

# Opportunities for Rural Development in Cooperative Extension's Second Century

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## The Importance of Rural Places in America's Future

It is well-known that the United States has moved towards a service-oriented economy in recent decades. Less widely known is that the value of goods exported far exceeds the value of exported services. The nation's trade balance, therefore, heavily depends on our ability to produce goods for the international market. Historically, our comparative advantage in production of goods tended to be our vast per capita land-based resources compared to most other developed economies, our technology, our institutions, and our relatively uncorrupted market system of governance. While the goods sector produces exports from cities, rural areas still provide opportunities in the form of food and natural resource-based goods. For example, natural gas has revived the U.S. energy sector in recent years, and may lead to exports, either in the form of liquefied gas or lower-cost goods made through processes powered by natural gas.

Another future export growth opportunity is in food production. Current world population projections, together with stagnating crop yields and uncertainty about climate, raise questions about the ability of the planet to feed itself in the future. The nation's future potential for exports depends in large measure on our ability to efficiently and flexibly connect rural areas to international markets. The rural America of the future will need to muster sophisticated responses to changing market requirements.

The creation of cooperative extension 100 years ago played a prominent role in the development and growth of our nation by providing knowledge and skills developed at universities to workers in the goods industries. As was true

100 years ago, extension can play a vital role in helping rural America meet today's challenges.

## Extension's Roles in Meeting Challenges for Rural America

To succeed in this challenging future, America needs skilled workers who choose to live in rural places. Increasingly, many rural places struggle to offer basic services as well as other amenities typically valued by skilled workers. Among these are viable career opportunities, amenities to promote healthy lifestyles, strong educational systems, and solid infrastructure including broadband Internet (Banchero, 2014). The rural challenges in delivering the kinds of goods and services required by skilled workers are great. Extension could play key roles in addressing eight priority issues for a strong rural America. While our focus is on the extension system, viable investments in extension must be supported through complementary investments and activities in the Agricultural Experiment Station system.

1. **Streamline Local Governance.** Rural America suffers because local governments often lack economies of scale to produce expertise consistent with the demands of society. New government delivery mechanisms to lower costs or improve services at the same cost will help maintain our ability to compete internationally. Extension investments in local government education and applied research can facilitate the modernization of government service delivery through better metrics and innovative methods to capture economies of scale while maintaining local control. New approaches to understanding community needs could complement these

efforts through crowd-sourcing and by engaging citizens in meaningful dialog via a wide range of opportunities including the use of new communications tools. Nationally, extension has over 150 professionals who participate in a loose network of local government educators ([www.LGET.org](http://www.LGET.org)). Strengthening the network for needs identification and curriculum development through targeted investments in national or regional coordination could unleash the power of this group.

- 2. Balance Labor Supply and Demand in Agriculture.** The days of cheap, imported labor may be ending (Carpenter, 2013; and Martin and Jackson-Smith, 2013). In Michigan, much of a bumper fruit crop in 2013 was left in the field despite unemployment in the 8% range (Jackson, 2013). In the short run, extension can help to alleviate spot labor shortages by working harder to match labor with need through matching services in a manner similar to what MarketMaker (<http://national.marketmaker.uiuc.edu/>) does for agricultural production. Market-Maker has already started to take steps to reprogram its website to help match farmers and workers (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 2012, p. 9). It would be relatively simple to accelerate that process and expand the service to the whole country. In the longer term, extension investments in teaching farmers how to implement increasingly automated operations is essential for continued productivity improvements. The extension investments in automation have to be preceded by experiment station work to develop varieties and practices appropriate to automation, and affordable, effective machines to do the work. If land-grant university investments in agricultural automation lag, extension can connect

to non-land-grant institutions, such as Carnegie-Mellon, where work on mechanization of labor-intensive cropping techniques is pushing forward (Fletcher, 2012). Another efficiency role for extension might be to identify the substantial spoilage losses within the food system (Buzby and Hyman, 2012) and educate people along the line from farmers to businesses to consumers in ways to reduce losses.

