

Theme Overview: Higher Education's Roles in Supporting a Rural Renaissance

Sam Cordes and Scott Peters

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A century ago, when one spoke of rural America, one was also speaking simultaneously about agriculture. The two terms were synonyms. Hundreds of thousands of small farms and ranches dotted the landscape. And almost all of the countless small and rural communities scattered across America existed mainly to provide goods and services to the multitudes of nearby farm and ranch families.

Today, agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy. The initial response of some is to lament this reality, but they typically change their minds and perspectives when it is pointed out there are many places around the globe where agriculture and rural remain synonymous, meaning agriculture is the linchpin of the rural economy. Such places are far too common in third-world countries where thousands of impoverished villages exist solely to provide goods and services to subsistence farmers.

Although efforts are underway across the nation that may enhance the role of agriculture in the rural economy through the establishment of local and regional community food systems that are more sustainable than the current industrial model, agriculture will most likely never return to the dominant position it once held. We are in a different world, with new opportunities and possibilities as well as challenges for rural people and the institutions that have obligations and missions to engage with them. This includes land-grant universities and their extension office and experiment stations.

The research and extension functions of the nation's land-grant universities were instrumental contributors to the process of transforming American agriculture by unlocking the full potential of its natural resource base. But as many

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critics have noted this process brought with it some troubling economic, environmental, and civic consequences. What if these same land-grant universities and other higher education institutions leveraged their human and intellectual resources to help transform rural America by unlocking the civic agency and full potential of its people and places? This issue of *Choices* is designed to stimulate and inform deliberations around this extremely important question.

The rural communities of yesteryear depended almost entirely on the farm and ranch population. Today, the tables are turned and many farm and ranch families are dependent upon nearby rural communities as a place to secure off-farm employment and employee benefits such as health insurance. Indeed, farm and ranch families may be the greatest beneficiaries of a diversified rural economy that is no longer reliant exclusively upon agriculture. In short, a more diverse rural economy is surely a good thing, especially for farm and ranch families. However, the scope of our

thinking and investments must go far beyond economic considerations. This broader scope was articulated beautifully by Liberty Hyde Bailey, one of the great visionaries of his day and founder of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University. In 1918, Bailey wrote:

“The ultimate welfare of the community does not depend on the balance-sheets of a few industries, but on the character of the people, the moral issues, the nature of home life, the community pride, the public spirit, the readiness of responses to calls for aid, the opportunities of education and recreation and entertainment and cooperative activity as well as of increased daily work and better wages.”

Much of what is articulated in this special issue may seem heretical by today's standards but not by those of Liberty Hyde Bailey. First, Wojan, Fluharty, and Cordes argue in the lead article that “science and education as usual” will not carry the day if higher education is to be a major player in rural and regional innovation. They argue that a very different way of thinking—design thinking—that is commonplace in a few sanctuaries within higher education, such as architecture, matches up extremely well with the complexity of rural renaissance. Because many rural development scholars and practitioners are already comfortable with “learning by building,” this provides an opportunity to demonstrate higher education's relevancy and effectiveness. It is hoped leaders and administrators within higher education may be wise enough to recognize the potential of this “prototyping opportunity” and to use it as a way to defuse the concern that today's graduates need to be more innovative and comfortable with the societal challenges ahead of them. While Wojan, Fluharty, and Cordes argue against “science and education as usual”, the article by Peters extends this argument to extension. His historic research points

out the way extension's early history is most frequently portrayed is largely at odds with yesterday's factual reality. What he refers to as the “comic book version” of history fails to adequately recognize the broad perspective noted above by Liberty Hyde Bailey. Today, much of extension's purpose and work are thought of as consisting of technical assistance directed to agriculture's bottom line. But its origins and early history featured a much broader range of purposes and work. It could, of course, reclaim its roots and be transformed into a multi-functional enterprise that has technical capacity as well as the capacity (and legacy) to explicitly “build community” through active engagement and support of cultural and civic life. Surely, this is essential if a rural renaissance is to occur. Will extension and others in the land-grant system provide the necessary leadership for this to happen?

While Peters challenges extension at the big-picture level, Loveridge, Albrecht, Welborn, and Goetz provide a more detailed blueprint by identifying eight high priority issues in which extension should become heavily involved in supporting a rural renaissance:

- Streamlining local governance
- Balancing labor supply and demand in agriculture
- Improving the stewardship of natural resources
- Revitalizing rural education
- Reviving interest in outdoor recreation
- Improving health outcomes
- Fostering greater rural entrepreneurship
- Reconciling old differences

Again, the same question: Will extension and others in the land-grant system provide the necessary leadership for extension to become heavily engaged in these eight areas?

This special issue concludes with an article in which Lichter and Brown remind us that this is no longer our grandparents' rural America. Today's rural America is an integral part of the U.S. social and economic fabric and never has there been a greater interdependency between rural and urban. Indeed, all Americans have a large and growing stake in the vitality of rural people and places. Social scientists should increase their attention to issues at the rural-urban interface. This may stimulate the development of a spatially-inclusive social science that acknowledges growing rural-urban interdependencies.

Much is included in this special issue but much is also omitted. We see this special issue as a way to “prime the pump” and stimulate additional articles for *Choices* (and other outlets) that can probe in multiple ways on the issue of higher education's roles in supporting a rural renaissance. We lift up three specific areas that are especially ripe for further development and articulation.

First, what new initiatives are currently on the drawing board or are being launched by higher education institutions? For example, the four-campus of the University of Nebraska have come together in the past two years to launch the very ambitious Rural Futures Institute. One of the many interesting aspects of this initiative is its transdisciplinary nature and the emphasis placed on the arts and culture in community life. As another example, earlier this year Purdue Extension created five new positions (regional educators in economic and community development) that are strategically located across Indiana.

Second, the four articles in this special issue have a decidedly land-grant orientation and from the 1862 component of the land-grant establishment. We do not apologize for that—especially on the 100th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act. However, it is also severely limiting. For

example, the work and challenges of the 1890 and 1994 land grants and their critical roles in supporting a rural renaissance need to be articulated for all to hear.

Third, we must move past the land-grant mentality. It is our belief that some of the most important and seminal work is going on outside the land-grant system. For example, no set of higher education institutions are likely to be closer to the true heartbeat of rural America than the 600 institutions that form the Rural Community College Alliance. In addition to educating rural students, these institutions often provide much of the civic leadership in rural America. As but one example, much of the credit for the renaissance underway in the Arrowhead region of Minnesota can be traced to the leadership provided by the Northeast Higher Education District.

“Regional universities” are another type of institution that often feel a special affinity and responsibility to support a rural renaissance. It is our observation that in many cases these institutions are more nimble and more adept in supporting rural and regional innovation than are larger research universities. Humboldt State University, Sam Houston State University, Delta State University, Ball State University, the University of Maine at Ft. Kent, the University of Northern Iowa, and Western Illinois University are but some noteworthy examples.

If higher education, broadly defined, can help unlock the full potential of rural people and places, our entire nation benefits. And so does higher education by virtue of demonstrating it has the capacity to address a truly wicked problem, namely, a long, overdue rural renaissance.

For More Information

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Sam Cordes (smcordes@purdue.edu) is Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics, former Associate Vice Provost for Engagement, and Co-Founder of the Center for Regional Development, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. Scott Peters (sjpeters@syr.edu) is Faculty Co-Director, Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, and Professor, Cultural Foundations of Education Department, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.