of Boston, Northeastern has experienced the most total enrollment growth since 2013, with a 53.5 percent increase in enrollment from 26,437 in 2013 to 40,572 in 2022. Most of this increase is due to an increase in graduate students which has risen 124.6 percent since 2013, while undergraduate enrollment has increased 19.7 percent within the same time frame (City of Boston n.d.). Northeastern University has made a concerted effort, especially in the past decade, to expand the institution, its global reach, and the educational opportunities for its students through the expansion of its flagship campus and its several satellite campuses (Hill 2023).

Higher education is facing increasing pressures, which were exacerbated after the COVID-19 pandemic, as there has been a decline in overall university enrollment, along with financial issues. Many universities have been severely affected by these pressures, especially small private colleges, regional public universities, and rural institutions (Fischer 2022). While higher education institutions are feeling pressure overall, there are select institutions, such as Northeastern University, that have been able to continue to grow and expand. In an effort to compete, universities may continue to expand by offering new services, programs, and amenities (Fischer 2022). Highly selective universities, like Northeastern University, are less affected by these pressures as they have a high percentage of international students, have a pedigree and profile that will continue to attract applicants, and are a research-focused institution (Fischer
2022), as shown by its record high 96,327 applicants for Fall 2023 and overall almost 50% increase in applications over the past 4 years (Spatz 2023).

Undergraduate housing for Northeastern University is also notable as the university has the highest number of undergraduates living off-campus and not at home, without family, as Northeastern houses a little less than half of its undergraduates with 47.9% living on-campus. Graduate students’ off-campus housing has had a significant increase of 67.9% in only two years (2020-2022), which follows a trend similar to other universities, but Northeastern University has seen one of the most significant increases and they have the highest number of graduate students living off-campus and not-at-home (City of Boston n.d.).

The student population racial/ethnic demographics at Northeastern University (2021) consists of a 43.8% majority of White students, followed by Asian students who make up 17.2%, 15.2% International, 10.2% Hispanic or Latino, 5.4% Black or African American, and 5.8% Two or More Races, 2.3% Race and Ethnicity unknown, <0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and <0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native (Northeastern University n.d.). Compared to 2013, the racial/ethnic demographics have changed mainly in terms of White students, with White students previously being 51% of the enrolled students. The Asian and Latino or Hispanic percentages have risen by a few percent each since 2013, while the enrollment of Black or African American students remained around 5% throughout the decade (Data USA n.d.). The median income for a student’s family at Northeastern is $150,900 and 65% of enrolled students come from the top 20% of median family income (Aisch et al. 2017). The tuition for 2023 is $63,141, not including room and board or any other student fees. Similarly to other universities across the country, tuition costs have significantly increased in recent years at Northeastern.
Comparatively, in 2013, Northeastern University’s tuition was $41,686, with a $20,000 increase over the course of the decade (Northeastern University n.d.).

In recent years, due partially to the significant increase in student enrollment, the university has prioritized a global expansion, which is further spurred by its status as a renowned research institution that promises innovation and progress. Its campus in the city of Boston exemplifies its priorities as an institution with its continued expansion into Boston neighborhoods. With an increased demand for space for students, there have been several large-scale projects in the past couple of decades, with notable additions specifically in the past decade within the Roxbury neighborhood. This increased presence in the neighborhood was outlined in the Institutional Master Plan proposed by Northeastern with its goals for university expansion for a decade (2013-2023). The projects proposed in this plan have been approved by the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) and have produced prominent completed development plans that have changed the landscapes of the neighborhoods the university occupies, including Roxbury.

The university first expanded into Roxbury in 2001 along Columbus Avenue with Davenport Commons which consists of two residence halls. Further major development in Roxbury continued with International Village, a residence hall, that opened in 2009. There was a demolition of the YMCA gymnasium in the neighborhood to make way for the construction of a 17-story dorm building in 2011 called the East Village Residence Hall, which was completed in November 2014. Another one of Northeastern’s largest development projects in recent years was the completion of the Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering Complex (ISEC), a 6-story building designed with research facilities, laboratories, classrooms, etc., in 2016. With the completion of this building came the related proposal for the construction of the EXP building to
complete the complex that began construction in 2020 after a delay because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The year 2019 marked the completion of the 21-story LightView building for apartment-style student housing that was in partnership with American Campus Communities (ACC) and served as the first developer-led student housing project in Boston. A pending development project is the 23-story mixed-use building on Columbus Avenue that was part of the 2013 Institutional Master Plan of Northeastern University. While the plan was created with input from the neighborhood of Roxbury, Northeastern University has proposed various amendments to the different projects in the past decade that have morphed the original proposal.

Map: Northeastern University’s Campus in Lower Roxbury outlined in red, (Northeastern University Planning, Real Estate, and Facilities n.d.)

The Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) has played a unique role in the expansion of universities and increasing gentrification in the city of Boston. The BPDA, originally named the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), is a governmental agency with a
storied history that began in the 1960s with urban renewal in Boston. While the agency has rebranded, it has continued to be criticized with claims that the agency’s policies and practices, including short-sighted planning and outdated zoning, accelerate gentrification and displacement in the city of Boston (Wu 2019). The agency is not under city council control as it serves as a separate entity in charge of the city’s entire development process from zoning to planning to approval, is partly funded by developers, and community input and concerns are not formally incorporated into the approval processes (Slade 2020). While the goal of this study is not to address the potential issues in the BPDA, it is important to take into account how the agency operates in conjunction with Northeastern University. Not only in the quantity of university development projects being approved by the agency, but also in how the development process unfolds and how much community involvement is prioritized by both institutions.

