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Community-University Partnerships for Change in the Black Belt South

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Abstract

This article explores issues related to community-university partnerships by examining the unfolding of the Black Belt Initiative, a 21st century mobilization within the Black Belt South to establish a Black Belt Regional Commission. The Black Belt Initiative provides an instructive and compelling case study. For instance, the very nature of the Black Belt Initiative's beginnings through the provision of a grant by Senator Zell Miller of Georgia to the University of Georgia with the proviso that "poverty – not race be the guiding principle…" heightened the tension between historically black and white universities reflecting longstanding contestations around how problems within the Black Belt should be framed and addressed. Consequently, these contestations resulted in very different ideas for the governance structures that would guide the definition of policies and practices for a Black Belt Regional Commission.

Key Words: Black Belt South, Community-University Partnerships, Poverty Policy, Regional Inequality, 1890 and 1862 Land Grant Institutions

Introduction

In fall, 2001 a coalition comprising academic institutions, community based organizations (CBOs), land based organizations (LBOs), community people, government agencies and businesses led by Tuskegee University and the University of Georgia-Athens initiated an effort to address chronic poverty and its consequences within the Black Belt region of the Southern U.S. This coalition and the resulting mobilization process are known as the Black Belt Initiative. This was not the first time that attention had been focused on the Black Belt region with the intention of strategizing to implement policies and programs that would improve the life circumstances and well-being of the region's residents. However, it was the first time in recent history that an alliance between a historically black and historically white university resulted in a complex, highly contested mobilization process that would raise important questions about who actually participates in making decisions about how a community's problems come to be defined and addressed. In other words, the mobilization raised important questions about whose voices get to be heard when social, political and economic change is being considered within the Black Belt region and it raised questions about the nature and quality of community-university engagements in opening spaces for these voices to be heard.

The following discussions highlight aspects of the Black Belt Initiative in tension with theoretical and policy frameworks that help to clarify the critical issues and questions that need to be engaged as communities and universities work in partnership to address concerns in the region. The first discussion reviews the demographic profile of the region in order to make the explicit connection between current conditions and the legacy of inequality and subjugation produced by the plantation-slave system. The next two sections provide background on the roots of southern protest and contemporary mobilizations in order to make the connection between the Black Belt Initiative and this historical legacy of contestation and empowerment. The following three sections highlight key developments as the Black Belt Initiative moved forward. They

bring to the fore questions about historical inequalities between historically black and historically white institutions. In particular they focus on how power and knowledge intersect in both opening and closing rhetorical and activist spaces for the local-community voice to be taken seriously. These are important concerns for shaping the policies that will impact the everyday lifeworld experiences of people in their communities. Historical policies impacting the Black Belt are discussed briefly in the section that follows in order to provide context for the very substantive impact the Black Belt initiative had on shaping legislation for the creation of a Black Belt regional commission. The concluding section discusses the questions emerging from the Black Belt Initiative within the broader frame of ongoing dialogues about dynamics between universities and communities in responding through true and deeply committed processes to community needs and concerns.

Background: Southern Black Belt Region

The Black Belt region within the Southern U.S. stretches across the heart of the old plantation South, from eastern Texas to Virginia, covering portions of Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, West Tennessee, Alabama, North and South Carolina, Georgia and North Florida. The Black Belt contains 34% of the nation's poor and 43% of the rural poor (Wimberley, 2008). As a clear reflection of slave-plantation social, political and economic legacies the Black Belt contains 46% of all African Americans, 83% of the non-metropolitan African American population and 90% of poor rural African Americans (Wimberley, 2008). Within the Black Belt the deeply rooted connection between poverty of place and poverty of people is clear.

Historically dependent on agriculture, the slow move to economic diversification within the Black Belt has rendered the economy rigid and weak. Moreover, the traditional reluctance of Southern state and local governments to invest in education and skill enhancement has resulted in significant pools of poorly educated, low-skill workers making the region especially vulnerable to the global economic changes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These vulnerabilities are characterized by the loss of manufacturing gains made in the 1970s, with better paying jobs moving to urban centers in the region, because of the better educated urban work forces and poorer quality, lower paying jobs moving to low-cost labor sites overseas (MDC Research Committee, 2000). The impacts of the Great Recession have deepened these vulnerabilities, and in fact, have devastated many communities in the region (MDC Research Committee, 2011).

