

THE RURAL FUTURES INSTITUTE

Potential for New Level University Vision and Support for Rural Nebraska and the Great Plains

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Exactly 150 years ago, and five years before Nebraska attained statehood, two critical pieces of Federal legislation were enacted: the Homestead Act and the Morrill Act. The latter was the foundation for the uniquely American institution known as the land-grant university, which led to the establishment of the University of Nebraska in 1869.

The Homestead Act

The “land rush” triggered by the Homestead Act of 1862 had a phenomenal impact on the Great Plains and Nebraska. It is no surprise that the National Park Service’s Homestead Monument is located near Beatrice. This National Monument pays homage to Daniel Freeman, arguably the nation’s first homesteader. Across the Plains, almost 800,000 claims were successfully settled including over 150,000 in Montana, and approximately 100,000 each in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and South Dakota.

In just two decades (1870-1890) Nebraska’s population increased nearly tenfold, from only 123,000 to slightly more than one million. In 1890, the combined populations of Omaha and Lincoln were less than 200,000 and none of the next three largest communities (Beatrice, Hastings, and Nebraska City) had more than 15,000 residents. Rural Nebraska was home to at least three-fourths of the State’s population.

In 1890, when one spoke of rural Nebraska, one was also speaking simultaneously about agriculture. The two terms were practically synonymous. Tens of thousands of small farms and ranches dotted the landscape. The primary purpose of countless small and rural communities scattered throughout the state was to provide goods and services to the multitudes of nearby homesteaders and farm and ranch families. In short, in Nebraska, rural was king and therefore, agriculture was king.

In the past 120 years, much has changed, but two markers stand out as particularly noteworthy. First, Beatrice and Nebraska City have fewer residents today than in 1890! On the other extreme, the two counties in which Omaha and Lincoln are located gained nearly 600,000 residents during this same

time period. Today, Lancaster and Douglas Counties account for well over 40 percent of the State’s total population. Similar changes have occurred throughout the Great Plains Region. Secondly, production agriculture and agribusiness, while still important, no longer dominate the economies in many rural counties.

Today, rural areas of the Great Plains and Nebraska are home to a wide and diverse set of economic actors and businesses whether that is the corporate headquarters of Cabela’s in Sydney or the wind turbine manufacturer, Katana Summit, in Columbus. While the rural communities of yesteryear depended almost entirely on the farm and ranch population for their existence, today, many farm and ranch families are heavily 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.

The fact agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy is to be applauded and celebrated. It need not be lamented, or be a source of nostalgia or apologetic behavior by agricultural interest groups and others. To keep the dynamics and the progress of the past 120 years in perspective, it is sobering to note that there are many places around the globe where agriculture and rural remain synonymous and agriculture is still the king 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. This nation and rural America are blessed to be far removed from such a wholesale dependency on agriculture. Because of the unprecedented growth in agricultural productivity, we now have the opportunity to think of rural economic possibilities and a vibrant and exciting rural life that acknowledges the historical linkage to agriculture but also transcends such a limited view. We can now think about a much broader world of future possibilities.

The Morrill Act – Land Grant Universities

Much of the change and progress just described can be traced back to higher education institutions, especially the national network of land-grant universities. This network has invested immeasurable resources during the past 150 years in basic and applied research directed specifically to the agricultural sector. Of course, research without application is a hollow victory. That is where another part of the land-grant establishment, the Cooperative Extension Service, has played such a vital and impressive role in bringing new scientific breakthroughs to farmers and ranchers.

The discoveries and application of new knowledge and technology (such as mechanization, hybrid seeds and irrigation technologies) have resulted in unprecedented and dramatic increases in agricultural productivity, a safe and affordable food supply and the ability to help meet growing worldwide food needs. This set of societal outcomes must also be celebrated and applauded.

However, many of these same scientific discoveries and technologies have also contributed to a commensurate increase in the size and scale of farming and ranching operations and fewer total farms. The number of farms in Nebraska peaked at slightly less than 140,000 in the mid-1930s. Today there is approximately one-third of that number.