These various projects from the last decade have caused much excitement and ambitious visions amongst the Northeastern University community with staff and students praising the new facilities as demonstrated by reactions during different buildings’ unveiling. Several reactions included words looking to the future like “innovation” and “progress”, which were emphasized alongside the creation of the research facilities in the modern-style buildings. During the topping-off ceremony of the Lightview apartment building, Northeastern President Joseph E. Aoun expressed, “This is a project that is opening our community and our university to innovation, to education, and to jobs, and that’s why we are very happy”, which conveys similar sentiments to the university’s response to the new development projects and how they would contribute to the neighborhoods they occupy. The impact of the newly built research facilities has also been emphasized with phrases describing the Interdisciplinary and Science Engineering Complex as a “hub of scientific breakthroughs and innovative engineering” and how the
“research carried out on these six floors will save lives across our country and around the world”, during its opening ceremony of the building.

Connected to the university’s vision and marketing as innovative and higher education as a marker of progress is the focus on sustainability and the link between environmental justice, Northeastern University, and Roxbury. It is clear that Northeastern University is prioritizing sustainability on its campus, which can be seen in its new buildings that are required to reach the LEED Gold standard and achieve a high energy efficiency standard, including the Integrated Science and Engineering Complex (Northeastern University n.d.). Other sustainability initiatives that the university heralds are reduced emissions, reduced energy use, reduced water use, using recycled materials, prioritizing greenspace, which makes up 16% of the campus, etc. While these sustainability efforts are admirable, it does call into question whether the Roxbury community is being afforded similar sustainability access and efforts. Environmental justice is a key issue, especially for low-income communities of color as the impact of climate change-related issues will be concentrated in their neighborhoods (Wu 2019). Roxbury is particularly vulnerable to climate change-related issues, such as flooding, along with its status as an urban heat island (Wu 2019). The potential disparity between Northeastern University and the Roxbury community in terms of environmental sustainability is an important consideration when examining the institution’s impact on the dynamics of the neighborhood as “green” gentrification can be an additional driver of neighborhood change in Roxbury.

METHODS

Data Collection and Data Sample

In order to understand and examine the role of universities in neighborhood change, a mixed methods approach was utilized. Data was collected through publicly available data,
mainly from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Northeastern University website, Boston Development and Planning Agency data, etc., as well as using Google Street View and semi-structured qualitative interviews. The quantitative data collection supplied context and emerging indications of gentrification in the neighborhood with the changing demographics, income levels, and landscape of the neighborhood over the past ten years. The qualitative semi-structured interviews permitted participants, who are long-term Roxbury residents, to share their experiences of neighborhood change in general and in connection to Northeastern University.

The publicly available data was utilized to capture the changes in the neighborhood, including how demographics in the neighborhood have changed, and analyze the data alongside the expansion efforts of Northeastern University over the past ten years to examine possible connections. U.S. Census Bureau data was used to find the demographic and socioeconomic changes in the neighborhood over the past decade. Publicly available data from the Northeastern University website and the Boston Planning and Development Agency was utilized to track the various expansion projects of Northeastern University, along with any proposed amendments throughout the development process. Google Street View data was used to gauge the physical changes in the landscape of the neighborhood, specifically in key streets near Northeastern University, throughout the study’s timeframe of the past ten years to help capture the full scope of the alterations taking place.

The interview participants consisted of long-term residents of Roxbury who had lived in the neighborhood for at least five years. This recruitment requirement incorporated the timeframe of neighborhood change examined in this study and established the participation of residents who had experienced any potential neighborhood change first-hand. The interviewees were also those who lived near Northeastern University, within a 1-mile radius of the Ruggles T
Station in Roxbury, to capture the experiences of residents who experienced the neighborhood change most. The physical boundaries included Ruggles Station and Roxbury Crossing because both spots have been key areas in Northeastern University’s expansion in Roxbury in the past ten years. Additionally, both areas were reported to be particularly vulnerable to gentrification as they have many areas in dire need of investments and typically have greater economic inequality, more Black residents, and lower median household income, home values, and college educational levels (Smith 2020).

Participants were recruited for the interviews through flyers placed in heavily trafficked areas near the Northeastern University Lower Roxbury campus, including the T station, and in community spaces. Information about the study and flyers were also sent to some neighborhood organizations via email to disseminate the study further to recruit qualifying participants. The flyer for interviews was also posted on public Facebook group pages connected to Roxbury and Lower Roxbury. Screener questionnaires were distributed electronically to potential participants who expressed interest in the study, which included questions about their age, whether they were a resident of Roxbury, the length of their residency in the neighborhood, and roughly the area they lived in, to determine a person’s eligibility to participate in the interviews. Once a person was determined as eligible to be interviewed, they were emailed/messaged to see if they would be willing to participate in an interview for this study. The study provided each participant with a $20 Target gift card as compensation for their participation in the interviews. The total number of participants that were interviewed was 5.

