

**Improving Health and Healthcare Advocacy through Engagement  
A Faith-Based Community View**

Forrest Toms, Cheryl LeMay Lloyd,  
Lori Carter-Edwards, and Calvin Ellison

North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University, North Carolina State  
University, Duke University, Oasis of Hope Church

ABSTRACT

This study of an intentional partnership between a coalition of African American faith-based leaders located in rural eastern North Carolina and North Carolina Agriculture & Technical State University (NC A&T), a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), describes the engaged partnership between a faith-based organization and a university to build leadership capacity for addressing health, education, and economic disparities. It provides an overview of civic engagement activities and replicable methodologies. The authors offer findings, initial reflections on lessons learned, and promising practices for other faith-based organizations and universities in future partnering. The article demonstrates that community-university partnerships can and do impact the engagement practices of faith based leaders. Thus the study provides insight into the importance of planning, communication, and teaching practices grounded in the cultural and historical context of community.

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## *Introduction*

**A**frican American Churches and their members work to improve the health outcomes and healthcare advocacy for citizens by offering fitness classes, sponsoring health ministries that teach others to accurately administer medications, and actively engaging physicians, public officials, and community leaders. This perhaps represents the scenario that health and faith leaders believe is needed to address the health disparities facing this ethnic community in the US. Are there intersections in which the collective efficacy of religious leaders, community leaders, and university faculty can change the individual health and human service related practices of African American parishioners while affecting local health and human service policy?

The relationship between spirituality and higher learning in African American communities has existed since diverse groups of African tribesmen with varied spiritual beliefs entered this country as slaves and found a common faith to be a path to social, economic, physical, and intellectual independence. This has evolved into higher education institutions that were originally outgrowths of the African American Church and are now exploring strategies for improving the health and wellbeing of the parishioners. The Christian church continues to play a unique role in the community. African Americans represent a significant share of those engaged in participatory faith.<sup>1</sup> Although they represent thirteen percent of the adult population in the U.S., African Americans account for twenty-five percent of those involved in small group participatory faith and thirty percent of house church attendees.<sup>2</sup> These figures are to be expected, given that the Church is the oldest institution in these communities.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the documented evidence from interventions within African American churches comes from academic institutions. Despite the emergence of interventions to address a myriad of chronic diseases, these interventions have short-term success. The first reason for this is that people are not viewed as whole entities; there is, therefore, a failure to involve the spiritual, biological, and social integration of health.<sup>4</sup> Second, the responsibility for change is placed solely on the individual. Long-term change requires understanding the whole person (including their spiritual side) and the role of the faith-based organization in the larger context.

The most prominent academic institutions in African American communities are historically black colleges and universities (HBCU). Given the name HBCU in 1964, they originated as two to four-year institutions for the express purpose of educating former slaves residing primarily in the southeast United States. Organizations and groups such as the Freedmen's Bureau, American Missionary Association, black churches, educators, political leaders, and some southern whites built the foundation and provided funding for these institutions because they understood the relationship between access to quality education and the betterment of a population's social, political, and economic condition.<sup>5</sup> HBCUs have developed into institutions focused on creating a supportive and structured environment for blacks and other races to pursue higher education. More recent studies have connected the research as well as the students of these institutions to potential

advances in the healthcare outcomes for the African American community.<sup>6</sup>

Despite previous research into the health issues among African Americans as well as the emergence of faith-based interventions in these populations, more research is needed to better understand and describe the implications of spirituality for the partnerships between universities and African American faith communities and the health outcomes from these partnerships. Research agendas focused on individual health practices have seldom considered the impacts of the process of engagement and the cultural context on organizational or individual outcomes. Exploring these relationships, particularly in a spiritual or faith-based context, may be critical in establishing the evaluation, accountability, modification, and sustainability of health programs. This type of inquiry may also lead to the development of innovative, integrative models of health policy for long-term community healthcare access.

This paper is an ethnographic study of an intentional partnership between a coalition of African American faith-based leaders located in rural eastern North Carolina and NC Agriculture & Technical State University (NC A&T), an HBCU. The partnership seeks to develop and implement a community capacity building initiative around health and educational disparities. The study examines the dynamics of interorganizational relationships that influence and impact the effectiveness and sustainability of joint engagement by a faith-based organization (FBO) and university. This work uses observational and qualitative methods to obtain information about the perceptions, practices, and reflections of faith-based leaders regarding community engagement as a tool for enlisting the participation of parishioners in shaping their own health and human service outcomes. This research has implications for how religious attitudes coupled with training impact the social views and the health advocacy practices of religious leaders and their constituents.