These trends have only exacerbated long-standing patterns of working poverty characterized by more part-time and seasonal employment and the lowest wage scales in the country (Jensen, 1999). Essentially, the wage earning and skill building opportunities available to men and women within the region reflect the historical limitations of the economy resulting in the litany of statistics on high rates of poverty, poor health status and so forth that are concomitants of such sustained economic insecurity.

Women, children, and non-white populations face particular disadvantages within the region. For women, weaker links to the labor market stemming from unemployment and underemployment, and concentrations in the lowest paying jobs within a notably weak economy have roots in the gendered work structures of the plantation economy, and in the segmented industrial structures that compounded gender and racial discrimination after slavery (Jones 1985). This dynamic is reflected in the much higher levels of poverty in mother only households within the region and the even higher levels within households headed by African American women.

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Since a parent's income remains the single most important factor for determining the overall quality of a child's present life and long-term well-being, the very nature of the regional economy and economic insecurity of many parents means that many children suffer within the region. This is true for two parent families, as well as mother only households. In fact, for children under the age of eighteen, poverty rates are highest in the South. Southern babies are more likely than those in other parts of the country to have low birth-weights and to die before their first birthdays (Kentucky Youth Advocates, 1997). African American children within the region are two times more likely than white children to be poor. This fact highlights the dramatic impact that historical forces – slavery and the institutionalized inequalities from the post-Reconstruction period forward have had in continuing to influence the life circumstances of African American families in the region.

It can be argued in fact that the interrelationship between racism, diminished African American economic power, low social mobility, constricted civic culture, and the sustained underdevelopment of the Black Belt plantation South economy form mutually reinforcing feedback loops. Racism has in effect been the impetus for and has deepened and intensified the impacts of historically weak investments in economic diversification, basic education and skills training rendering the region much weaker economically than any other in the country (Harris and Worthen, 2003).[1] Throughout this history of subjugation - uprisings, protests and mobilizations have given rise to an unrelenting force confronting the power structures determined to undermine empowerment within the region. The following section provides a brief overview of this history of protest and challenge within the region.

The Roots of Southern Protest and Activism

African slave labor made possible the accumulation of great wealth by southern planters and in the process generated the race, gender, and class relations that gave form to the economies and social systems peculiar to the plantation South. Nevertheless, planter-slaveholders were consistently challenged by the resourceful ways in which African slaves overtly and covertly worked to end their subjugation and to create and sustain a sense of kin and community viability under the most oppressive conditions.

These challenges took such forms as revolts, work stoppages, flights to the North and suggest an often unacknowledged history of protest and mobilization pre-dating the emergence of southern populism, the most noted mobilization within the region. Southern populism itself emerged as the pressures of industrialization tied to overseas investment capital forced the exploration of ways to continue the production of cotton and tobacco under conditions similar to slavery. This was necessary to "prevent the growth of a balance of trade so unfavorable that it would discourage the further influx of foreign capital" (Palmer, 1990, p. 139). With Northern Republicans seeking the political support of southern planters came the rescinding of support for the enfranchisement of African Americans in 1877 that would allow southern planters to re-secure black labor, in insidious ways.

In order to re-secure black labor planters developed a system in which "they not only rented the land, but also took over the mercantile function of advancing credit for seed, fertilizer, and equipment, at a considerable interest, to propertyless freed people in return for a large share of the cotton crop…" (Palmer, 1990, p. 141). This arrangement was known as the crop lien system. Because the price of cotton was in decline in the years following the Civil War and the interest rates on cropping inputs exorbitant, the majority of black farmers found it impossible to escape the cycle of indebtedness this system virtually assured.

By the late 1870s independent white farmers were forced to turn to the lien system in order to remain in agriculture when cotton prices plummeted and many lost ownership of their land. This re-structuring of the economy and of the social relations of agricultural production under the lien system led to the impoverishment of many former yeoman farmers and to racial codes and practices that would serve to further impoverish and disempower African Americans and fan the flames of racial hatred that often resulted in acts of violence against African Americans. These patterns were firmly entrenched by 1890 when the southern populist movement had gained a considerable following.

Arguably the southern populist movement laid the foundation for future mobilizations within the region because it challenged affronts to those working the hardest to maintain a self-sustaining independent economic base vital to preserving the independence of thought and choice necessary for democracy, as espoused by Thomas Jefferson. Massive grass roots organizing campaigns characterized ongoing efforts by populists to foster economic cooperation among farmers that would allow them to maneuver past the high interest rates on goods and services expected by local merchants and landlords (Palmer, 1990).

