

The New Rural-Urban Interface: Lessons for Higher Education

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Americans—taxpayers, politicians, and policy makers—have an urban-centric world view. Big cities and suburbs are where most of us live and work. Urban issues and interests understandably dominate our everyday discussions; they also define America’s problems and policy solutions. Urban America is where culture is shaped and reshaped by politics, media, and money, where new jobs and technology are incubated, and where big ideas start and flourish. Rural Americans—all 46 million of them—are often left on the sidelines, presumably waiting to develop, prosper, and join the American mainstream.

For many rural Americans, waiting for rural development is no longer an option. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, 179,000 people on balance left America’s rural areas (also referred to as nonmetro areas), escaping the perceived cultural and economic disadvantages of rural and small-town life. Rural natural increase (births minus deaths) no longer fully offsets population losses from net out-migration. As a result, for the first time ever, nonmetro areas overall are now experiencing population declines. In fact, according to the Economic Research Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) depopulation characterized 1,261 (or 64 percent) of all nonmetro counties for the 2010 to 2012 period, a fact that reflects chronic out-migration of young people (of reproductive ages) and rapid population aging. Rural natural decrease—deaths exceeding births—is the new demographic norm.

How can some parts of rural America avert a slow demographic death? This question seems hardly a priority for most Americans living in big cities and suburbs; they often know little or nothing about day-to-day life in small towns

or in the countryside. Yet, we contend that *all* Americans have a large and growing stake in the demographic and economic vitality of rural people and places. At a minimum, we cannot forget that urban Americans depend on rural America for food and fiber, natural resources (for energy), recreation and entertainment, and much more. The fact that nonmetro counties today make up 72% of America’s land area also demands good stewardship. Rural America requires our attention, perhaps as never before.

The paradox is that rural and urban America are highly interconnected and embedded in a rapidly globalizing world. The rural-urban interface has been given new meaning and shape by the increasing back and forth flows of capital, labor, population, information and ideas, and material goods. The “new” rural America is marked by accelerated spatial interdependence—a rapid blurring of traditional rural-urban spatial and symbolic boundaries. We contend that a simple binary view of urban vs. rural represents a conceptual and empirical roadblock to addressing underdevelopment, yet it is a view that is endemic to higher education and the land grant university system. As Shaeffer, Loveridge, and Weiler (2014) argue in their introduction to a special issue of *Economic Development Quarterly* on the rural-urban interface, rural and urban are “complementary parts” of a nation’s settlement system, and “familiarity with only one of them limits understanding of the whole.” Viewing “rural” and “urban” as competing rather than complementary sectors obscures fundamental spatial interrelationships that often drive rural economic development. The rural-urban interface is a zone of interdependence, not a clear boundary that neatly separates rural from urban people and places.

Our main point is straightforward: Rural and urban issues are flip-sides of the same coin, in research, teaching, and extension. They need to be treated as such in higher education. We argue here that research on the social, economic, and environmental interactions at the urban-rural interface should be better reflected in extension-outreach programming. To be sure, Cooperative Extension has played a central role in outreach activities conducted by land grant universities, and it has a well-deserved reputation for effectively translating research knowledge into practical applications. But extension also has concentrated on agricultural issues, while arguably underinvesting in community economic development (as well as family and consumer issues). The continuing disproportionate emphasis on agriculture, often at the expense of other critical rural public policy issues, seems increasingly anachronistic and unsustainable.

Rural-related theory and research must be integrated with urban and global perspectives, and vice versa. The rural social sciences cannot be relegated to the intellectual backwaters of America's universities, devalued and ghettoized administratively. Higher education—the U.S. land grant system in particular—must assume a much larger leadership role in the rural social sciences at a time when many of our most pressing problems are social, cultural, economic, or environmental rather than technical. Energy development, climate change, waste disposal, among other topics, impose new challenges for all Americans, now and into the foreseeable future. They also provide important new lessons for higher education, including the land grant system. At a minimum, higher education must foster a new research synthesis that acknowledges the shared destinies of rural and urban people in a rapidly globalizing and interconnected world. The land grant system's commitment to expanding investments in

rural social science research or engagement has never materialized. Funding has always been negligible when contrasted with the resources targeted to the agriculture disciplines. Now is the time for a change in priorities.

The Blurring of Spatial Boundaries

The cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the nation's largest cities has been unmistakable over the past century. In 1900, over 60% of the United States lived in rural areas, defined as people living in small towns (less than 2,500), the open countryside, and on farms. Today, roughly 85% of Americans live in urban areas; the largest 10 metropolitan areas alone account for over 25% of the U.S. population. Rural and urban communities have always been linked to some extent; yet, the social and spatial boundaries that have separated rural and urban people arguably are much less pronounced or obvious today.

