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HBCU Adult Learner Initiative: A Focus on Black Rurality



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Executive Summary

In January 2024, UNCF’s Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute (FDPRI) published “Adult Learner Initiative External Report,” which outlined key findings and recommendations from an evaluation of the Adult Learner Initiative, a multi-million-dollar grant focused on improving the educational experiences of Black adult learners. To supplement and extend that work, Ascendium Education Group collaborated with FDPRI and Lumina Foundation to fund this portion of the evaluation, which centers Black, rural learners. Essential to both Ascendium’s strategy and the realities of higher education in North Carolina, identifying markers of rurality was central to the evaluation design and the following research questions:

(A) How do institutional policies and processes impact the Black, rural learner experience?

(B) What markers of rurality are reflected throughout participating institutions and surrounding communities?

PARTICIPATING NORTH CAROLINA HBCUs

We center insights and expertise from five North Carolina Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), which are listed below:

- Elizabeth City State University
- Fayetteville State University
- Johnson C. Smith University
- Shaw University
- Winston-Salem State University

OVERVIEW

Black, rural learners and other institutional actors at HBCUs in North Carolina experience rurality in varied ways. Despite institutional characteristics and geospatial locations that contribute to the unique identities of HBCUs, actors offered nuanced considerations about rurality. Faculty, staff, and students understood rurality in the context of environmental, financial, and social factors in addition to services and programs tailored to rural students.

This report engages rural data landscapes, scholarship on rural students, and empirical research about adult learners at HBCUs to explore rurality. Our overall approach is threefold: First, we use place-based data categories and nomenclature to situate HBCUs within rural discourses. Second, we position institutional and statewide strategic plans as critical documents that help contextualize researchers’ and institutional actors’ conceptions of rurality. Third, we frame HBCU actors’ voices about place as essential contextual components for understanding institutional and community cultures and differentiating between HBCU environments.

CONSIDERATIONS OF RURALITY

We grapple with the term, *rurality*, expansively and fluidly. Specifically, we think about rurality as encompassing several factors like rural place, rural people, rural livelihoods, rural governance, and sociopsychological-rural perceptions (Chigbu, 2013).

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

This report begins with background and contextual information of Black, rural higher education; continues by providing institutional profiles of participating HBCUs within the context of rurality; and concludes by offering a set of new learning and recommendations for policy and practice that provide a way forward for supporting Black adult learners and HBCUs that support rural students.



Rural Black Adult Learners

To amplify the dearth, yet emerging research on HBCU student success in rural spaces, we provide in-depth and required context on this topic.

POLITICAL MARKERS OF RURALITY

Various definitions, conceptualizations, and understandings of rurality shape the context and confines of rural communities. The U.S. Census Bureau (Census) considers geospatial location from two primary vantage points: urban and rural. Urban areas are densely developed territories, while rural areas broadly represent all remaining areas. Similarly, The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) centers on county-level geographies and dichotomizes two primary markers: micropolitan and metropolitan areas. Micropolitan areas comprise 10,000 to 49,999 people, while metropolitan areas comprise at least 50,000 people. Essentially, nonmetropolitan areas—comprised of micropolitan and smaller remaining areas—are considered rural, while metropolitan areas are considered urban.

Also noteworthy is the existence of other, often supplementary, means and methods for identifying and delineating places. The Rural-Urban Continuum Codes and Urban Influence Codes provide greater nuance between rural and urban and metropolitan and nonmetropolitan binaries by determining the relationality between neighboring areas. Rural-urban commuting Area Codes and Frontier and Remote Area Codes consider the distance to critical resources and basic needs to determine the difference between rural and urban places. Beyond traditional approaches to understanding place, the Natural Amenities Scale focuses on physical and environmental characteristics of place, and the Economic Research Service Typology Codes rely on socioeconomic indicators to contextualize regional definitions. When thinking about HBCUs, specifically, these socio-political markers for understanding rurality have a greater capacity to narrate the livelihood of Black communities and identify various amenities and features that appeal to their aesthetic. Depending on the scope of work and desired outcomes, researchers and policymakers often depend on one or more of these place-based designations to inform their decision-making.