Biracial coalitions of black and white farmers often emerged to strengthen the potential of populist mobilization efforts to protect their abilities to generate an independent livelihood. While some white populists promised protection of and advocacy for the political and legal rights of African Americans the prevailing ideology of racial superiority held fast and discouraged such commitments. Faced with the reality of becoming disenfranchised on par with African Americans, as a result of the alignment of forces that were reversing their fortunes and allowing others to amass great wealth by exploiting them, many white Populists held on tightly to the one distinction that they felt made them superior, the fact that they were white (Jones, 1986).

Despite the betrayal by Northern Republicans in 1877 and the growing violence and hostilities resulting from the increasing disempowerment of poor whites, African Americans continued to fight for the equality of opportunity that had been extended albeit tentatively after the Civil War ended. This took forms such as local suffrage and protest movements and mutual aid organizations (Cashman, 1991).

These early efforts on the part of African Americans and white people to confront forces within southern society that were at odds with the spirit and letter of American democracy, as reflected in the U.S. constitution were both conditioned and weakened by impacts associated with the accelerated growth of industrial/corporate capitalism and accompanying industrialization and urbanization (Palmer, 1990). In this respect, these efforts were responses to many of the same pressures that inspire contemporary mobilizations within the region, i.e., increasing economic insecurity, weakening and fragmenting of community social structures, increased polarization with respect to race, gender and class, and weakening political power.

Contemporary Mobilizations Within the Rural South

Contemporary mobilizations within the rural South take many forms, but essentially can be tied to the ongoing quest for economic security, social justice, and political power. The origins of the 1950-60s Civil Rights movement can be traced to increasing efforts on the part of African Americans to organize in the mid-1930s in support of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs (Sitkoff, 1978). African Americans in Northern cities, mostly southern African Americans, who had voted with their feet by leaving, were proving that they could make a difference in the political climate, switching parties and voting heavily in favor of Roosevelt.

African Americans in the South were prevented from voting in significant numbers until the Civil Rights movement gained momentum "(y)et as never before since Reconstruction, blacks in the South organized attended mass meetings, sang freedom songs and formed study groups in their campaigns for voter registration" (Sitkoff, 1978, p. 99).

By the 1970s-80s the momentum of the Civil Rights movement had inspired various movements devoted to social, economic, and political change within the South. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives has focused on empowering small-scale farmers black, white, Native and Latina/Latino by supporting the formation of farming cooperatives where sustainability and survival can be better insured through the sharing of resources. Mobilizations continue in communities across the South to protest the siting of toxic waste dumps in low-income and minority communities, in attempts to stave off conditions conducive to causing a range of debilitating health conditions (Bullard, 2000). Numerous mobilizations have been formed in response to industries relocating, leaving behind economically and socially devastated communities (Gaventa et al., 1990). In each instance local people have evidenced a capacity to speak for themselves and to work creatively and consistently for the generation of health and well-being and workable economic alternatives in their communities.

The Role of Land Grant Institutions in Mobilizing for Change in the Black Belt

By virtue of their peripheral status historically, within the land grant system and their mission to serve disenfranchised constituencies, historically black land grant institutions have worked with very limited resources to address some of the most pressing social and economic problems in the South (Harris, 1990). As such, they can be counted among the traditional and contemporary mobilizations for change within the South.

Beginning in 1954 with the move to desegregate educational institutions, historically black land grant institutions have faced many challenges to fulfilling their historical missions to low-income populations. In the case of some institutions their Extension and agricultural education functions have been re-allocated to the historically white land grant institutions within their states (Schor, 1982). Moreover, low levels of state support for research and Extension have left many historically black land grant institutions dependent on federal formula funds to carry out their research and Extension functions. Over time, this has often resulted in the definition of research and Extension priorities less supportive of the human capital needs of their constituencies (Harris, 1990). This structural re-alignment of priorities over time has had implications for the nature and quality of community-university engagements focused on confronting pressing conditions within the Black Belt region.

The following discussion focuses on key elements of the Black Belt Initiative, a 21st century mobilization that challenged historically black land grant institutions in their role as community-engaged institutions in very distinctive ways. The discussion unfolds by engaging questions about the mobilization within the context of questions about community-university relationships more broadly by invoking relevant theoretical and policy frameworks.

