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Considerations on the field theory of community expectancy and college attendance: The urban neighborhood

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Abstract

Higher education institutions increasingly are relying on alternative populations of potential students and are working to be strategic in their recruitment processes. These two actions direct institutions to consider how and why potential students make choices about if and where to attend postsecondary education. Students make decisions about postsecondary participation for a variety of reasons, and the field theory of community expectancy holds that the environmental factors and social capital that surround a young person can influence these decisions. The current study was designed to explore how citizens in an urban neighborhood perceived the influence of others on their actions, including their perceptions of postsecondary education. Using an oral survey in an urban, midwestern city neighborhood, data were collected at three different sites from approximately 200 participants. The vast majority of the participants were residents of the neighborhood who grew up in the area, and the majority have lived in the neighborhood for over a decade. Through a series of 11 questions, participants agreed to strongly-agreed that the people with whom they interact in the neighborhood have 'shaped' who they are today. Similarly, study participants indicated that they observe and can see what others in the neighborhood do as well as businesses and the city administration. They also reported that others in the neighborhood do influence how they perceive higher education. Study findings reinforce the need for college and university leaders to take into account these home-based experiences and perceptions as they design recruitment strategies for the future.

Keywords: Community expectancy, college going decision, community development, postsecondary education, college recruitment, non-traditional students

Introduction

Higher education institutions have a variety of reasons to be concerned about enrollment. In part, this concern is based on a declining number of students who might fit the demographic profile of who attends college, in part it might be due to the needed tuition dollars to fund an institution, and in part it might simply be due to the mission of an institution to educate the population. Regardless of an institution's motivation, higher education has an articulated interest in recruiting and enrolling students (Bidwell, 2018) ^[1].

As has been prominently highlighted, the declining birth rate following the Great Recession has resulted in a steep decline in college-aged students, projecting severe decreases in enrollment beginning around 2029 (Grawe, 2018) ^[11]. This means that institutions either learn to live with fewer resources or they must find new students to enroll. The later strategy has been of primary interest to institutional leaders, and this means that they must work to find non-traditional students to enroll in their institutions. For many institutions, this means exploring underserved populations of students, including those from underserved backgrounds, many of whom have been identified as residing in urban areas (Leggins, 2021) ^[13].

Urban populations comprise over 80% of the US population, a figure expected to grow to nearly 90% over the next two decades (Center for Sustainable Systems, 2021). This population distribution has grown particularly in US 'sunbelt' cities, and there are competing descriptions of the evolution of contemporary urbanized areas.

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One depiction includes a growing wealth-inequity where underrepresented minorities pay disproportionately for urban services and infrastructure (Rothstein, 2017) ^[18] as compared to descriptions of praise for urban renewal and the welcoming environment of urban oases that foster creativity, the arts, and new thinking on urban design (Brugmann, 2009; Glaeser, 2011) ^[2, 10].

Considering the complexity of urbanized areas with issues such as population density, gentrification and poverty, and education participation, it is critical to understand the role of neighborhoods in creating culture. Specifically, it is important to understand how the culture that is created values and encourages further education participation. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was twofold: first, to identify the extent to which individuals confirm community expectancy as a variable that influences decisions, and second, to identify the extent to which individuals view others influencing their perceptions of college going. Set against the framework of community expectancy, the qualitative inquiry explores how values toward education are conveyed to young adults, particularly as they progress through secondary education and consider their future.

1A. Community Expectancy

The concept of community expectancy is embedded in the larger framework of identity development, specifically the work of Erikson (1950/1993; 1968/1994). Erikson's work focused on the combination of internal and external variables and stimuli that interact upon and within an individual at different stages in life development, ultimately influencing an individual's identity formation. Erikson specifically focused on the role of the family and the crucial adolescent years of 12-15 years of age.

Community expectancy is based on the idea that external variables surrounding an individual at certain times in life can impact both how a person sees themselves and what the individual decides to value and what is important (Derden, 2011) ^[6]. Derden explored the concept of community expectancy in smaller communities in a mid-southern state in relation to perceptions about attending college. He found that the presence of theaters, for example, can play a role in creating an expectation of leaving a small town and moving away to attend college.

Early studies in community expectancy focused on unplanned interactions and common expectations throughout a community, often using some common activity in the process. Miller and Tuttle (2006; 2007) ^[16, 15] studied rural community colleges in Mississippi and noted the powerful impact of athletic teams in bringing a community together and they noted that this coalescing of community pride around the community college's sports team transcended race and socio-economic status, resulting in the fandom serving as a binding agent for the community. In turn, community members began to expect that others in the community had an interest in and supported these sport teams.

