Proceedings of the 2013 Rural Futures Conference
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Also, thanks to Gina Fe Causin's Fall 2013 Hospitality, Tourism & Restaurant Management class (HRTM 289: Introduction to the Event Industry) for assisting with logistics and organization for the conference.
I can’t think of anything more important to the future of the United States than finding a way to reinvigorate rural America.

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FOREWORD

It gives me great pleasure to introduce these proceedings of the second National Rural Futures Conference, “Beyond Boundaries.” Like the first conference in 2012, the 2013 Conference drew a capacity crowd, confirming that rural does matter and there is strong interest and support for the RFI mission “to create knowledge and action that supports rural people and places to achieve unique paths to their desired futures.”

The Beyond Boundaries conference theme implies a sense of vision and hope. While the theme acknowledges that boundaries exist, the goal of the tagline was to encourage conference-goers to boldly push beyond them and explore new opportunities. Conference participants were challenged to seek new collaborations and partnerships that could positively impact the future for rural people and places.

The Rural Futures Institute is now moving more vigorously toward its vision to “be an internationally recognized leader for increasing community capacity as well as the confidence of rural people to address their challenges and opportunities, resulting in resilient sustainable rural futures.” I was very humbled to be asked to lead this next phase of development as the Founding Executive Director of the Institute, and had the opportunity to share some of my plans and expectations at the “Beyond Boundaries” conference. The Institute’s unprecedented support and engagement from University of Nebraska regents, administrators, faculty and staff across all campuses fuels the potential success of this global endeavor.

Flowing from the 2013 conference was powerful enthusiasm for moving forward on an action agenda. The RFI now has more than twenty grant-funded projects under way that are transdisciplinary and based on community-identified needs. Recognizing that one entity alone cannot revitalize rural areas, the RFI is building a powerful network of partnerships that will collaboratively draw upon available resources to prepare rural individuals and communities to meet their challenges and embrace opportunities of the future.

The RFI believes vibrant rural people and places are essential to the fabric of American life. I hope you will find ideas and perhaps even inspiration in this document to help bring genuine hope to our nation’s rural dimension.

I look forward to continued conversations and collaborations with you and others who have a passion for creating positive rural futures.

Charles P. “Chuck” Schroeder
Founding Executive Director
University of Nebraska
Rural Futures Institute
Executive Summary
Imagine Beyond Boundaries
Executive Summary

The 2013 Rural Futures Conference Encouraged Attendees to Step Beyond Their Boundaries

Crossing boundaries of time, space and imagination was the order of the day for the more than 550 men and women who attended the 2013 Rural Futures Conference Nov. 3–5 in Lincoln. The University of Nebraska-sponsored event aimed to engage people with widely varying experiences and perspectives on rural life, bringing ideas together to enrich the efforts of the fledgling Rural Futures Institute.

People from 23 states, the District of Columbia and the United Kingdom heard from rural community residents, scientists, policymakers, health professionals, extension educators, university officials, college students, professors, business executives, a futurist, musicians, economists, land use planners and humanities scholars, all sparking ideas and igniting conversations about the rural future.

Ronnie Green, University of Nebraska vice president and vice chancellor of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, told attendees that the first Rural Futures Conference in May 2012 confirmed that creating a Rural Futures Institute was “an audacious goal.”

“It was something that was maybe bigger than all of us, to talk about rural sustainability,” he said, “but we should be doing it and we should be investing in it in new and different ways.”

The 2013 conference, with its theme “Beyond Boundaries,” represented steps toward reaching that goal. “There are boundaries that we have to break down in order to do that, and we have to be willing to take those risks,” Green said.
The conference program was designed to highlight the Rural Futures Institute's first-year accomplishments and to explore some of the key challenges facing rural communities as they strive to shape their future. It also aimed to nudge participants into imagining new solutions to old problems by creating structured as well as informal opportunities for conference-goers to socialize, engage in problem-solving activities, compare notes with one another and get feedback on work in progress.

Three featured speakers challenged participants to expand their thinking about the future:

- Humanities scholar Clay Jenkinson portrayed Thomas Jefferson, the nation's third president, who purchased the Louisiana Territory and ordered its exploration by Capt. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, thus pushing the boundaries of the United States across the Mississippi River all the way to the Pacific Ocean and envisioning a previously unimagined future for the still-new nation.

- Tom Koulopoulos, president and founder of the Delphi Group, a leading advisor on trends in business and technology, urged conference-goers not to be bound to the past but instead to be willing to take chances on making new connections. Under Koulopoulos' guidance, participants practiced strategies for identifying and solving problems without getting bogged down in endless brainstorming or falling into political minefields.

- Tom Vilsack, secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and a former Iowa governor, identified challenges for rural people to harness new economic ideas for the rural future and highlighted the need to support community services that contribute to the quality of life in rural America. Vilsack's presentation was jointly sponsored with the Heuermann Lectures in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

Conference attendees also met and heard from Chuck Schroeder, founding executive director of the Rural Futures Institute. Schroeder and RFI Interim Director Mark Gustafson led an informal panel discussion recapping the evolution and accomplishments of the institute as a University-wide entity, encompassing all four campuses and aiming to involve people from widely varying academic disciplines, communities and the public and private sectors. Schroeder also outlined his aspirations for the institute and described his intent to focus on research, education, engagement, public policy issues and cultural advocacy.

