

Bridging the Divide



Auburn University's Outreach to Alabama's Black Belt

Bridging the Divide

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to
Alabama's Black Belt



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ON THE COVER:

Made famous by the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March, the Edmund Pettus Bridge is the most recognized symbol of the Alabama Black Belt. Besides being the traditional gateway to the region, the Edmund Pettus is emblematic of the struggles of people to bridge the divides separating them from freedom and prosperity.

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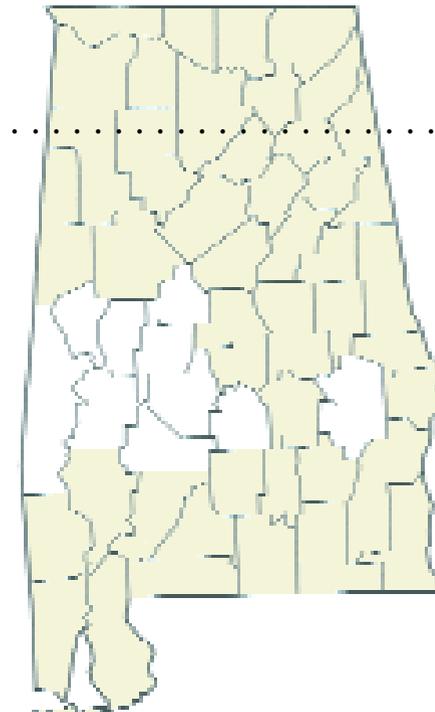


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PREFACE

Message from Vice President for University Outreach

One has only to look at the demographics of the Black Belt to understand that there is a great divide separating the region from the rest of the State of Alabama. Based upon most economic measures – employment, housing, infrastructure, industry, healthcare, education and quality of life – Black Belt counties lag behind their neighbors in prosperity. It is a divide which Auburn University strives to bridge through outreach and engagement.



As Alabama’s largest land-grant university, Auburn continues to play an ever-growing increasing leadership role in the recovery of the Black Belt. Auburn University Outreach partners with residents, governmental agencies, school systems, industry and grassroots organizations to advance the region. Our efforts involve every AU school, college and outreach unit, as well as, Auburn University Montgomery and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. Initiatives are comprehensive, ranging from an emphasis on education and personal development, to community and economic growth.

Bridging the Divide: Auburn University’s Outreach to Alabama’s Black Belt provides an overview of Auburn University programs and projects in Alabama’s Black Belt, past, present and future. This publication does not include all outreach that is being conducted in the Black Belt; however, it does highlight some of the most successful and longstanding programs. It also offers a glimpse at some exciting new initiatives under development at Auburn University. We dedicate this book, as well as, ourselves to the citizens of the region and pledge Auburn’s continued support of initiatives to bring more economic prosperity to the Black Belt.

David Wilson
Vice President for University Outreach and Associate Provost

HISTORY

Challenging a Legacy of Decline

The region known as Alabama’s Black Belt cuts directly through the middle of the state, from the Mississippi state line to just short of the Georgia border. Some 20 Alabama counties are considered in the Black Belt, which Columbia Encyclopedia reports is so named for its “black soil and excellent cotton-growing conditions.” Yet, the region is defined more by its history than it is by geology.

A century ago, Booker T. Washington in *Up From Slavery* wrote that, although the Black Belt derived its name from the dark soil, the term had other meanings as well. For example, slave labor supported the region’s many cotton plantations and other agricultural work. However, as it has been well documented, designating this region as the Black Belt was also done for political purposes. Washington noted that after the Civil War “the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense – that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white,” referring to the thousands of African-Americans who remained in the area after emancipation. Today, their descendents still make up the majority of the population.

After the Civil War, agriculture remained dominant in the Black Belt, primarily supported by sharecroppers and tenant farmers, most of whom were former plantation workers. Unable to profit from their own labor, let alone amass wealth to buy their own farms, generations of sharecropping families were trapped in a cycle of poverty. In 1936 author Arthur Raper described the Black Belt as having “the richest soil and the poorest people.” This observation remains true today; poverty rates in the Black Belt are among the highest in the United States. In the 21st century, the Black Belt continues to be defined by soil, race and poverty. However,



Once king of the region, cotton still dots the Black Belt landscape.

with a stagnant economy, declining population, racial inequities and a poverty level double that of the Alabama average, the Black Belt is truly isolated from the rest of the state. Economic gains made by Alabama in recent years have not trickled down throughout the Black Belt region, causing the great divide of prosperity that exists between the Black Belt and its neighboring counties. So great, is the divide, that the *Birmingham News* called the region “Alabama’s Third World” in a series of editorials in 2002.

