



# College, Campus, Company-Town

## The Growing Power Imbalance and Abuses of Elite Colleges

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### Introduction

With a goal as noble as furthering and spreading education and knowledge, it is unsurprising that one finds the omniscience of the power of colleges and universities benign—perhaps due to an assumption that such a professedly devout meritocratic institution may be especially trusted with power. Yet in many ways, elite educational institutions do not wield their power responsibly—oftentimes taking advantage of those they possess power over, such as surrounding communities, graduate students, and school staff. While schools are eager to highlight their roles in cultivating, producing and housing top minds, they are more reluctant to address the glaring deficiencies and abuses of power in their roles as landowners, employers, gentrifiers, occupiers, and members of their greater communities.

After a brief history of the tax-exempt status of colleges, this poster will briefly outline alternative lenses to interpreting the relations of power and inequity between schools and those it claims to serve, with a primary example of Columbia University, through two sections: the first section will focus on graduate students; the second on surrounding and marginalized communities; and the conclusion will synthesize main themes as well as briefly overviewing efforts of resistance.

### Power: History of Tax Exemption

- Colleges have been amassing assets tax-free since the colonial era of the United States. Around the time of the foundation of the modern federal tax system, the Revenue Act of 1909 codified this tax-exempt status by declaring that “any corporation or association organized and operated exclusively for [...] educational purposes” would be deemed a federal tax-exempt nonprofit.
- In 2004 over half of the top ten public charities in the United States by size of total assets were elite schools and universities. Harvard University topped the list with an endowment of \$38 billion, and a growth of 6.8%; Columbia University, rank 12, possessed almost \$11 billion.



Graduate students protesting in April 2018, calling for Bollinger to recognize and bargain with the union.

Photo from [Columbia Daily Spectator](#).

### Students/Workers/Tenants

#### Brief History of Labor Relations at Columbia

- After 20 years of unionization efforts, the National Labor Relations Board ruled in 2016 that graduate students and teaching assistants were entitled to collective bargaining rights under the National Labor Relations Act.
- Nevertheless, Columbia refused to bargain with the union after its establishment, and only acknowledged the legitimacy of the student union in 2018, following a week-long strike by the union. The framework established from initial talks with the school, however, mandated that the union conceded to a no-strike clause until April 2020.

### Students/Workers/Tenants cont.

#### COVID: Wielding Power Imbalance

- Graduate students—who may very well also be employed as educators for other students—claimed that pandemic-related losses of “part-time jobs, research grants, and other sources of income” rendered them financially unable to pay rent, with almost 80% of respondents to a graduate student survey stating “they would struggle to pay rent over the next six months.”
- Given the immediate economic consequences on small businesses, Columbia announced the waiving of 2 months of rent for commercial renters of Columbia-owned properties; for university-owned residential rental units, however, the university ignored petitions and requests from graduate and postdoctoral students asking for similar rent cancellations.
- Instead, the university offered \$3000 for eligible Ph.D. students, which one striker claimed as insufficient, explaining the funds are only enough to “cover two months of your rent, based on the average Columbia rent” instead of providing enough to support the survival of these students throughout the entirety of the uncertain summer ahead.
- In response, hundreds of Columbia graduate students began a strike on April 24th, accompanied with a public letter listing their demands for an appropriate COVID response regarding graduate students, such as \$6000 Ph.D. summer funding and cancelling rent. The strike is still ongoing.

*“It’s a lot like the company-town system, where workers pay portions of their paycheck back to the university for the essential goods that they need to live.” - a striker*

#### Compounding Effects of Totality: A Company Town

- In their open letter to the university’s administrators, strikers highlighted how the simultaneous existence of the employer, educator, and landlord relationships between graduate students and the school structurally compound into a totalizing force in the lives of some, writing:  
“We further demand that the University de-link academic status from rent payments. The practice of linking academic status to rent payments can impact our ability to register enrollment at the university and therefore, by extension, can have a direct impact on the visa status of international students; with such leverage, the university unlike other landlords rarely has to enforce its evictions in housing court.”
- The interconnectedness of these concurrent relations through one institution demonstrate the school’s omniscient and near-totalizing force against graduate students, allowing for the school to command one’s employment, housing, student, and legal status in one fell swoop.

### “Urban Revitalization”

#### Land Acquisition

- The acquisition of land and property is especially fraught with ethical dilemmas in urban areas, particularly in New York City. As schools take and transform land from its previous local owners to the kinds of businesses that attract educational talent, they begin to alter and negatively impact the fabric of the pre-existing communities; spaces once owned, maintained, and occupied by the community are transferred hands and remolded into places unwelcoming to non-school affiliates.
- As Davarian Baldwin explains: “these noneducational investments re- place affordable rate with market rate housing, and land values can skyrocket beyond the reach of local residents, who are largely shunted into the low-wage sectors of the creative class as ivory tower janitors, cooks, and groundskeepers.”

### “Urban Revitalization” cont.

#### Manhattanville Campus

- Facing inadequate space on its Morningside Heights campus, Columbia University launched the project, which added 6.8 million square feet of space for \$6.3 billion while displacing an estimated 5000 people.
- The land, however, was only seized after a fight: the 17-acre plot of land, once filled with small businesses run by Harlem residents, reached New York state’s highest court before being handed, via eminent domain, to Columbia University.
- To justify its case, the university commissioned an environmental report that described the surrounding area of Harlem as “blighted,” characterizing the businesses and residents of the area; the losing parties of the case consisted of the owners of four warehouses and two gas stations.
- As a show of community engagement, Columbia committed \$150 million to a community benefits agreement with the West Harlem Local Development Corporation focused on helping local residents. For comparison, \$150 million would represent approximately 2% of the total cost of constructing the Manhattanville Campus.

#### Policing and Racialized Harassment

- Manhattanville has been described as possessing “dozens of security cameras, several forms of hostile architecture” and “constant presence” of “security guard patrols” invite local residents, 70% of whom identify as Black or Latino, who are more likely to experience racialized surveillance and police violence.
- Columbia is not alone in accusations of racialized policing and harassment. For example, University of Chicago, known for its tense relationship with its local communities (whose native long-term residents are largely Black), has a private police force with arresting powers that have jurisdiction over an incredible 65,000 people, 50,000 of whom are not students. In ten months, the force stopped and questioned 166 people on foot, all but 11 of whom were Black.
- Black bodies at multiple prestigious institutions, like Columbia University, Yale University, and University of Chicago have had publicized incidents of racialized harassment.
- Unlike public police forces, the private ownership of these forces shield them from accountability since they are not held to the same level of public transparency. Despite attempts to sue for the rights to access the arrest records of private campus police forces, these private police forces have been protected from the responsibility of their actions and racial profiling by colleges and universities.

### Conclusion

Colleges have become complex creatures. While this poster focuses, by necessity, on the negative aspects of this power, it is important to acknowledge the genuine good they do provide: colleges and universities are nonetheless major employers, innovators, and educators—they provide breakthrough research, financial aid to students who would otherwise not be able to attend, and so on. Nevertheless, even if it were determinable that the benefits an institution provided outweighed the negative effects from the ways in which it abused its powers, it would not absolve schools from their shirked responsibilities, for those benefits are being generated by those very abuses. While scholarship in this specific area is nascent, it will likely become increasingly vital: as colleges equip themselves with political influence and police forces bankrolled by billions, and as their role in our lives becomes more totalizing, society must renegotiate the role of these institutions. The road ahead offers no clear way forward, but there is a gust pushing us to move: for if we continue down this road, the place we are going is bleaker than where we are now.