Several Rural Futures Conference program elements focused particularly on perspectives of younger generations, a fitting feature for a setting in which some 43 percent of attendees were younger than 40.

- A Quick Pitch Spotlight featured presenters pitching 16 bold ideas about the rural future. Presenters got feedback from a panel of judges and from the audience about widely varying proposals to help young farmers and ranchers get a start, to get more young lawyers to set up shop on Main Streets, to develop a planned community on a South
Dakota Indian reservation, to use the arts to engage students in understanding their environment and cultural heritage, and many other concepts.

- A **Posters and Partnering Reception** encouraged participants to collaborate beyond boundaries as they examined graduate and undergraduate student entries in a poster contest and mingled in a mash-up session with representatives from 20 communities that posed challenging questions they’re facing and sought opportunities to link with other people and ideas to explore answers to those questions. Communities asked, for example: how to deal with problems associated with dilapidated housing; how to capitalize on civic celebrations; how to integrate digital technology in a rural business community; how to create greater awareness of personal health in rural communities and other big questions.

- A **Youth Working Through Complexities** panel featured young leaders from the public, private and nonprofit sectors in four states who told conference-goers that focusing on getting things done is a key to resolving complex challenges communities face.

The conference also featured morning and afternoon concurrent sessions with a box lunch break that gave participants more than three hours to wrestle with one of five themes related to the rural future. The interactive sessions addressed:

- Building vibrant communities through entrepreneurship,
- Governing the land: maximizing rural places locally and globally,
- The essential conversation: linking communities and higher education,
- Innovative approaches to rural health, and
- #Visioning4aNEWfuture, which focused on integrating youth into the basic workings of rural communities.
A sixth concurrent session, the Rural Commons, invited participant-generated and participant-led discussion of topics not otherwise addressed on the conference agenda.

While conference participants were challenged to envision and create new tomorrows, University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken reminded them that the Rural Futures Institute owes its inspiration to the Morrill Act of 1862, which created the land grant university system with its benefits still being reaped more than 150 years later.

“It opened the doors of higher education to the sons and daughters of the farmers and millworkers,” Milliken said. “It created a platform for research to provide economic opportunity to advance a new nation. And through extension and other means, it connected the intellectual capacity of our great public universities with people in the fields, the factories and our communities.”

The Rural Futures Institute represents a continuation of that original goal, he said, with a focus on transdisciplinary work among all NU campuses and with collaborations among other academic institutions and partners in the public and private sectors in Nebraska, across the country and around the world.

“I look forward,” Milliken said, “to the success of this bold, risky, ambitious effort for us to ensure that we do everything we can to tap the intellectual capabilities, the energy and the commitment of people at our universities, our communities and our governments to build a great rural life in America and beyond.”

Sunday Social Highlights Music and Culture

Rural Futures Conference-goers pondered seemingly intractable problems facing rural communities that have often defied solutions. But they also had time for plain old fun.

Singer-songwriter Daniel Christian, a native of Tecumseh, Neb., entertained attendees at the conference’s opening night. Two original songs by the Nashville recording artist, who has won two National Country Music Festival Awards, also were used in the video “Living Beyond Boundaries,” which kicked off the three-day event.

And later that evening, conference attendees who lingered for a welcoming reception were treated to a flash mob sparked by members of the University of Nebraska at Kearney performing group The Nebraskats. Just as the conference theme encouraged people to step beyond boundaries, The Nebraskats urged people out of their comfort zones of chatting with colleagues and into singing and dancing to popular tunes… in short, to have fun.

Members of The Nebraskats who enticed conference participants to join the performance included UNK students: Megan Decker, Madison Hoge, Morgan Wopperling, Natalie Beckman, Alyssa Wetovich, Benjamin Hill, Austin Edghill, Tyler Hileman, Spencer Dagerman and Tommy Augustine. Also joining in as a vocalist was Kelli Dagerman, a University of Nebraska–Lincoln student. The Nebraskats director is Andrew R. White, and the group’s choreographer is Elizabeth White, both of whom are UNK faculty.
Mainstage: Sunday, November 3

Thomas Jefferson’s Passion for Rural Life Greets Conference Attendees

“I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past.”
-Thomas Jefferson

Traveling backwards in time some two centuries, Rural Futures Conference attendees spent an evening with Thomas Jefferson, portrayed by award-winning humanities scholar Clay Jenkinson, who characterized America’s third president as a man focused intently on the future.

When introducing the man who played pivotal roles in the nation’s early history, Tom Field, director of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, suggested that just as Jefferson wrestled with important questions about the future, so also must today’s audience wrestle with “the questions that stand between us and the rural future of our dreams and aspirations.”

But such questions are not unique to this generation, Field noted.

“History is ripe with examples of previous generations struggling with choices and with challenges,” Field said. That’s why it’s fitting, he said, to set the stage for Rural Futures Conference deliberations with a figure from the past whose bold visions for the future set him apart from his contemporaries.

Field shared that Jefferson was a reluctant public servant and transdisciplinary scholar who worked tirelessly to create a better future and who demonstrated that citizenship was an act of responsibility, not an act of entitlement. “If ever there was a citizen to whom we should turn, it is the third president of these United States,” Field said.

Such was Jefferson’s vision, in fact, that he bought, sight unseen, the 575-million-acre Louisiana Territory from France for three cents an acre, believing it to be “the making moment of American history.”