Of course, cities and their elites have always been viewed as the incubators of new ideas, technology, and mass opinion that spread outward to people living in small places and the countryside. What is different is the accelerated pace of social, economic, and political transactions spanning spatial and social boundaries. New rural-urban interdependencies are driven by rapidly changing information technology, globalization, and governmental devolution. Past technological innovations—railroads, interstate highways, air transportation, hard-wired telephones, and telegraphs—had large spatial impacts by virtue of improving the movement of products, people, and information. Yet, the speed of rural-urban transactions was limited by the physical characteristics of these technologies. Today's technologies have greatly reduced the costs of physical distance and have facilitated the rapid (and relatively costless) movement of information and capital—Internet,

cable and satellite TV, broadband—while stitching together America's rural and urban communities as never before.

Technological advances also have brought most aspects of rural life into the urban fold and linked rural people and communities directly to the global economy. Today's multinational corporations have a global reach, often dominating local commerce and dictating the price of products and services, even in remote rural areas. Fiduciary obligations to international investors have placed many rural communities at increasing risk of off-shoring, especially if they are unable to compete with low production costs and cheap labor in developing countries. Cities, on the other hand, have become the main nodes in global economic networks, while having ever-more dominion over rural and small-town economies. This has occurred at the same time that the federal government's direct role in local affairs has fundamentally shifted. The Reagan revolution radically altered the nature of inter-governmental relationships in America, which often exacerbated spatial inequalities in local access to essential public services. The Obama Administration now recognizes that "rural communities will require a different place-policy approach" that better addresses the "evolution of interdependent and interconnected regions and ecosystems" over the past 40 years. We need a new, spatially inclusive social science that acknowledges growing rural-urban interdependencies.

Some Examples

A simple demographic example illustrates our main point. Migrants can be conceptualized as crossing spatial and social boundaries; rural people become urban people and vice versa. New migrants, in either direction, represent cultural and economic change agents or brokers that bridge rural and urban America. Geographic

or spatial boundaries also can shift through metro or urban expansion into previously rural territory, for example, through annexation and the incorporation of new urban places. Some rural communities “grow up” to be redefined as urban or metropolitan areas. Indeed, boundary shifts account for a large but unappreciated component of all urban population growth and the metropolitanization in America. According to USDA researcher John Cromartie at the Economic Research Service, 113 non-metro counties—roughly 5.9 million people—switched to metro between 2000 and 2010. This is hardly an asymmetrical process: 36 counties with just over 1 million people no longer qualified as metro, and were redefined as nonmetro. On balance, reclassification resulted in a net non-metro population “loss” of 4.8 million over the 2000s.

Suburban communities might rightly be viewed as bridges between big cities and nearby rural communities and the countryside. The outward demographic and economic expansion of most big cities means that spatial boundaries are most ambiguous or blurred at the urban-rural fringe or in exurbia, where commuters, consumers, and local citizens interact on a daily basis. Research shows that even when persons move from urban to rural residences, they often retain their urban jobs. In other words, they have one foot in rural America and the other in urban. The so-called urban-rural divide is not a divide at all. It is a space of intense social, economic, political, and environmental interaction. It also is space where rural and urban interests are sometimes in competition, for example over land use management, while in other instances rural and urban interests are conflated.

Of course, new rural-urban interactions are not limited to demographic change. Many rural areas—ocean and mountain resort areas, retirement communities, cultural or historic

sites, and national parks and recreational areas—have become “places of consumption.” They are places where rural goods and services are directed toward and consumed disproportionately by people with strong urban ties. Recreational or amenity areas (as defined by USDA’s Economic Research Service) have been among the fastest growing nonmetro counties; high-amenity counties increased in population by over 150% between 1970 and 2010 compared with population decline in low-amenity counties. Between 2010 and 2012, in the midst of overall rural population decline, areas rich in recreational amenities continued to grow, albeit less rapidly. Amenity-related growth, including retirement communities and eco-tourism, is part of the new lexicon of economic development strategies which further erode distinctions between urban and rural areas and create new economic interdependencies that are rapidly changing leisure patterns and urban lifestyles over the life course. Many urbanites own second homes and pay local property taxes in rural areas rich in natural amenities (e.g., along a lake or seashore).

The new interdependency of urban and rural America is perhaps illustrated best in the agricultural sector. America’s “food system” cannot be examined in isolation from other aspects of the economy and society. The restructuring of the meatpacking industry makes our point. Rather than shipping cattle or hogs to slaughterhouses in faraway cities, such as Chicago and Kansas City, most are now processed close to where they are raised in rural areas. For some small towns, this has been a demographic and economic boon, especially in the Midwest and Southeast, such as poultry and pork processing. Some Hispanic “boom towns,” such as Worthington, Minn., the home of Swift and Company, were virtually “all-white” in 1990, but today are “majority minority” communities with large immigrant populations from around the world and from

urban gateways. The new in-migration of immigrants brings urban values, diverse cultural perspectives, and formal and informal social relationships that create new interdependencies between urban and rural America, along with clear linkages to the global community.