The authors (1) describe the engaged partnership between an FBO and university to build leadership capacity in the areas of health, education, and economic development; (2) highlight the foundational literature for developing engaged partnerships; (3) provide an overview of the methods and procedures used in a qualitative assessment of FBO's perceptions and activities around civic/community engagement; (4) present findings from the qualitative assessment; and (5) offer initial reflections and conclusions on lessons learned and promising practices for FBOs and universities in future partnering.

### ***Community Empowerment Network: A Brief Background***

The Community Empower Network, NC (CEN) is a collaboration of forty Christian faith-based organizations representing sixteen counties in eastern North Carolina. CEN's mission is to advance their communities through partnerships that thrive on economic development, superior education, and the elimination of health disparities. CEN was established in 2005 through support for Success Dynamics Community Development Corporation (SDCDC) from the North Carolina Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities (OMHHD). One of its signature programs, the

Community Health Ambassador Program (CHAP), started as a pilot program that currently operates in more than fifteen of the CEN churches by providing health screenings for diabetes and other health issues.<sup>7</sup> The program has grown from six health ambassadors in 2005 to more than 350 in 2010. Health and wellness centers in churches grew from three in 2005 to twenty-three in 2010. Additionally, reported health education and fitness messages communicated to church members and the community increased from 102 in 2005 to 2196 in 2010. CEN-sponsored programs and activities included diabetes prevention, HIV/STD training, kidney disease prevention, cancer prevention outreach, nonprofit management, leadership enhancement training, and financial planning and resource development. More than 460 citizens in the region participated in training activities, community forums, roundtable discussions, and civic engagement planning meetings between Fall 2007 and Spring 2010.

### ***North Carolina A&T State University: A Brief Background***

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University is a public, land-grant university founded in 1891. This designation reflects its creation as an HBCU for the express purpose of supporting a threefold mission of teaching, research, and community outreach or extension for the segregated African American population of NC. The University offers degrees at the baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral levels and has a commitment to excellence in a comprehensive range of academic disciplines.

NC A&T is increasingly engaged in promoting its mission, with particular growth in research and community outreach. Interinstitutional partnerships with other academic institutions in NC as well as community partnerships to promote health and wellness have led to the recognition of NC A&T as a visible hub for partnering in African American communities. The university has maintained its commitment to citizens through its continued support of Cooperative Extension and University outreach initiatives across the state. The Interdisciplinary Leadership Studies doctoral program has become the main vehicle for the institution's mission of fostering transformation and leadership for a dynamic and global society.

### ***CEN and NC A&T Partnership***

The partnership between CEN and NC A&T is grounded in the shared belief that leadership and community capacity building are core building blocks for effective community engagement in African American communities. The partnership focuses on developing the capacity of CEN and its members. The Leadership Enhancement and Engagement Project (LEEP) and Participation Engagement and Practice (PEP) projects were implemented in 2007 as two parts of a comprehensive and long-term community capacity building initiative of Success Dynamics Community Development Corporation (SDCDC) and its faith-based program, CEN. The LEEP/PEP project

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was designed to develop CEN's capacity in three primary areas: (1) enhance CEN's organizational capacity to plan, develop, implement, and sustain ongoing community engagement efforts; (2) develop and enhance the knowledge and skills of CEN churches to intentionally engage public officials and agencies around policy and resource distribution in the areas of health, educational, and economic disparities; and (3) provide CEN members with the training, multimedia educational tools, and community building skills to organize and encourage citizens to participate in the civic and political process.<sup>8</sup> Components of the program included participatory research, four regional leadership institutes, four roundtable discussions with elected officials, and participation in a six-month civic engagement training session. The participants in a 2007 community needs assessment reported the following:

- Over 85% agreed that Black Churches have a responsibility to develop their communities through use of public and private funds.
- 70% of ministers reported speaking about community and health issues in the pulpit.
- Less than 20% wrote letters to public officials or editorials on community or health topics over the past year.
- 80% had no contact with elected officials in the past year.
- 68% did not engage city councils; 84% did not engage county commissions.
- 68% had no contact with public health or mental health agencies and schools systems.
- Only 20% had direct meetings with state elected officials.

Based on these findings, it was decided that more emphasis on leadership and civic engagement was needed in order to have an impact on the structural aspects of health disparities (e.g., engaging leaders, agencies, policies, and practices).