The Black Belt Initiative: University-Community Engagement Under Scrutiny

How universities engage communities, how engagement is defined and actualized by them has become a growing area of concern for universities themselves, community based organizations, community people, and for policy makers and foundations. For instance, in 1999, in the form of an open invitation to chancellors and presidents of state universities and land grant colleges the Kellogg Foundation reflected these concerns when it challenged these institutions to

return to their roots, to become engaged within their constituent communities (Kellogg Commission, 1999). But this call also raised compelling questions about what constitutes true engagements, true partnerships between universities and communities in addressing the needs of community people. The report presses the point that authentic engagement is much more than public service or Extension as usual. Engagement means "institutions that have redesigned their research, teaching and Extension functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities…" (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. vi). This means that traditional models of university outreach and Extension as one-way channels of information and expertise need to be challenged in favor of models that provide for a "more porous and interactive flow of knowledge between universities and communities" (Boyte and Hollander, 1999, p. 14).

From the outset, the unfolding of the Black Belt Initiative revealed the tensions related to authentic engagement reflected above. The University of Georgia with the financial support of then Senator Zell Miller of Georgia and Georgia timber man Benjy Griffith set an agenda to assess the feasibility of establishing a Black Belt Regional Commission similar in structure and mission to that of the Appalachian Regional Commission established over thirty years ago to address persistent poverty and its consequences within Central Appalachia (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, University of Georgia, 2002). The University of Georgia originally set out to accomplish this alone by focusing on gathering information from government officials, people in the business community, academics, and politicians. Only belatedly and with considerable resistance did the University of Georgia concede that a historically black institution, Tuskegee University, had an extensive knowledge base for informing the development of a regional commission because of its deeply rooted historical experience with communities in the Black Belt. Moreover, Tuskegee University had developed a collaborative model of engagement in the mid-1990s, the Southern Food Systems Education Consortium (SOFSEC) to bring the historically black land grant institutions into partnership with public schools and community-based institutions to address challenges faced by communities in the region (Southern Food Systems Education Consortium, 2003). Tuskegee University shared its desire to expand and employ this structure as a resource in developing a methodology that would increase input from community members in the decision-making process regarding the structure and mission of a regional commission. The University of Georgia pushed back against an approach that would include community people, but conceded a sub-contract to Tuskegee that allowed it to do so.

Whose Knowledge?

So the often unstated question about whose knowledge should be engaged in making decisions about community change was brought to the fore by Tuskegee University when concerns about the absence of the community voice were expressed. It is clear that the response to this was in fact contested and reflects broad concerns regarding who are the actual producers of legitimate knowledge. Arguably, as universities become increasingly proficient at turning out highly trained specialists with particular knowledge expertise, knowledge itself has increasingly come to be looked at as a commodity (Hall, 1980). Moreover, knowledge is increasingly thought of as a commodity that only people from particular class backgrounds, by virtue of their access to higher education are capable of producing.

Antonio Gramsci, 1971, observes that this is in fact a trope of capitalist culture. While some people's common sense, by virtue of their class positions comes to be recognized as legitimate knowledge other people's common sense does not. He argues, "all men (sic) are

intellectual…but not all men (sic) have in society the function of intellectuals" (p. 9). Gramsci describes two groups of intellectuals. The traditional intellectuals, i.e., scholars and scientists tied to the upper class positions in society and the organic intellectuals who are the thinking and analytical persons in any class. These are people who are not usually recognized as intellectuals or as being capable of producing legitimate knowledge by virtue of their lower class positions. They are visible to us in the form of community organizers, union leaders, grass roots activists and so forth. Yet there is the potential through the work that they are doing to cultivate linkages with traditional intellectuals to help them realize that intellectual/analytical activity and the generation of legitimate knowledge is occurring outside of their cognitive/class spheres. The most striking consequence of this cognitive/class blindness is that those most familiar with problems in the life worlds of the poor and disenfranchised are ignored and excluded from making the changes that might lead to improvements in people's lives (Hall, 1980).

Ironically, because they live these realities and have developed a thoroughgoing-grounded analysis of problems and potential solutions they are positioned to provide the most strategic guidance. This exemplifies one of Foucault's most striking observations regarding the relational nature of power, that power and knowledge cannot be disconnected. He argues: "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1995, p. 27). Universities are bastions of "regimes of truth" which hold that the knowledge and approaches (practices) to teaching, research, and outreach taken by those within the institution should prevail over, for instance, approaches taken by community people, thus repressing their power/knowledge. But, Foucault apprises that power/knowledge can be productive as well as repressive. In these instances communities reclaim their stories in their own words and their analyses and pedagogies on their own terms. This can happen as well in partnership with those in the academy who exchange knowledge and skills with community people as equals.