As farm and ranch operations grew in size and as the total number of farm operations declined, there has been widespread rural population loss and the decline/demise of many smaller rural towns and communities. Nowhere has this been more pronounced than in the rural Great Plains, a vast region that is about 2,000 miles long (beginning in Texas and ending in Canada) and about 500 miles wide, stretching eastward from the Rocky Mountains. This is one of the most sparsely populated areas in the lower 48 states and includes only a handful of cities; and almost all of them are on either the far western or eastern edges of this large sweep of geography, e.g., Denver, Oklahoma City, Kansas City and Omaha.

The land-grant university system has been criticized for not being more concerned and responsive to the unintended consequence of increased agricultural productivity; specifically, the secondary impacts on rural community life and vitality. This is a legitimate

concern. After all, if the scientific advances from these institutions led to some of the unintended but negative consequences, don't they also have some responsibility to address these negative consequences? More importantly, is it not the role of a publicly chartered and supported land-grant university to address a wide range of societal issues regardless of their origin?

To be sure, a number of land-grant universities, including the University of Nebraska, have made some efforts to address the broader challenges and opportunities facing rural people and places. Often, this investment involves support for a handful of extension educators and one or two faculty specialists (typically, a rural sociologist and agricultural economist) who are engaged in applied research and community outreach on rural community development. However, support for this area of work has been dwarfed by the resources allocated to animal science, agronomy and other agricultural sciences.

The University of Nebraska believes it can and should be doing more... and a Rural Futures Institute (RFI) can be that catalyst.

THE RFI AND THE RURAL FUTURES CONFERENCE

The idea of a RFI has been under consideration for several years and considerable thought and effort have gone into it. Most of the thought and discussion have been internal to the University of Nebraska, although community forums were also held in late 2011 and early 2012. University-based discussions included forums on all four campuses; and approximately 200 external stakeholders participated in one of the following community forums: Beatrice; Broken Bow; Columbus; Curtis; Grand Island; Kearney; Norfolk; McCook; Omaha; Ord; Scottsbluff; and Valentine.

We believe it is now a propitious time to convene some of the best minds on the planet—both from within Nebraska and from other states and countries—to help us think through carefully and expeditiously the further development and refinement of the RFI. That is the primary purpose of the Rural Futures Conference in which you are participating. In helping us at this critical point in this important journey, it is also our hope that you will

learn, have fun, make new friends and connections and give thought as to how you and/or your organization may want to participate in the further development of the RFI.

Some Selected Considerations for Conferees

Prior to the conference, conferees were given the opportunity to comment on the RFI vision and the nine core values that have been identified to undergird the work of the RFI. The four points that follow reinforce and/or build upon many of these core values. We believe the considerations below need to be kept foremost in everyone's mind during the Rural Futures Conference.

1. Transdisciplinary Work is Essential.

Transdisciplinary is defined as “research and education that addresses contemporary issues that cannot be solved by one or even a few points-of-view. It brings together academic experts, field practitioners, community members, research scientists, political leaders, and business owners among others to solve some of the pressing problems facing the world, from the local to the global... What sets transdisciplinary studies apart is the emphasis on engagement, investigation, and participation in addressing present-day issues and problems in a manner that explicitly destabilizes disciplinary boundaries while respecting disciplinary expertise.”

Playing on this definition, two follow-up points are important. First, Frans Johansson, a Conference keynoter, makes the compelling case that innovation and creativity is most likely to be unleashed at the intersection of disciplines and when a diverse and inclusive group of stakeholders is working on an issue or opportunity.

Second, emphasis on “engagement” in the definition of transdisciplinary is worth highlighting. It is important to note that engagement does not fit “the expert model” that often drives work on narrow, technical issues. True engagement is a two-way street based on mutual respect and understanding, with faculty and staff open to and eager to learn from “local knowledge” and local knowledge keepers. The mindset and attitude must be one of doing things “with the community,” rather than doing things “for the community” or “to the community.” When this happens, faculty and staff often realize they have learned more than they have given.