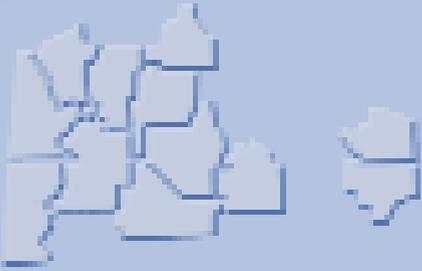
Auburn University’s involvement in Alabama’s Black Belt extends over many years, beginning with the establishment of cooperative extension offices and experiment stations throughout the region in the first half of the 20th century. These operations focused largely on agricultural services, but by the 1980s Auburn was exploring alternative economic initiatives in the region. County extension agents began to advise Black Belt residents on community development strategies. In 1982 the Auburn University Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures established in Greensboro the Fish Farming Center, a non-traditional agricultural initiative focused on catfish production. In 1993 the late Samuel Mockbee, professor of architecture, and professor D.K. Ruth, founded the Rural Studio, in which architecture students design and build homes for disadvantaged families.

In 1995 David Wilson, Auburn University’s Vice President for University Outreach, planned a series of public forums around the state to discuss programming needs. The Black Belt was specifically targeted for the kick-off meeting. Nearly 300 residents from across racial, socioeconomic and professional lines attended the first forum in Demopolis. Feedback from this forum targeted education and economic development as the primary issues concerning residents. Recognizing that the region required more than singular efforts to deal with a century of decline, Auburn University mobilized its entire campus to create comprehensive strategic approaches to bridge the great divide separating Black Belt residents from a better quality of life.

Creating partnerships are key to the success of Auburn University’s outreach programs across the Black Belt. Programs are developed through extensive dialogue with area residents and agencies. Most initiatives involve faculty, staff, administrators and students campus-wide working with and through civic partners in the region.

Challenges to the Black Belt Region

- Declining population
- Average poverty level: 29.5% (13.3% higher than state avg.)
- Median household income: \$21,432 (30% below state avg.)
- 45% of citizens over 25 years old have not completed high school
- High unemployment
- Lack of adequate health, social services
- Racial polarization




Vacant store fronts testify to decades of economic decline.

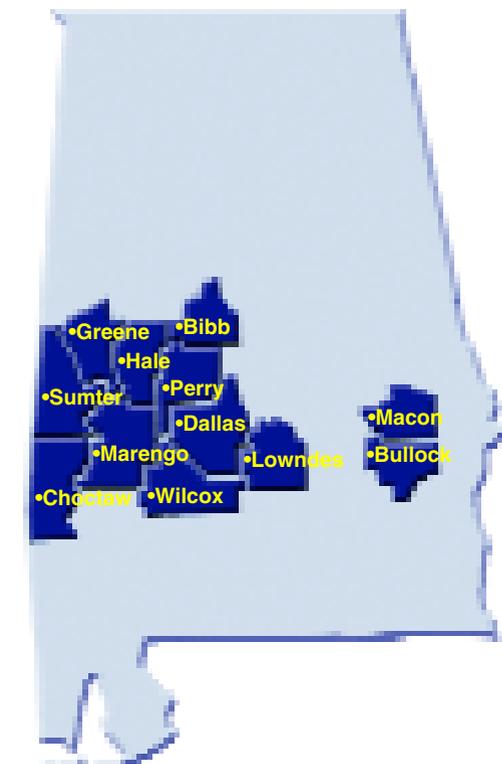
Under the leadership of the Vice President for University Outreach, who himself grew up in the Black Belt, numerous noteworthy initiatives have been launched in the last 10 years, addressing four areas of concern:

- Education/K-12
- Community and Economic Development
- Cultural Preservation/Awareness
- Agriculture/Natural Resources

These programs, directed by Auburn’s schools and colleges, outreach units and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, focus primarily on these and other surrounding Black Belt counties: Bibb, Bullock, Choctaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Marengo, Macon, Perry, Sumter and Wilcox.



In contrast to general conditions seen in most Black Belt communities, beautiful antebellum homes can be found throughout the region.



EDUCATION

Focus on Learning

Many Black Belt Schools, like Macon County's D.C. Wolfe High, lack resources to maintain facilities or support programs.

Education/K12 Initiatives

For any community to achieve or sustain economic growth, a sound educational system must be in place. Because of the lack of financial capital and human resources, many Black Belt schools struggle to deliver adequate educational opportunities to students. Auburn University is committed to providing resources and technical assistance to Alabama's Black Belt K-12 school systems to create and support opportunities for academic achievement.

Auburn University has continuously aimed many of its outreach educational initiatives towards assisting these school systems, by providing teachers stronger instructional resources and students access to a wealth of educational opportunities. Projects undertaken by Auburn have provided teachers with in-service programs for professional development as well as donated equipment to supplement classroom activities. Additionally, the University brings mentoring programs that provide students additional help in core subject areas.

West Alabama Learning Coalition

Organized in 1995, the West Alabama Learning Coalition aims to improve educational achievements of students in the Black Belt while promoting economic and community development throughout the region. Developed by the AU College of Education's Truman Pierce Institute and supported by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, the Coalition promotes proven educational methods and practices through partnerships with public schools, institutions of higher learning and businesses. The Coalition includes Auburn and Alabama State Universities, Alabama Southern and Beville State Community Colleges, and the Universities of Montevallo, South Alabama and West Alabama, working with Black Belt county and city schools. Examples of some of the initiatives include internship programs, on-site college classes, expanded field-based experiences for pre-interns, teaching strategy diversification, research expansion activities linked to school-based problems and increased student performance.

