

# Cultivating Reciprocity: The Guiding Framework for Benedict College in Partnership with the Community to Garner Economic and Community Growth

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## Abstract

This article delineates Benedict College's strategies for transforming the community to foster a strong sense of connectedness and inclusivity to the institution. Reciprocal partnerships between the college and the community have served as a vehicle for achieving the mission of the college and addressing critical community issues. Benedict College has collaborated in such community development endeavors as renewal of the area surrounding the college, including improved housing for underserved local families. In its efforts to holistically organize college and community, Benedict College has institutionalized service-learning as a sustainable method of integrating community partnership into higher education. Information presented in this article focuses primarily on the methodical partnership between Benedict College and its surrounding community to collaboratively address the issue of economic and community growth through unified, sustainable plans and decisions.

## Benedict College and the Community: Building the Partnership

**A***historical overview:* Since 1870 Benedict College has remained true to its name. The name Benedict means *blessing*, and for 137 years, Benedict College has been a *blessing* to the African American community. The largest accredited private historically black college (HBCU) in the two Carolinas, Benedict College, like many HBCUs, stands proud in the heart of a once-prominent neighborhood that continually seeks ways to revitalize and sustain its spirit. Rich in pride, prominence, and prosperity, the Edgewood-Waverly community encircles Benedict College. From a historical perspective, the local neighborhood was once immersed in the livelihood of churches, schools, black-owned businesses, and a medical facility, in addition to doctors, lawyers, and educators who provided renowned service to the neighborhood and other South Carolina blacks during an unforgettable era of racial segregation. Educational facilities, such as Benedict College,

were especially significant for their service to blacks when racial discrimination denied many of them educational opportunities equal to those available to whites. Today, Benedict College remains committed to its neighboring community.

**Community analysis:** Assessing the need, Benedict College made the decision to concentrate its efforts on creating affordable housing in the Edgewood section of the community. A later analysis further justified the decision, as it revealed that the total popula-

**Table 1. Population Trends**

2008 Projection	4,174
2003 Estimate	4,460
2000 Census	4,645
1990 Census	4,859
1990-2000 Total Growth	-4.40%
Annual Average	-0.44%

*Source: F. A. Johnson Consulting Group, Inc.*

tion of the community between 1990 and 2000 decreased consistently. It spiraled down from 4,859 to 4,645 and is projected to decrease to a low of 4,174 persons by 2008 (table 1). Public housing served as home for many of the residents. As a part of the city's plan, public housing was to be eradicated and replaced with single-family dwellings. The steady decrease

**Table 2. Occupied Housing Units**

2000 Total Occupied Housing Units	1,174
Owner Occupied	10.99%
Renter Occupied	89.01%
Average # of persons per household	2.19

*Source: F. A. Johnson Consulting Group, Inc.*

reflects the decline of many residential areas. Approximately 89 percent of all the occupied homes in the community were renter occupied, indicating a relatively transient population base (table 2). Only 50.48 percent of the population over age twenty-five had earned a high school diploma or GED. The high percentage of the population lacking a high school diploma or GED adversely impacted the household income and per capita income levels achieved. In 2000, just over 54 percent of the population generated incomes below the poverty level. The median household income and per capita household income levels were less than half those reported for Richland County, the state of South Carolina, and the nation (*F. A. Johnson Consulting Group 2004*).

