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### Executive Summary

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), particularly the 1890 land-grant institutions, have served rural African American communities in the South. Despite their essential role as anchor institutions, these universities and the rural Black populations they support remain underexamined in community-engaged research. This research commentary explores the role of HBCUs in rural community-based research, drawing on the author's experiences at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU) to highlight challenges and opportunities. African Americans in the rural South, especially those in historically Black Belt regions, face persistent social, economic, and health disparities. As an 1890 land-grant institution, PVAMU is uniquely poised to address these inequities through research, outreach, and partnerships. Although this work is rewarding, rural engagement presents distinct challenges. The gap between university faculty and residents—exacerbated by geographic distance and limited infrastructure—hinders long-term engagement. Ensuring community members influence research priorities remains an ongoing challenge. Lessons learned underscore the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration, community advisory boards, and student involvement. Moving forward, HBCUs must strengthen their institutional frameworks for community-engaged research, particularly in rural areas, by nurturing interdisciplinary partnerships and prioritizing community needs.

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## Introduction

Data from the 2020 Census shows that the South remains home to a large portion of the rural African American population, with approximately 57% of Black Americans residing in the region. This demographic is mainly concentrated in regions historically identified as the “Black Belt”—including states like Alabama, Mississippi, and parts of the Delta in Louisiana and Arkansas. These areas reflect a unique racial diversity pattern rooted in longstanding cultural and historical connections for Black communities across the Southern U.S. (Brookings, 2020; One Country Project, 2020). African Americans in these rural areas face unique challenges marked by systemic social, economic, and healthcare disparities (Harrison, 2021; Mason, 2015). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) serve as critical anchor institutions for these communities, particularly those in rural areas, through their dedication to social justice, community engagement, and capacity building. Nearly ninety percent of all HBCUs are in the Southern United States.

As a faculty member at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU)—an 1890 land grant HBCU—I have worked on several grant-funded, community-engaged research projects since 2017. Each project addressed rural residents’ health care, housing, and technological needs. Founded in 1876, PVAMU is Texas’s second-oldest public institution of higher learning and one of the nation’s HBCUs. Located in Prairie View, Texas, the university was established under the auspices of the Second Morrill Act of 1890 as one of the country’s Black land-grant institutions. This designation mandated that PVAMU provide accessible, practical education in agriculture, mechanical arts, and military tactics to African Americans who were denied entry into white land-grant universities. Since its founding, PVAMU has embraced its dual mission of educating underserved populations and supporting rural communities through outreach and applied research (Robinson & Cambrice, 2023).

This research commentary outlines my journey, exploring the significance of rural community-engaged research from the perspective of HBCUs and the specific challenges and opportunities I encountered while representing an 1890 institution. Engaging with rural communities presents challenges such as infrastructure limitations and geographic isolation. However, my research experiences revealed significant benefits. For students, these collaborations provide hands-on, experiential learning opportunities that deepen their understanding of real-world social issues. For academic researchers, working with rural communities fosters meaningful relationships that can inform research and create solutions tailored to the unique needs of these areas.

## HBCUs: A Legacy of Service and Innovation

HBCUs, particularly 1890 land-grant universities, have deep historical roots in rural southern communities, serving as critical resources for Black Americans in regions overlooked by predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Hine, 1991; Mayberry, 1991; Cooper, 2024). Through agricultural extension programs, these universities provided hands-on training, technical assistance, and vital education to Black farmers, strengthening their ties to rural communities (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2002). Extension work at 1890 land-grant institutions began at Tuskegee Institute under Booker T. Washington’s leadership. The Hatch Act of 1887 facilitated research at Tuskegee, creating the “movable school,” where educators visited farmers to share agricultural innovations. By 1892, the first Negro Farmers Conference further solidified Extension efforts, aiming not only to introduce new farming methods but also to empower farmers to share their knowledge within their communities (Comer, 2006). By the end of the century, other Black land-grant universities hosted similar conferences, broadening the conversation to include education and other critical issues facing rural communities. Through archival research, my colleague Marco Robinson and I have documented PVAMU’s extension efforts, highlighting its outreach to local communities from the late 1800s

to the mid-1900s. The Colored Cooperative Extension Service (CCES), established at Prairie View, educated Black farmers on agricultural practices to improve their yields and sustain farmland fertility. Extension agents promoted community health through clean-up initiatives and advocated for balanced nutrition. PVAMU also held annual conferences from 1930 to 1966 that addressed various issues, including education reform, social change, and the economic status of Black Texans (Robinson & Cambrice, 2023).