Contact: Cindy Reed, Director, Truman Pierce Institute, (334) 844-4488.

Extension 4-H and Youth Development

As a result of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's 4-H organization, youth development initiatives, and Teens Getting Involved for the Future (TGIF) program, high school students in Choctaw and neighboring counties have made tremendous strides in preparing themselves educationally and socially for the future. The programs provide a support system for students to address tough issues such as teenage pregnancy. This program has also reinforced the importance of higher education and provided the necessary encouragement for many high school students to attend college.

Contact: Lamar Nichols, Assistant Director for 4-H and Youth Development, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, (334) 844-4444.

Extension BEEing Better Dads

In 1997 the Alabama Cooperative Extension System launched this program in Choctaw and Wilcox counties with funding from the Children's Trust Fund. The program, which is part of the overall Begin Education Early (BEE) initiative, pairs non-custodial fathers with extension program assistants using research-based parenting curricula to assist them with becoming better fathers. The goal is to benefit children's lives through their fathers' personal development and self improvement.

Contact: Evelyn Crayton, Assistant Director, Family and Community Programs, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, (334) 844-2224.

Sowing Seeds of Hope

Sowing Seeds of Hope is a people's partnership between Perry County and the Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). Auburn University officials serve on the Advisory Board of this faith-based initiative drawn from the Holy Bible's 25th Chapter of Matthew which contains powerful teachings about the judgment of God. Organized in 1999, this partnership is aimed at improving the quality of living in Perry County by improving the educational system with a focus on making job training consistent with local job needs. Sowing Seeds of Hope is committed to working *with* the people of Perry County, not *at* them or *for* them or *toward* them.

Contact: Sowing Seeds of Hope Advisory Board members Wayne Flynt, Distinguished University Professor of History, (334) 844-6650, or Robert Montjoy, Assistant Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.



The Black Belt's many churches are key to the growing number of faith-based initiatives like Sowing Seeds of Hope.

Federal Child Care Partnerships

Due to inadequate training for many childcare providers, the Federal Child Care Partnerships (FCCP) was established by the Alabama Department of Human Resources and Auburn University's Department of Human Development and Family Studies. FCCP is currently offering training and professional development to child care workers in Dallas, Greene, Hale, Macon, Marengo and Sumter counties. Since 2000, more than 21 licensed family child care providers in Black Belt counties have received in-home mentoring to improve the quality of child care.

Contact: Ellen Abell, FCCP Program Director, (334) 844-4480, or Ellaine B. Miller, FCCP Program Coordinator, (334) 844-3244.

Surplus Property Program

Financially-strapped school systems have found it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to replace aging equipment. This program, coordinated by Auburn University's offices of University Outreach, Surplus Property and the Truman Pierce Institute, provides K-12 school systems throughout the state of Alabama access to quality surplus property and equipment that Auburn University can no longer utilize in its teaching and research programs. Since 2001, approximately 550 items have been donated to Alabama public school systems including chairs, cabinets, tables, computer systems, printers, monitors, typewriters and fax machines. Additionally, thousands of books have been donated through the program. To date, schools in Barbour, Blount, Calhoun, Chambers, Conecuh, Dallas, Dekalb, Elmore, Hale, Houston, Jefferson, Lee, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Sumter and Tallapoosa counties have participated. Feedback on the program is poignant; numerous teachers reported that simply being able to type their own tests had contributed significantly to their teaching effectiveness.

Contact: Cindy Reed, Director, Truman Pierce Institute, (334) 844-4488, or Royrickers Cook, Special Assistant to the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.

Leadership Institute for Math Teachers

Because of the new SAT10 which requires students to explain how they reach their conclusions in mathematics, a workshop, "Critical Thinking and Problem Solving", was developed to provide K-8th grade teachers with instructional strategies to assist students with understanding problem solving, reasoning and proofs, communication of math and different representations of mathematical ideas. The initial program was conducted over eight days during the summer of 2002 with participants from Dallas and Lowndes county schools. The impact and feedback from this program was positive, warranting the development of follow-up sessions in surrounding counties. Since 2002, teachers from Dallas, Perry, Hale and Lowndes counties have registered to attend the summer sessions.

Contact: Chris Rodger, Professor of Discrete Statistical Science, (334) 844-3746.

Special Lectures for Students

Most school systems have few funds or adequate facilities to host special programs. Since 2002 the Office of the Vice President for University Outreach has sponsored appearances by national-caliber speakers and performers offered free of charge to Black Belt schools and students. Among these, Dr. Mae Jemison, the first African-American female astronaut to travel into outer space, addressed some 400 local and Black Belt K-12 students on her exploits in space, careers in medicine, science and technology, and societal responsibility. Focusing on the importance of science education, Dr. Jemison stressed students should strive to achieve goals and "become who they intend to be."

Contact: Royrickers Cook, Special Assistant to the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.



The Mae Jemison lecture provided Black Belt students a rare opportunity to meet a national hero.

