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## Community Voices: Importance of the Community Partner Role at NOSC 2012

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## Importance of the Community Partner Role at NOSC 2012

**Felecia Jones**

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### **Abstract**

NOSC 2012 had many firsts, including the largest conference in the organization's 13-year history and the highest number of community partner participants. But the real breakthrough was the emerging understanding and respect scholars and community partners developed for each other, which came home in a variety of ways, from the number of community partners attending to the "ah ha" moment when one delegate first understood how essential community partners are to all aspects of engaged scholarship.

### **Introduction**

The 2012 National Outreach Scholarship Conference (now Engagement Scholarship Consortium) held on the campus of The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, broke ground where community partner engagement was concerned. While there are no official counts of the number of community partners who have attended or made presentations at the 12 previous conferences, veteran officials believe NOSC 2012 set records both in the number of community partners attending and making presentations. Of the approximately 235 presentations and workshops made at the conference, 33 were by community partners and many other community partners assisted in presentations in the two other tracks, Voice of the Faculty and Staff and Voice of the Student.

Having attended two conferences prior to this one, I only realized how valuable community partners are to university research when I became immersed in the activities of the 2012 conference. At

this conference, the facilitators and presenters went deeper and farther concerning the involvement of community partners than at any of the previous conferences I had attended. Community partners were not only invited to attend workshops; they were also included at the table in making plans and this conference made history by having a Voice of the Community Partner track, with many presentations by community members. This was monumental and meant that community partners could be seen as critical to the success of the conference. Community partners in attendance were from a record 14 states.

As president of the Black Belt Community Foundation in Selma, Ala., I have benefited from partnerships with The University of Alabama and others since our founding in 2004. UA Vice President for Community Affairs Dr. Samory Pruitt serves on our Board of Trustees and always includes my organization whenever there is a mutually beneficial project. However, when Dr. Pruitt asked me to serve on the planning committee for the conference, I was hesitant. Although I hold a graduate degree, I did not know if I would have anything valuable to contribute to the dialogue, and I did not know if the group would be genuinely interested in my community-focused opinions. I was a little intimidated because I was entering their "circle." But after attending the meetings, I realized that Dr. Pruitt did not just want to talk community engagement; he wanted to put some real effort behind it and make it happen. That was a great learning experience for me. In addition to my attendance, Dr. Pruitt also helped 10–15 of my community associates attend the conference

as well. For most of them this was their first time attending a scholarly conference, and they came away with an immensely enjoyable and useful learning experience.

There was something for just about every community interest at the conference, and the attendees with whom I talked were very pleased, not just over the content but also because of the welcoming feeling they received from the university scholars. One of my Black Belt Community Foundation's community associates, Sheryl Threadgill-Matthews (2012), who runs an after-school and summer enrichment program for children in rural Wilcox County, expressed the feeling well:

I am so appreciative of the opportunity to attend the NOSC conference. The networking was invaluable. I was so inspired and encouraged. Sometimes we need to take time away from our servant roles for time to be stimulated. I came back with a renewed energy.

Paulette Newbern (2012), a community arts program volunteer in Pickens County, wrote:

Thank you, Black Belt Community Foundation, for making it possible for me to attend the NOSC conference. I must say I gained a wealth of knowledge from the presenters and I did some wonderful networking. This will certainly help me to be more effective in the work I do in my community. The community partners were included in every aspect of the conference and made to feel like we were an integral part of every discussion.

It became quickly clear to any community partner and representative attending the conference that this would be a conference that gave more than lip service to the importance of community partnerships in engaged scholarship. For example, there was a clear focus on the rights of the community partners to be listed as full partners in published research and the obligation of universities to share funding received for research with the partners. I heard a version of this principle evoked at several presentations and it gave me encouragement about the future of university-community partnerships.

Another "ah ha" moment for me was that in the past we have always wanted universities

to approach us with projects, but during the sessions we repeatedly heard that partners should not hesitate to approach universities suggesting problems where university resources could be combined with community resources for social and/or economic progress. Until I heard this, it had never occurred to me that we could approach these groups and that they would be as eager to work with us along those lines.

For example, my organization works to transform the most economically challenged counties in the state of Alabama through our small grants program, leadership opportunities, non-profit organizations, financial literacy, and networking. Prior to the conference, I thought unless a university approached us with a project and funding, I could not solicit their assistance. We raise dollars from the community, and we invest dollars in the community. Change happens in the community, but it only happens when you work with the people in the community. One-way projects, where only the "experts" do the research, have proven over and over again to be a dead end. The days of research being a one-sided relationship seem on their way out. Unfortunately, people who live in the Black Belt Region of Alabama have been accustomed to such one-sided treatment. The organization or university gets the grant dollars, starts a program, and leaves when the funds run out. Many of us came away from NOSC 2012 with the resolve that if a university wants to work with us, then it needs to make us an equitable partner, bringing its resources to the table—because we are also bringing our resources to the table, which includes the people we recruit from our communities. We may not all have large financial resources, but we all have other things that are just as valuable, for example our knowledge of the problems and our ideas about their solutions. We know "the lay of the land." Until NOSC 2012 I didn't fully understand the attractiveness or the benefits that partnering with my organization brings to the university or larger organization.

All along we have both needed each other, but we are just now accepting and acknowledging that. As large as The University of Alabama is, it still could not reach the people in the Black Belt that it is reaching without the assistance of the Black Belt Community Foundation. In fact, without our input, the University might even miss what the most important issues to us are. The University helps bring scholarly credibility to our organization, while we help take away the skepticism the community has about scholars. This

mutual support and interdependence, I learned at the conference, is the most valuable thing in determining whether an engaged project will have a successful outcome that benefits all participants.

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### **About the Author**

Felecia Jones is president of the Black Belt Community Foundation in Selma, Alabama, and member of the NOSC 2012 University of Alabama Planning Committee.