Beyond quantitative approaches to exploring place are qualitative approaches. To highlight rural ideologies and student success practices undergirding Black institutions and communities, we analyzed qualitative data from the University of North Carolina System 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, strategic plans from 5 HBCUs in North Carolina, and interviews with students, staff, and faculty across those same institutions. This method provided a much-needed context for understanding population, proximity, and socioeconomic status impacting institutional actors at HBCUs.

THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, PLACE, AND EDUCATION: A FOCUS ON RURALITY

The experiences of Black, rural collegians are sparsely covered in the literature. When discussed, there is heightened attention given to the role of K-12 institutions in preparing students for and informing their dispositions about postsecondary trajectories in education and within society broadly (Castro, 2021; Chambers, 2020; Crumb et al., 2021; Kitzmiller & Burton, 2021; Means et al., 2016). Beyond K-12 institutions, there is a dearth of research about Black, rural collegians attending and traversing various institutional types in higher education. For example, Black collegians grapple with the intersections of rural and racial identities when attending PWIs (Woldoff et al., 2011), explore practices for building and sustaining community while at rural PWIs (Boettcher et al., 2022), and engage in rigorous research activity at HBCUs and surrounding rural communities (Taylor et al., 2021). Higher education discourses also address equitable policies and practices for recruiting and retaining Black, rural students (Means et al., 2022) and Black student activism at rural institutions (Chambers et al., 2021). As Black rural collegians graduate and transition into the workforce, narratives about them shift again to focus on relocation tendencies and patterns (Wolfe et al., 2019) and their experiences working in rural regions (Erby & Hammonds, 2020). Transcending age and generational boundaries, research also reflects educational culture shifts in the rural South as students and alumni, representative of multiple decades, matriculated through K-12 and higher education contexts (Nichols, 2021).

As a result, this study offers a fresh perspective on race and rurality within a statewide HBCU landscape for the following reasons:

- 1st: It centers HBCUs, as opposed to other institutional types like PWIs, where extant rural research takes place.
- 2nd: It focuses on current HBCU actors, not K-12 students who aspire to attend college.
- 3rd: It highlights how students attending HBCUs in rural communities think about being and existing in rural places, rather than transitioning to and through them.
- 4th: It grapples with the state context of North Carolina as a fluid geospatial and socio-cultural scene with multiple relationships to rurality.



INSTITUTIONAL MARKERS OF RURALITY

In a 2022 report and mapping project conducted by the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges, researchers made key distinctions between rural-located and rural-serving institutions (RSIs) (Koricich et al., 2022). Elementally, they described rural-located institutions as postsecondary institutions that are geographically and architecturally configured on land that is considered rural. Historically, rural-located institutions have been identifiable by federal and state place-based designations, many of which were mentioned above. To expand conceptions of rurality, their work centers RSIs, which are postsecondary institutions that, despite their location, “provide important service to rural populations and places, such as large land-grant universities and regional colleges that exist on the suburban fringe of more urbanized areas” (Koricich et al., 2022, p. 9).

The following charts provide a place-based context for situating each of the 5 HBCUs within institutional, county, regional, and state parameters. They contextualize regionality broadly and, at times, rurality specifically. Each chart is divided into four quadrants, which are outlined below.

Quadrant 1 (top-left): This quadrant depicts data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Rural-Serving Institution (RSI) Data Tool created by the ARRC (Koricich et al., 2022). We specifically looked at the NCES campus setting designation, a locale classification that is “a general geographic indicator that describes the type of area where a school is located” (NCES, n.d.). We used the ARRC RSI data tool to identify the number of RSIs across the state, the RSI-designation status of each institution, the percent of the rural population in the county, the average percent of the rural population in adjacent counties, and the percent of adult students at the institution.

Quadrant 2 (bottom-left): This quadrant offers a quote from a student, staff, or faculty member at each institution. It offers context and nuance to quantitative data presented in Quadrant 1.

Quadrant 3 (top-right): This quadrant presents a place-based excerpt from each institution’s strategic plan that was accessed via institutional websites. Such place-based excerpts presented considerations for rurality and local and regional communities.