COMMUNITY

Focus on Helping

HERO

HERO
The Environmental and Technical Department
KNOWLEDGE CAFE
Hale County Community Center Resource Center

10-BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Community and Economic Development

A region's quality of life also depends on adequate housing, health care and nutrition. There must be good jobs and available civic services. All these are persistent challenges for the Black Belt. Auburn University has focused considerable resources on assisting Black Belt citizens with community and economic development challenges. These issues are complicated by the racial divide that is often present in small rural Alabama towns.

With this in mind, Auburn University works with citizens on closing racial and cultural divisions by identifying projects that unite communities across differences in race, gender and age. These programs range from constructing houses to assisting with the development of community-based organizations.

The Rural Studio

When many residents of the Black Belt, particularly in Hale county, think of a roof over their heads, a "warm, dry room" in which to survive the winter, or a redesigned Family Service Center — and a new playground behind it — they think of Auburn. These tangible outreach projects are the product of the College of Architecture, Design and Construction's Rural Studio. First established in the Hale County seat of Greensboro and now located in Newbern, the Rural Studio was established in 1993 with grants from the Alabama Power Foundation and Jessie Ball duPont Fund.

Architecture students live at the Rural Studio gaining hands-on experience in actual design and construction of housing. Students meet and collaborate with the people who will live in the homes they will build. Many students, for the first time, see the effects of poverty on the lives of people. For these students, the Rural Studio is a life-changing experience. The Rural Studio and its late co-founder, Samuel Mockbee, have been showcased in the *New York Times* and *Architecture* magazine, as well as on national television. Recognized and often hailed as a national model of teaching excellence, service learning and university outreach, the Rural Studio has inspired other Auburn programs to enter the region to initiate similar university-community partnerships.

Contact: Bruce Lindsey, Co-Director, Architecture Rural Studio, (334) 844-5418.



Rural Studio architecture students design and build a variety of home and public facilities including this community ball park in Newbern.

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Extension Family and Community Programs

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) works with counties throughout the Black Belt region to address major quality-of-life issues through comprehensive family, community and economic development initiatives. ACES provides educational and technical assistance in economic development, leadership development, strategic planning, environmental education, community health, workforce development and public policy education. Projects include the Alabama-Mississippi Rural Tourism Conference and the Tuskegee/Macon County Tourism Plan. The Alabama Cooperative Extension Nutrition Education Program (ACENEP) combines two highly successful education programs into a single initiative to strengthen nutrition education in the state. All counties located throughout the Black Belt are served by ACENEP, which focuses on both family and youth audiences with the goal of improving the total family diet.

Contact: Evelyn Crayton, Assistant Director, Family and Community Programs, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, (334) 844-2224.

Auburn University Montgomery School of Nursing Rural Health Initiative

Launched in 1988, this program set out to improve rural residents' health and quality of life in Wilcox and Lowndes counties. The project was supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, which funded the project with three three-year grants of \$1 million each. The program launched innovative efforts to meet the needs of the community by mobilizing volunteers. The projects focused on in-home assistance to elderly citizens, student health and academic performance, and integrating health education and job training. More than 400 residents were trained to become home health aides and earned certification. The communities involved have been able to sustain many of the volunteer projects resulting from the AUM Nursing Rural Health Initiatives. The program was recently selected by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation as one of 75 funded projects to be highlighted during the foundation's 75th anniversary.

Contact: Barbara S. Witt, Dean, School of Nursing (334) 244-3658.

Leadership Selma/Dallas County

Since 1993 Auburn faculty conducts strategic planning workshops for Leadership Selma/Dallas County. The four workshops involve participants in a Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat analysis of their county and provide planning exercises addressing each phase of their analysis.

Contact: William Sauser, Associate Dean of Business and Engineering Outreach, (334) 844-2352.



West Alabama Public Service Interns

The Office of the Vice President for University Outreach sponsors graduate students to work as interns with community officials on a request basis. Since 1996 interns have been placed in Wilcox, Marengo and Perry counties. Interns serve within local governments or are assigned to specific community and economic development projects. The primary emphasis of these internships is providing students with opportunities to apply their graduate training to address some of the needs identified by local communities.

Contact: Royrickers Cook, Special Assistant to the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.



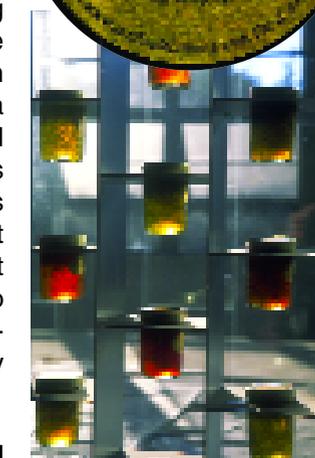
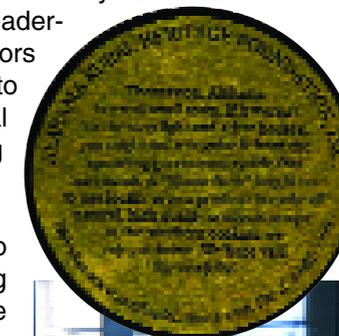
Interns work directly with community leaders on projects in their assigned locales.