Community expectancy as a concept grew beyond relationships to binding activities and has included both the role of formal agents of a community (Deggs & Miller, 2012) ^[5] ^[5] as well as the expectations that can be placed upon an individual based on informal interactions (Miller, 2019; Tolliver, 2020) ^[14, 21].

1B. Evolving Urban Landscape

The US Census defines urbanicity as having a population of over 50,000 individuals (US Department of Justice, 2020).

This definition is somewhat problematic as at the very least it is suggestive of different types or levels of urbanicity and requires an acknowledgement of population density. Subsequently, urbanized areas might be high-low in terms of their urban nature and might have a high-low density measure. Subsequently, there are different conceptions or images of what 'urban' might mean and what it might look like and can have different ideas of neighborhoods and neighbor proximity. Imagery of tenement houses or high-rise apartment buildings might be accurate in some urban areas, and in others, subdivisions with single-family homes and large lawns might be the norm. The result is that the idea of 'urban' has many faces and is difficult to restrict to a single definition.

Within the larger conversation of what an urban landscape looks like, there are at least three major trends that are shaping these environments. First are migration patterns, which refers to where and how people live and move. Once thriving downtown neighborhoods co-existed with manufacturing. As wealth accumulated, the migration flow was to the suburbs, replacing wealth with new communities of people who lacked the resources to live elsewhere. Recent changes in manufacturing, at least in part, have spurred a resurgence in downtown living and the gentrification of historic urban spaces, resulting in a new downtown population that is better resourced and has expectations for certain urban amenities. This migration flow, however, is not stagnant, but rather, is fluid as pockets of urban centers emerge as new highly-desirable locations.

Second is the changing diversity of urban centers. Hispanic, Asian, and Eastern European immigration patterns have resulted in their eclipsing the Black population in many urban locations resulting in an evolving sense of community. Many immigrant communities, for example, have established themselves in neighborhoods and areas that have been previously occupied by different groups. So as one minority group moves out, new groups move in, creating a new set of traditions, experiences, and expectations that are consistent with their cultural and religious backgrounds. And, as these groups have reconstructed different urban spaces, they have typically done so with few resources, meaning that the lower-socio-economic groups, especially immigrants, are building communities within larger spaces to support themselves and to develop the resources necessary for continued growth and ultimately improving their own quality of life. To some extent, the urban American space continues to be an incubator for immigrant populations who learn to thrive and move on to 'gentrified' areas.

And third, urban planning has become a science and has changed how urban spaces are being seen, used, and planned for. Although less studied but frequently reported, urban locations are constantly evolving with the resources they possess and the structure of how they exist. For example, there is a trend (Gross, 2022) ^[12] for urban areas to be more neighborhood centered than they have become in recent years. Referring to 'doughnut cities' or the 'post-urban city' the concept holds that there is an offering of all necessary services within a short-range for urban dwellers, resulting in a resurgence in the emphasis on the neighborhood.

The collective understanding of the urban space is that while it continues to grow and evolve, it also retains several core characteristics that include an emphasis on the immediate local area. This immediate area has the potential to influence how individuals can come to see themselves and how others exert influence on them in this developmental process. The

emphasis is on a sense of community, specifically, the physical and ideological community that can express expectations onto an individual for almost any aspect of an individual's life, including, but not limited to, perceptions about acceptable occupations, the role of marriage and religion, and even expectations about what it means to be educated. The current study explores this intersection of community expectancy with self-identified perceptions of community influence, identifying the power of the urban space in identity formation.

Research Methods and Materials

The research was situated in an upper mid-western city of 500,000 residents and a combined metropolitan area of approximately 1.1 million (referred to as Everytown for anonymity in the study). The city is classified as a 'global city' by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network, is home to four Fortune 500 companies, and primarily has an economic base grounded in agriculture, food processing, and insurance. The population of the city is primarily White (75%), but there is a growing Hispanic population (14%), and an historically strong Native American population (2%).

Everytown is based on an historical river-center from which it has grown outward. The oldest buildings and neighborhoods are situated near this historical downtown, and much of the city's diverse residential base is located just outside of this historical center. Generally, Everytown has been divided into six geographic areas and over 45 distinct neighborhoods.

Three neighborhoods in Everytown were selected for study due to meeting four criteria: all had at least 30% diversity in the neighborhood, all had some defined central area in the neighborhood, each had a history of at least 75 years; and each was historically known for some binding element, such as an immigration pattern, industrial relationship, etc. (eg, "Little Bohemia"). Although no city-wide permissions were required for the study, the mayor's office and city council were communicated with about the study and the data collection. The city manager was made aware and acknowledged that the study would be conducted in public locations.