Quadrant 4 (bottom-right): This quadrant centers on the University of North Carolina’s 2022 Strategic Plan (n.d.). We use one of the strategic plan’s outlined goals, which is to increase the enrollment of students from underserved counties by the year 2027, and an accompanied map of underserved counties that was included in the strategic plan. Noteworthy is that only three of the five institutions in this study are members of the University of North Carolina System; however, all five institutions are situated in counties affected by the system’s goals.

Each quadrant in the chart contributes to a more holistic view of understanding rural contexts that HBCUs in North Carolina navigate and the experiences of Black adult learners in and around rural communities.



1

Elizabeth City State University

County, State: Pasquotank County, North Carolina
NCES Campus Setting Designation: **Town-Distant**
Number of Rural-Serving Institutions Across the State: **67**
Identified as a Rural-Serving Institution: **Yes**
Percent of Rural Population in County: **42.32%**
Average Percent Rural for Adjacent Counties: **88.1%**
Percent of Adult Students: **18%**

2

Quote in Context

Me personally, me coming from a rural area, I actually like this type of setting. I like nature, being separated from people... Not so packed, house by house, having land to do certain things. But it would be a lot better if, like they said, we did have a little bit more entertainment here, a mall or something... But like I said, I like the land, the space. But here has great opportunities as well, like you said, as far as tax purposes. And it's a lot cheaper than where I'm from. So, if I get an opportunity to stay here financially and I'm fine with it, then I'll definitely stay here because even though it is still not much to do, Virginia is 45 minutes away. I don't mind driving that.

— Student at ECSU

3

Strategic Plan 2020-2025

- **Goal 1.6 Academic Excellence:**
Collaborate with regional K-12 local education agencies to enhance education and preparation quality and deliver best-practices
- **Goal 6 Regional Development:**
Secure our position as a catalyst in regional economic, social, and environmental development and facilitate collaboration with industry and government to improve our region

4

State Policy Context

According to the University of North Carolina System's 2022 Strategic Plan, one goal is to improve access to postsecondary degree attainment by increasing enrollment of students from underserved counties. Pasquotank County, the homeplace of ECSU, is listed as an underserved county.

One of the key features of ECSU is that its NCES designation is Town-Distant, which means that it is a "territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area" (NCES, n.d.). ECSU is a rural-serving institution situated in and around counties with a high rural population percentage. Though ECSU's strategic plan does not specifically mention rurality, it mentions regionality within the context of establishing regional partnerships with K-12 agencies, industries, and governmental entities. ECSU is part of the University of North Carolina System and is located in an underserved county. The quote from the ECSU student reflects the rural location of the institution, noting the financial and environmental benefits and social drawbacks of the location.



1

Fayetteville State University

County, State: **Cumberland County, North Carolina**

NCES Campus Setting Designation: **City-Midsize**

Number of Rural-Serving Institutions Across the State: **67**

Identified as a Rural-Serving Institution: **No**

Percent of Rural Population in County: **13.37%**

Average Percent Rural for Adjacent Counties: **57.41%**

Percent of Adult Students: **39%**

2

Quote in Context

Fayetteville is the fakest city-country place ever. And I say it's a fake city because if you live in Raeford, you look at Fayetteville as a city. If you live in Lumberton, you look at Fayetteville as a city. I grew up in Fayetteville, the city, you know what I'm saying? It's not a city... So, El Paso [Texas], that was so out, you know what I'm saying? To come from here to there, it was like, "Oh my... Now, this is a city."

— Student at FSU

3

Strategic Plan 2022-2027

- **Strategic Plan 2022-2027:** FSU strives to meet the educational, career, and personal aspirations of its traditional and non-traditional students from rural, military, and other diverse backgrounds so that they are equipped with academic and practical knowledge to serve local, state, national, and global communities as enlightened citizens, globally astute leaders, and engaged solution creators.

4

State Policy Context

According to the University of North Carolina System's 2022 Strategic Plan, one goal is to improve access to postsecondary degree attainment by increasing enrollment of students from underserved counties. Cumberland County, the homeplace of FSU, is listed as an underserved county.