### ***Foundations for an Engaged Partnerships***

Higher education institutions, including HBCUs, have been criticized for their lack of responsiveness to real-world issues. They have been overtly challenged to engage with communities rather than prescribe and deliver treatment.<sup>9</sup> The long history of universities partnering with FBOs and community-based organizations (CBOs), particularly in the public health, health sciences, and human service areas, offers a framework upon which to build.<sup>10</sup> These relationships have been the

foundation for multiple grants, contracts, and research projects that, many at the community level suggest, often result in less than reciprocal partnerships. Although often identified as appropriate partners, FBOs and CBOs are seen by universities as having few if any assets to contribute as partners in a solely grant and contract driven system. These disproportional relationships often require small community organizations to be prepared for partnering with traditionally large research institutions of higher education, generally without the necessary knowledge, leadership, organizational support, operating resources, or voice and leverage to communicate their needs and desires as residents within these communities. Byron White suggests that institutional leaders (political and academic) initiate partnerships with the intention of including community leaders in decision making and design; however, they often find it difficult to manage the differences between the academy's and community's notions of power and strategies for ameliorating that power.<sup>11</sup> He asserts that the process is futile without citizen input with authentic authority into strategic planning. Depending on the differences among partnering entities and their approach, the imbalance in terms of the power, interest, and agenda results in a coercive or unidirectional course for the partnerships.

Others suggest that this imbalance of power and resources—perceived or real—often challenges partnering organizations (FBOs) in practicing the leadership needed for sustainable relationships. This has implications for interpersonal and interorganizational partnering in an environment driven by globalization and technology.<sup>12</sup> These authors and others suggest that we live in a new economic and societal age where knowledge, knowledge production, and innovation are highly valued commodities.<sup>13</sup>

The nature of these partnerships is grounded in what researchers have described as relational context and relational social power.<sup>14</sup> This relational capacity is based on fostering a positive working climate, developing a shared vision, and promoting power sharing. The characteristics and outcomes of these partnerships for civic engagement depend on a number of factors: prior relationships, motivation, trust, the ability of the partner to serve as a leader, and the management of competing institutional demands. Partnerships that emerge from such an orientation are better equipped to achieve targeted outcomes and sustain community support.<sup>15</sup> Ferman offers a salient reflection on the relationship expectations: “Just as all politics is local, all partnerships are personal.”<sup>16</sup>

These roles are dependent on relational context rather than disciplinary content to enhance social capital and thereby foster innovation and intentional engagement. Individual social capital and collective efficacy is required by all involved to support the strongest predictors of engagement: trust, social agency, value of life, neighborhood connections, family and friend connections, tolerance of diversity, work connections, and participation in community.<sup>17</sup> Failure to create this relational capital ultimately impacts resource distribution and quality of life for the FBO and its individual constituents.

The engaged partnership between FBOs and universities is a participatory, developmental process that ameliorates the relational injustices of power and privilege and results in growth and in-



creased capacity in all the partners. While a number of factors impact institutions' engagement, the capacity to develop trusting, authentic relationships between university faculty members and FBO members is critical in communities that have few trusting relationships (individual or communal) with agencies and institution. Furthermore, it requires a new paradigm of thinking, one where the faith-centered perspective of FBO members is a primary component of the decision making in this partnership.

### ***Methodology***

The purpose of this engaged scholarship was to obtain baseline information regarding self-reported levels of community engagement by members of Christian FBOs. Christian organizations represent the majority of FBOs in this state. Participants volunteered to engage in a six-month participatory research and training program sponsored by CEN and NC A&T's Leadership Studies program. The framework for the program included participation in monthly leadership and advocacy training institutes, bimonthly site-based team meetings, observations of civic government agencies (e.g., health departments, school boards, city council, and county commissioners), and completion of observation forms.

Of the 150 participants who completed community needs assessments in 2007, three pilot counties were selected as partners in the six-month participatory research and training project. The sample population in this study included forty-five participants (fifteen in each county) representing twenty-five inter-denominational Christian churches in rural eastern North Carolina. The target area included fifteen North Carolina counties representing the highest concentrations of African American citizens and experiencing significant disparities in the areas of health, education, and economic development. A six-question open-ended questionnaire was administered to assess their perceptions, beliefs, and practices regarding engagement. The six questions are as follows: (1) Please list up to five challenges of participating in community engagement; (2) Please list up to five opportunities of participating in civic/community engagement; (3) How important is relationship building among and between faith-based leaders and organizations to community engagement?; (4) How important is equity in the role of relationship building among and between leaders and their organizations?; (5) Please share your thoughts on the importance of building relationships and examples of how to do it; and (6) What skills do you need to continue to become more efficient in civic/community engagement?