Do Something! Grants / Grow Your Own Jobs

In 1998, Auburn University's Office of the Vice President for University Outreach launched a competition for faculty-community partnership grants aimed at "doing something" with the Black Belt. The "Do Something!" grants funded five proposals from faculty members across campus. These initiatives included forming a leadership program for Sumter County, initiating an aquaculture honors program to introduce young African-Americans in the Black Belt to careers in fisheries and allied aquaculture, starting a regional entrepreneurship program, funding a pharmacy health screening project, and forming a jobs creation program in Thomaston.

This latter program, dubbed "Grow Your Own Jobs" continues to serve the Thomaston community and has received supporting funds from a Forest Service Economic Recovery Grant and the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation. Projects include working with the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel to develop an area Heritage Center and developing a retail gift shop to market local products such as plants, quilts and food items. The impact of this initiative has been enormous to the region. In 2002 sales receipts were approximately \$30,000 at the gift shop located in a vacant vocational building at Marengo County High School. The project also attracted grants from USDA and HUD for almost \$500,000 to renovate and equip the proposed kitchen and vegetable processing operation which now produces food items such as pepper jelly for the gift shop.

Contact: Robin Fellers, Associate Professor of Nutrition and Food Science, (334) 844-3270.



Pepper jelly on display at a gift shop in Thomaston.

Civic Architectural Planning

The Center for Architecture and Urban Studies, housed in Auburn University's College of Architecture, Design and Construction, developed plans in 1999 for the city of Marion located in Perry County. Students worked with citizens, focusing on protecting and preserving aspects of the town which were considered special while planning for revitalization, growth and improved quality of life. The community architectural designs and layouts are part of overall civic planning for the physical and economic vitality of the town.

Contact: Cheryl Morgan, Director and Professor, Urban Studio, School of Architecture, (205) 323-3592.

Business and Industrial Technical Assistance / Southeastern Cheese

The Auburn Technical Assistance Center/Alabama Technology Network-AU is the industrial outreach arm of the College of Business. The center performs comprehensive consultation and assistance to existing and emerging companies across the state. The center assisted Southeastern Cheese, a Uniontown dairy plant, with improving its production yield and increasing its employee base. Among the services provided were a plant feasibility study, which assessed a plant addition for producing specialty cheese that would increase profit; implementation of a spreadsheet accounting system to more accurately document production costs; hazard analysis and critical control review, which was required by industry standards; and development of new, more profitable cheese products.

Contact: Henry Burd, Director, ATAC/ATN-AU, (334) 844-4659.



Southeastern Cheese improved its production and profitability with Auburn's assistance.

Uniontown and "Uniontown Cares"

A local student created the inspiring logo for "Uniontown Cares", a product of community-university collaboration.

In 1999 Auburn University joined the City of Uniontown in Perry County on developing a strategy for community renewal and growth. The University received a three-year HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center grant to establish a model for delivering comprehensive outreach services to rural areas in the state. Uniontown became the focal point for the grant, which is managed by Auburn University's Economic Development Institute, in collaboration with Student Affairs, the Center for Governmental Services and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.



External partners are Tuskegee University, the University of Alabama and Design Corps Inc., a non-profit organization which provides architectural, planning and design services to communities. Six projects were launched in Uniontown: graduate student mentoring/tutoring at R. C. Hatch High School; organization of a community leadership development program; civic infrastructure development for the city's municipal personnel and budgeting systems; local small business assistance; creation of a Uniontown economic profile; and planning of city landscaping and security lighting.

As part of a Civil Economics Research Project funded by the Kettering Foundation, Auburn University turned once again to Uniontown. This project provided a stimulus for residents of different racial, cultural and economic backgrounds to come together in community harmony to develop strategies to improve the quality of life in Uniontown. Their commitment to improving Uniontown's quality of life has served as the driving force behind the establishment in 2001 of a representative community group called "Uniontown Cares." With assistance from Auburn University, Uniontown Cares members have worked tirelessly on projects aimed at improving the image, conditions and race relations in this city. Efforts include downtown revitalization and clean up of parks and playgrounds; developing community brochures, welcome signs and web page (www.uniontownalabama.org); and organizing an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter.



Contact: Joe Sumners, Director, Economic Development Institute (EDI), (334) 844-4704, or Christa Slaton, Professor of Political Science, (334) 844-6123, or Jeremy Arthur, Outreach Assistant II, EDI, (334) 844-4704 or Robert Montjoy or Royrickers Cook, Office of the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.

Black Belt Community Foundation

In 1997, Auburn University's Office of the Vice President for University Outreach commenced planning for a Black Belt Regional Education and Economic Development Foundation. Patterned after the Foundation for the Mid-South, headquartered in Mississippi, the proposed foundation would focus on education, economic and community development, and grassroots leadership in 12 Black Belt counties. Subsequently, Auburn has joined with Black Belt residents who were organizing a similar community foundation. The collaborative effort resulted in the establishment of the now named Black Belt Community Foundation. The Ford Foundation provided a \$100,000 grant to conduct the preliminary planning to bring this entity into full operation. The Foundation is expected to become operational by mid to late 2004.

Contact: David Wilson, Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.