One of the key features of FSU is that its NCES designation is City-Midsize, which means that it is a “territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with [a] population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000” (NCES, n.d.). Though FSU is not a rural-serving institution, the percent of rural population in the county is the second highest among participating HBCUs, and it is surrounded by counties with a relatively high rural population percentage. Further, FSU's strategic plan explicitly mentions rural students as a group it seeks to support. FSU is also part of the University of North Carolina System and is located in an underserved county. The quote from the FSU student reflects the relativity of rurality, underscoring how rural communities are compared to other places as a point of reference to make sense of rural identities.



1

Johnson C. Smith University

County, State: **Mecklenburg County, North Carolina**
NCES Campus Setting Designation: **City-Large**
Number of Rural-Serving Institutions Across the State: **67**
Identified as a Rural-Serving Institution: **No**
Percent of Rural Population in County: **1.07%**
Average Percent Rural for Adjacent Counties: **29.08%**
Percent of Adult Students: **18%**

2

Quote in Context

So, we don't have a huge rural population within our adult learners, but we also probably need to do a deeper dive and do some comparisons on zip codes from where our students come. But just in knowing our students, we haven't had a huge population of rural students
— Staff at JCSU

3

Strategic Plan 2021-2025

- **Goal 3: Expand Partnerships and Community Engagement**
We will develop and expand dynamic, mutually beneficial corporate, civic and community partnerships that validate the University's position in driving the future of Charlotte and surrounding areas, creating impactful collaborations that support students' academic, social, personal, and professional needs and strengthen professional outcomes.

4

State Policy Context

According to the University of North Carolina System's 2022 Strategic Plan, one goal is to improve access to postsecondary degree attainment by increasing enrollment of students from underserved counties. Mecklenburg County, the homeplace of JCSU, is not listed as an underserved county.

One of the key features of JCSU is that its NCES designation is City-Large, which means that it is a "territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more" (NCES, n.d.). JCSU is not a rural-serving institution and is neither located in nor around counties with high rural population percentages. JCSU's strategic plan also does not explicitly mention rurality but rather focuses broadly on developing and expanding regional partnerships. JCSU is not part of the University of North Carolina System and is not located in an underserved county. The quote from the JCSU staff member reinforces data presented in the rest of the quadrants. It also offers consideration about the data infrastructure at JCSU and its history, ability, and possibility to capture place-based data.

**1**

Shaw University

County, State: **Wake County, North Carolina**

NCES Campus Setting Designation: **City-Large**

Number of Rural-Serving Institutions Across the State: **67**

Identified as a Rural-Serving Institution: **No**

Percent of Rural Population in County: **6.1%**

Average Percent Rural for Adjacent Counties: **46.66%**

Percent of Adult Students: **14%**

2

Quote in Context

It's impacted it [educational success] in the realm of that I have to take off work... I have to drive and spend gas money which impacts negatively more than positively. And I would love to say that it was a positive impact more than negative. But when I'm met up against the, "Hey, well you have to come on campus," you have to come on campus. And I'm like, "How am I supposed to be successful if you're not even taking into consideration, I work Monday through Friday... from 8:00 to 5:00 PM? If I take off, that's time out of my stuff. You're taking money out of my pocket, to pay for my bills." Thank God for financial aid because I don't think I'd be able to do that.

— Student at SU

3

Strategic Plan 2020+

- **Strategic Priority 4:** Develop new local, national, and global strategic partnerships that increase faculty effectiveness and engagement; diversity and student success

4

State Policy Context

According to the University of North Carolina System's 2022 Strategic Plan, one goal is to improve access to postsecondary degree attainment by increasing enrollment of students from underserved counties. Wake County, the homeplace of SU, is not listed as an underserved county.

One of the key features of SU is that its NCES designation is City-Large, which means that it is a "territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more" (NCES, n.d.). Though SU is not a rural-serving institution and is located in a county with a low rural population percentage, it is surrounded by counties with a relatively high rural population percentage. SU's strategic plan also does not explicitly mention rurality, but it mentions developing local partnerships. SU is not part of the University of North Carolina System and is not located in an underserved county. The quote from the SU student reflects that SU's geographic location affects Black adult learner commuter students who travel to campus.