### ***Findings***

This study involved a qualitative analysis of data collected from the pilot project with faith-based organization leaders from three target sites in eastern North Carolina. Participants included forty-five individuals (fifteen per site), all volunteers in a six-month leadership/civic engagement

training program. Responses to a six-item open-ended questionnaire were transcribed, coded, and further analyzed for salient themes and areas of focus. Findings from this study can serve as guideposts for future researchers and community based leaders involved in community engagement scholarship and practices.

Overall, responses fell into three broad categories: leadership, communication and planning, and development. Within each broad category, researchers identified specific subcategory focus areas. The need for more leadership enhancement, knowledge building, and skills development was reported. There was an overwhelming endorsement of the need for leaders and citizens to increase their knowledge, skills, and experiences in the civic and community engagement arena. This requires that all stakeholders acquire an openness to collaboratively learning from both successes and failures. This has been described as “learning in public” (LIP). The phrase describes the need for citizens to enhance their ability to be effective champions in civic and community engagement around health and other community issues. This includes oral and written communication skills; facilitation of public discussions; familiarity with meeting protocols, policies, and practices; and the ability to plan and organize.”<sup>18</sup> They believed this would increase their effectiveness in engaging elected officials and agencies around policy, program, and resource distribution. Likewise, they also focused on the need to increase their understanding of data analysis and metrics associated with effectively communicating their concerns and issues to public officials and agencies.

Respondents considered communication skills to be critically important. Specifically, public speaking, effective writing, and facilitation ranked at the top of the list of needed skills. Facilitation serves both as an individual communication skill and as an organizational method. Meeting facilitation was identified as an essential and primary tool needed to effectively educate the community and as a prerequisite to equitable participation in civic dialogue around issues of healthcare and educational disparities.

Respondents believed they also needed to develop the ability to effectively plan for impacting local policy development by intentionally engaging elected officials and initiating networks of stakeholders within their communities and with other communities of interest and place. This was deemed particularly important around issues of educational disparities and access, utilization, and affordability of healthcare services.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities***

CEN’s most noted challenge involved bringing pastors, churches, and community members together from different denominations to meet in a central location. This necessitated consistent, strategic, and tactical planning around the physical, social, psychological, and denominational dynamics among and between leaders and churches. An intentional focus was placed on consistent and persistent social marketing strategies involving multiple forms of communication. This particular strategy was deemed necessary due to the partners’ prior experiences in community



organizing in the region which provided an in-depth understanding of the leadership history and psychology of African Americans regarding civic and community engagement.

The strategies involved the development of phone trees in each county that were sometimes the primary and secondary means of communication for members. This strategy was necessary because not all churches and leaders in the region had access to broadband technology and the internet. The participants with access to technology found communication through emails, text messages, and social marketing tools to be extremely effective.

Helping the group to develop new mental models required the implementation of three strategies: 1) monthly training sessions, 2) bimonthly site-based meetings, and 3) information transfer through reading, discussion, and reflection. Encouraging the modification of existing paradigms and practices became the salient challenge for the partnership. Respondents addressed the challenges faced in getting pastors and communities to think regionally in terms of 1) addressing disparities through community/civic engagement, 2) intentionally addressing health disparity issues through local health department boards and meetings, and 3) opening up to new ideas and concepts that could then be communicated to parishioners in order to encourage change.

University challenges began with the need to create a new model of pedagogy that included both teaching and learning. This is particularly true in terms of university partners' ability to talk to people in the community in nonacademic terms, without sacrificing the content of the information and without underestimating the intellectual capital of the community.<sup>19</sup> The capacity to honor and respect the indigenous wisdom of the faith community was foundational in the development of such relationships. Faculty members and students would have to be not only responsive to the needs of the faith community but also willing to learn from the community. A common presumption that each entity is a valuable and equitable source of expertise in the realms of knowledge, skill, and ability is important to producing the health and wellbeing outcomes desired. Parishioners described experiences that contributed to the beneficial act of collaborative learning. They included the invitation to participate in presentations to other university faculty members, the willingness of faculty to listen to the concerns and interests of the community, and the consistency with which questions were presented and explored collectively. One participant responded, "I got so much more than I expected. I felt empowered, able to do far more than I ever dreamed."

### ***Opportunities for Growth***

Respondents identified a number of opportunities for growth. The most prevalent responses to areas of opportunity for growth and development included:

- Encouraging FBOs to become engaged in nontraditional outreach programs, such as establishing health wellness resource centers in all CEN churches.
- Educating FBOs regarding organizational, programmatic, and leadership

development and community engagement.

