# Partnering for Impact:
# Insights From a Strategic HBCU-PWI Collaboration

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*While collaborative partnerships between Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) do occur, they are rarely discussed in the literature. In this piece, the authors provide an overview of a collaborative partnership between two HBCUs—Alabama A&M University and Winston-Salem State University —and one PWI—Michigan State University—to improve science teaching and learning in rural Alabama and North Carolina. This article serves as a reflection of what it means to truly create and sustain collaborative partnerships in higher education. Lessons learned, and insights gained from the first years of the developing partnership, will also be discussed.*

*Keywords: HBCU, PWI, science education, partnership, collaborative partnerships*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Michigan State University was awarded a mid-phase Education, Innovation, and Research (EIR) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The project, *A Culturally Responsive Project-Based Learning Intervention in Secondary Science in Alabama and North Carolina*, involves the implementation of an innovative science curriculum specifically focused on supporting students taking chemistry and physics courses in southern rural schools. In addition to exposing U.S. students in Alabama and North Carolina to the Crafting Engaging Science Environments (CESE) curriculum (Schneider et al., 2022), the project also serves as a lesson in the development of a partnership between Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

The purpose of this paper is to expound on the partnership that exists between Michigan State University, a PWI, and Alabama A&M University (AAMU) and Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), two HBCUs, to transform the teaching and learning of science in the rural South. The concept of partnerships and how they should be implemented, including in educational spaces, have been clearly defined in the literature. For example, Goodlad (1988) described partnerships as "a deliberately designed, collaborative arrangement between different institutions, working together to advance self-interest and

solve common problems" (p. 13). Peters and Besley (2022) explained that educational partnerships typically involve two or more entities "agreeing to join together and combine staff and assets to achieve common academic and institutional goals that have tangible economic and social benefits to all partners" (p. 192). As noted by Peters and Besley (2022), partnerships can be collaborative in nature and can potentially transform teaching, learning, and research.

Although authors such as Allen and Esters (2018) have advocated for HBCUs and PWIs to establish partnerships that serve to benefit students, research conducted by other scholars, including Warren et al. (2019), indicate that while beneficial, HBCU-PWI partnerships, like all partnerships, are not without their challenges. As such, this paper will specifically delve into how Michigan State University (MSU), Alabama A&M University (AAMU), and Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), are working to sustain a collaborative partnership, with the common and collective goal of advancing the teaching and learning of physics and chemistry. By building consensus, practicing shared understanding, and engaging in intentional communication and inclusive collaboration, these three institutions will work to serve as a foundation for building knowledge on HBCU-PWI partnerships.

## A FOCUS ON PARTNERSHIP

### Creating and Sustaining Effective Partnership: From Concession to Consensus

Michigan State University (MSU), Alabama A&M University (AAMU), and Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) entered a collaborative partnership with the primary goal of advancing the teaching and learning of physics and chemistry in rural high schools in the states of Alabama and North Carolina. The team of key personnel from across the three institutions were diverse in professional background, research expertise, and knowledge and experiences related to the social and education landscape of the Deep South.

At the onset of the partnership, the Principal Investigator (PI) from MSU established two simple but powerful directives, which we now realize are the foundation for consensus building. The first is that the work on the project is team-based and requires input from all, and the second is that everyone's expertise is important to the team's and the project's success. To support the two directives, several team members co-facilitated the first three team meetings sharing their professional expertise and research related to key components of the project, including rural education, research-based pedagogical strategies for teaching science, and performance-based assessments. Supporting articles and publications, some authored by team members, were also shared with the team. Synergy and trust within the team improved after the professional experiences and diversity of knowledge were highlighted, leading to greater efficiency in building team consensus.

Progressing from a place of concession to consensus within a demographically diverse team was perceived by AAMU team members as the most challenging aspect of the partnership. Other than the Principal Investigator (PI), AAMU team members had not met other team members from MSU or WSSU prior to the first team meeting. The goal of the project naturally aligned with the mission of the HBCUs involved, and the local knowledge and interaction with area schools positioned the HBCU team members as integral to the success of the project. However, with the knowledge of stereotyping of non-white faculty by PWIs (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021; Campbell-Whatley et.al., 2022), the AAMU team mindfully entered the partnership, aware that non-white and HBCU faculty are often underappreciated for their expertise. However, this was not the experience of AAMU team members—particularly during discussions about the physics and chemistry curricula, which required creating student activities relevant to the communities and cultures of rural areas in both states. While deciding on learning activities suitable for rural Alabama and North Carolina students was sometimes iterative and exhausting—requiring hours of open dialog among a diverse team of scholars—centering discussions around the goal of the project, and acknowledging the expertise of each member of the team, eventually led to consensus replacing concession.