With the Louisiana Purchase, “we would be a continental nation, what I called an empire for liberty such as the world has never previously seen.”
To Jefferson, that empire for liberty was predicated on his conviction that independent, self-sufficient farmers played a critical role in ensuring that future. “I said that as long as the great bulk of the American people are farmers, we will be the happiest and freest and most virtuous people who ever lived on earth.”

Agriculture, in fact, was Jefferson’s first love. “I always considered myself a farmer first, a scientist second and a political figure only reluctantly.”

He noted that in his day, some 97 percent of people in the fledgling nation he helped create were farmers, compared to about two percent today. Moreover, few of today’s farmers are actually self-sufficient, as were the farmers who inspired Jefferson’s conviction that they were “the chosen people of God, if he ever had a chosen people.”

Jefferson challenged conference-goers to reinvigorate that sense of self-sufficiency.

“I think you need to put the culture back in agriculture,” he said. “Agriculture is a way of life. It’s a philosophy.”

Jefferson suggested that farmers should grow at least some of the food they eat, as well as producing bushels of wheat for the world market, and should spend time every day with their hands in the dirt.

“If you will restore the culture of that agriculture, you will find that people come back to rural life,” he said.

But Jefferson made clear he was not advocating a return to an imagined, idyllic past. “We mustn’t lock ourselves into an undue reverence for the past,” he said, particularly in America, which he called “the most experimental of all nations.”

Before and after his presidency, Jefferson himself was an avid experimenter and inventor. Among his inventions were tools to reduce the amount of back-breaking labor that had been a feature of farming for centuries. The lifelong farmer, in fact, used his mathematical skills and curiosity to improve the design of the moldboard plow to reduce resistance as it is pulled through soil. And he’s also credited with work on iron plows specially designed for plowing hillsides. But modern farmers, Jefferson suggested, are so machine-dependent, they are kept away from the soil, they don’t grow their own food “and they don’t participate in nature and nature’s law.”

Clay Jenkinson as Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was a scientist, a farmer, an architect and a reluctant politician. At 33 years of age, he wrote the Declaration of Independence and articulated the words that gave birth to the United States of America. Jefferson was shy, inquisitive and one of the most ardent supporters of widespread public education in the new republic. With the stroke of the pen, he purchased the Louisiana Territory and doubled the size of the fledgling nation. While not directly responsible, Jefferson may well have been the inspiration for the eventual establishment of the land grant university system, the settlement of the American West, and the root of the spirit of optimism that still characterizes American culture. He was the third U.S. president, serving from 1801 to 1809.
He acknowledged that some conference-goers would disagree with his skeptical view of farmers' dependency on large-scale machinery in their large-scale ag operations, but he said he hoped the disagreement would be as “rational friends.”

“When I hear another man express an opinion which is not mine, I say to myself, he has a right to his opinion as I do to mine; his error does me no injury.”

Jefferson challenged the audience to rethink an agriculture that is based on what he called Hamiltonian, profit-driven motives, a reference to his political rival Alexander Hamilton, the nation’s first treasury secretary.

“I am skeptical about your capacity to reinvigorate rural culture if you only pursue Hamiltonian models of development,” Jefferson said. “He has infected you into believing in a profit model of agriculture, and, of course, profit is essential. I should have paid more attention to it at Monticello,” his Virginia farm where he died on July 4, 1826, deeply in debt.

But life is more than that, he said.

“Life is commitment to things that can’t be measured in Mr. Hamilton’s terms. Mr. Hamilton wants to know the monetary value of things, what’s fungible. But that’s not why you’re in agriculture; that’s not the purpose of agriculture. The purpose of agriculture is to create citizens and in addition to that, to create complete lives where the soul is nurtured as much as the potatoes.”

An Agrarian Man

Even out of character as Thomas Jefferson, Clay Jenkinson described himself as deeply committed to agrarian life. The grandson of Minnesota farmers, Jenkinson grew up in North Dakota, and he recalled an early experience living with his in-laws on a farm in northwest Kansas that drew irrigation water from the Ogallala Aquifer. Moving unwieldy irrigation pipes by hand in 108-degree heat while shouting to be heard over the sound of the pumps “didn’t feel very Jeffersonian to me; it felt like industrial agriculture,” Jenkinson said.

He recalled his mother-in-law once lamenting that a crop sprayer had destroyed a neighbor’s peach orchard. “And I said, that’s just terrible. She said, yeah, she should know better than to have an orchard out here.”
Jefferson suggested the Rural Futures Institute may have its work cut out for it, but he said he hoped it can accomplish its goals.

“The best of American history is yet to come as long as you maintain a fundamental commitment to rural life. The minute you abandon rural life, America will cease to be the most interesting experiment in the world and become just another nation.”

Jefferson said he hoped the RFI would find creative ways to assure the nation always has a backbone of family farmers “who can remind the rest of the people what’s really at stake in a free society.”

“I can't think of anything more important to the future of the United States than finding a way to reinvigorate rural America,” he said. “Most people don't see it that way, but I did and I do.”
Mainstage: Monday, November 4
Koulopoulos Urges Conference Attendees to Take Charge of Creating Their Own Future

Tom Koulopoulos is a futurist.

But so are you, the leadership and management consultant told nearly 550 people attending the Rural Futures Conference.

In a morning keynote speech and an afternoon hands-on interactive session, the Boston-based advisor on industry and technology trends challenged audience members to think through what they want the future to look like and be willing to build it “in the absence of certainty.”