Today, HBCUs, including Alcorn State University, PVAMU, Tuskegee University, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and West Virginia State University, continue to address the agricultural and business needs of marginalized farmers in rural areas through outreach and applied research initiatives (Mahoney, 2012). Many studies highlight partnerships between universities and communities that tackle agricultural issues (Hargrove et al., 2014; Shange et al., 2014; Vilme et al., 2022; Wall et al., 2017). However, there is less literature on how the 1890s can address quality of life issues such as poverty, food insecurity, and social inequities. These longstanding challenges underscore a continuing need for community engagement efforts on the part of HBCU 1890 institutions. Multidisciplinary research teams, which include sociologists, are uniquely positioned to work alongside communities to help bridge disparities in healthcare, education, and technological access (McClure et al., 2021).

### The Importance of Community-Engaged Research in Rural Areas

In recent decades, community engagement has become a widely accepted practice at universities and colleges, prompting many institutions to establish administrative structures that support and coordinate these initiatives (Martinez et al., 2013). The wide acceptance of community engagement in higher education is also evident in the growing body of scholarship based on academic-community partnerships. The most persistent themes in the research include the importance of establishing trust in partnerships,

mutual benefits for the researchers and community partners, and transparency.

Models and approaches used to facilitate and evaluate university-community partnerships are also omnipresent. For example, the Community-based Participatory Approach (CBPR) is the gold standard for partnership. CBPR “assures that there is knowledge and benefit in the shared partnership between academia and community” and has been used by faculty in psychology, public health, social work, sociology, and urban studies (Hacker, 2013, p. 5). Moreover, the approach values the expertise provided by the community members in the scientific process.



*PVAMU faculty and student researchers at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Prairie View following a community discussion on rural technology needs as part of a research initiative.*

Community and university partnerships are urgent for marginalized rural spaces. HBCUs and universities, in general, can be powerful partners due to their significant capital in the form of researchers,

grant funding, and infrastructure, such as space for community meetings and events. The Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges report lists 118 anchor institutions vital to rural areas' social and economic survival. Several HBCUs, including Alcorn State University, Elizabeth City State University, Grambling State University, Langston University, and PVAMU, were among the listed anchor institutions. PVAMU's focus on research and development has led to numerous research centers, for example, that address local and national issues, spanning disciplines such as agriculture, engineering, social sciences, and health. As such, PVAMU researchers lead projects that tackle pressing challenges like cybersecurity, social justice, military data intelligence, and technological innovation. With a vision of being one of the few HBCUs classified as R1— "very high research activity"—PVAMU aims to broaden its research capacity and impact. Achieving R1 status would place PVAMU among the top research universities in the United States, enabling it to attract increased funding and partnerships, further supporting its mission to empower students and uplift the communities it serves.

### From Cityscapes to Countryside: Shifting Focus to Rural Sociology

Before relocating to Houston, Texas, in 2014, my research focused on the intersection of social inequality, disaster, and community building within urban contexts. I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in post-Katrina New Orleans, observing neighborhood dynamics, attending community events, and conducting in-depth interviews with residents. This research provided valuable insights into the resilience and challenges urban communities face in the aftermath of disaster. My previous experiences as an urban ethnographer have positioned me to collaborate with engineering, agriculture, and architecture colleagues interested in understanding the quality of life in nearby rural areas such as the city of Prairie View and the nearby town of Hempstead.