Interviews were conducted in person or remotely over Zoom, depending on the preferences of each participant. For the in-person interviews, they took place in a predetermined location coordinated by the researcher and the participant. Participants took part in one interview,
which were approximately 20-30 minutes each. Most of the interviews were conducted over Zoom, with the exception of one that was conducted in-person, and were all audio recorded.

The interviews were recorded either through the Zoom platform or with a physical Zoom audio recorder. Prior to each interview, participants were sent an informed consent form via email to be signed. Along with the signing of the form, before each interview, the document was discussed with each participant and they were asked if they had any questions about the study or the form. It was made clear that participation was completely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point. The participants were also sent a series of demographic questions electronically, which included a question about whether their residence was owned or rented and if participants had any affiliation with Northeastern University, which were factors to take into account when analyzing their responses.

The interview questions had two sections, which were the neighborhood-related questions and the questions about the drivers of community change. The first section focused on the Roxbury neighborhood and community, as well as general changes in the area. The latter section of questions made up the bulk of the interview and consisted of questions connected to the role of Northeastern University in the neighborhood and residents’ perceptions of the institution.

Participants’ signed consent form was required before the interview began. On the consent form, a signature was required to allow for audio recording of the interview. If the participant did not give consent to be audio recorded, the researcher logged their responses via written notes. Audio recordings were uploaded to the Boston College Sociology departmental server after each interview. The audio recordings were transcribed utilizing the transcription software, Rev.ai, and checked over multiple times afterward to correct any inaccuracies.
Afterward, the transcripts of the interviews were stored in the Boston College Sociology departmental server. Within these transcribed interviews, participants were de-identified and given pseudonyms.

**Analytic Strategy**

I analyzed the qualitative data by coding the transcripts via Excel to identify different themes within the participants’ responses that speak to the different ways that Roxbury has changed over the past ten years, residents’ perceptions and responses to the changes occurring, and the role that Northeastern University plays within the matrix of the changing urban landscape. Inductive coding was utilized while analyzing the qualitative interview transcripts. I specifically focused on the changes in the neighborhood that the long-term residents had witnessed, the role that Northeastern University plays in the neighborhood, and the concerns that community members have regarding the university’s expansion.

**Google Street View Data Collection**

To fully capture the physical changes in the Roxbury neighborhood, Google Street View data was utilized. Nine categories were created to systematically document the changes, which were Physical Disorder, Natural Features, Chain Stores, Small Businesses, Transportation Access, Bike Lanes, Pedestrian Safety, Sidewalk Amenities, and Construction/Architecture. Many of the categories created were informed by research utilizing this method of data collection (Ben-Joseph et al. 2013, Hwang and Sampson 2014, Rundle et al. 2011). Within a few of the categories, there were subcategories to count specific instances of certain urban changes. For example, within the category of sidewalk amenities, there were subcategories: benches, trashcans, bike racks, murals, and rental bikes. Two main streets in Lower Roxbury near Northeastern University’s campus in Roxbury were analyzed. Approximately 9 blocks of each of
the streets were observed using Google Street View, with both sides of the streets being observed. In total, there were about 36 “block faces”, one side of the street, (Hwang and Sampson 2014) that were observed in this study. Google Street View has a feature within it that allows users to see captures of streets from past years. This feature served well for this study as it helped better capture past conditions in the neighborhood, specifically within the time frame that the study is focused on (2013-2023). Observations for each block face were made using the most recent Google Street View captures of the area, which was September 2023, and captures from ten years ago, from August 2013, to fully encapsulate the changes during the time frame of the study. For the parts of the observed streets that did not have Google Street View collected data from September 2023 and/or August 2013, the next closest date was observed (such as October 2022 and June 2015, respectively). The observations for the block faces from the two different years were done alongside one another to directly compare the changes that occurred over the ten-year time span. The counts for each category counted each instance of a change observed within the categories outlined, such as whether an amenity was added or removed over the ten-year period. I virtually examined each block face using the rotation, panoramic, and zoom features within Google Street View to better capture the changes in the neighborhood. Each block face was observed repeatedly to ensure all changes were counted.

**Google street view analysis.** Google Street View was a valuable tool that helped supplement data that the other research methods were lacking. This method of data collection allowed for an objective view of the physical change in the neighborhood. The observation of the area showed an overall change in the landscape of Lower Roxbury, specifically around Northeastern University. It also supplied specific instances of change that point to larger neighborhood change in the area. Physical Disorder in the neighborhood was calculated by
defining certain parameters of what constituted physical disorder, including garbage/litter, broken windows, graffiti, boarded up houses, and empty storefronts. This category presented itself most with the garbage/litter subcategory as it had the highest instances of change and was more prominent in the 2023 observations. The small businesses category counted changes as some businesses were gone. There were a couple of instances of businesses no longer existing in the area. There were also a few instances of small businesses that were replaced with other small businesses. Other than a single instance of a major chain replacing a small business, for the most part, the area consisted mostly of small businesses even with the ten-year gap.