One of the ways in which this dynamic is actualized in an inter-organizational context is through the ways in which power/knowledge is distributed by universities. Some universities are considered the centers of expert knowledge production, by virtue of their location in wealthy countries, although "(a) small number of recognized central universities in the United States dominate the large majority of universities" (Altbach, 1980, p. 43). These "central" institutions set the academic tone and research priorities (regimes of truth) for other universities. Moreover, by virtue of their concentrations of resources, power and authority they are in positions to limit resources going to less well endowed, less powerful organizations (Benson, 1975). Many of the less well-endowed, less powerful "peripheral" universities are in other countries, particularly within the Non-West, but many are within the U.S. as well. For instance, historically black land grant universities, many colleges and universities in the Appalachian region and the American Indian Tribal colleges have worked historically to address the needs of communities challenged by poverty and underdevelopment. They have a history and track record of generating knowledge conducive to helping these communities. However, funding patterns, federal mandates, historical relationships with "central" institutions have served to undermine the value of power/knowledge and the room for maneuver that peripheral institutions have in addressing the needs of their constituent communities (Harris, 1990).

Power/Knowledge and the Cultural Constructions of Region and Community
As the Black Belt Initiative unfolded, distinctive patterns emerged as the institutions worked with their respective approaches to engagement with power/knowledge. As discussed

earlier, Tuskegee University focused primarily on gathering information for shaping the concept for a regional commission from community people and community-based organizations. While the University of Georgia included community-based organizations in its data collection matrix, it focused primarily on gathering information from small businesses, large corporations, state agencies, Governors' offices and so forth.

One of the stipulations made by Senator Zell Miller in granting the money to the University of Georgia for the feasibility study was that poverty – not race be the guiding principle. Revisiting the demographic profile of the region discussed earlier, it is clear that approaching the study in this way reflected a long established way of constructing the region by subverting its history and decontextualizing the intersecting dynamic forces – gender, race, class, racism, sexism, spatial exploitation/dislocation and so forth that play ongoing roles in shaping and reshaping the region. By focusing its attention on the narratives emerging from the day to day lifeworld experiences of people from persistently poor communities in addition to the narratives from the institutions (e.g., churches, social services agencies, advocacy groups and so forth) in these communities, Tuskegee University affirmed that the "(r)egion is not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction …" (Powell, 2007, p. 6). This was a belief expressed and codified at the turn of the century by both Booker T. Washington (Washington, 1901) and W.E.B. Du Bois (Du Bois, 1903).

In this respect, Tuskegee University's approach illustrates that the conception of community that universities work with will be vital in determining the authenticity of their engagement and the depth and breadth of their understanding of community dynamics and needs. Universities can work for development *in* the community or development *of* the community. Development in the community focuses on those activities that are instrumental in creating jobs, retaining businesses and so forth. These activities are usually brokered by outside influences and agencies working in the community for specified periods of time. Development of community involves a much more expansive, but interactive and inclusive approach in which local residents are key decision-makers, interacting to build linkages that accomplish both the short term goals related to projects and issues and the longer term goals that transform the very structure of the community to bring about long-term well-being (Wilkinson, 1991).

Development of community presupposes a reliance on the lived experiences and intentional responses of local people to the challenges they face in their communities. It requires a belief by local residents in their own capacities to influence the fates of their communities through local activism and effective voice. It also requires the encouragement of universities and other agencies working in partnership with community people to engage "community partners in thoughtful, reflective dialogue and insists on respecting the diversity of opinions that result from that dialogue" (Pew Partnership, 2003, p. 6). When this is not the approach that is taken the community's "countervailing vigilance" will often turn "against the experts, the teachers, and the developers who are bringing in the message and not looking to the people's own knowledge and experience (Hinsdale et al., 1995, p. 170; Borda, 1985, p. 32). The "people's own knowledge and experience" in the case of the Black Belt Initiative-community-based approach, as guided by Tuskegee University, resulted in recommendations for a very different governance structure for a Black Belt Regional Commission compared to the governance structure recommended by the University of Georgia. The following discussion compares these structures, but begins by providing an historical overview of policies impacting the Black Belt South.