Located in Waller County, the city of Prairie View's population is estimated to be 6,369, and the median household income is \$28,929, which puts 46% of the population below the poverty line (City Data, 2019). While the median age for the city is 20.1, it is skewed by the student population; most non-student residents comprise an aging population, with roughly 88.6% of the community consisting of African Americans. Although the city of Prairie View is larger than typical rural towns and has a significant university presence, it still maintains a rural character due to its overall landscape, low population density outside the campus, and surrounding agricultural areas. Hempstead, also located in Waller County, has a population of approximately 5,690 residents, with a median age of 25.4 years and a median household income of \$54,066. Despite increases in PVAMU's enrollment, the city of Prairie View and neighboring Hempstead have struggled to attract and retain a range of businesses and services.



*The minister from St. Francis of Assisi visits PVAMU's Senior Seminar class to discuss the church's history of community work, strengthening ties between the university and the broader Prairie View community.*

During my community engagement work, the city of Prairie View had no grocery stores. It lacked retail options or recreational activities to serve its transient college student population and long-term residents. Public services in Prairie View were also limited, with the nearest hospitals and clinics nearly 40 miles away, creating significant challenges during emergencies like hurricanes. Similarly, Hempstead lacks major retail amenities and national retail chains, limiting shopping and service options for the local community.

As a researcher, I have participated in town hall meetings, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders to identify service gaps and address immediate needs. As part of my efforts to address the social needs of rural African American communities, I worked on two distinct grant-funded projects that underscore the role of PVAMU as an 1890 land-grant institution. These projects exemplified the potential impact of HBCU-led community engagement in rural areas, particularly in addressing technology gaps and health disparities. The first project, titled “Smart & Connected Rural Communities” (SCRC), was a National Science Foundation (NSF)-funded planning grant that ran from 2017 to 2019. As a co-principal investigator, I collaborated with a multidisciplinary team of researchers to conduct a comprehensive needs and capability assessment to lay the groundwork for implementing smart technologies within rural communities near PVAMU. The qualitative data collected on behalf of the planning grant underscored the urgent need for sustainable technological solutions in underserved areas while revealing key sociological challenges to implementation. These challenges included disparities in technological literacy, generational differences in adoption, and limited access to education on emerging technologies in rural communities.

The second project, launched in 2023, focused on addressing COVID-19 disparities within Waller County, where PVAMU is located. Entitled “COVID-19 Disparities in Waller County,” this

initiative aimed to understand the pandemic’s ongoing effects in a predominantly Black and Hispanic agricultural community with only a 38% full vaccination rate. To capture local perspectives on the pandemic, I facilitated two community engagement meetings in Hempstead, Texas, where approximately 40 residents shared their experiences related to community support, governmental communication, and access to vaccines and testing. Through these meetings, I gathered vital qualitative data that underscored the community’s needs and challenges in navigating the pandemic, providing insights that could inform local health interventions and policy recommendations for similar rural communities. These projects demonstrate the value and potential of HBCUs like PVAMU in fostering community resilience and addressing longstanding inequities, particularly in technology access and public health. By engaging directly with rural residents, we brought university resources into the community and deepened the understanding of these communities’ unique challenges and perspectives.

### Rewards of Community-Engaged Research at HBCUs

*“... I mean, we have this concept of communiversity that we talk about, but since I have been around, it has been just a concept. From what I have seen, both entities have been working independently instead of coming to the table and having a conversation”- Prairie View Resident, Focus Group 2018.*

Establishing community partnerships with local stakeholders has been the most rewarding aspect of my community-engaged research. The community-engaged research (CER) approach values residents’ unique knowledge about their communities, which is crucial for addressing local needs (Bowen, 2010; Williamson et al., 2016). While community involvement in CER exists along a continuum, meaningful engagement occurs when community members shape research at each stage (Hacker, 2013). In the SCRC planning grant, my collaboration with the mayor of Prairie View was

invaluable. Not only did he introduce me to key local stakeholders, but his advocacy helped generate broader community involvement through robocalls, newsletters, and direct outreach for the needs assessment. Our alternating planning meetings at city hall and PVAMU became a space for shared decision-making, as he provided critical insights for organizing community events. Together, we designed a survey to deepen resident engagement, which became a focal point of our community meetings.

