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**Unveiling Perceptions Held by Community Residents of an  
Academic Institution in Their Midst  
By**

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Unveiling Perceptions Held by Community Residents  
of an Academic Institution in Their Midst

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**Abstract**

This colloquium presentation contextualizes the subject of college interest through the perceptions held about a mid-sized, urban university by community residents. The impact of these perceptions are considered in relation to the decisions of local African American students' consideration to apply or attend the institution, situated less than two miles from their residential community. Personal accounts through qualitative methods detailing interactions between long-standing community members and the university provide a historical lens of the environmental landscape that colors the perceptions the students hold of the university, as a means of providing insight into why there exists a disconnect between the two entities.

**Aim**

This study aims to determine how the members of the community perceive the intentions and presence of the university in an effort to provide insight into interests of the residential children to apply to and attend the university.

**Problem**

Located in a city that reports a 44% African American demographic (Census, 2015), Fourdlet University, an elite, medium-sized, private institution in the eastern United States African Americans reports only 5.5% of the 2015 incoming freshman class as African American. This attendance rate represents African Americans from throughout the country, and by extension, a smaller percentage of the population from the city. Even smaller would be the percentage of students from the community of Greatland, which has an African American population of 88% and is located less than two miles away from the campus. Despite its proximity from their neighborhood, statistics demonstrate that the African American children who reside in Greatland have not made the decision to attend Fourdlet University. Moreover, there is potential for a student who lives in this community to never encounter another individual from Greatland who attends or has attended Fourdlet University. This phenomenon is made even more blistering when considering that the community of Greatland has been designated one of the most impoverished communities in our nation, and the direct impact that education has on the eradication of poverty.

Established as a suburb in the early 1800's, Greatland has always been a residential community. The earliest residents were wealthy landowners who began vacating the area in the late 1950's due to increased gang violence, leaving behind residents who did not possess the financial capability to migrate to other areas of the city. Family incomes have decreased over time, with some residents currently earning salaries below \$9,000 annually, and with the decline of family income and the inability of some residents to maintain their homes, the area has suffered the emergence of abandoned

homes and vacant lots that has earned some sections of Greatland the designation as 'blighted'. The labeling of blight carries with it the authorization of corporate or development groups to abscond property through the power of *eminent domain*. The requirement of this provision, however, is that said spaces must be converted from unsafe, uninhabitable structures or spaces, into public, usable space (Powell, 2006). Sweeping designations of blight left residents with the feeling that they were being pushed out of their homes when instead of creating public spaces, developers converted the spaces into housing to benefit the expansion efforts of Fourdlet University.

The Greatland community residents have viewed this gentrification process (Redfern, 2003) as being sanctioned by the university, and they are contending with the transition from a single family residential area to that of a college town with university students moving further into the community in search of housing no longer available on campus (Gollotti, 2009). Those residents who have been able to remain are left with the sentiments that can be likened to individuals who have been victims of eminent domain; the feeling of loss of the familiarity and security of their community and surroundings and the resultant sense of sadness, fear and anger (Powell, 2006). These sentiments become embodied in the children, who do not exist in a vacuum, but are affected by the ideas, sentiments, attitudes, behaviors, concerns and beliefs that diffuse (Rogers, 1995) from their immediate caregivers, and it is these elements that help to shape and form their own belief systems (Grusec, 2006); consequently becoming the foundation of the sentiments that they hold regarding the institution.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to provide a response to the question of why an elite institution situated in a low SES residential community which has a demographic composition of 88% African American, does not exemplify the African American students from the community as part of its student body. To that end, members of the affected community are called upon to provide insight into perceptions and beliefs about the university that may impact the mindsets of the community's children. This study utilizes the Ecological Systems Theory in conjunction with Mere Exposure Theory to explore how and why perceptions are formed based upon repetitive, and increased exposure to a subject. Permeating these theories is the theory of Critical Race to support the lens through which this topic is explored in acknowledgement of the dynamics of race in America as well as emphasizing the role of the voices of the members of the community. Community members who have resided in Greatland for twenty years or more possess the ability to give a historical perspective of the presence of the university in the community and the evolutions between the two factions that have occurred over this time period. They are able to offer personal accounts and interactions that they have experienced in relation to the university. The participants of this study satisfy these conditions and have been termed *longstanding residents* who are able to speak to why despite its close proximity their students do not consider Fourdlet University when considering college options.

The Ecological Systems Theory developed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1989), holds that the first meaningful exposures for children occur within the first three of the five layers. The *microsystem*, the first and closest layer to the child, encompasses the most immediate contacts, the family and the classroom. The second layer, *the mesosystem*, is a

broadening of the microsystem but contains an expansion of family and community contacts. The *exosystem*, the third layer, includes those external elements of the environment that indirectly affect the child such as the local school board, or the parents' employment. It is within these three realms that children will develop their earliest perceptions of the world around them, and for this reason, is necessary to consider when exploring the sentiments of adults within Greatland community towards the presence of Fourdlet University. Getting to the heart of Greatland students' aversion to Fourdlet is critical to improving the relationship between community and institution, and subsequently increasing applications and attendance, and this research seeks to achieve this through understanding the basis of perceptions held about the institution by adults and caregivers who most influence the mindsets of the children. Making transparent the sentiments that residents hold concerning the presence of the university in their community allows for the thoughtful consideration of improving relations between the two groups and advances the potential for increased exposure to higher education opportunities.