Data were collected through open, in-person survey methods whereby public tables were placed in high visibility and high pedestrian traffic areas in the three neighborhoods engaged in the study. One table was placed at the entrance to a public park, one at the entrance to an historical marker, and one area was in a public-square area in front of a branch of the metropolitan library. The tables were open and staffed on two-consecutive days, a Friday and Saturday, from the morning until the late afternoon (approximately 9 AM – 5 PM on each day). The tables were staffed by two volunteers at each table who were associated with the researcher. All six volunteers received the same training on how to administer the survey. The volunteers approached individuals as they came into each of the areas to participate in the study, and data were collected in the early fall of 2023.

The survey began with three qualifying questions (see Table 1) about the individual's residency, and only those who indicated that they lived in the neighborhood were included in the study. The next 11 items asked participants to rate their level of agreement on a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree progressing to 5=Strongly Agree) with each statement about the role and influence of the neighborhood on individual and family behaviors (see Table 2). The last question on the survey asked participants to identify three

unique aspects of their neighborhood. The items included in the instrument were developed based on existing literature on the role of community and society, and the instrument was pilot tested with two groups of 20 citizens in a different urban location in a different state. The instrument was also reviewed by two faculty peers working in sociology and education for face validity. The Cronbach alpha computed on the sample data resulted in an alpha level of .7300.

Research Findings

Data collection occurred on the same two weekend days at three different locations, a public park, historical area, and a public library plaza. Recognizing the potential for individuals to be at more than one location during the days of data collection, an informal question was added to the interview protocol with some variation but included the concept of 'have you already taken this survey.' Informal data indicated that some individuals had indeed been approached and completed the survey at another location, and if any individual indicated that they had taken the survey, they were eliminated from taking it a second time.

A total of 273 individuals were approached and consented to take the survey. Of those (see Table 1), 74 indicated that they did not live in the neighborhood and were subsequently discontinued from taking the survey. A total of 199 individuals completed the survey, including 52 at the public park location, 37 near the historical marker, and 110 in the library plaza.

Of the 199 individuals who completed the survey, over three-fourths (N=164, 82%) reported that they had grown up in the area near the neighborhood where they were currently, and 53% indicated that they had lived in the neighborhood for ten or more years (N=104). This suggested that a number of individuals had grown up in the area, had moved away for some reason, such as college or to an apartment in another part of the city, and had returned at some point in time.

Overall, respondents agreed most strongly with the statement that '*my family regularly sees the things that our neighbors do*' ($\bar{x} = 4.88$, SD .5769) meaning that the actions of others are visible to participants and their families. This was an important perception to measure as it provides evidence that the possibility of influence exists. The second most agreed to statement was that '*the people that I interact with in the neighborhood help shape who I am today*' ($\bar{x} = 4.75$, SD .3293), meaning that not only are neighbors visible, but that what they do is perceived by individuals to impact personal decisions, choices, and behaviors. This perception was also reinforced with the third highest agreement which was ($\bar{x} = 4.38$, SD .6770) '*the people who run the city have an influence on me,*' followed by '*the businesses in this neighborhood influence how I see the world*' ($\bar{x} = 4.27$, SD .6647) and '*the people who run the city have an influence on what my family does*' ($\bar{x} = 4.26$, SD .8781; See Table 2).

Data were separated by the characteristic of length of time living in the neighborhood, with 47% (N=95) of the sample having lived in the neighborhood under 10 years and 53% (N=104) over 10 years. For those living in the neighborhood under 10 years, they had a collective mean rating for all items of 4.21 and agreed most strongly with the statements '*my family regularly sees the things that our neighbors do*' ($\bar{x} = 4.92$, SD .8837), '*the people that I interact with in the neighborhood help shape who I am today*' ($\bar{x} = 4.84$, SD .4782), and '*the people who run the city have an influence on me*' ($\bar{x} = 4.47$; SD .9816). For those with over 10 years of residency in the neighborhood, their agreement was similarly

the strongest for the top two statements as those with a shorter residency ($\bar{x} = 4.84$, SD .8280; $\bar{x} = 4.66$, SD .2835, respectively, see Table 2). These longer term residents had the third highest level of agreement with the statement of ‘the people who run the city have an influence on what my family does’ ($\bar{x} = 4.31$, SD .8109). The lowest level of agreement with the statements for the overall group and for each of the two subgroups was ‘people I don’t know have an influence on what I do’ (group $\bar{x} = 3.41$, under 10 years $\bar{x} = 3.26$, over 10 years $\bar{x} = 3.51$).

Participants were asked to identify the extent to which they perceived others in their neighborhood influencing current or future perceptions of going to college. Those who had lived in the neighborhood for less than 10 years reported neutral-to-agreement ($\bar{x} = 3.89$, SD .9013) that the community influenced their perceptions while the residents with a longer tenure in the neighborhood reported a higher level of agreement ($\bar{x} = 4.23$, SD .4326) for an overall sample perception of agreement (group $\bar{x} = 4.06$; SD .7782).