*“We are in this together. There needs to be a more cooperative relationship between the University and the town.” – Anthony Solomon, Chief of Police, Prairie View, February 26, 2018, Prairie View City Hall.*

Knowing our research team was not from Prairie View, the mayor led us through the community, pointing out longstanding concerns, introducing us to residents, and sharing the city’s rich history. This firsthand insight transformed our understanding of the community and laid a foundation of trust and respect. Our collaboration culminated in a joint presentation at the 2018 U.S. Ignite Application Summit, a conference focused on leveraging technology to support smart and connected communities. Alongside the mayor, I stressed the significance of community-based research and reciprocal partnerships. This experience made me realize the potential of collaborations between communities and universities, instilling hope that these connections could be both reciprocal and impactful. My involvement in the panel underscored how these partnerships can tackle challenges in rural communities and emphasize the importance of genuinely engaged and mutually beneficial collaboration.

Equally rewarding was the opportunity to incorporate our students into these community-engaged projects. Mentoring HBCU students has been my core motivation, and community-engaged research provides a meaningful avenue to fulfill this purpose.

Through the two rural community-based projects, undergraduate and graduate students have gained skills to develop, organize, and analyze stakeholder input while learning to design solutions that are genuinely responsive to community needs. Providing HBCU students with hands-on research and community engagement opportunities is crucial for equipping them with the skills to navigate real-world challenges and become active change agents. For generations, HBCUs, particularly those across the Deep South, have actively equipped students to engage with and support surrounding communities, grounding their education in civic responsibility and social justice. Julian Bond (Morehouse College), Diane Nash (Fisk University), John Lewis (Fisk University), and the Greensboro Four – Ezell Alexander Blair Jr., David Richmond, Franklin Eugene McCain, and Joseph McNeil (North Carolina A&T State University) – were part of a well-known group of HBCU student activists who participated in the Freedom Rides and lunch counter sit-ins. Institutions such as Bethune-Cookman University also helped citizens fight unfair practices and laws aimed at stripping them of their civil rights (Gasman et al., 2015). When HBCU students work within underserved communities, they encounter and critically engage with systemic issues such as economic disparities, limited access to healthcare, and racial injustices that directly impact the lives of residents. This exposure provides a real-world context for their education, blending academic knowledge with a commitment to social change.

As part of the COVID-19 Disparities Project, I moderated two community listening sessions at the Hempstead Public Library. I invited students from my undergraduate Sociological Research Methods course to observe firsthand how group interviews are conducted in community-based research, allowing them to experience research in action. The following spring, I invited local community stakeholders—individuals I connected with through my community-engaged research—to visit campus and speak with students who were developing group projects on socio-economic

issues in rural areas. The stakeholders shared their expertise and unique perspectives, enriching the classroom discussion and demonstrating the value of community knowledge in academic settings. These efforts highlight practical ways to build connections between the university and rural community leaders, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration.



*PVAMU community partners present at the 2018 U.S. Ignite Application Summit in Kansas City, highlighting collaborative efforts to support smart and connected rural communities.*

Engaging residents offered PVAMU students an experiential learning opportunity and enhanced the data collection process in ways we had not anticipated. Surprisingly, our students' rapport with residents became a valuable asset anticipated. For example, in my field notes, I wrote about an undergraduate student engaging in a rather insightful exchange with an older resident on broadband services. When the resident expressed unfamiliarity with broadband terminology, Jeremy, the student, explained connectivity issues from his own experiences at the university, bridging generational and technological divides. Moments like these were instrumental in making residents feel heard and respected, allowing them to share more freely, strengthening the quality of our field data, and broadening our understanding of local challenges.

The opportunity to create additional, structured roles for students in the community, such as acting as university ambassadors, could further enrich these partnerships. In my research, elderly residents often expressed interest in connecting more with the university and its students, even suggesting that the campus had become less accessible for them over the years. A service-learning component in future projects could create more avenues for student-resident interaction, such as students accompanying residents to university events or regularly checking in on residents by phone. By positioning students as ambassadors and liaisons, we could deepen their learning while expanding the university's presence in the community—a mutually beneficial relationship that aligns with our commitment to serving the local population.