1

Winston-Salem State University

County, State: Forsyth County, North Carolina

NCES Campus Setting Designation: **City-Midsize**

Number of Rural-Serving Institutions Across the State: **67**

Identified as a Rural-Serving Institution: **No**

Percent of Rural Population in County: **7.35%**

Average Percent Rural for Adjacent Counties: **53.61%**

Percent of Adult Students: **17%**

3

Strategic Plan by 2030

- **Aspiration 11:** Expand WSSU's footprint in rural and out-of-state areas by increasing online degree programs.

4

State Policy Context

State Policy Context According to the University of North Carolina System's 2022 Strategic Plan, one goal is to improve access to postsecondary degree attainment by increasing enrollment of students from underserved counties. Forsyth County, the homeplace of WSSU, is not listed as an underserved county.

2

Quote in Context

...They were mainly locals. So, I don't think I've had very many adult learners, post-traditional, who came from, let's say, Washington State or Atlanta, Georgia. Most of them live in this area or are North Carolinians, so they're rural.

— Faculty at WSSU

One of the key features of WSSU is that its NCES designation is City-Midsize, which means that it is a “territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with [a] population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000” (NCES, n.d.). Though WSSU is not a rural-serving institution and is in a county with a low rural population percentage, it is surrounded by counties with a relatively high rural population percentage. Further, WSSU's strategic plan explicitly mentions rural areas as a place for the institution to make a greater impact. WSSU is also part of the University of North Carolina System, but it is not located in an underserved county. The quote from the WSSU faculty member reflects a disconnect between WSSU's designation as a non-rural serving institution and rural students that the faculty member knows that WSSU serves.

Despite stark differences in institutional and county-level characteristics across all 5 HBCUs, perceptions about rural students and communities reverberated from actors. New learning from this study underscores how HBCUs gauge Black, rural students' changing needs, make innovative decisions to support them, and understand regional identities and partnerships.



New Learning

This section presents findings and excerpts from HBCU faculty and staff as they navigate and contend with programs, practices, and policies that serve Black, rural students.

New Learning 1: HBCUs Provide Practical Yet Promising Practices and Solutions for Addressing Barriers for Rural Adult Learners

To support Black, rural adult learners, HBCUs rely on practices and strategies that address their unique needs. One barrier that many students faced was access to the internet and technology services to complete assignments. One solution that HBCUs provided addressed the staff's capacity to be available to students when students needed them most. For example, WSSU expanded its work hours for the Office of Information Technology so that they would be more flexible. Instead of the office being open from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM, WSSU extended the closing time to 11:00 PM to accommodate students who complete assignments at night. Students at JCSU faced similar issues regarding internet access and connectivity. Some students were forced to connect to wireless internet connections from the parking lots of local businesses because they did not have home internet services, which consequently led to them being confronted by police who inquired about their loitering. JCSU staff worked with students to help them advocate for themselves in those situations. Other barriers that Black, rural adult learners faced involved transportation to institutions and institution-sponsored events. A staff member at SU stated:

So, for example, Friday we're going over to LexisNexis, so we're going to take the bus, the Shaw bus, then drive them to that employer. And that would be helpful for adult degree students if we could find a way to get them if they do have transportation issues. I know we were able to give a couple of Uber gift cards to some students who needed to get to an interview or something.

The staff member realized that addressing transportation issues was multiplex for adult learners. In addition to providing a generalized solution like providing a bus to visit an employer, SU saw the need to provide specialized services like offering Uber cards.

New Learning 2: Black, Rural Adult Learners at HBCUs Have Multiple Identities

Though our study centered on five HBCUs in North Carolina, it is important to note that students' experiences across institutions were not monolithic. More specifically, we realized faculty, staff, and students did not always use "rural" language to describe students who they knew to be rural. At times, those students held more salient identities and, in turn, were supported under programming targeting those salient identities. A staff member at JCSU reiterated this sentiment by discussing veteran students.