**The role of Benedict-Allen Community Development Corporation:** In partnership with the community, under the lead-

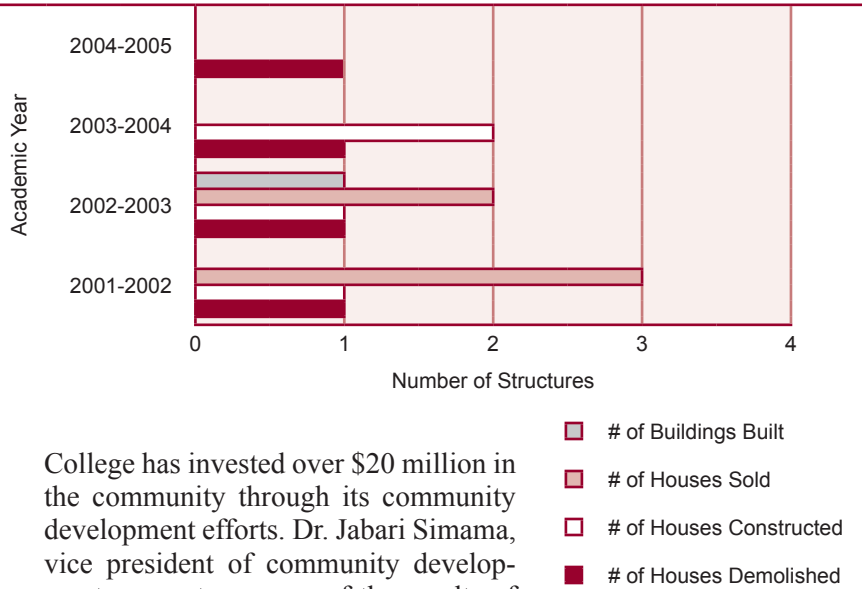
ership of President David H. Swinton, Benedict College is effectuating its institutional mission to provide public service and to impact conditions in the African American community. Established at the college in 1995 as a vision of President Swinton, the Benedict-Allen Community Development Corporation (CDC) has been a catalyst for the renewal of the community surrounding the college. A unit of the Division of Community Development, the Benedict-Allen CDC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation created to implement activities promoting its mission of community development and neighborhood revitalization. The CDC's primary objective is to serve as a catalyst for change by combining public and private resources to accomplish common goals (*Benedict College. Division of Community Development 2007*). In collaboration with the local community councils and the city of Columbia, the Benedict-Allen CDC has renovated and built homes for low- to moderate-income families, beginning with the surrounding Edgewood community, referenced in the corporation's literature as the Waverly/Read Street community. Building affordable houses in that community was a rarity due to the expanding suburban community development in the city. Nevertheless, Dr. Swinton believed in the viability, decency, and economic opportunity of the local neighborhood:

When I came to Benedict, I learned that people were afraid to walk down certain blocks around the college. There were unsavory characters hanging around some of the houses; windows on homes were boarded up; and drugs were rampant. Our children were exposed to this negative behavior. I knew something needed to be done. (*Nkuo 2002, 14*)

***The reciprocity of the partnership:*** Partnering with the community, Benedict College rolled up its sleeves and did something to address the need for economic and community development. The Benedict-Allen CDC addressed the need for the Waverly/Read Street residential revitalization through the promotion of home ownership as a result of the acquisition, rehabilitation, and resale of existing substandard housing and new home development. From 2000 to 2005, four houses were demolished, four houses were constructed, five houses were sold, and one building was built (see figure 1) (*Benedict College. Division of Community Development 2005*). This is quite remarkable for a small CDC during a five-year span.

Yet the impact is even greater. For example, since 1999 when the full Division of Community Development was formed, Benedict

**Figure 1. Physical Structures within the Division of Community Development**



Source: Benedict College,  
Division of Community  
Development 2005

College has invested over \$20 million in the community through its community development efforts. Dr. Jabari Simama, vice president of community development, presents a scope of the results of the partnership (*Simama 2007*). Alongside U.S. Representative Jim Clyburn during a tour of the community, Dr. Simama showcased both completed and planned affordable houses developed as a result of the partnership with the Benedict-Allen CDC. The tour included the “off the footprint” phase of development that encompasses homes of top college administrators; a community park where the college students and the community enjoy facilities for tennis, basketball, and jogging; affordable housing; new student dormitories; and the Business Development Center (BDC), which is the focus for the growth of black businesses in the Midlands. He also shared the plans for a new mixed-use development to be called the Shoppes on Read. They ended the tour at the Charlie W. Johnson Football Stadium, a new venue that offers space for ten thousand spectators and executive suites for special events. The developments delineated during the tour recapitulate the compelling story of “how a small college can drive economic and community development and make a profound difference in its immediate environs” (*Simama 2007, 4*).

One of Benedict’s staunch community partners, a long-standing member of the community surrounding Benedict and a catalyst for the community’s revitalization, Mrs. Myrtle Gordon, says, “Benedict has been a blessing to the revitalization of the

area. Benedict picked up where the city [of Columbia] left off and is helping to transform the community” (*Greene et al. 2002, 83*). “Years ago, this was a thriving community [around Benedict]. Unfortunately, many lifelong residents died, leaving their property to family members. The family members often moved away, either selling the home or turning it into a rental property. The neighborhood ended up with many absentee landlords and was soon filled with people who did not care about the area,” says Gordon. “I consider them [Benedict College] a savior of the neighborhood” (*Nkwo 2002, 16*).