### Challenges in Rural Community-Engaged Research

Despite the successes, engaging with rural communities comes with challenges. The remote nature of the communities I engaged in made it challenging to establish the same rapport I had achieved in urban settings. In rural communities such as Prairie View, geographic isolation and insufficient infrastructure create

difficulties in forming research connections and maintaining long-term collaborations among faculty, staff, and residents. Like many faculty and staff, I do not reside locally, often for similar quality-of-life reasons expressed by community residents. Building rapport with the community was difficult due to the distance between the university and the rural areas we served.

The limited infrastructure in Hempstead and Prairie View has made it challenging for faculty to reside nearby, leading to a disconnect between university staff and the local community. Moreover, years of neglect and underinvestment in these rural areas have contributed to a sense of isolation, further hindering relationship-building efforts. This remoteness was exacerbated by the transient nature of the student population, as many students and faculty reside outside the rural area, leading to gaps in continuity and community engagement.

*“We must go 25 miles for medical attention and need an urgent care center here. If we had urgent care so you could diagnose. The nearest facilities are in Cypress or Tomball. We also need a bigger grocery store. It’s cheaper in Cypress, but they are more affluent. It doesn’t make sense.” – Focus Group Participant, COVID-19 Disparities in Waller County, October 28, 2023.*

Additionally, HBCU researchers should be careful to maintain the importance of diversity and inclusion. Even when faculty and students reflect the community’s racial composition, diversity in perspectives, experiences, and expertise must remain a key consideration in these collaborations. Moreover, researchers of color are not exempt from having racial blind spots or implicit bias. An example in my work was the inability to engage Prairie View’s growing Latino population. During community-wide meetings, residents insisted that there was an influx of Latino residents in Prairie View. The research team’s attempt to engage Latino residents came too late in the process, and as a result, their voices were not

captured in the study. Researchers and community partners should keep diversity and inclusion at the forefront of the planning process.

## Opportunities for HBCUs in Rural Community Engagement

Despite these challenges I faced during my research, HBCUs like PVAMU have unique opportunities to contribute significantly to rural communities. Students at HBCUs, even those from transient populations, bring energy and a desire to enact change in rural areas, offering valuable insights and support to local development efforts. This student involvement enhances academic learning and empowers students to become agents of social transformation in their communities. By continuing to engage students in these projects, 1890 HBCUs can strengthen institutional ties with local communities and foster a new generation of socially conscious leaders.

Another avenue for growth in promoting rural community engagement involves establishing an infrastructure that supports multidisciplinary collaboration. As evidenced by my projects with engineering and agriculture colleagues, some rural-based quality-of-life issues require collaboration between STEM and social sciences. HBCUs like PVAMU must develop and promote intersections between STEM and social sciences in grant-funded projects. Integrating disciplines like sociology early in the process strengthens research partnerships, ensuring engagement efforts are meaningful rather than superficial.

Authentic rural community engagement requires equitable partnerships and well-developed methodologies that center on the community’s needs, not just research funding agencies’ needs. In retrospect, a community advisory board (CAB) could have significantly enhanced my engagement efforts. A CAB can bridge academic researchers and the broader community, drawing on members’ local knowledge and networks to build trust and promote transparency. While challenges in forming CABs—such as setting

clear expectations, managing time commitments, and carefully composing board membership—are documented (see Ortega et al., 2018), I believe that a well-established CAB would help prioritize Prairie View's needs, offering diverse perspectives that could shape more effective community engagement strategies. Establishing CABs at 1890 institutions would thus provide essential support for researchers working to foster meaningful, sustainable partnerships in rural communities.

Through my work at PVAMU, I have experienced both the rewards and challenges of rural community-engaged research. The distance, infrastructural limitations, and lack of connectivity in rural communities significantly hindered my engagement efforts. However, the potential for HBCUs to impact these communities is vast, and opportunities abound for student engagement and institutional partnership building. Future research and outreach initiatives should consider these challenges as they build engagement frameworks that leverage HBCUs' unique strengths. By fostering deeper, sustained partnerships with rural communities and prioritizing student involvement, HBCUs can play an instrumental role in transforming rural landscapes and creating pathways to socioeconomic equity for Black communities in the rural South.

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