Ironically, the contemporary agricultural economy has also opened up niches for some small- to medium-sized producers who benefit from direct access to large urban markets. This development has been especially rapid at the urban-rural interface, where profits from direct marketing of high-value crops are sufficient to offset the high costs of land, labor, and operating costs. Location at the urban fringe also provides access to a large pool of seasonal or part time labor, and to urban consumers through farmers markets, restaurant and gourmet grocery outlets, road side stands, and U-pick operations. High consumer demand for fresh, local produce has led to a new symbiosis between city and countryside, one that benefits both small farmers and urban people. The metropolitan farmer is not an oxymoron.

Symmetry or Urban Dominance?

Historically, urban-rural interdependency has been another name for urban dominance—corporate agriculture, big oil, and urban-based extractive industries (mountaintop mining or clear-cut forestry). But today, rural-urban interdependency arguably is less asymmetrical. Rural communities have new agency, in part because of the infusion of outside interests. Environmental groups in New York State, for example, have mobilized rural pushback to fracking. This has created new conflicts between some local landowners, who expect a financial windfall, and other local residents, who reap few financial rewards but bear the costs of more congestion, housing shortages, and environmental risk.

Consider also the issue of urban waste disposal in rural landfills. While one may complain that rural areas have become urban America's dumping grounds (e.g., hazardous wastes and prisons), some rural communities see this as an opportunity for economic development. Each day, New York City (NYC) generates over 12,000 tons of garbage. Prior to its closing in 2001, most of it went to the Fresh Kill Landfill on Staten Island. At its peak, 20 barges a day—each carrying 650 tons of garbage—made the 10-mile trip from Manhattan to Staten Island. Now, 2,230 trucks are needed each day to collect NYC's garbage, move it to transfer facilities, and then cart it off to landfills in rural upstate New York and surrounding states. Rather than traveling 10 miles on a barge, NYC's waste is now trucked over 250 miles to the Seneca Meadows landfill in rural upstate New York, near Seneca Falls.

The movement of NYC's trash contributes to the burgeoning set of transactions binding urban areas with their rural neighbors. Is this a problem or an opportunity for the local community—a source of pollution, an environmental hazard, or an economic development opportunity? Interviews with local leaders and citizens indicate that the Seneca Falls community believes that the Seneca Meadows Company is a benevolent corporate neighbor that is environmentally responsible, provides over 160 jobs, and is a generous contributor to community development and educational programs. Moreover, since the landfill determines the cost of depositing trash in the site, and regulates other aspects of the transaction, this form of mobility at the rural-urban interface reverses the direction of power contributing to a more symmetric urban-rural relationship.

The Role of Higher Education

Higher education, and especially the land grant university system, has a

key role to play in enhancing social and economic opportunities at the urban-rural interface. At a minimum, it should endeavor to make the “space between the cities” an area of intellectual inquiry and excitement and a fertile ground for engaging students, faculty, and the broad array of community and regional stakeholders. Emerging information technologies make this now possible, creating new connections across the rural-urban interface in areas of business development (e.g., e-commerce), education and outreach (e.g., distance learning), healthcare, and governance and civil society (e.g., social media). Moreover, the research-based information produced by land grant scientists is largely a public good; it can be translated directly into the cutting-edge applications of immense policy importance such as environmental management, energy policy, or community and economic development. It should be noted, however, that the land grant university research system has its critics. Glenna and his colleagues (2007), for example, have argued that the trend toward neoliberalism in the United States has led to privatization of research conducted by land grant university scientists and, hence, a reduction of the public good value of their discoveries. Treating urban and rural as separate or self-contained spaces fails to acknowledge the intense social, economic, and environmental interaction now occurring between them.

Research and education focused on the urban-rural interface potentially benefits everyone, rural and urban alike. Most college-age young adults today, unlike their grandparents, have had little or no real exposure to rural issues. Higher education, and especially land grant universities, should target social science research at the rural-urban interface, and produce educational and training programs that translate research into innovative applications and public engagement. Colleges and universities

arguably must endeavor to provide a curriculum that is spatially inclusive, that views rural and urban as symbiotic rather than competitive or distinct. “One size fits all” policies and perspectives, whether urban or rural, ignore a large and arguably increasingly important sector of the U.S. economy and social fabric. America's natural and human systems increasingly interact at the urban-rural interface. Higher education should, and must, acknowledge this reality and focus teaching, research, and extension-outreach activities where they are needed most.