Benedict College’s vision of revitalization is more than just the development of another isolated program. The passion and commitment to the institution’s role in the local community reverberate through its strategic plan in the aim to help create sustainable ways to improve the college and the community through shared opportunities and decision making. “In my judgment,” says President Swinton, “there is a direct connection between education and the economy, between education and civility, between education and the future of society at large. Benedict College is committed to being a strong partner in that connection” (*Benedict College. Office of the President 2001, 6*).

### Service-Learning: The Added Value of Revitalization

***Sustaining change through service-learning:*** The Benedict College Service-Learning Program was identified as a viable established program that could help effectuate and sustain the progression of the community’s development. Institutionalized in 1995 as a graduation requirement, service-learning engages students in 120 hours of service activities connected directly to the curriculum. Dr. Swinton believes “that Benedict College scholars must provide new insight into some of the persisting and intractable problems that challenge our society today. It is important for Benedict faculty and student scholars to work on advancing the knowledge required to enable African Americans to become full and equal partners in America” (*Benedict College. Office of the President 2001, 18*). The Benedict College Service-Learning Program is an example of an institutional initiative that expands classroom teaching and builds student altruism. Students are placed at sites that canvass the following areas of service in approximately the proportions indicated: education (36%), health (12%), human needs (40%), crime prevention (1%), environmental awareness (2%), technology (2%), and research (7%). Students render approximately forty-six

thousand hours of service to the community per year through identified courses that strategically blend service and learning simultaneously (*Benedict College. Service-Learning Program 2006*).

Service-learning is proudly supported by Dr. Swinton as a means for helping to cultivate a sense of responsibility to the community and themselves in each of the college's nearly 2700 students.

Service-Learning provides Benedict College students with an opportunity to put what they are learning into practice. It helps them hone their leadership skills and to develop confidence in their ability to provide work of value to society. In addition, it instills in them a sense of personal responsibility for finding solutions to the problems and concerns of society. Service-Learning teaches students to take ownership and think in terms of "us" and "we" rather than in terms of "them" and "they." While they learn and serve, Benedict students provide incredible resources to help address important social and community issues.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, students have played a vital role in the Edgewood-Waverly revitalization efforts through the collegewide, cross-disciplinary program. With the help of students, faculty, and staff, community revitalization has far exceeded the scope of housing renovations; it has served as a method for addressing the human element of the local neighborhood. A myriad of student engagement initiatives has been developed specifically in the Edgewood-Waverly neighborhood, ranging from community clean-ups to health awareness, intergenerational therapeutic and recreational activities, historical documentation, community council meetings, and town hall forums, in addition to faith-based and school district tutoring and mentoring programs. Table 3 gives a sampling of academic-based projects and impact.

### Factors Influencing the Partnership Success

The factors listed below are derived from best practices of the collaborative building of partnerships (*Leiderman et al. 2002*) and the merit of inclusivity in creating community (*Fine 2000*). Reciprocity, in its truest form, is the underlying principle that guides the success of effective partnerships that endure.

**Table 3. Sample Benedict College service-learning partnerships and projects across the curriculum directly impacting the Edgewood-Waverly community**

Academic Courses	Descriptions	Community Partners	Area of Service	Community Impact
CJ 433: Community Crime Prevention and Private Security	An intervention program where college students provide tutoring and mentoring to middle and high school students	Columbia Police Department Richland School District I	Crime prevention & education	Reduced crime, drugs, violence, and truancy, and enhanced academic achievement of 60 at-risk youth per year
FA 211, 212: Fine Arts Sophomore Seminar SW 211, 212: Social Work Sophomore Seminar	An intervention program for troubled youths where college students provide tutoring and mentoring to middle, high, and alternative school students	Save Our Kids (nonprofit organization)	Human needs, crime prevention & education	Enhanced academic achievement and career/collegiate mentoring for 100 troubled youths
ENG 237: Oral Communication	A health awareness campaign that requires college students to seek creative methods for addressing health disparities while demonstrating acquired oral communication skills	Bethlehem Community Center	Health & education	Addressed health disparities such as HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in the African American community with 80 afterschool youth per year

1. *The rationale for the collaboration was identified and agreed upon.* A hint of mistrust can initiate the demise of a partnership. Therefore, the more partners are able to listen and communicate openly, the stronger a foundation of trust can be built. These partners established both historical and current foundations on which they could agree to collaborate, with the implicit intention of dispelling traditional connotations of the town-gown relationship.
2. *There was a set of mutually determined goals.* Inclusion is key to partnership development. It creates connectedness. With a sense of connectedness, individual partners' operational contexts can be comprehended, and goals and processes can be mutually achieved. These partners developed a mutual understanding. Decisions were not made without the consent of each. As a result, ideas were

sometimes tabled. Those that moved forth were decided collaboratively.