Natural features of the area changed in small ways as well. The main change was with Carter Playground, which was upgraded in 2018 with a public-private partnership between Northeastern University and the city of Boston (Thomsen 2018). While this was a major renovation that occurred during the ten-year time frame, it was counted as one instance of change. Another facet of this category that was counted was the presence of greenery, specifically trees. There were mostly minimal changes with trees being added or removed in some parts of the area. A major change regarding the amount of trees was present in one instance where a line of trees was no longer there. However, this can be attributed to the fact that the trees were directly in front of a construction site on Northeastern University’s campus, so it can be assumed that the removed greenery will be reinstalled once the project is completed. A notable change involved the Bike Lane category as bike lanes were more clearly demarcated with green paint on the roads, as well as some of the sidewalks around the campus.

Instances of change in the neighborhood concerning Pedestrian Safety mainly dealt with changes in increased signage in the area. Sidewalk Amenities was one of the categories in the observation that accrued the most changes. In terms of benches, there were a couple of fewer
benches in 2023 compared to 2013. The change in trash cans was quite minimal as there were a couple that were added while one was removed. There was an additional bike rack added to the area according to the 2023 observations as well as a couple of bike rental stations. Murals also formed new forms of sidewalk amenities in the area observed. The two added murals reflected the history and demographics of the neighborhood as one of the murals was a depiction of Frederick Douglass welcoming people to Lower Roxbury and the other depicted two grinning African-American children in front of a colorful background. In terms of Construction/Architecture, the change in the landscape of the neighborhood was more evident than some of the other categories documented. There were a few construction building sites, two of which were large constructions whose end results were presumably going to be tall relative to the typical 3-5-story apartment buildings, but on par with the existing Northeastern University buildings.

Throughout the ten-year time frame of the study, changes within various categories were documented utilizing Google Street View. While this study is not comprehensive with its examination of two main streets in Lower Roxbury, the observations made and tallied provide insight into the types of changes that are occurring in the area and how the urban landscape of the neighborhood is altering. The changes observed in the neighborhood varied from better signage and improved bike lanes to stark changes in the architecture and physical construction of the neighborhood. The comparison of the observations from both ends of the ten-year time frame allowed for a more in-depth examination of the changes in the neighborhood, especially as key Northeastern University development projects were begun, completed, or are currently in progress during these years.
The changes observed utilizing Google Street View in Roxbury cannot be solely attributed to Northeastern University’s increasing presence in the neighborhood. Nonetheless, the institution’s presence and contribution to the neighborhood are evident with its towering structures and sleek, modern buildings that contrast the much smaller residential and commercial buildings that make up the rest of the neighborhood. The smaller instances of change observed may not be solely attributed to Northeastern University’s presence, but it is crucial to take into account the impact of such a prominent institution in the area, especially as the university has expanded over the past 10 years and continues to expand into Roxbury. The data provided with Google Street View observation reflected points in the other methods of data collection in the study, including observations made by residents of the changes they have witnessed over the past ten years when they were interviewed.

**Interviews.** Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to gain insight from the Roxbury community who have experienced the changes in the neighborhood firsthand. The total number of participants that were interviewed was 5. In order to be eligible to be interviewed, each participant had to have lived in Lower Roxbury for at least the past 5 years. Of the participants who were interviewed, most of them have been residents of Roxbury for at least 8 years, except one participant who has lived in the neighborhood for about 6 years. Three men and two women were interviewed, with ages ranging from 23 to 66 years old, with most participants being in their 20s or early 30s. The ethnic/racial background of the participants consisted of all Black participants, with one participant also identifying as Latino/Hispanic. All of the participants were renters in the area, which aligns with the statistical trend in the area as 81% of the housing units in Roxbury are renter-occupied (Smith 2020), compared to 65% in Boston overall (Walsh 2017).
RESULTS

The main findings from the qualitative interviews can be split into three sections: how the Roxbury neighborhood has changed over the past 5-10 years, residents’ thoughts on Northeastern University and its impact on their lives, and community concerns that Northeastern University should take into consideration when expanding into the neighborhood.

Neighborhood Change

When the participants were asked about their neighborhood and the changes they have witnessed over the years of their residence, while their answers varied on the specific changes, most of them expressed that there have been significant changes in the neighborhood since they first moved into the neighborhood. The changes the participants specified ranged from reduced gun violence to more recreational activities and bike lanes. While the responses to the changes participants observed taking place were wide-ranging, there were some commonalities. A couple of the participants described an increase in the development projects occurring in the neighborhood, with one participant, Jade (age 23), specifically noting the increase in high-rise condominiums and “definitely more construction” in the area. When asked to expand, Jade (age 23) cited examples of increased construction, specifically in Mission Hill, the neighborhood bordering Lower Roxbury, as she canvassed in the area and went on to explain the increased construction, development, and displacement in the area. Jade (age 23) stated:

“It's just more, more money's coming in. So the developers are just really, they're really kicking people out. Gentrification is real. Definitely more of that.”

Jade (age 23) was one of two participants who directly cited gentrification as a factor in the neighborhood and change within it. The other participant who mentioned it, Melanie (age 66), shared:
“I see the gentrification. It gives me a little sad feeling, but then it gives me a lot of hope. And then I hope that people who live in the area could take advantage of it. And just not see life pass them by because we are evolving. I mean, you gotta get on board or you stay behind.”