**Achieving Shared Understanding**

As a subset of consensus building, the efficacy of shared understanding depends on open, rich, honest and intentional communication among team members. Shared understanding thrives within a community that has strong leadership and is united by a team that is focused on similar goals. To achieve shared understanding, a team should also exemplify shared responsibility which "requires intentionally creating avenues for everyone to engage in collaborative decision-making regarding the direction, culture, and outcomes" (Alvarez McHatton et.al., 2022, p.6) of the project. For this CESE project, communication was mixed with high and low points as the team grappled with making critical decisions, especially related to curriculum ideas rooted in community contexts. According to Bittner & Leimeister (2013), to be productive, teams engaging in collaborative work must first have common knowledge and understanding about the project. Consequently, "team members are able to coordinate their behaviors towards common goals or objectives" (Bittner & Leimeister, 2013. p.107).

Initially, the CESE team meetings were extremely beneficial in learning about team expertise and behaviors, allowing team members to construct their understanding of expectations and team dynamics and establishing shared understanding of valued concepts and project processes. Also emerging from the initial team meetings were social and hierarchical patterns mainly associated with professional skills, institutional norms, and informational expertise. Furthermore, the reading materials shared and the multiple training sessions on creating formative assessments, that were modeled on Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), enhanced understandings of the conceptual framework and related outcomes which were recurring in subsequent conversations. In addition, during small group meetings with thoughtful deliberations about curriculum design for chemistry and physics, co-construction and constructive conflicts (Bittner & Leimeister, 2012) were frequent. Therefore, addressing differences of ideas directly and immediately produced consensus among team members.

**Appreciating Safe Spaces**

In recent years, collaboration between Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) and PWIs have increased, arguably for mutual benefits between institutions. When viewed from a lens of how this collaboration developed, it appears that one of the driving reasons for collaborations between HBCUs and PWIs is meeting the requirements delineated by federal agencies and both institutions seeking to improve the probability of acquiring funding from agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the U.S. Department of Education. Collaborating to acquire specific grants that serve underrepresented and marginalized populations is laudable and should be encouraged. However, the members of such collaboratives might have little experience or training in operating successfully within diverse teams. A major benefit of a diverse collaborative is that engagement yields far more sophisticated and complex discussions than might be experienced without the involvement of the other partners (Siemens et al., 2014). Given the paucity of research on the challenges facing MSI/PWI collaborations and the factors contributing to their success, the AAMU team members' reflection relies on individual experiences and models such as those related to team building and collaborative partnerships in other sectors besides education. Two of the elements contributing to the success of the MSU/AAMU/WSSU collaboration already explored in this discussion are building consensus and shared understanding in creating and sustaining success. The third element the AAMU team found to be essential in enhancing collaboration and team success is appreciating safe space within this diverse group.

The MSU/AAMU/WSSU project team has an expansive scope of expertise and experience. Upon reflection on the level of collaboration among team members, as observed by the AAMU team members, it appears that individual team members experience different levels of involvement, even with an open invitation for involvement extended by the Principal Investigator (PI). In hindsight, the complexity of the team could have benefited from training about creating and participating in a safe space to enhance involvement. Different levels of team participation range from exchanging communication about progress towards meeting project objectives, to full interdependence and integrative decision-making (Siemens et al., 2014). It is possible that the element of safe space in the relationship could influence where team members find themselves on the involvement spectrum. In this context, 'safe space' refers not to a physical

location but to a 'situational space,'—a term coined to describe team practices impacting individuals' involvement in team collaboration. The situational safe space is practiced every time the full project team or sub-teams communicate formally and informally in a group, small or large. This situational space is characterized by the following:

- the presence of a facilitator who asks questions, redirects or seeks consensus on ideas, and summarizes key elements and decisions
- maintaining reciprocal respect for each other
- encouraging openness in expressing views without fear
- practicing active listening
- acknowledging the views of others, and adding to, rather than dismissing the views of team members.

It is the position of the AAMU team members that a successful safe space enhances team productivity because team members will explore additional roles, develop trust, and extend their creativity, resulting in a stronger partnership.

The AAMU team maximizes the benefit of the collaboration while working through the challenges unassociated with the project and the HBCU landscape. For example, the AAMU team members make a concerted effort to have at least one member of the team attend and participate in CESE curricula planning meetings, become involved in decision-making about curricula, regularly communicate with team members from other academic institutions, and volunteer whenever there is need for additional assistance. By optimizing safe space practices of the collaborative, the MSU/AAMU/WSSU team is progressing towards ensuring the goal of implementation of innovative science curricula specifically focused on supporting students taking chemistry and physics courses in southern rural schools. The AAMU team also optimizes the safe space by being involved in discussions, challenging self and others about misconceptions, and exchanging ideas to support the project goal. In addition, the safe space supports the AAMU team with expanding experiences, visibility, and knowledge beyond the HBCU bubble.