“What you're doing here is building a sense of community” with global implications, he said.

Koulopoulos suggested that the reality of urbanization in the history of the world reflects an inherent human need to create community. “We urbanized because the only way we could make connections without technology was to be in the same place at the same time. Well, guess what? We don’t have to do that anymore .... We’re driven to community. Not to place, but to people.”

Koulopoulos cited his own college- and high-school-aged children and their love affairs with communications technology to illustrate how changing behavior will affect our understanding of community.

“These kids grow up in a very different way. They grow up constantly connected to each other and to their devices. The devices become part of the community.”

One way to glimpse the pace of technological change—and the contemporary misjudgments of what it meant—is to consider the case of the first Motorola cell phones that came out in the early 1980s, Koulopoulos suggested. Pundits of the day generally agreed that by the end of the 20th century, about 10 million cell phones—not just Motorola’s, but all brands—would be in use worldwide. A few people predicted the number could be 100 million globally, but most thought 10 million was a closer bet, he said.

But the actual number of cell phones in use today? At least 5.6 billion. Probably more, he said. It’s a difference that hardly can be called a rounding error, Koulopoulos said, calling such predictions “incredibly inept futurism.”

So be willing to live with uncertainty, he said.

“If you want to be part of these communities going forward, there are two things you’ve got to do. You’ve got to allow yourself to be disrupted and uncomfortable, and you have to be willing to let go of that which allowed you and gave you license to succeed up until now.”
Koulopoulos said the first challenge for communities is to recognize the reality of uncertainty. “You have to adopt a behavior that incorporates the notion of uncertainty into it and allows you to build community and use community as a hedge against uncertainty.”

Rather than trying to predict the future, the futurist said, “worry about moving when you see the damn thing. When you see the future, move quickly enough to do something about it. Either get out of the way so you don’t get run over or take advantage of it. So don’t predict it; survive it.”

Koulopoulos described a principle of uncertainty this way: as time goes on, opportunity increases and uncertainty increases while the time to react decreases. Uncertainty increases because the amount of information available expands, giving people more information with which to make decisions. But at the same time, they have less time in which to make those decisions. So communities need to learn to move quickly enough to take advantage of opportunities or to avoid obstacles, he said.

The problem, he said, is that people need patterns in their lives, but they get stuck in those patterns because the patterns become a survival mechanism.

“Ultimately the challenge in building any future is that we get stuck in these patterns of the past,” he said. “We believe in these patterns. It’s not that they’re bad patterns. They worked for a long time.”

The challenge, he said, is to let the past inform the future, but not define the future. “Don’t let the limits of the past convince you that they will define the limits of the future. They don’t.”

Koulopoulos advocated using “reverse mentors” in community groups. Starting at about age 14, kids can be empowered to mentor adults on understanding and using social media and other behaviors and perspectives that are new to the older generations but are part of the reality communities face.

Following a lunch break, Koulopoulos led the conference attendees in an exercise called scenario-based planning.

Table groups were challenged to create a tool called a morphological matrix, originally developed in the 1920s as a way for engineers to figure out every possible combination of conditions in which an airplane, for example, would operate so that all the parts would work together.

The process involved identifying all the dimensions of a problem and then identifying all the attributes of those dimensions, or the ways in which those dimensions might manifest themselves. Then, randomly selecting elements

Don’t let the limits of the past convince you that they will define the limits of the future.”
During the interactive session, facilitated by Tom Koulopoulos, participants worked in small groups to break down a predetermined question into smaller components that could be grouped together to find different outcomes. The tool that was used was called the Morphological “Morph” Matrix.

from the columns and rows on the matrix presents unique combinations of characteristics of the problem that force a group to solve it in previously unimagined ways.

Table groups were assigned one of the following challenge questions:

- How will rural communities attract young adults and provide opportunities for them to assume an active role in the community?
- How will rural communities welcome diverse ideas, perspectives and people?
- How can we foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship that integrates the talent, ideas and capital of higher educational institutions and rural communities?
- What innovative approaches can communities implement to enhance health and ensure access to health care?

Table groups worked on their assignments for about an hour and then shared their observations about the process.

A critical part of the process, Koulopoulos said, is the initial stage of breaking down the problem into its various components.

“So often we try to solve a problem without a common vocabulary about the problem,” he said. “We don’t really know what the problem is that we’re solving because it’s not one problem, it’s several different problems that have been somehow stitched together into a single problem statement.”

Breaking a problem down gives everyone a common vocabulary with which to address it, he said.

The second step is generating ideas. But rather than endless brainstorming, the idea-generating process has to end with actually
selecting from among the ideas, he said. Otherwise, the group has nothing to show for its efforts and will be stuck in more brainstorming.

That’s where the randomized linking of various ideas can generate fruitful discussion, because it eliminates the politics in a brainstorming session.

“One of the biggest impediments in any team-based brainstorming or creative problem-solving exercise is that political tension,” Koulopoulos said. “Whose idea was this? Am I going to insult, am I going to otherwise put this person off? Am I going to play favorites if I use so-and-so’s idea as opposed to his idea? And you want to diffuse that immediately.”

Koulopoulos urged the conference attendees to adopt problem solving methods as they address their communities’ futures that create a structure for breaking down the problem, generating ideas, selecting ideas and coming up with a plan. Initially, some of the ideas may not seem to make sense.