While both participants mentioned gentrification they have witnessed in the area, their viewpoints on the effects of gentrification were quite different. Even while Melanie (age 66) acknowledged the sadness that the process caused, she concurrently noted the positive feelings it provoked for her. Yet, even while she speaks of the neighborhood evolving, she says “you get on board or you stay behind” which suggests that the process of gentrification is occurring to the residents, rather than being driven by the residents, and it is up to the residents to evolve with it or “stay behind” as Melanie (age 66) phrased it.

Changes in those who live in the neighborhood were mentioned by two participants in their interviews. One of the participants, George (age 28), affirmed that a lot has changed in the neighborhood as new residents have moved in, while others have moved out since his residency in the neighborhood. George (age 28) described Northeastern University’s presence in the neighborhood over the past ten years mainly in connection to the increased presence of students who have settled in the area and noted that some of them stayed in the area after they completed their education at Northeastern University. Thomas (age 28), another participant, concurred as he explained that:

“Most of them [residents from when he first moved into the neighborhood], they've moved out and just few of them now are left in the neighborhood.”

People moving in and out of the neighborhood, as expressed by the two participants, can potentially be connected to the demographic changes that the neighborhood has experienced over the past ten years. Each Roxbury resident interviewed provided a variety of changes they have
seen in their neighborhood since they first moved in. This range of responses provided insight into the different ways in which the residents perceived the alterations to the area, whether it be positively or negatively.

**Northeastern University’s Role in Roxbury**

When I asked participants about their thoughts on Northeastern University, the participants interviewed had generally positive views on the higher education institution. There were a few critiques of the university that arose connecting to community concerns, but overall the residents interviewed were either neutral or viewed it as a positive institution in the neighborhood. The university’s reputation/demographics were brought up by three of the participants when discussing Northeastern University. The economic position of the higher education institution and the socioeconomic demographics of the students at the university were briefly touched on as Cameron (age 32) remarked “you got people that go to that school [Northeastern University] whose parents is rich” and Melanie (age 66) stated that she knew that the university had money. Two participants specifically mentioned the significant number of international students that go to the university. Jade (age 23) described what she has heard of the university:

“I heard it's on the up and up, like it's getting more accredited and stuff as the years go by.”

Jade’s (age 23) observation aligns with the university’s reputation, especially in recent decades as they have risen significantly in the national rankings of universities, from spot 120 in 2004 to spot 49 in 2013, through a focused effort on the part of the institution (Kutner 2014). The observations by both Jade (age 23) and Cameron (age 32) also reflect the demographics of the
university as approximately 15% of the population at Northeastern University are international students and the majority of the student body comes from the top 20% (Aisch et al. 2017).

As participants explained how they saw Northeastern University and their role in the neighborhood, they noted positive improvements they attributed to the presence of the institution in the area. One of the participants, Cameron (age 32), asserted that the university made the area “a bit better than it was [before]”. Another participant, George (age 28), observed that the university has brought more development to the area. A few of the participants described the students of Northeastern University as friends which linked to their positive views about the institution.

The participants were asked about any Northeastern University facilities that they may use. In some of the development plans of the university, the university advertises that there are spaces in the projects that are open to the public. So, the questions about facility usage were important to gauge how much residents of Roxbury utilize any Northeastern University facilities or if they are even aware of them. Most of the participants expressed that they did not use any Northeastern University facilities, while a couple of them stated that they were not aware of any facilities available. When some facilities were mentioned by the residents interviewed, most of the examples provided were not Northeastern University facilities. The only facility mentioned that was provided by Northeastern University was the ISEC Pedestrian Bridge, which a couple of participants said they used. The ISEC Pedestrian Bridge, which opened in 2019, connects Northeastern University’s campus in Roxbury to the main campus in Fenway.

When asked about any changes in terms of access to resources due to Northeastern University’s presence in the neighborhood, most of the participants denied that there were any new resources provided by their proximity to the institution. The participant who affirmed that
there were more resources made available could not think of examples when asked to describe what specific resources were provided. Northeastern University maintains that they contribute and give back to the community significantly, and while there have been positive changes attributed to the institution, the lack of significant usage of the facilities and the lack of changes in any resources over the years that the university has expanded into the neighborhood signals a disparity between what Northeastern University claims it is doing for the neighborhood and what the neighborhood receives and experiences in reality.

Community Concerns

A central part of the research in this study focuses on the specific concerns of community members. While most of the participants had neutral or positive reactions in general when speaking about Northeastern University, when asked about specific community concerns the university should take into consideration when expanding into the neighborhood, more critiques arose. A few participants specifically spoke about long-term residents and the need to take them and their needs into account as the university expands. Cameron (age 32) talked about “residents that have been there before” when asked about community concerns. He extrapolated further:

“You need to also embrace the residents that's been there for 10, 15, 20, 30 years. [...] Involve the residents that are not students. There’s the elderly that been there for years.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by the other residents who were interviewed as they emphasized the need for community involvement and participation in Northeastern University as it expands. They had some suggestions for how Northeastern University can involve the community more, including talking and asking the neighbors, conducting more community meetings, offering residents classes, etc. A notable concern and suggestion made by one of the
participants, George (age 28), was regarding student housing in the area and the need for more student housing facilities to accommodate the student body, especially the students who live off campus. The need for more student housing is a critical issue for Northeastern University as one of the goals for the 2013-2023 Institutional Master Plan was to expand student residential facilities and create 1,000 more student beds. Yet, as 2023 drew to a close, student housing continues to be a pertinent issue for the Roxbury community, as well as the students of Northeastern University, who have the highest percentage of undergraduate and graduate students living off-campus in the city of Boston (City of Boston n.d.).