3. *Resources, rewards, and risks were shared among partners.* Each partner should have something to offer that is clear and equally beneficial to all. These partners held town hall meetings, allocated shared space, and identified and exchanged resources during the initial building stages. They also anticipated risks and predicted rewards to be shared.
4. *Parity was fundamental.* The partners should acknowledge and respect each other's expertise and experiences. These partners established and demonstrated a sense of equality during the early stages. There were no hidden agendas. The results, therefore, were exceeded. Economic growth became evident through affordable housing for local underserved constituents, and other physical structures were developed, sold, or demolished. Additionally, dialogue and outreach activities enriched the partnership that involved the full campus community and the local neighborhood.
5. *A shared vision was established.* Without a vision, the partnership will perish. A shared vision must be built on genuine excitement and passion. The passion of both partners was not only demonstrated among them but also communicated to outside constituencies to help create a win-win collaboration.
6. *Assessment and sustainability became an essential part of the planning and implementation.* Here today and gone tomorrow. This is the life of many programs and partnerships. Both components work hand in hand. Programs that have wonderful assessment plans but no plans for continuance will soon dissolve. This partnership mapped out an assessment plan that included periodic review. Then, the stakeholders meticulously identified established areas where they could immerse the programmatic concepts into the culture of the institution and the community through the articulation of facets of the partnership into their practices and policies.

## Conclusion

The Carnegie Foundation asserts that there is a need not just for more programs, but for a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a



larger clarity of direction in the nation's life (*Campus Compact 2001*). Larger issues may never be fully and holistically addressed until communities (groups of people) organize to develop and articulate methods that work, not as isolated activities but as institutionalized activities and decisions. In this context, *institutionalized* activities and decisions are those which have been strategically immersed into the overall culture of the institution and the community. This is a more sustainable method for integration than routine implementation.

Now more than ever is the time for higher education institutions to transform their academic environments by considering the community as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Colleges not only need to go to the community but also need the community to come to their campuses to create reciprocal environments for partnership development. At Benedict College, the vision for and efforts of the Benedict-Allen CDC have helped transform the neighboring Edgewood-Waverly community and helped to restore the prominence it once enjoyed. Not only has affordable housing been developed for underserved families, but homes have been renovated to attract the college's faculty and staff to become residents. Demonstrating further impact for change, the Service-Learning Program continues to assist with the neighborhood transformation by retooling the teaching and learning process at the institution, across each academic discipline, to extend beyond the traditional purview of scholarship from classrooms and textbooks to the civic engagement of students and faculty. By design, the aim of sustained economic and community growth is the result of the reciprocal relationship established between the partnership of Benedict College and its neighbor, the Edgewood-Waverly community.

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## Endnotes

1. Taken from Dr. Swinton's original interview as documented in the video *Service-Learning in Higher Education: A Portrait of Five Institutions* (Neal 1999), which includes coverage of the Benedict College Service-Learning Program. The video interview is a demonstration of the president's total commitment to the institutionalization of service-learning as a primary vehicle for the development of student leadership at the college.

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- Gwenda R. Greene, Ph.D., serves as the assistant dean for the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences and an assistant professor of English in the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Mass Communication at Benedict College, Columbia, South Carolina. She has also served at the college as the associate director for student leadership development and director for the Service-Learning Program. In addition to her higher education responsibilities as an administrator and professor, she is also a regional advisor for the National Service-Learning Exchange, and a board member of the International Service-Learning Center for Service-Learning in Teacher Education. Dr. Greene is recognized nationally for her experience in service-learning that spans more than a decade. Credited to her experience is the institutionalized service-learning program at Benedict College, established in 1995 as a graduation requirement. The program has been featured in the video *Service-Learning in Higher Education: A Portrait of Five Institutions* and the resource publications *A Gallery of Portraits in Service-Learning Action Research in Teacher Education*, *Studying Service-Learning: Innovations in Education Research Methodology*, the *Generator*, and the *National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Newsletter*.