But the future often doesn’t make sense either, he said. “This is the problem with uncertainty. It doesn’t look like the past any more.”

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Morphological Matrix Creative Problem Solving Tool Takeaway

- Creativity needs a neutral and level playing field as free of politics and ownership as possible.
- Team-based problem solving must involve a collective understanding of the problem or challenge being addressed.
- Thinking in unconventional terms about familiar problems requires the introduction of a disruptor such as randomness or uncertainty, in order to force new ways to look at existing challenges.
- Breakthrough thinking requires developing and reinforcing an adeptness to working as a team on unforeseen opportunities and challenges.
Mainstage: Tuesday, November 5
Young Leaders Say Rural Problems are Opportunities in Disguise

Panelist Meghan Bown raised some eyebrows among Rural Futures Conference attendees when she told everyone to stand up and, like kindergarteners, “reach for some apples in the trees.”

After hours of sitting, “we need to move,” the community health coordinator from Itasca County, Minn., said. “So we’re going to put our arms across our chest, stretch out a little bit. And you think that this is crazy, but there’s also some physical and mental reasons behind my doing this—switch arms—it’s because studies show that when you have a little bit of physical activity, do a little moving and stretching, you’re better listeners.”

And conference goers had a lot to listen to as Bown and four other young leaders described efforts in their communities to overcome or work around entrenched practices that sometimes stand in the way of change.

For starters, said Joe Johnson, who became city administrator of Nebraska City, Neb., 10 years ago at age 25, leaders need to focus on getting things done.

“If you’re not a doer, if you’re not somebody on the road pounding that pavement, nothing will get done,” he said. “So we can make speeches and we can stand on our soapbox, … but you’re not a leader until things get done.”

Architect and community builder Scott Moore y Medina of Pawhuska, Okla., agreed. “If you’re not physically standing there and doing something about it, … then you’re not really contributing to the future or the solutions that need to be out there for our communities to thrive and get ahead.”
Moore y Medina is principal architect of Blue Star Studio Inc., a Native American architecture and planning firm devoted to quality and place-based solutions for rural, tribal and other small communities. The firm’s work has included sustainable community planning projects in Montana, South Dakota, Kansas and Oklahoma.

But getting things done doesn’t always happen quickly because of the relationships you need to establish first, suggested Katie Meiklejohn of Helmville, Mont., who has worked for a number of nonprofit groups on efforts to link ranching and landscape conservation in the Rocky Mountain West.

Meiklejohn said that because the ranchers and ranching community she works with are often decades older than she is, it’s critical for her to listen and learn from their experience.

“The success of my work depended on having coffee,” she said. “I needed to sit down with these people and have coffee and talk and listen to them and learn from them and build a relationship, and from there, I could start to work with them on the issues that were challenging.”

Often, Moore y Medina said, local people create their own obstacles because they’re afraid of the future. So planners encounter “the really crusty bank owner that doesn’t want to help out with any kind of community project.” Or “the traditional elder that says, that’s not the way we ever did it.”

A certain amount of fear is inherent in all rural communities, Moore y Medina suggested, because of their ties to the land and the ever-present dangers of tornadoes, blizzards and other circumstances beyond their control. “But at the same time, we’re also hardworking people and very resilient,” he said. “Taking that inherent resiliency and using that as a force to get past all of these hardships is really important.”

Panel moderator Nicole Sedlacek, executive director of Holt County Economic Development in O’Neill, Neb., noted that one of the most common phrases people hear whenever a new idea emerges in a community is: “We’ve tried that already, or we tried that and it failed.”

Sedlacek called that “one of the most annoying things to hear because you tried that 20 years ago; it’s a whole different ball game now.” She asked fellow panelists how they responded whenever they heard such assertions.

“That just kind of drives my commitment to figure out how to make that thing work,” Meiklejohn replied.
“As human beings, I think we're really afraid of failure,” she said. “That is one of the biggest obstacles out there to progress.” People should redefine failure as an opportunity to learn from experience and figure out what it will take to make something happen rather than being afraid of taking risks, she said.

Johnson noted that risk aversion is a particular characteristic of government officials. “Government does not handle risk very well,” he said. “Government tends to be reactive instead of proactive.” At every level of government, “citizens elect people that don't want to be risk takers,” he said, so political reality often stands in the way of responding to new ideas.

Bown said that in her community of Grand Rapids, Minn., she has learned to respond to the “we tried that and it didn't work” complaint by trying to get to the bottom of what happened before. “Half the time when they say it didn't work, it's because they didn't have the right people at the table,” she said.

Bown said she's made it her business to know everybody and figure out their strengths: “I can make those connections to get the right people at the table to make things a success.”

But old habits can be hard to overcome.

Moore y Medina described the challenge of working with the small town where he grew up and attended a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school. He said he has gone back to meet with the city council, which wants to build a small community building. “And they can't even get past their own animosities towards each other,” he said.

Johnson suggested that too many communities don't perceive that the world is their competition.

“As soon as we start thinking in that light, that we're not competing against other small communities that are around us that we may play football against on a Friday night, as soon as we get over that, we'll realize that this world is not flat. It's very round, and we're competing globally against other countries.”

One audience member said that in his rural community, there seems to be a lack of young people willing to be involved and asked the panel how to get them to participate.