The Black Belt Initiative Informs Policy

Historically, federal, state, and local policies intersecting with national trends and local political dynamics have often served to disadvantage the Black Belt region as a whole, and African American communities in particular. For instance, New Deal policies implemented in the form of programs such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) were largely weakened by the strategic surrender of federal control to local politicians (Sitkoff, 1978). Discriminatory practices marginalizing an increasing number of African Americans therefore prevailed. This pattern has persisted overtime. The USDA, for instance, acknowledges that it has enabled the local level discriminatory lending practices of its Farmer's Home Administration (FmHA) program and has therefore contributed to the rapid decline in African American held farmland (Civil Rights Action Team, 1997).

Similar dynamics characterize the impacts of social welfare policies that have increasingly shifted decision-making authority for the allocation of resources from the federal government to state and local governments. This means that a region historically plagued by a disproportionate share of the nation's poverty has also had historically low levels of benefits and cash assistance (Zimmerman, 2002). Finally, policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that have facilitated the shift to a global marketplace have significantly altered the opportunity potential for the region. In order to find the right pool of workers, many manufacturing firms are now moving to areas with populations either having higher levels of educational attainment and good job-related skills or to overseas locations that offer lower labor costs (McGranahan, 1999; MDC Research Committee, 2000). The end result is that many individuals, families and communities in the region find themselves more deeply entrenched in poverty and impacted by its longer-term consequences. However, the momentum created by social justice and activist legacies even predating the Civil Rights movement continues to give form to grassroots mobilizations specifically focused on confronting the consequences of persistent poverty driven by policies reflecting the intersecting dynamics of historical inequalities and globalization.

Tuskegee University's community-based approach drew upon and built upon the historical momentum of social justice and activist legacies. Recommendations from the research carried out under its auspices were translated into legislation by Representative Artur Davis, 7th District – Alabama. The legislation H.R. 678, the Southern Empowerment and Economic Development (SEED) Bill introduced in 2003 provided for the creation of the Delta Black Belt Regional Authority (DBRA) combining coverage for both persistently poor counties in the Black Belt and Delta. What really distinguished this legislation and dramatically reflected the impacts of the community-based participation that had generated the ideas for the legislation were provisions mandating the formation of a Community Constituency Board, made up of residents residing in distressed communities. The Board was provided with the discretionary power to allocate 20% of DBRA funds to the priorities they regarded as important such as education, housing and health care. Alternatively, funding for infrastructure development was capped at 25%. Recommendations from the research carried out by the University of Georgia were translated into legislation by Senator Zell Miller who introduced S. 527 in the Senate and Congressman Mike McIntyre of North Carolina who introduced H.R. 3618 in the House. Both pieces of legislation called for establishing a regional commission very similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission where Governors, representatives from the business community, academia and so forth are the major decision-makers and the majority of funding is allocated to infrastructure development.

These bills were not passed, however, legislation for establishing a commission continued to be introduced between 2003 and 2008. In all, twelve House and Senate Bills were introduced to establish a commission. By 2008, sections of a number of the bills were included in the 2008 Farm Bill and a commission was authorized. The Commission was authorized in sections 15101, 15301, and 15731 of the June 14, "Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008," and was titled, "The Southeast Crescent Regional Commission." In Section 15731 of the Farm Bill it specifies that the commission include all the counties of Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida, but excludes counties covered by the Appalachian Regional Commission or the Delta Regional Authority. Specifically "(t)he Appalachian Regional Commission already serves some of the counties bordering Appalachia in all of these states but Florida. The Delta Regional Authority serves many Mississippi Delta counties plus several from Alabama that, of course, are not a part of the river delta" (Wimberley et al., Under Review).

Similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission appoints a federal co-chairperson as well as an alternate federal co-chairperson, a state co-chairperson who is a governor of one of the participating states, the governors of the participating states or their designees, and an executive director (Section 15301). The decision-making structure provides that policy will be set by votes of the federal co-chair and a majority of the state members (Section 15302) (Wimberley et al., Under Review).

Originally $30 million was allocated for years 2008 through 2012 (Section 15751), however, funding was not authorized for 2008. In order to initiate planning for the commission $250,000 was allocated for the 2009 to 2010 fiscal year in H.R. 3183. In fiscal years 2011 and 2012, Congress provided $250,000 through the Energy and Water Appropriation bill to begin the operation of the commission. In 2013, Congress eliminated funding and even though the Senate passed a bill allocating $250,000 to fund the commission the level of funding for 2013 has not been decided. Moreover, a Federal Co-Chair will have to be appointed by the President to initiate the start-up phase. As such, "the actual, working Southeast Crescent Regional Commission has not yet been appropriated and formed" (Wimberley et al., Under Review).