This means adding instructors and researchers, coursework, and multidisciplinary journals that are sympathetic of an inclusive, spatial perspective. The university reward system, which emphasizes departmental rankings and disciplinary journals, has been slow to the challenge. New research at the rural-urban interface is inherently interdisciplinary. Research, teaching, and public engagement will be motivated and shaped by interrelated social, economic, and environmental issues that require conceptual lenses and empirical approaches of many different disciplines. These include issues of environmental quality, land use management, community and regional development, food security, human capital formation, immigration and race/ethnic relations, green jobs, waste management, poverty and inequality, and many others. These issues have large rural (and urban) dimensions that will only grow in importance over the foreseeable future. The rural-urban interface provides accessible natural laboratories that lend themselves to comparative studies of social, economic, and environmental processes that are of general rather than parochial interest.

The immediate challenge is that rural issues typically are segregated, both intellectually and administratively, in land grant institutions and throughout the academy. By narrowly

focusing on rural issues or uncoupling them from urban, national, or global concerns, land grant universities may be missing opportunities to move forward in creative and responsive ways to pressing problems. The land grant university system should not abandon its traditional technical focus on farming and agriculture, but the current disproportionate focus on such issues can be short-sighted if it misses emerging opportunities that acknowledge the shared destinies of rural and urban people and places. Higher education, like other publicly supported institutions, is increasingly accountable to taxpayers. Targeting resources on the highest priority issues is essential for institutional sustainability.

In our view, research at the urban-rural interface provides a platform for expanding the mission and activities of the land grant system. Traditional rural and agricultural issues and their solutions have a large but often unappreciated behavioral component that requires the social sciences perhaps as never before. New perspectives are needed that recognize important interrelationships among the natural, physical, and social worlds. For example, rather than examining structure and change in agriculture per se, contemporary scholars now investigate structure and change in the global “food system.” A new holistic perspective recognizes that the quality, quantity, safety, and security of our food supply involves basic and applied science; agronomic practices in the field, pasture, and orchard; marketing and retailing; as well as consumers and cooks in the home. Examining the food system in this holistic manner requires contributions from the social, economic, biological, and physical sciences, often in partnership with each other. The land grant system can take the lead in promoting the development of creative new inter-disciplines among the social sciences and creating new partnerships with the natural and physical

sciences. New problems demand new scientific approaches.

We recommend a strategy that supports rigorous disciplinary scholarship, while allocating resources to activities that foster multi-disciplinary engagement with the world’s most pressing social, economic, and environmental problems. Interdisciplinary research and training centers, especially those with a regional perspective that embraces rural and urban communities, are one option. Regional science associations, involving a mix of economists, geographers, sociologists, and planners, can provide valuable intellectual lessons for developing the kinds of interdisciplinary teams now needed for integrated treatments of social and economic interactions across spatial units. Most problems are multi-dimensional in nature; they cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary lens. University-supported centers, for example, can be incubators for better understanding the food system, regional economic development, and the human dimensions of climate change, among other issues. Technical fixes alone cannot address the big issues facing America today, such as depopulation, concentrated poverty, immigrant incorporation, environmental management, schooling and upward mobility, food and obesity, energy and recreational development, or population aging. The social sciences must become better integrated into the fabric and mission of the land grant system.

At a minimum, this means allocating additional resources to social scientific research and educational programs that focus on people, communities, and the natural environment, especially those that operate in the space between cities. Moreover, we suggest that agricultural- and rural-oriented scientists, including social scientists, adopt a larger, less parochial agenda. Rural people, communities, and environments cannot

be considered in isolation from urban populations and environments, either domestically or throughout the world. Redeploying efforts and resources at the rural-urban interface are an inherently interdisciplinary project. Contemporary issues do not respect disciplinary barriers, let alone institutional boundaries that separate colleges and departments into semi-autonomous domains. This is simply not the way the world is organized; in fact, it never was.

Failure to develop creative, interdisciplinary programs will almost certainly result in the marginalization of the land grant university system and the social science disciplines that comprise it. Why, for example, should universities continue to segregate (resource, applied, or agricultural) economists and (rural or development) sociologists in the land grant system—both intellectually and physically—from their disciplinary colleagues in other parts of the university? This has sometimes created a two-tier system that undermines the intellectual synergies that can result only from proximity, cooperation, and collaboration. Moreover, current physical and administrative arrangements narrow the spatial lenses at a time when a broader perspective is more likely to find cost-effective solutions to national and global problems. This also affects the way we train students, and it reinforces rigid hierarchies that often place rural people and communities at the bottom of our list of priorities.

Interestingly, the land grant system was a populist project that arose from the need to produce research-based information and education in support of the nation’s development. It can reclaim this role by adapting to the demographic, economic, and environmental realities of contemporary society and to globalization. And it can start by recognizing that many inter-connected social, economic, and environmental processes

in contemporary society take place at the rural-urban interface.

For More Information

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