A lot of our veterans come from the eastern part of the state, which is rural. And that is where both our base and posts are located. Though they have the resources in the rural area, they don't have the opportunity. So, they come from the rural area expecting the urban area to have the resources that they had in the east. So, we have the opportunity, but one of the things that really could be telling is that in the State of North Carolina, Charlotte Mecklenburg has the second-highest percentage of homeless veterans with Buncombe County, which is a little bit to the west...



New Learning 3: Dilemmas that Black, Rural Adult Learners Face Have the Potential to Innovate the Next Wave of Postsecondary Education

As faculty, staff, and students discussed some of the barriers that Black, rural adult learners face and promising practices that best support them, we noticed that there was potential for HBCUs to innovate future practices for providing postsecondary education to families. A faculty member at FSU stated:

...I think we do a great job at least in our program for the working student because all of our courses are in the evening after 6:00 PM. Well, you're talking about a niece or a nephew that's getting off from work, and then they've got family issues. And now I've got to take my aunt or uncle to class, and then kind of wait around until they're done, and come back to pick them up, and bring them back out there. I mean, it can pose a challenge to people.

The FSU faculty member raised an important concern and dilemma that Black, rural learners often navigate. From an asset-based perspective, there is room to think about familial wait time as an opportunity to provide credentialing, course credit, and other postsecondary education to family members who transport their relatives to campus for class.

Recommendations for Institutions

Based on findings from this study, we offer three recommendations to institutions committed to supporting rural students.

- **Support institutional research offices in efforts to make rurality an explicit data point.** Some faculty and staff at participating institutions expressed uncertainty about the depth and consistency of research being conducted on rural students and their communities.
- **Expound on institutional strategic plans to include and/or contextualize rurality.** Explicit mention of a focus on rural students and communities, and not just regionality, broadly helps faculty justify endeavors to secure related grant funding, and it provides clear direction and scope to all institutional actors.
- **Market programming for students at the intersections of adult learning and rurality.** Participants noted institution-wide initiatives that either supported adult learners or rural students, specifically, but rarely, focused on both at once.



As faculty, staff, and students discussed some of the barriers that Black, rural adult learners face and promising practices that best support them, we noticed that there was potential for HBCUs to innovate future practices for providing postsecondary education to families.



Recommendations for Intermediaries

We offer the following recommendations for intermediaries with vested interests in supporting rural students.

- **Fund HBCUs with programs of study that demonstrate a proven commitment to serving rural students and communities.** Two notable programs mentioned in this study were social work and business administration. This was particularly the case at ECSU. Intermediaries can seek clearer insights about rural-centric work by taking a more decentralized approach to funding and centering programs, practices, and policies within departments. Specifically, intermediaries should identify programs and initiatives that align with rural communities' social and economic needs and interests.
- **Focus funding on workforce development.** Related support areas include seeking promotion, professional advancement post-graduation, and high-earning careers in rural areas. Such transformation work requires funding to support ideological change-making, specifically dispositions about the value and utility of undergraduate education in rural communities.
- **Fund cross-county projects.** Though all participating institutions were not considered rural-serving institutions or located in cities or counties considered rural, they were surrounded by counties with high populations of rural citizens. Institutions willing to partner with rural K-12 schools, community colleges, and industries are well-positioned to serve rural adult learners. Intermediaries should understand regional contexts and engage with community actors who inform policy, practice, and ideology across counties. An example includes collaborating with institutional, organizational, and political leaders in rural communities to acknowledge current student success landscapes, assess needs, and gauge levels of partnership.
- **Require regional acknowledgment statements in requests for proposals (RFPs).** Many researchers and institutional leaders are already familiar with crafting land and/or labor acknowledgments to underscore the relationship between institutions and Indigenous and/or Black communities in building and sustaining their inner workings. Similarly, regional acknowledgment statements can be an opportunity to communicate regional distinctions and find common ground on or gain clarity on how potential grantees view rural students and communities.



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Links to Strategic Plans

<https://www.ecsu.edu/about/strategic-plan.php#:~:text=Elizabeth%20City%20State%20University's%20strategic,is%20where%20leaders%20are%20created.>

<https://www.northcarolina.edu/impact/strategic-plan/>

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