“One audience member said that in his rural community, there seems to be a lack of young people willing to be involved and asked the panel how to get them to participate. "Have you ever asked them? Have you ever given them the opportunity?" Bown asked. "In some cases, folks of my age have tried to step up and have been told no, we are doing it this way, and this is the way that it's going to go because this is the way we've done it for this long."
People need to realize there’s more than one right way to do something, she said. “And inviting people and giving them the opportunity to do it their way, even if it’s not your way, is a very important factor in that.”

Another audience member challenged the panelists to describe in 10 words or less what they’ll do when they return to their communities to keep the spirit of cooperation going.

Bown said she would “continue to make transdisciplinary solutions to complex problems.”

Medina, Johnson and Sedlacek said they would keep looking for doers, people with passion to make their dreams for the community happen.

And Meiklejohn? “I’m going to have coffee.”
Mainstage: Monday, November 4
The RFI Journey: From the Initial Idea to Present Day Vision

People have been trying for decades to address rural community development.

But what makes the Rural Futures Institute different is the commitment to it by the top leaders of the university, the multi-campus, transdisciplinary nature of the effort and the focus on issues that go beyond economics, according to Sam Cordes, a key RFI advisor who has spent nearly four decades as a faculty member and administrator at various land grant universities.

Cordes said the RFI reminded him of Daniel Burnham, the architect and urban planner credited with designing a master plan for the city of Chicago, who famously said: “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.”

“What you’re seeing here is something of that vintage,” Cordes told Rural Futures Conference attendees at the Monday morning session featuring an informal discussion among RFI Interim Director Mark Gustafson, Founding Executive Director Chuck Schroeder and representatives of higher education, business, community and nonprofit partners involved in initial RFI efforts.

“We’re really talking about something that involves reimagining the land grant university in support of rural Nebraska, the rural Great Plains, rural America,” Cordes said.

Gustafson noted that to be successful, the RFI needs to build relationships among the various organizations and individuals with a stake in the future of rural places, and the ability to do just that is one of the key characteristics
he said Schroeder brings to the job. He has had leadership positions in government and industry, in a university foundation and most recently as CEO of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

Schroeder said his western Nebraska upbringing on his family's ranch taught him the responsibilities of citizenship in a small community, but it also taught him that "living in a small community didn't confine my view and access of the world to Hayes County."

Schroeder recalled that dinner-table conversations sometimes included "scientists and leaders in education and industry and painters and writers from around the country and around the world that my parents would come across in various roles and invite to come spend some time with us."

Moreover, he said, his parents expected him and his five siblings to have a broad range of interests and gave them the freedom to pursue those interests.

"There was never a notion that what you're doing today necessarily creates a wall around what you might do tomorrow," he said.

That expansive, borderless view characterizes what the RFI is all about, he suggested.

Panelists representing projects that received initial RFI grants echoed that view, reporting on work that has linked communities, students and faculty members engaged in addressing rural concerns.

Roni Reiter-Palmon, a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, described a project focused on rural leadership and designed to create opportunities for rural people to hone their leadership skills.

Stephanie Sands, research associate at UNO's Center for Collaborative Science, which administers the project, told the conference-goers, "Being a leader in rural communities can give you the opportunities that you don't have in urban communities."

She said it has been exciting to see the passion young rural leaders have brought to community gardens, museums, art exhibits, breweries "and all these crazy diverse things that they're gaining experience from."

Sands said the project's research component involved asking young leaders why they came back to their rural communities after going away to college. Researchers discovered that it's not only the opportunity to start something new in a community that drives the returnees.
“It’s just the family values and they themselves being raised in these rural communities and seeing what it was like as a kid ... and they wanted to raise their kids in that environment,” Sands said. “Some of them even mentioned having the open spaces just cleared their head and allowed them to come up with these new ideas.”

Shawn Kaskie, director of the Center for Rural Research and Development at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, described efforts to address the rural brain drain by reaching out to local alumni and asking them: “Have you ever thought about bringing your skills, your expertise back to a rural community?”

Jobs in technology, accounting, engineering and other fields often can be done easily in a home office or on Main Street in a rural community, Kaskie said.

The key, said Paul Eurek of Loup City, CEO of Xpanxion LLC, a global software engineering company, is not to have just a job.

“It’s not a job we’re promoting,” Eurek said. “It’s an opportunity ... for people who have left the state, who have a career, who have built a career, to be able to come back to the state and start new opportunities.” Rather than outsourcing jobs to India and China, Eurek’s company has had success “rural sourcing” computer software work and recruiting professionals back to communities like Kearney and Loup City.

Schroeder said Eurek’s enterprise illustrates an important aspect of what the Rural Futures Institute is trying to do.

“This is not just nostalgia,” Schroeder said. “It is not trying to go back to a rural structure that was and maybe is held dearly in our hearts. That’s not what this is about.”

Eurek’s approach is an example of “seeing rural communities as an opportunity that is not going backwards, but it’s truly taking advantage of what is a great resource with new, innovative ideas” that require strong community leadership, Schroeder said.
Sometimes communities aren’t even sure what resources they already have, suggested Kathy Tweeten of North Dakota State University (NDSU). While many towns in her state are experiencing unprecedented growth related to an energy boom, other communities are still trying to attract new residents.

She recounted how people in Ellendale, N.D., working with NDSU Extension Agent Jodi Bruns, realized they were so concerned with bringing in new residents that they weren’t marketing “to the people they already have there.”