- Expanding roundtable discussion with local and state elected officials around healthcare and educational disparities in their communities.
- Exposing faith-based leaders to community and state agencies (e.g., Department of Commerce, Community Colleges, Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities, National Kidney Foundation, Local Health Departments).
- Empowering churches within CEN to work collectively around issues of access to healthcare through increasing civic engagement with agencies and elected officials.
- Expanding the attendance of faith-based and community stakeholders in the organization's educational meetings/functions and outreach programs.
- Inviting pastors to come together monthly for empowerment, strengthening of relational engagement, and continued training in leadership and organizational development.

### ***Discussion***

Perhaps the signature lesson learned by these researchers is the need to explore more extensively the importance (tacit power) of individual relationships to organizational partnerships. The initial creation of a shared vision, reciprocity, and trust contributes to engaged partnerships with catalytic effects on organizational effectiveness. FBO leaders suggest that this exchange cannot be built between organizations; it lies, rather, in the interpersonal relationships between leaders. They describe this relationship as spiritual capital. One of the faith-based leaders suggested, "This is not a religious construct but a relational connection that transcends the logical and contractual, dependent upon faith in the individuals."<sup>20</sup> It lies in the relational engagement among and between partners that permits individuals to develop a degree of faith in each other that goes beyond simply dependability to perform a task. Leaders in such partnerships mutually allow for the acceptance of risk that accompanies the establishment of new relationships and innovations. Lloyd's work around community-university partnerships offers a more descriptive look at "spiritual capital" and how it manifests itself in relationships. She offers one interviewee's comment: "If you bring someone or something to me and recommend it, I know that you have my best interest as well as your own in mind and that you would not do anything that would harm me."<sup>21</sup> Spiritual capital shared by individuals is critical to building sustainable partnerships between community people and universities. This capital can and does evolve into social capital, which becomes the foundation necessary for effective community partnerships. What makes spiritual capital important to social capital? The intimacy and familial commitment attached to spiritual capital suggest sustained

commitment and a willingness to learn and take risks together for the long term. The construct creates strong interpersonal ties between members of different communities that allow for organizational partnerships that are sustainable.

Another significant lesson learned suggests the need to respond to the complex and dynamic environment in which both FBOs and universities must perform. Successfully negotiating the waters of a new knowledge driven economy makes it imperative that the HBCU and the historically Black Church develop the capacity to collaboratively create and innovate. This new paradigm for knowledge flow requires that institutions, communities and individuals become far more adept at a process we describe as “learning in public (LIP).”<sup>22</sup> Toms notes that LIP includes the history of engagement, the nature of local protocol (overt/tacit), the psycho-cultural context, types of intentional collaborations, communication skills, an understanding of the metrics of engagement, and the capacity to plan, develop, and innovate.<sup>23</sup> LIP, then, represents an evolution towards social learning that is specialized, complex, and dynamic, requiring the reciprocal contribution of expertise and experience from every stakeholder. However, in order for this process to occur, all participants need to be predisposed to recognize that each entity is a valuable and equitable source of expertise in the realms of knowledge, skills, and abilities. This construct diverges from the historical and traditional notions of expertise and power located with authority and the professionally educated. So, in this new era, the university becomes a partner, community member, and co-learner, sharing both leadership and follower-ship. This emphasizes a shift away from an “expert” model of delivering university knowledge to the public and towards a more collaborative model in which community partners play a significant role in creating and sharing knowledge to the mutual benefit of institutions and society.

Both institutions are capable and called to reach out and engage with communities. How they engage, their level of engagement, types of engagement, and sharing of leadership and power remain a challenge and, at times, a roadblock to effective and sustainable partnerships. Central to these concerns is the question, in what ways can partnerships between universities and communities be enhanced to empower both parties to learn, grow, and develop innovative processes reflective of a society and world in a “knowledge era”?

## ***Conclusion***

This study demonstrates that community-university partnerships can and do impact the engagement practices of faith based leaders. It provides insight into the importance of communication and teaching practices that are grounded in the cultural and historical context of a community of place. The findings indicate that significant numbers of African American faith and community leaders will actively participate in ongoing training and planning as long as it is meaningful and they can contribute to its content and format. Findings also indicate that there is often more readiness to learn and engage in faith communities than researchers and others would acknowledge.

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That is, people know what they don't know, and they know what they need to know. Participants in this study were very clear on their need to learn how to learn in public (LIP). Specific skills in the areas of public speaking, effective writing, and data analysis were deemed as prerequisites to gaining credibility as an effective leader. It is the onus of the leaders in the partnership to be steadfast in their efforts to ensure that people's voices are heard and built into the fabric of all discussions. Those who accept the responsibility of representing others are ethically and morally accountable to create avenues to hear the voices of those they represent and build those voices into the center of all discussions regarding programs, service needs, and resource distribution.

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### Endnotes

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