Local Government Training

For a quarter century, Auburn's Center for Governmental Services (CGS) has provided training and professional development for county commissioners, tax assessors, tax administrators, sales tax examiners, public personnel administrators and other civic officials. Since 2001 the center's service to Black Belt government has accelerated. Twenty-six Black Belt commissioners have completed CGS' 50-hour education program for county officials.

Working with the Alabama Rural Water Association, CGS conducted extensive management and administrative training in Demopolis, Monroeville and Selma, serving more than 200 rural water utility professionals and civic officials. Additionally, CGS has conducted technical assistance projects in Black Belt communities to develop or modernize the governmental personnel practices, including job description, pay and classification plans, performance appraisal, policies and procedures.

Contact: Jim Seroka, Director, Center for Governmental Services, (334) 844-4781.



CGS serves local and county government officials throughout the Black Belt.

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) Technical Assistance for Distressed Counties

Auburn University's Economic Development Institute provides assistance to two economically distressed communities in Hale and Pickens counties which are part of the Appalachian Regional Commission service area. Assistance includes developing a strategic economic development plan for each community, preparing grant proposals on behalf of communities to help support a project aligned with one of ARC's strategic goals, and helping communities establish effective mentoring relationships with successful ARC communities.

Contact: Joe Sumners, Director, Economic Development Institute, (334) 844-4704.

Transition Certificate of Achievement Program

The Transition Certificate of Achievement Program (TCAP) for West Alabama provides competency-based training to transition personnel striving to move high school students with disabilities from school to work. The greatest strength of this training initiative was the simplicity of its concept: to assist students with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining community integrated competitive employment. This program supports 10 full-time employees from participating school systems in West Alabama who were required to complete 192 hours of instruction and 120 hours of field-based application experiences/activities. Individuals have been trained under TCAP's seven participating school systems (Choctaw, Dallas, Marengo and Perry counties and the cities of Demopolis, Linden and Selma).

Contact: Vivian Larkin, Project Director of TCAP, (334) 844-5943.



CULTURE

Focus on Preserving



Cultural Preservation/Awareness

The Black Belt has been center stage for some of the state's and indeed the nation's most historic events. The region has been host to the founding of Tuskegee University and the launching of the Civil Rights Movement, both of which profoundly advanced freedom in this country. However, Black Belt citizens have limited institutional resources to document and preserve their heritage. At the same time, there are few opportunities for people in the region to learn in context about cultural links – and differences – between the Black Belt and the world around it.

Auburn University works with Black Belt communities to identify and preserve the history and culture of the region, as well as expose residents – especially young people – to the diversity of the arts and humanities beyond their locale. These efforts emphasize collaboration with local schools and civic organizations, that allow the University and external providers to present students with an opportunity to learn about their own heritage while promoting an appreciation for the heritage of those who differ from their own.

Snow Hill Institute

The Snow Hill Institute was founded in 1893 by William Edwards, graduate of Tuskegee Institute and protégé of Booker T. Washington. Snow Hill was a private boarding school that offered academic and vocational courses to African-Americans. The Institute was eventually incorporated into the county school system, and later closed in Wilcox County. Consuela Lee, William Edward's granddaughter, organized a group of alumni and grassroots organizations to reopen the school as an educational center. In 1995 Lee and the community contacted Auburn University's Office of the Vice President for University Outreach and the College of Architecture, Design and Construction and requested assistance with facilitating restoration of the Institute. Since the initial request for assistance, Auburn University has conducted a study for the Institute which emphasized maintaining cultural and environmental surroundings, and the development of a charter school emphasizing arts, agriculture and technology.

Contact: David Wilson, Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.

Black Belt School and Library Humanities Initiatives

Schools and libraries in the Black Belt are the focal point of a collaborative effort to bring national caliber humanities opportunities to students. The "Helping High Schools through the Humanities" program was developed in 1996 by AU's Center for the Arts and Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts. Historically faced with limited or no resources for humanities programming, Black Belt schools and local public libraries were able to host through the program a number of plays, poetry workshops, author visits and civil rights presentations otherwise not accessible to students in rural communities. Auburn's Distinguished University Professor of History Wayne Flynt, author Linda Holmes, Tuskegee Airman Lt. Col. Charles Dryden, poet