### Findings

Data from the focus group and interview sessions revealed two overarching themes of 'exposure' and 'welcomeness', and contained in these themes are the two core sentiments 'they don't want' and 'being pushed out'. These two sentiments were expressed by all participants of the study. As a group, they have found the university to be unwelcoming based upon the absence of outreach to the community over the years as well as negative events and interactions that they have experienced in association with the institution. The Mere Exposure Theory states that increased, repetitive exposure to a subject increases its attractiveness because of familiarity when there are positive associations. In the case of Greatland residents, the inverse has also been found to be true in that attraction to Fourdlet University was decreased due to negative occurrences. The cores sentiments that emerged support why exposure to the university has reduced the level of interest that potential students from Greatland would have in applying and ultimately attending Fourdlet University.

### Core Sentiment

#### They Don't Want

The phrase "they don't want" was counted as being uttered seventeen times during the course of the focus group session. What followed the three words were any variation of sentiments: "...us to be on the campus, "...us to use things designated for students", "...their students exposed to us", "...any Black kids to go here." One participant revealed the impression that Fourdlet was believed to be,

*off limits to us because you never heard anybody speak of Fourdlet, so that was one of the furthest thing from my mind is my kids going to Fourdlet because I didn't know how to go about it.*

The interpretation of this sentiment is a pervasive feeling of rejection over time that has been manifest in outward expressions of insult and anger by members of the community. They resent the feeling that the university is attempting to dictate what or how the community should be without including community members in the process, and this

anger is often displayed when they are experiencing the second core sentiment of ‘being pushed out’.

### **Being Pushed Out**

Residents of the community voiced the greatest amount of anger at the sentiment of ‘being pushed out’. Their belief that Fourdlet wants to “take over” their community through what they see as the renovation of older buildings to house the university’s students while aiding developers to find their homes uninhabitable in an effort to move them out, has inspired resistance by community members. The anger that they express regarding issues relating to Fourdlet is based upon their familiarity with the institution and how they have been victimized in the past, and anger has stemmed from the feeling of powerlessness that they have over their situation. They are overwhelmingly concerned about their homes as the property values rise in the area despite laws that were passed in recent years to exempt longstanding resident from increases in market rate taxes.

### **Discussion**

With over 4700 colleges and universities in the United States (NCES, 2013), academic institutions situated in communities that coexist with residential communities are an American phenomenon (Gumprecht, 2003). University outreach to area residents is assumed to provide significant assistance as a benefit of its proximity (Livability, 2013) through provisions of continuing education courses, training, counseling and career services, and mentoring and tutoring. Implicit in this assumption is that the mission of all academic institutions so situated, is to extend itself to the community, or that residents who find themselves included in the extended infrastructure of the campus, consider it advantageous to be located therein.

The findings of this research do not support this assumption, rather they suggest that the sentiments that long-standing community residents hold concerning the institution have had a significant impact on the way that younger community members perceive the university, and that while no physical barriers exist in regard to direct access to the campus, there exists a perceived barrier for their students who as a result elect to apply to institutions that are further in distance.

### **Research Implications and Significance**

The significance this research is in its contribution to the scholarship on issues of access and equity in higher education. It provides an alternate perspective from the more traditional reasons proffered as explanations for low African American student representation on the campuses of elite institutions. The positioning of the study is intentional in its discounting of deficit reasons (i.e., academics, finance) for low the attendance, and instead relies upon the voices of stakeholders of the community to reveal sentiments that address perceptions held about the university which may account for the disinterest on the part of African American students to consider attending institutions categorized as elite, traditionally white (TWI) or predominately white (PWI), and it considers it from the perspective of students who live in communities where institutions such as these are also located.

In the absence of geographical, financial, and academic barriers, there is an implication that students perceive barriers to the institution, which prevent them from considering these spaces a viable choice to further their education. Further, this

implication is extended onto the campuses of these institution towards those African American students who originate from low SES, high poverty, segregated communities and is supported by scholarship that demonstrates that African American students raised in segregated communities attending elite institutions, perform at a lower level than their counterparts from more racially diverse communities.

Finally, this research suggests that further inquiry can be made into the roles and responsibilities of academic institutions that are situated in severely poor communities. In considering the level of influence on children that schooling and communities share based upon the Ecological Systems Theory, more extensive research on ways to positively shape the perceptions of the children of these communities would benefit academic institutions that occupy space within low SES, high poverty communities.

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revitalization in West Philadelphia. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(1), 267-272.

### **Author Information and Biography**

Shawwna L. Thomas-EL is a second year student in the doctoral program for Educational Leadership and Learning Technologies. Her area of concentration is in Higher Education where she has spent the nearly 30 years working to recruit and counsel students in elite institutions and medical schools. She has a heart for supporting African American students, who have been traditionally underrepresented on these campuses, in realizing their goals of pursuing and receiving higher education, thus her research centers around the identifying obstacles that would deny them the opportunity. Born and raised in West Philadelphia, Shawwna was educated in the Philadelphia public schools and Drexel University. She began her professional career 26 years ago as an advocate for African American students in higher education. Drawing upon her experiences at private academic institutions in the areas of admissions and student affairs to support her dissertation research, she will explore the impact of exposing underrepresented African-American students to competitive colleges during their middle school years, on their ability to successfully compete for admission, thrive, and graduate from elite institutions. Creating opportunities for access to higher education for African American students is the driving force behind Shawwna's academic endeavors. Recently, her work has taken on more personal significance as she has joined the ranks of parents who are navigating the college investigation process with the oldest of her two daughters.