- 3. Improve Stewardship of Natural Resources.** One of the strengths of rural areas is their close proximity to abundant natural resources. However, a strong rural America requires attention to the environment to protect and maintain this asset. Extension's skills in leadership development and conflict resolution, along with its ability to transmit information about practices to sustain our environment, are critical to preserving rural areas as attractive places to live. Extension's neutral role as a knowledgeable non-enforcer can be critical in communicating with land owners and businesses about how to best manage existing resources and how to reclaim areas if remediation is needed. Stewardship of natural resources also means spreading high quality communications technologies throughout rural areas so that electrons can reduce or replace the physical movement of people and goods. Extension can help by teaching people how to use the technologies and also how to organize their own service delivery districts when no existing provider is available.
- 4. Revitalize Rural Education.** Changes in education may present the toughest challenges facing our rural areas. The pressures on rural schools are tremendous. Where population decline combines with fewer children per household,

school consolidation usually follows. School consolidations, in turn, lead to longer student commutes, encouraging parents to opt out of the system. As a result, rural home schooling is on the rise (Price, 2012). A weakening tax base threatens local school funding and declining enrollments cause state payments to shrink. Parents who might have advocated for the system are instead busy home-schooling. While much can be done with technology in a home school environment, it cannot replicate the socialization process of education occurring side-by-side with other students who may come from different backgrounds. Furthermore, a home schooling system may perpetuate parents' shortcomings, cascading down to subsequent generations (Green-Hennessy, 2014). A future with a highly fragmented and possibly dysfunctional system looms. Extension's club-based youth development system may be able to bridge the gap between small, isolated school environments (home school or public school) by creating intensive co-learning situations that expose children to age-appropriate career and socialization experiences. Rural schools also face serious difficulty in attracting and keeping talented teachers. Strategies similar to those noted above about streamlining local governments may have parallel applications to small, rural schools. Likewise, providing training, support, and networking opportunities for rural teachers through distance education networks offered by extension may draw more interest to rural teaching positions from both within and from outside the community. Finally, extension's full repertoire of resources to train and support parents to work effectively with their children at home and in support of the school system can be

deployed more extensively to rural areas to seal the gaps between home and school partnerships.

**5. Revive Interest in Outdoor Recreation.**

Nationwide, we are becoming detached from skill sets and even the physical fitness needed to enjoy the great outdoors. As we lose these skills, the attractiveness of rural areas as places to live and work also declines. The outdoors becomes something to fear rather than an amenity to enjoy, and urbanized people may resist job moves that require relocation to rural America. The national labor market will be less efficient if well-paying jobs located in rural areas go unfilled. A classic example of this mismatch is in health care; rural areas have struggled for some time to find enough practitioners willing to operate out of small towns. A less well-known example is in veterinary medicine, where a rural shortage in some states co-exists with an urban or suburban oversupply (Jacob, 2012). Extension can work to overcome the lack of familiarity with outdoor activities through educational programs designed to reskill urban populations in outdoor pastimes and through urban-to-rural-host matching programs much like the national and international exchange programs it now operates in many states. As the interest in visiting rural places is rekindled, extension is ready to help agricultural establishments learn how to build and market agritourism opportunities. This relatively new type of tourism might help reestablish rural-urban connections.

**6. Improve Health Outcomes.**

Some areas of the United States are experiencing serious declines in life expectancy, and rural places are disproportionately represented on the list of losers (Marema and Poynter, 2013). Extension is well

positioned to deliver community health assessment programs to help local leaders identify the problem areas (which could be quite different from one location to the next), and facilitate dialog to identify priority areas for improvement. This should be conducted on an ongoing basis based on routinely updated health metrics. Extension personnel are already engaged in community health programs through the family and consumer sciences program area. Small amounts of additional funding can help organize them nationally in partnership with other land-grant health professionals, as shown in the recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services-funded project led by the Regional Rural Development Centers that is engaging 18 land-grants (team web site: <http://healthbench.info/team.html>; and pilot community web site: <http://healthbench.info/communities.html>). Additionally, extension plays an important disease prevention role by promoting healthy cooking and eating practices, encouraging fitness and exercise, and helping individuals understand the importance of monitoring and controlling key health metrics such as body mass, blood pressure, and cholesterol. In the absence of health care professional services, these prevention practices are even more crucial to community viability.