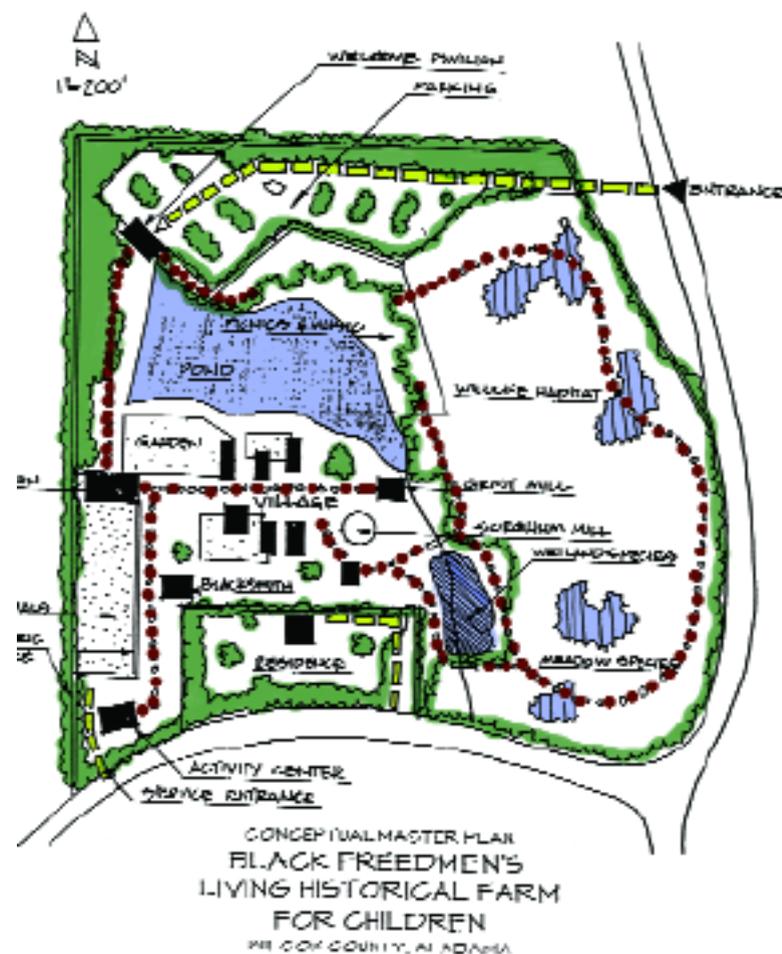
Sonia Sanchez, and the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company were among the presenters in extraordinary humanities events arranged by the Center for local schools. Other projects include historical and cultural preservation activities aimed at building students' appreciation for the rich legacy of their region.

Contact: Jay Lamar, Interim Director, Center for Arts and Humanities, (334) 844-4948.

Black Freedmen's Living Historical Farm for Children

The Black Freedmen's Living Historical Farm for Children Inc., was founded in 1994 by Ellen O. Byrd. Located on 40 acres of land in Wilcox County, this farm provides school children throughout the state of Alabama with an alternative educational experience that focuses on farming, tree identification and aquatics, evoking the memory of the post-Civil War Freedmen who farmed the area. Byrd has introduced hundreds of school children in Wilcox County and throughout the state to how natural resources were utilized not only for survival but to improve one's personal and economic growth. Auburn University Outreach has been working with Byrd since 1996 on developing this educational establishment. Currently, professors and students from Auburn University's College of Architecture are developing site plans for renovating an existing building into an Environmental Education Center. This center will be used to stimulate environmental consciousness as it relates to cultural awareness, recreational activities and historical reenactments.

Contact: Royrickers Cook, Special Assistant to the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.



The values and industry of the Freedmen of the post-Civil War Black Belt is being recreated in an educational center for Alabama's school children.

Special Performances for Students

In 2003 University Outreach and the Auburn Theatre Department hosted Black Belt schools for three performances by the Ailey II dancers of the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Based in New York City, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is an award-winning company that has performed for more than 19 million people worldwide. Considered one of America's most acclaimed international cultural ambassadors, Ailey II conducted interactive performances which allowed students to ask questions, participate in routines and fully understand the importance of dance, as it relates to body movement and overall physical fitness. Approximately 1,300 students from Black Belt and area schools attended the performances.

Contact: Royrickers Cook, Special Assistant to the Vice President for University Outreach, (334) 844-5700.



AGRICULTURE

Focus on Developing

The vast majority of the Black Belt region remains in miles and miles of farmland.

Agriculture and Natural Resources

Because of rich, fertile soil that gives the region its name, the Black Belt has historically been considered the agricultural center of the state, particularly Alabama's cotton industry. But beyond traditional row crop agriculture, the flat land and black clay soil is perfect for livestock production and even non-traditional agricultural endeavors such as fish farming. A large portion of the region is covered in forests, supporting active forest products, managed wildlife and recreational industries which greatly expands the regional economy.

Auburn University has been assisting landowners on refining and developing best practices for farming, timber and wildlife management for many years. Agricultural and natural resources programming and farm assistance has been provided primarily by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES), the College of Agriculture and the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. Extension agents and specialists operate in every county throughout the region, along with staff at several dedicated research-extension facilities.

Agricultural Programs and Services

ACES with its counterparts in the College of Agriculture and the Agricultural Experiment Station provide assistance statewide to farmers, including those in Black Belt counties. Extension helps Alabama's farmers create and maintain healthy, profitable and environmentally sustainable operations. The Experiment Station's Black Belt Substation originated in the late 1920s. Today, the Black Belt Research and Extension Center addresses the specific needs of agriculture in the region. Home gardening and urban horticulture are also major Extension priorities.

Services include consultation, diagnostic and trial studies, and a library of informational circulars and training programs. Agricultural programs and services focus on: cattle, poultry and other animal production and waste management; irrigation and water resources; pesticide use and pest management; agribusiness development; farm business management; commercial vegetable production; cotton and other crop production; and plant diagnostics and soil testing.