Ellendale is home to a small college with about 200 students and payroll of some $2 million. “And the community didn’t even recognize that this was a wonderful asset to their community,” Tweeten said.

But improved communication between the college and community members has led to more engagement of students and efforts by local businesses to cater to student interests, with features like one-dollar-off pizzas at the local convenience store. “Those kind of things never happened before because they never saw the students as an audience, as somebody they needed to market to,” Tweeten said.

In addition to linking with communities, early RFI efforts also have involved linking with other institutions of higher education and nonprofit organizations with an interest in rural futures.

Barry Dunn, dean of the college of agriculture and biological sciences at South Dakota State University, praised the University of Nebraska for taking the lead with the Rural Futures Institute and also for seeking involvement from other academic institutions outside Nebraska. “State boundaries … don’t need to be roadblocks to success,” he said, noting that the Great Plains states all share similar opportunities and challenges.

“State boundaries … don’t need to be roadblocks to success.”

Bottom left: Kathy Tweeten
Top right: Barry Dunn and Sarah Skerratt
Bottom right: Milan Wall and B.J. Reed
Sarah Skerratt of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, director of Scotland’s Rural College–Rural Policy Center, said the exciting thing about the RFI “is its commitment to making a difference.”

Rather than considering itself an elite institution, the RFI is listening to and engaging with rural communities and is seeking to affect public policy, she said.

Milan Wall, a founder of the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, said such collaboration is essential to bring about change. “If all we’re doing is going out and repeating the same old platitudes, frankly, this won’t make any difference to anybody,” he said.

B.J. Reed, senior vice chancellor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), emphasized the importance of all four NU campuses and people across all disciplines being involved with RFI efforts. Reed said it’s wrong to think a metropolitan university like UNO is disconnected from rural parts of the state. He said the campus is heavily involved in community and economic development, capacity building and leadership development, all of which know no boundaries.

“If Greater Nebraska and rural parts of Nebraska aren’t successful, Omaha is not going to be successful,” he said.

Dunn challenged the RFI to reach out in partnership to Native American communities in the region, noting that the nine Indian reservations in South Dakota represent the state’s fastest-growing communities. “I would challenge the institute ... in a spirit of partnership with the future, to help those communities on those reservations deal with the toughest health challenges, educational challenges and economic development challenges in our region,” he said.
Schroeder emphatically agreed, citing his work with Indian communities in Oklahoma for the past 12 years in connection with the cowboy museum.

“It is a challenge, but also an enormous opportunity,” Schroeder said. “Here are people that are very enterprising, who believe that you have a base of culture that overwhelms other considerations. And we have things to learn from that, to capitalize on and to help them in building their communities in ways that are meaningful to them.”

Schroeder and Gustafson noted that a recurring theme among all panelists is the importance of community leadership.

“It is leadership,” Schroeder said, “that makes it possible for some communities to defy a popular narrative that small rural places are doomed to die.”

Another overarching narrative about rural places that’s hard to change, Gustafson said, is the image of strong individuals “conquering the frontier.” There were strong individuals to be sure, he said, but an equally important part of the narrative is the threshing bees and barn raisings and building community churches—the collaborative community efforts that have always been critical in rural places and continue to be the focus of the Rural Futures Institute.
To Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, a vigorous rural economy matters, not just to people who live in rural places, but to people in urban and suburban America and around the world.

The former Iowa governor who is serving as the 30th secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture was the closing speaker at the Rural Futures Conference. His talk was also part of the Heuermann Lecture series, which focuses on food, natural resources, renewable energy and sustainable rural communities. The lecture series is sponsored by UNL’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources and is supported by a gift from Nebraskans Keith and Norma Heuermann.

Vilsack noted that while only a tiny fraction of Americans farm, their work contributes to national security because they produce all the food Americans need.

“I wish everybody in this country understood that,” he said, adding: “Very few nations in the world today have that capacity.”

American farmers “produce nearly 85 percent of everything we consume and the other 15 percent is consumed just because we like to have avocados 12 months out of the year instead of six months out of the year.”

In addition to being the source of food for the nation, rural places also are the source of the nation’s water and energy resources and much of the nation’s recreation. Moreover, Vilsack said, “Rural families disproportionately send their sons and daughters to military service.” Only 16 percent of the nation’s population lives in rural places, he said, but nearly 40 percent of the nation’s military originates from rural communities.

But much of rural America faces challenges associated with income inequality and, in some places, persistent poverty, he noted.

People used to believe that when farmers did well, everybody else in rural communities did well, too, Vilsack said, but that’s no longer the case because there are simply too few farmers.

“Production agriculture needs to be part of, but not the only strategy for rebuilding and revitalizing the rural economy,” Vilsack said.

At USDA, “we have begun to fashion a strategy for USDA for the programs and policies that we control to try to begin the process of making the case that rural America is a place where you want to live and work and raise your family and is a place where there can be prosperity and is a place where you can have enormous opportunity and it is a place where you can contribute significantly and mightily to your country,” Vilsack said.
The agriculture secretary said USDA is pursuing a five-fold strategy to invigorate rural America. The strategy focuses on: production agriculture, local and regional food systems, conservation, recreational opportunity and bio-based manufacturing.

Production agriculture will continue to be a critical underpinning of the rural economy, Vilsack said, because of growing global demand for food. In the next four decades, worldwide food production will have to increase by 70 percent, he said, which will require more innovation in agriculture in the next 40 years than in the past 10,000 years of farming.