An Analysis of Variance was computed on the three grand mean scores (under 10 years, over 10 years, and overall mean) and resulted in a $P = .390$ (alpha .05), indicating the lack of significant differences between the three groups.

The last question on the survey provided an opportunity for participants to respond to the question “what are three things that are unique about your neighborhood?” As a note, not all participants replied to the question. Respondents typically

interpreted this as good or positive things about living in their neighborhood and 112 individuals had some response related to “the people” of the area. These responses included statements such as “the people around here are great” or “we all care for each other, we’re those kind of people.” Several others commented “the people in this neighborhood are diverse, and all are welcome.” In addition to these comments about “the people,” a number of comments highlighted good job opportunities, a comfortable quality of life, low crime, and the quality of shopping and dining (see Table 3).

Table 1: Participant responses to survey questions qualifying questions, N=199

Variable	Frequency
Section 1: Qualifying Questions	
Do you live in this neighborhood?	
Yes	199
No	74
Did you grow up in this area?	
Yes	164
No	35
How long have you lived in this neighborhood?	
Under 10 years	95
Over 10 years	104

Table 2: Survey response data role of neighborhood overall and by length of residency

	< 10 N=95	> 10 N=104	All N=199
The people that I interact with in the neighborhood help shape who I am today	4.84	4.66	4.75
My neighbors are role models for my me.	4.19	4.15	4.17
My neighbors are role models for my family.	4.04	4.07	4.06
My family regularly sees the things that our neighbors do.	4.92	4.84	4.88
People I don’t know have an influence on what I do.	3.26	3.51	3.41
People I don’t know have an influence on what my family or children do.	3.69	3.63	3.66
The people who run the city have an influence on me.	4.47	4.29	4.38
The people who run the city have an influence on what my family does	4.20	4.31	4.26
The businesses in this neighborhood influence how I see the world.	4.35	4.19	4.27
The businesses in this neighborhood influence how my family sees the world	4.20	4.16	4.18
The individuals in the neighborhood influence my perceptions of going to college	3.89	4.23	4.06
Overall mean scores	4.18	4.18	4.19

Table 3: Open ended responses to neighborhood

Survey Prompt	Responses
What are three things that are unique about your neighborhood	
“The people”	112
Responses such as: Are nice, are diverse, care for each other, and have a strong work ethic	
Good career opportunities	70
Comfortable here	61
Low crime	54
Wonderful shopping/dining	39
History with the area	28
Great schools	27

Items mentioned only once include: streets and roads are good, housing costs are good, sidewalks, well lighted streets, entertainment options, consistently have new things coming up, and a good place to be able to walk to work

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the data collection and analysis offer insights into how members of a community, particularly an urban community, see themselves interacting with others and the

role of others in their lives. All of the ratings across all items (except one) were close to agree-to-strongly agree in support for the power of community interactions and the observation of what others in the neighborhood were involved in. This was particularly evident in ratings about observing others and agencies (such as ‘the city’), ultimately resulting in the agreement that these have an influence on perceptions about postsecondary education. This means that to some extent, that needs to be identified and measured, those around an individual are shaping their perceptions of the value of college. Subsequently, if colleges are truly interested in recruiting more students and students from first-generation or non-traditional backgrounds, they must consider the larger community and not just rely on individual recruitment strategies.

Larger community recruitment might include programming and messaging that is outside of the traditional secondary or high school, but might also be focused increasingly on the parents and guardians as decision-makers or at least contributors to the decision-making process. These activities might include community resource fairs, branding services that are provided in the neighborhood, such as community

counseling clinics, open meetings to support FAFSA completion, etc. These programs also need to consider the larger issues that families face when thinking about postsecondary education, notably, how the experience address a quality of life and whether the cost-benefit decision will work in favor of attending college. The overarching concept, however, is that based on these study findings, community makes a difference. If college marketing becomes targeted or in a silo affiliated with a high school, the visibility and potential for interactions among community members will be greatly limited.

Findings also provide a suggestion of what community member's value in the space where they live. The dominant variable identified was "the people," meaning that those who live, work, and play near each other ultimately influence the decision about where to live. Somewhat surprisingly, only 27 individuals (about 13% of the sample) identified "great schools" as a reason to live where they did.

Ultimately, the study provides an initial exploration that should be expanded about the role of the individual in society and how society creates expectations for others. For those interested in collegiate recruitment, the findings reinforce the need to explore the power of the home-life in creating expectations for individuals, whether those expectations are in conflict with the family tradition or are supported and seen as a pathway to a better life. These findings also suggest the need for a better understanding about community interactions and whether community can be constructed, and if so, if that construction can include the creation of embedded community expectations, such as working for the welfare of oneself or others.

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