2. Innovation and Entrepreneurship are Crucial.

We are in a globally competitive economy and the competitive edge for the U.S. is “the knowledge economy.” By definition, higher education is obviously a critical part of the knowledge economy.

We believe there is incredible talent and a long history of innovation and entrepreneurship in the rural Great Plains. This indigenous talent and capacity is often overlooked or underappreciated. The RFI should try to be helpful in identifying, celebrating, linking and leveraging this capacity to the “knowledge resources” of the University of Nebraska and its partners.

It is important to emphasize that innovation and entrepreneurship should NOT be linked solely to private sector business considerations. Social and institutional innovation in the public and nonprofit sectors is another area of untapped and unrecognized potential in the rural Great Plains. Additionally, it is important to develop an entrepreneurial and innovative culture within our institutions of higher education in order for them to provide relevant discovery, learning and engagement programming as we face the rapidly changing world of the future.

3. It is More Than Economics.

Despite the prior comment about the global economy and competitiveness, it is essential that the future of rural Nebraska and the Great Plains NOT be viewed solely through an economics lens. There is a much broader set of considerations. There are basic human services such as health care and education that present both opportunities and challenges to rural people and places, and assets are already in place that are helping to address these considerations. For example, the NU system alone has a comprehensive Medical Center, three Colleges of Education and a College of Public Affairs and Community Service.

Another important level of consideration is the civic, cultural, design and artistic elements that attend to aspects of human and community development that can't be counted and measured, and can't be justified only with economic returns. It is worth noting that Nebraska has a long and rich civic and cultural life, including serving as the birthplace or home to many notable leaders, public intellectuals, artists and writers such as George Norris, Fred

Astaire, Red Cloud, Johnny Carson, Ted Kooser, Malcolm X, Joel Sartore, William Jennings Bryan, Marlon Brando, Willa Cather, John G. Neihardt, Chief Standing Bear, Susan La Flesche Picotte, Julius Sterling Morton, Dick Cavett and Mari Sandoz to mention a few. It is essential that the RFI builds upon this legacy and richness to help leverage the cultural, artistic and humanities assets of higher education in support of rural communities in Nebraska and the Great Plains.

Liberty Hyde Bailey, one of the great visionaries of his day and founder of the Cornell College of Agriculture, stated in 1918 that...

"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."

4. Deep Collaborations are a Foundational Element.

If the RFI is to be successful it must create an environment in which deep and meaningful collaborative partnerships are the norm across campuses; across departments and disciplines; and with external stakeholders such as state and local government, trade associations, civic groups and the philanthropic community. This assertion rests on three premises.

First, as Frans Johansson notes, the level of creativity and innovation will be enhanced if we engage multiple talents, multiple disciplines, multiple perspectives and multiple stakeholders. Second, in an era of exceedingly tight resources, meaningful collaborative partnerships allow everyone who is at the table to stretch and leverage their existing resources as they work together with others and gain access to what others have to offer. Third, there is strategic value in having strong and credible partners and partnerships when it is time to seek new resources, publicize joint success and to help one another when a partner needs allies and support.

Creating and sustaining meaningful collaborative partnerships is not always easy. Indeed, it has sometimes been referred to as "an unnatural act among non-consenting organizations and agencies."

The good thinking and spirit of cooperation of the participants in the Rural Futures Conference can help think through and begin to build the networks, trust and collaboration that will be essential if the RFI is to be viable and capable of achieving the vision of:

"...providing internationally recognized intellectual leadership to assist rural Nebraska and the Great Plains in creating a resilient and sustainable future building upon a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship. Drawing upon the resources of the University of Nebraska system and those of its partners, the RFI will help enable rural people and places find unique paths to their desired futures."

Thank you for your involvement, support and contributions to a successful Rural Futures Conference and helping envision the development of the Rural Futures Institute.