Study looks at LSU's neighbor to north

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Geographically, LSU and the neighborhoods to the north can hardly be closer. In most other respects, they've been worlds apart. The T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History's study of the area is part of an effort to change that.

The study, now in its fourth year, has at least another year to go. When it ends, a history will be written of a predominantly black section long ignored by those who don't live there.

"It's a poor inner city neighborhood that needs all the help it can get," said center director Pamela Dean. "We're trying to be good neighbors. Historically, LSU has not been a good neighbor to the African-American community."

Even before the center began its study, the neighborhood was picked by LSU's Community-University Partnership for emphasis. The partnership, Dean said, draws from various parts of the university to focus research grants on selected neighborhoods.

When black residents boycotted the Baton Rouge bus system in 1953, cars like the one in the background provided free rides. The boycott lasted eight days and forced the bus system to allow black riders to sit in all but the front two rows.

Study

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"It enables students and faculty to do research in the real world rather than the theoretical," Dean said. "It also helps the university better serve an underserved part of the community."

The project, led by Petra Munro, includes the McKinley High area known to residents as "The Bottom" and extends north past Government Street. In keeping with the center's mission, the study involves interviewing residents about various aspects of community life. Some of the interviews have been conducted by McKinley High students.

The history of McKinley — the first public high school for area black students — initiated the study. Other topics are area businesses and churches and the 1953 bus boycott. Dean hasn't decided what other aspects to explore.