## INSIGHTS FROM EXPERIENCE: BUILDING EFFECTIVE HBCU-PWI PARTNERSHIPS

As noted above, developing and maintaining strong, collaborative partnerships are challenging. Therefore, it is imperative that even while the research team is focused on meeting the goal of the Crafting Engaging Science Environments (CESE) curriculum and project (i.e. strengthening chemistry and physics education in the rural South), that members of the team actively reflect on how the HBCU-PWI partnership could continue to develop and be maintained to serve the purposes and goal of the project.

Continued partnership development and partnership sustainability are key to ensuring that the collective (i.e. HBCUs and PWI) continues to make a difference in science education, specifically in the rural South. As of today, Alabama and North Carolina currently lead in the number of HBCUs housed within their respective states. Alabama currently has 14 HBCUs and North Carolina has a total of 10 HBCUs (HBCU First, n.d.). While these institutions have always significantly impacted the field of education, the reality is that they have been severely underfunded and under-resourced. As noted by Johnson (2013), HBCU's have been and continue to be plagued by a number of challenges. According to the author, these challenges include "aging infrastructures, limited access to digital and wireless networking technology, absence of state-of-the-art equipment, low salary structures, small endowments, and limited funds for faculty development and new academic programs for their students" (Johnson, 2013, p. 65). Sentiments along the same lines were echoed by Warren et al. (2019) whose research on HBCU-PWI partnerships led the authors to also indicate that at HBCU's, heavy teaching loads and responsibilities have impeded faculty's abilities to conduct research. Hence, well-funded PWIs should serve as natural partners for HBCUs and their faculty who are willing to collaborate to improve the educational experiences of students and for the purposes of conducting research.

Even when partners may ideally and naturally fit, however, Siemens et al. (2014) indicated that team members are not always accustomed to, nor have they been specifically trained, for the realities of working

collaboratively to accomplish goals. As such, the authors indicated that a reflective stance on lessons learned from various collaborations has been a staple in the literature. In the case of this HBCU-PWI partnership, the following serve as lessons and recommendations that can add to the body of knowledge:

1. HBCU-PWI partnerships can be valuable to both types of institutions, however, shared understanding of how partnership and project goals will be accomplished, how day-to-day activities will be conducted, and how decisions will be made must be established early. Conversations about each of these should also occur consistently between all stakeholders.
2. Establishing situational safe spaces to understand nuances in educational contexts, to understand the expertise of all team members, and to freely share ideas, ask questions, and challenge notions, is critical to the success of HBCU-PWI partnerships.
3. Building consensus takes work. Even with developing shared understanding and working towards accomplishing the goals of a project, participation from team members can be fluid. Therefore, being clear about how participation should occur and capitalizing on the contributions of all team members is paramount to the success of any partnership and project.
4. Leadership in a team matters. As noted earlier, the project's Principal Investigator (PI) clearly indicated that input from all team members was required. The project leadership did not only state this, but also implemented activities to encourage participation. If HBCU-PWI partnerships are to work, all team members must be valued and must also be given agency to speak and to be heard.
5. Participation in project activities should help all faculty members on a team, including HBCU faculty, meet their personal and professional goals. As noted earlier, faculty at HBCU's typically experience heavy teaching loads (Warren et al., 2019) at institutions that are, more often than not, underfunded. This sometimes makes it difficult for faculty members at HBCU's to engage in meaningful research activities. HBCU-PWI partnerships can provide faculty with access to teams with varying perspectives, research methodologies and approaches, tools, and resources that may not always be readily available in specific contexts. Faculty at HBCU's should capitalize on these opportunities, while being vocal about what they need to meet their own professional endeavors.
6. Distance can be an issue. Even with consistent meetings over platforms such as Zoom, holding physical meetings on respective campuses, including the campuses of Alabama A&M University and Winston-Salem State University, and touring high schools of interest in the rural South, managing team efforts from a distance can, at times, be difficult. Hence, being strategic about how and when conversations occur is important to accomplishing the goals of the project.
7. Outside factors, such as requirements established by funding agencies, state agencies, and university operations and procedures, can define, and sometimes limit, how the partnership can develop. Laying issues on the table for all to appropriately address facilitates effective communication, helps to build trust, and ensures that issues are resolved promptly.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The HBCU-PWI team has made impressive strides in working to transform how students in rural Alabama and North Carolina will experience science learning, specifically in the subject areas of chemistry and physics. Due to the partnership, the CESE curriculum has been developed to reflect the lives and experiences of secondary students in both states. In addition, strategic relationships have been developed with high schools, school districts, and state departments of education to ensure that the goal of the CESE project is met and realized. As team members move from the initial phases of the grant, to now piloting the CESE curriculum in selected school districts, it is even more imperative that AAMU, WSSU, and MSU solidify their relationship to move the needle forward in science education.

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