Conclusion

Twentieth and 21st century global economic restructuring has had significant impacts on the economies and social institutions of many rural communities within the U.S. often compounding historical legacies of social, economic and political problems (Falk and Lobao, 2003). This has challenged local governments, community based organizations, and community people to mobilize in order to address the problems resulting from these impacts. These mobilizations often draw on longstanding traditions and strategies of community organizing and activism guided by the wisdom and experiences of community people.

State and land grant universities historically have as their guiding missions, a dedication to be of service to their constituent communities, to contribute resources for solving pressing problems. However, universities as institutional entities or as bases from which individuals, i.e., students and professors move forth to work in collaboration with community people are increasingly being called upon to account for how they engage the community. Are engagements primarily one-way transfers of knowledge and expertise from the university to the community or are they interactive, dynamic flows of knowledge and wisdom between university and community? Since conditions in many rural communities appear to have worsened over time, with many in crisis as a result of current economic restructuring, the urgency to understand the

factors that have both facilitated and obstructed universities' engagement resonant with the needs and concerns of community people need to be understood.

The Black Belt Initiative engaged these issues from its inception. Senator Zell Miller set the parameters – focus on poverty, not race and specified using the top-down structure of the Appalachian Regional Commission as a guiding framework. As a "central" institution the University of Georgia received the funding to design the methodology for following these directives. Tuskegee University as a historically "peripheral" institution with a long history of engaging communities in the Black Belt maneuvered to design a methodology that would capture the broad range of perspectives at the local level. This helped in examining issues through the prism of experience that imaged race and racism as central dynamic forces creating and sustaining persistent poverty and its consequences.

The expansion and refinement of Tuskegee University's SOFSEC Community-University partnership framework served to facilitate the "dynamic flows of knowledge" among community-university partners. Ultimately, this dynamic resulted in the voices of community people having prominence in shaping legislation for the creation of a regional commission - H.R. 678, the Southern Empowerment and Economic Development (SEED) Bill. The Bill provided for their voices to have prominence on an ongoing basis through the institution of a Community Constituency Board that would use its decision-making power to allocate funds for human resource development. This is a striking contrast to the structure for a regional commission, one very similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission, recommended by the University of Georgia.

Although the SEED legislation was not enacted and the legislation to create the Southeast Crescent Regional Commission, similar to the Appalachian Regional Commission, did pass in 2008 it still "has not yet been appropriated and formed." So there is the opening for possibilities, for reformulation to include the community voice in decision-making. And the process and outcomes of the Black Belt Initiative make it abundantly clear that there is work to be done in partnership within the communities that builds on the foundations set in place by the Initiative. As one of many community partners who trusts in the intention of these partnerships and the precious strength and resources in her community expresses in her invitation to universities in moving Black Belt communities from their old stories to their new stories:

> Our new story …we are a community that is held together by generations of cooperative effort. We have tremendous resources. We have vast deposits of kenneling, granite, pink granite – some of the hardest granite available. We have vast tracks of undeveloped land- millions of cords of wood. We have intelligent, hardworking, creative people. We have a history of sustaining ourselves. We have a history of cooperation. We still have those old societies where you pay $.10 cents a month and when you pass, you get something to help bury yourself with or go towards your repast. We have five of those societies that are still active. So we are a community with tremendous resources and we have to begin to see ourselves that way. It's time for us to tell a new story, and we tell ourselves a new story to not only give ourselves hope, but we extend an invitation to those with the research capabilities and the resources to help us develop what we have. So that's our new story, and I'm here today to put my bread, no, our bread on the larder. We invite you to come and help us. Hancock County has always rewarded its dreamers and risk takers. Jean Toomer came and taught for a summer and he wrote "Cane" which became one of the premier novels of the Harlem Renaissance … So we reward the dreamers and the risk takers and I know we got some of those people in this room. So I invite you to

come and help us write that new story (Jeannette Waddell, Storyteller, Hancock County, Georgia).

Endnotes
1. This section has borrowed heavily from – African Americans in Rural America. Harris, R. and D. Worthen. (2003). In D.L. Brown and L. Swanson (eds.), *Challenges in Rural America in the 21st Century.* University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

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