Among the innovative programs available to the region is the Master Cattle Producers Training Program which provides instruction in all aspects of a competitive cattle operation. More than 1,450 producers from 41 counties have been certified through this program. ACES, along with the Alabama Fire Ant Management Project, has worked in Lowndes County to establish phorid flies, a major predator of fire ants, in an effort to reduce the ants which can be dangerous to humans and livestock.

Contact: Gaines Smith, Interim Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, (334) 844-4444 or John Jenson, Interim Dean and Director, College of Agriculture and Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station, (334) 844-3209.

Alabama Fish Farming Center

In 1982 the Fish Farming Center was established in Greensboro to provide statewide educational and technical assistance in all aspects of fish farming. Since then, the number of water acreage being farmed has tripled. Such increases reflect the growth of aquaculture nationwide, where farm-raised fish production has become a major component of the seafood industry. Annually, the Fish Farming Center analyzes thousands of water samples, diagnosing disease cases and surveying hundreds of acres in pond sites. The center is supported by AU's Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures, the Alabama Soil and Conservation District, ACES, the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station and the USDA's Wildlife Services Agency.

Contact: Greg Whitis, Area Extension Specialist, Alabama Fish Farming Center, Greensboro, (334) 624-4016.

Forestry Programs

The School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences serves the timber industry in the region, conducting extensive research and extension projects. In 1999 forestry faculty launched a study in Greene County to examine the effectiveness of plastic tube shelters and wire cages in reducing damage by deer grazing on planted oak seedlings. The study also analyzed costs and benefits of fertilizer application at the time of planting and its interaction with the browse control treatments. In 2000 a study in Sumter County focused on improving the reproduction of high-quality oaks in the region's bottomland forests. The study analyzed species composition, growth and quality of tree reproduction following clear cut harvesting.

Contact: Edward Loewenstein, Assistant Professor of Silviculture, School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, (334) 844-1069.



Catfish farms provide their produce for the local processing plant which serves an ever expanding seafood market.

VISION

Promise for Prosperity

Even with years of extensive effort by various civic organizations, governmental agencies and educational institutions, the Black Belt remains on almost every sociological, educational and economic level woefully behind the rest of the state. In 2003 Governor Bob Riley declared the Black Belt as one of his administration's top priorities. In response, Auburn University launched an effort to create a viable strategic plan to assist residents of this region with overcoming some of the obstacles that have been present for decades. The resulting draft, "Moving Forward in the Black Belt of Alabama: Strategies for Auburn University's Continued Engagement in the Region," outlines comprehensive goals and objectives for economic development in the region.

This plan is deliberate, inclusive, creative and unconventional, offering numerous recommendations and proposals for advancing the region. It builds upon AU-led initiatives already in place, taking advantage of the University's unique strengths, and forging new public and private partnerships. The plan focuses on ways Auburn University can best utilize its resources and expertise to address social, educational, health and economic conditions in the Black Belt.

Five areas have been identified as the focus of Auburn University's efforts over the next 5 to 7 years:

- Education
- Health and Wellness
- Student and Faculty Housing
- Community and Economic Development
- The Rural Studio

Based on the variety of data the University has compiled on the assets, strengths and challenges of the region, the programs and directions outlined in this report are the best ways Auburn can use its collective expertise to assist in building regional capacity. Goals include:

1. Working more closely with K-12 teachers, principals and students, through the West Alabama Learning Coalition, **to improve the effectiveness of schools and to improve student academic performance.**
2. **Increasing the number of teachers in mathematics and science** working in Black Belt Schools.
3. **Creating the Auburn University Virtual High School** to offer advanced placement courses to students, using Auburn University faculty and graduate students.

4. Improving professional development of teachers by **creating a Teaching and Learning Academy in the Black Belt**.

5. Establishing partnerships with health providers to **create programs to reduce mortality rates in the Black Belt** due to stroke, heart disease, HIV and cancer.

6. **Building housing in Hale County for 30-40 Auburn University students and 3-4 Auburn University faculty** to enable more students and faculty from Auburn University to engage in outreach and service learning in the region.

7. Working with elected officials, community groups and others to **produce a regional economic development strategy for the Black Belt**.

8. Continuing Auburn University's efforts, in partnership with community groups and others, to **create a regional Black Belt Foundation and endowment**.

9. Eliminating barriers to college by **creating a scholarship program** to target students in many Black Belt schools.

It will be costly to bridge the divide which separates the Black Belt from a brighter future. Not counting the substantial commitment of resources Auburn already provides to the region, conservative estimates call for an investment of approximately \$17 million over five to seven years to conduct the initiatives outlined in the report. But more importantly, it will take a dedicated partnership between Auburn University, the state of Alabama, the private sector, private foundations and others to achieve the goals of the strategic plan. However, beyond any cost or time estimates, a revitalized Black Belt would be priceless in terms of benefits to the citizens of this region who have so long suffered a lesser quality of life than their fellow Alabamians.



For Additional Information:

www.auburn.edu/outreach

<http://www.auburn.edu/outreach/alabamablackbelt>

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BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: Auburn University's Outreach to Alabama's Black Belt