When talking about community concerns, two participants talked about the need for more social outreach, including canvassing and initiatives, and generally making people more aware of the changes occurring in the area. Cameron (age 32), when speaking about the need for social outreach in Roxbury, referenced another city near Boston and a higher education institution within it. He argued:

“Not just for Cambridge, 'cause Harvard's there, but for Roxbury, for Dorchester, for Mattapan.”

Cameron (age 32) referencing Cambridge and Harvard when speaking of the need for more social outreach and contrasting it with Boston neighborhoods like Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan signals a disparity he noticed in certain cities and neighborhoods. Citing Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan was particularly striking as those are the neighborhoods in Boston with the largest Black populations with an estimated two-thirds of the Black population in the city living in these three neighborhoods (Elton 2020). The differences in social outreach observed depending on the area may speak to disparities among populations that determine who is afforded certain resources.
Another participant, Melanie (age 66), more directly pointed out racial differences in communities, when speaking about an ideal community. She revealed that she would:

“...like to see communities like the white people have, you know, not to say they have to duplicate it.”

Melanie (age 66) expanded upon her answer of what she meant by “communities like white people have” by talking about the sidewalks, the flowers, the grass, and the stores. She claimed that those communities are lighter, that the sun “just shines on their community” with their clean streets and businesses. Her phrasing of delineating these communities as those of White people suggests that she noticed a disparity in conditions of communities related to racial demographics, which is important to consider, especially as Roxbury is a historically Black neighborhood that has, in past decades, been plagued by disinvestment and redlining due to racism against its majority Black population that created a gap in the resources allocated for their community (Jimenez 2024).

Environmental concerns were brought up by two of the participants when speaking about overall community concerns that should be taken into account by Northeastern University. It was the central concern mentioned by Jade (age 23), who spoke about the importance of taking into account the “climate”, in regards to the rising water levels and flooding that occurs specifically around Ruggles Street. She emphasized watching the environment and considering the neighbors by asking them and seeing what is wrong. Jade (age 23) also expressed interest in hearing about the climate action plan of the university. Melanie (age 66) talked about another environmental-related topic which was air quality as she explained that a lot of people in the area have breathing problems. She spoke about the environmental issues in the area related to
residents’ health, specifically with elderly people in Roxbury. Melanie (age 66) noted this as a community concern as she explained:

“People need to breathe fresh air. They need to be able to walk on walkable grounds and they need to be able to, you know, live in a community that's conducive to their health.”

Both Jade (age 23) and Melanie (age 66) brought up important environmental concerns that they witnessed in the neighborhood and connected to the considerations that Northeastern University should take into account when expanding. The environmental issues they speak about link to Roxbury’s particularly vulnerable position with climate change-related issues (Wu 2019).

Melanie (age 66) also talked about Northeastern University’s responsibility to the neighborhood and its residents:

“I believe when you're that big of a company [Northeastern University], you have a civic responsibility to feed back into and pay back, pay forward into that community that you're in.”

This quote connects with the participants’ recommendations on how Northeastern University can involve the community more as they suggested varying ways the institution can contribute more to the area. Melanie (age 66) put it in more direct terms by pointing out the civic responsibility that Northeastern University has to the community it occupies. She explained the need for the university to give back to the community they are in which acknowledges the fact that the community is giving something to Northeastern University. Thus, it is their responsibility to feed back into the community, especially because of their size/position which speaks to the reputation and the continued expansion of the university.
The disparity in quality between the Northeastern University buildings in the area compared to other buildings in the neighborhood was noted by Cameron (age 32):

“Now Northeastern is doing Northeastern. They ain’t doing nothing for the residents. You ain’t upgrade my building but you upgraded the building across the street. That don’t make sense.”

This connects to the drastic difference between the architecture and modernization of Northeastern University buildings, especially in a historic neighborhood like Lower Roxbury, where the Boston zoning code prohibits buildings over 65 feet tall (which Northeastern University has circumvented with a few of its new developments). Northeastern University’s commitment to the betterment of the neighborhood was called into question as they continue to develop in the area. In a similar vein, another participant talked about the economic interests and the intentions of the university. Melanie (age 66) expressed that she did not know what Northeastern University’s intentions were in the neighborhood with the community, whether they aimed to “knock everyone out” or completely “gentrify it”. In terms of the economic interests of the university, Melanie (age 66) stated:

“So economically as they rise and meet their financial goals, I hope they don't wash out the people that are dependent on the community, because that's all they know, that's their neighbors…Economically, they're [Northeastern University] gonna get their money, but just remember where you are.”

While the participants have acknowledged the good that they see that Northeastern University has done in the community, it appears that they are not under any illusions about the university prioritizing their interests first. Above all, the residents interviewed centered community involvement when speaking about how Northeastern University should handle its
expansion and the contributions that can be made on the side of the university to improve the neighborhood and collaborate with the neighbors in the community. For the most part, participants did not express negative feelings about development in the neighborhood in general, in fact, a couple of the participants praised it. Nevertheless, they still had concerns about the role of the neighborhood and the impact on the area that would be caused by the expansion. According to the residents interviewed, they are not against new developments in the area, but they undeniably want a say in how their community changes and be considered as the landscape of the neighborhood shifts.

**DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to examine the relationship between Northeastern University and gentrification in the Roxbury neighborhood as the institution has expanded over the past decade. Northeastern University in Roxbury was utilized as a case study to explore how gentrification operates in relation to institutions of higher education in urban areas. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, I found that there is a connection between higher education institutions and neighborhood change in cities. Various changes were documented in the research methods, including changing racial demographics, altered physical environment, increased development, etc. The changes that occurred in Lower Roxbury are consistent with previous gentrification research linking higher institutions of education with neighborhood change and gentrification (Baldwin 2017, Etienne 2012, Moos et al. 2019).

The demographic changes were showcased mainly in the publically available quantitative data. There has been a decrease in the Black population of Roxbury within the time frame of the study and a concurrent increase in the White population of the neighborhood. Racial/ethnic demographic changes were key shifts found in other research examining how gentrification
unfolds in cities and its impact on Black and Latino neighborhoods (Fallon 2021, Rucks-Ahidiana 2021, Rucks-Ahidiana 2022). For Roxbury, the demographic changes are particularly important as it is a historically Black neighborhood that has long been known as the center of Boston’s Black community (Hayden 2019).

Examining the physical changes of the neighborhood over the ten-year time frame of the study was captured mostly with the Google Street View data collection. It provided snapshots of the area from different years to analyze the change over time of the area with each instance of change being documented and tallied to demonstrate the changing landscape of Lower Roxbury near Northeastern University. Some of the findings of the Google Street View data align with other studies that utilize the tool to examine gentrification and mark signals of neighborhood change (Hwang and Sampson 2014, Rundle et al. 2011).

A key aim of this research was to find out community members' thoughts on Northeastern University’s increasing presence in the neighborhood. The publicly available data provided a bit of insight into residents’ feelings about the new Northeastern University developments in the area. However, the semi-structured qualitative interviews supplied most of the information regarding how residents of Roxbury felt about Northeastern University’s presence in Lower Roxbury. The participants described the various changes they saw over the past 5-10 years, such as increased development, more construction, and people moving in and out of the area.

Participants' thoughts on Northeastern University were mixed. There were instances where participants praised the institution, but there were also times when the residents critiqued the university. The critiques were mainly centered around community concerns surrounding long-term residents of the neighborhood and the disparities that participants noted between
Northeastern University and the rest of Lower Roxbury. These findings are consistent with some other studies that used qualitative interviews with residents of gentrifying neighborhoods that emphasize the impacts of gentrification on long-term residents and the changing landscape of their communities (Betancur 2011, Shaw and Hagemans 2015, Valli 2016). The interviews with long-term residents provided a deeper understanding of how the community has changed since 2013 and the role that Northeastern University has played in the changes. There was a mix of positive and negative impacts on Roxbury over the ten-year period which corresponds to other research in this area (Etienne 2012). A finding from the semi-structured qualitative interviews was the residents’ perceptions of the university, as well as its impact on the lives of participants and examining the benefits claimed to be provided by Northeastern University versus the reality of what the residents reap.

A key finding from the interviews was the community concerns expressed by the residents as it provided more insight into the changes they would like to see in the neighborhood and the role they would want to have in the changes to the neighborhood. The residents want the community involved in the shifts occurring as they are the ones who experience the impact of the changes. Some previous research shows the need for collaboration between institutions and the neighborhoods they occupy. For instance, Etienne (2012) discusses the challenge that arises between universities and the communities in reaching a consensus regarding mutually agreed and accessible goals, direction, and metrics of progress and impacts, which can be at least partially attributed to the detrimental impacts to existing residents of the area. This coincides with some of the thoughts spoken by participants as they centered community involvement as Northeastern University expands. The interviews also supplied recommendations from residents for
Northeastern University and the ways in which they can work more collaboratively with the Roxbury community.

In the publicly available data collected, while it was clear that Roxbury residents had critiques of Northeastern University and how it handled the expansion into the neighborhood, there was a clear emphasis on wanting a partnership with the institution that would take residents’ input (Cotter 2020). This sentiment is echoed by the findings about community concerns and involvement from the interviews with long-term residents of Lower Roxbury. In the interviews, the students of Northeastern University were mentioned as well as being a part of the collaboration with the institution, especially as students are the ones moving into the surrounding neighborhoods off campus because Northeastern University’s on-campus housing cannot accommodate the student population. The residents interviewed expressed positive thoughts about the students and collaboration with them is evidently welcome. Thus far, Northeastern University has shown no signs of slowing down its expansion into the neighborhoods it occupies. In fact, in March 2024, the BPDA approved the previously pending proposal for a 23-story building on Columbus Avenue in Lower Roxbury.