**7. Foster Greater Rural Entrepreneurship.**

When family farms were the predominant employer in rural America, most residents were either entrepreneurs or related to an entrepreneur. This is no longer the case. The government sector, including healthcare and social assistance, has displaced the private sector as the major employer in many rural counties, and retailing—often through chain stores—now employs more

workers than any other private sector (Goetz, Loveridge, and Albrecht, 2013). Entrepreneurial skills that formerly came naturally to residents through farm life and exposure by family members now must be learned in other ways. The road to economic growth through entrepreneurship is a long one. Many of the seeds planted today will die, and those that thrive may not sprout a major employer for many years. But the odds of gaining a vibrant new business only increase when people are exposed to entrepreneurship. Extension already has in place a number of programs aimed at helping youth gain entrepreneurial skills, increasing the success rate of food entrepreneurs, and fostering greater entrepreneurship in communities. These programs can be expanded into more regions through creative, forward-thinking partnerships with schools, state governments, and local leaders. The advent of 3D printing has the potential to offer vast and as yet unknown opportunities for rural entrepreneurs. Additionally, the growth of broadband availability that is beginning to spread to rural areas opens the door even wider to rural entrepreneurial success. Yet training rural innovators to use the newly available technologies effectively is key, and extension can fill that gap.

**8. Reconcile Old Differences.**

Many current rural residents are descendants of farmers who settled the land generations ago. The injustices of past generations against members of the community are often remembered by the current generation, resulting in distrust, and shape the actions of the players in ways that are detrimental to progress (Robison and Ritchie, 2010). One of the authors once worked with a town of 200 residents and four

churches—all serving people of the same ethnic background and denomination. Schisms within the town had caused the people to divide their limited resources. Another example comes from farmland sale research, which reveals multiple prices, depending on whether or not the seller and buyer hold a family grudge (Robison, Myers, and Siles, 2002). It is more difficult for markets to perform their magic in environments fraught with conflict. Extension programs in facilitation and conflict resolution can help residents overcome past differences to move forward towards a brighter common future. Similar skill-sets can be applied to assure that new arrivals don't fall into the old traps of mutual dislike and distrust or to bridge ethnic differences that arose from long-abandoned state or federal policies.

### The Way Forward

Rural America is evolving. While its history and culture are interesting and rich, it is not a museum. It is a work in progress and extension is positioned to be a key player in forging a dynamic, productive, and exciting future for this critical and oft-forgotten part of our country. To meet the challenges with limited resources, extension must reinvent how it interacts with stakeholders. Extension must meet learners in the spaces where they now congregate. One hundred years ago, it was the county fair. Now it must expand to include a tablet or some other online form. However, like the county fair experience of 100 years ago, a chance meeting in a connecting space is not enough; the follow-up must engage learners in behavioral change that visibly improves their lives. More extension programs need to adopt outcome-based metrics for self-assessment. An example of the type of metrics all extension

programs could be considering can be found with Extension Community Development programs in the North Central Region ([http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/ncrcrd/state\\_extension\\_leader\\_section1](http://ncrcrd.msu.edu/ncrcrd/state_extension_leader_section1)). By adopting outcome-based measures, extension can learn where it is most effective in addressing rural problems and concentrate resources into those areas while also identifying new areas for development and improvement. A national study team could help surface more ways in which extension is already innovating at the state and local levels so that emerging best practices could be disseminated rapidly throughout the national system.

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