Within the community concerns voiced by the participants interviewed, a couple of the residents brought up environmental issues, which serves as an important indicator of the centrality of these issues for residents of Roxbury, specifically in connection to institutions of higher education expanding into the area. Roxbury is particularly vulnerable to problems related to climate change, such as flooding, being a heat island, etc. (Wu 2019). Taking these issues into account is critical, especially as Northeastern University centers sustainability in its new developments in Roxbury and serves as a key facet within the university’s image of innovation and progress. Environmental considerations should be taken into account by the university,
especially considering how the institution continues to expand into the area and the need for collaboration with the community affected by these environmental issues.

While Northeastern University has lauded itself as an institution for progress and innovation, it is important to consider how its vision of progress manifests and who it benefits. Baldwin (2017) speaks of a “public-good paradox”, which frames institutions of higher education as an inherently public good. The non-profit status of universities exempts them from paying taxes and helps generate “significant private profit” for the universities themselves, “with little public benefit” to their surrounding areas (Baldwin 2017). In the context of the city of Boston, this paradox can be seen in the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) program, started in 2012, which are voluntary payments on an institution’s tax-exempt property value (City of Boston 2022). While Northeastern University has increased its contributions to the program over the past decade, the institution has yet to pay in full. In 2023, Northeastern University contributed 67 percent of what was asked by the city of Boston (City of Boston 2023). The university is one of the three universities in Boston, along with Harvard University and Boston University, that are responsible for about 60 percent of the educational sector’s unmet payments for the program in 2023 (Beaudet 2023). This gap in the contributions Northeastern University provides showcases the public-good paradox Baldwin (2017) discusses as the university reaps the benefits of being an untaxed non-profit institution, while not contributing a full payment to the city, which funds city services for residents. Overall, untaxed universities in the city of Boston contribute 70 percent of the payment, compared to 90 percent contributed by medical institutions. Beyond just Northeastern University, the disparity between what institutions of higher education ought to contribute and what they do contribute in the PILOT program
illustrates the benefits they reap, which can be at the expense of the residents of the areas they occupy.

While this study focused on Northeastern University in Roxbury, the research has implications for institutions of higher education and their role in fomenting neighborhood change in the urban areas they are located in. Moreover, this study contributes to the perpetually evolving definition of gentrification by highlighting a lesser known actor, universities, and examining their role in the changes occurring in cities. The role of institutions of higher education should be taken into account, especially as some institutions, such as Northeastern University, have student bodies with socioeconomic and racial/ethnic demographics that are starkly different from the neighborhoods they are in, which can spur detrimental impacts to long-time residents of the area. While all of the changes cannot be attributed solely to higher education institutions, they are key actors in the changing landscape of cities and neighborhoods.

Limitations

This study did come with certain limitations. The interview sample was small as I interviewed only 5 people. While they were all long-term residents of Lower Roxbury, they are not representative of the whole community. The scope of the Google Street View data collection was also quite limited as two main streets were examined. These were key streets in Lower Roxbury in close proximity to Northeastern University but the observations made cannot capture the whole picture of the physical changes that occurred in the neighborhood, especially as the physical environment was examined at the start and end of the ten-year time frame and not throughout.

Despite the limitations of the study, the research helped advance our understanding of neighborhood change in Roxbury in relation to Northeastern University and the role of
institutions of higher education in gentrification in general. Additionally, this research helped us better understand community concerns of Roxbury residents and has provided important considerations that higher education institutions should take into account as they expand into neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

Gentrification has contributed to shaping the changing landscape of cities. Institutions of higher education have served as under-examined actors in spurring the process of gentrification. The research in this study has contributed to the existing literature on gentrification through its examination of the role of universities in neighborhood change in urban areas by providing insight into the specific changes driven by gentrification, as well as the concerns of the community who are impacted by the altered environment and want a say in what happens in their neighborhood as it continues to change.
REFERENCES


Department of Neighborhood Development, Policy Development & Research Division. N.d. “ROXBURY DATA PROFILE POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS.”


Wu, Michelle. 2019. *FIXING BOSTON’S BROKEN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS WHY AND HOW TO ABOLISH THE BPDA*.

### APPENDIX A

Google Street View Data

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<td>Graffiti</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rental Bikes</td>
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### Construction/Architecture

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<td>Construction Sites</td>
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APPENDIX B

*Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview Guide*

**Neighborhood-Related Questions:**

- So to start off, how would you describe a community which satisfies all of your social needs (like the type and quality of housing, the quality of education, and things which are specific to a community’s culture)?
- What do you like most about your neighborhood?
- In thinking about your neighborhood, what are some areas of improvement you’d like to see?
- How long have you lived in the neighborhood? How has your neighborhood changed in the past 5-10 years?

**Drivers of Community Change Questions:**

- In thinking more about changes you’ve witnessed in the community, are there any specific organizations and/or companies that have significantly contributed to these changes?
- As a resident living in close proximity, what are your thoughts on Northeastern University?
- Can you describe the university’s presence in the neighborhood over the past 10 years?
- Do you use any Northeastern University facilities?
  - If you do not use them, why?
  - If you do use them, how has having the spaces provided helped? Is there typically a welcoming atmosphere for those who are not students?
● How has the institution affected your life in Roxbury?
  ○ Can you think of a specific example of this?
● Have more resources been made available to you because of your proximity to Northeastern University?
● What community concerns do you think would be important for a university to take into account when they are expanding into surrounding communities?
● Is there anything else important on this topic that we have not talked about?