That means more research and expanding export markets for American producers to maintain their place as the most productive farmers in the world, he said.

But while production agriculture will remain central to rural places, continued advances mean it simply won't require as many people as it did in days gone by.

That's why USDA is supporting efforts to expand domestic as well as foreign demand with micro loans and other programs that encourage organic production, local farmers’ markets and the development of food hubs to aggregate locally produced items and package them to facilitate sale to institutional buyers like schools.

Vilsack said nearly 40 percent of the nation's schools are buying some food items that are grown locally or regionally.

The agriculture secretary said USDA also is focusing on new approaches to conservation of soil and water resources, including attempts to attract private sector investment in maintaining land and water. The ability to use land as a way to sequester carbon will become increasingly important as a way of dealing with climate change, he suggested.

And when conservation increases wildlife in rural areas, it also expands recreational opportunities.

“As you improve landscapes and water resources,” Vilsack said, “you create more hunting and fishing and hiking and biking opportunities and you get a larger opportunity to seize a portion of that $650-some billion industry we call recreation.”
It’s critical to understand the linkages among conservation, wildlife habitat and outdoor recreation, which brings more tourist dollars into rural areas, he said, adding: “That tourism dollar rattles around the rural economy more quickly than just about any other dollar.”

Vilsack said the last element of USDA’s efforts to boost the rural economy relate to promoting bio-based manufacturing, with new ways to use crop residue and livestock waste to create new products like chemicals, polymers, fabrics, fibers, solvents, cleansers, inks and ingredients for all manners of other products.

“Because of the bulk and the mass of bio-based production,” he said, “it has to be done in rural areas because you can’t transport that biomass very far because of its size and its bulk.”

He cited as examples:
- A plant in Wisconsin that is using corncobs to produce all the plastic bottles the Coca-Cola Company needs for its water and soda products;
- A Virginia company using plant material to create a substitute for fiberglass;
- A Wisconsin business using wood chips and wood scraps to make bulletproof vests that are lighter and stronger than Kevlar; and
- An energy company in Florida that is turning agricultural and municipal waste into fuel.

“This is a brave new future we have,” Vilsack said, “the ability to redesign, re-engineer the American economy and bring manufacturing back and bring it back to rural areas.”

The result, he said, is the chance to create more jobs in rural places to complement and supplement other economic opportunities for young people who want to make a difference.
Vilsack said USDA has adopted a strategy of encouraging rural communities to collaborate regionally.

“We’re encouraging communities to think collaboratively to understand what their niche and role is in the regional economy and to expand on it and create a strategic vision which we at USDA will help invest in,” he said.

Vilsack noted that many people aren’t aware that in addition to supporting agriculture and food programs, his department also invests in rural quality-of-life efforts that help finance rural housing, schools, libraries, hospitals and other community facilities, including expanded broadband access, which is critical to rural community vitality.

By focusing on these quality-of-life efforts, Vilsack explained that the results would create opportunities for bright young people who truly really want to live, work and raise their families in rural communities and who want to have an opportunity to make a difference.

More is at stake in ensuring a vigorous rural future than just agriculture or the economy, Vilsack said. Most important, he said, is maintaining “a value system that makes America unique.”

It’s a value system based on something he said every farmer knows because it’s something the land teaches. “You cannot keep taking from the land. You’ve got to give something back to it,” Vilsack said. “If you don’t, it stops producing. It’s pretty simple.”

“These country is no different. And young people who grow up in these rural areas, they understand that … if something’s given this much to me, I have to give something back to it … We grow up understanding we’ve got to give something back.”
Concurrent Sessions
Rise Beyond Boundaries
Concurrent Session: Tuesday, November 5  
Governing the Land: Maximizing Rural Places Locally and Globally

Put in one room several dozen people who care about land, plus a panel that includes a former United Kingdom government official turned college professor, a tribal lawyer, and people whose jobs involve community planning, rangeland management, water resources management and site selection of power transmission lines and the conversation becomes quite exhilarating.

Now get everyone standing around tables playing “Plainsopoly” making decisions about sometimes thorny land use questions drawn by a roll of the dice on game boards created from Google Earth-based images of towns and open countryside.

The result?

More questions than answers, but a candid acknowledgment of the competing government, regulatory, economic and personal interests that can stand in the way of making decisions about long-term land use goals.

The board game came after a presentation by Richard Wakeford of Winchcombe, U.K., a professor of environment, land use and rural strategy at Birmingham City University. He also is chairman of the U.K.’s Sustainable Development Research Network and previously headed Scotland’s department responsible for agriculture, environment and rural affairs.

Wakeford described the inextricable link between urban and rural land, even though planners in the 1960s, he noted, focused on “places” and didn’t quite “know what to do with the stuff that isn’t places, so they kind of market it as a recreation zone or something like that.” They approached planning from the perspective of creating mechanisms to make sure towns developed appropriately, but didn’t think much about how to use land wisely, he said.

As a result different levels of government are all trying to do different things with different policies, many of which have an impact on land use.

“And nobody’s looking at it, as far as I can see, from the other way out, in a place-based way, and saying: here’s this land, what’s the best use of it, how are we going to achieve that?”

Understanding that is important, he said, because continued growth of cities is inevitable. But all of them “are going to demand more and more ecosystem services from rural areas.”

At issue, he said, is identifying key assets of the land and determining how to exploit those assets to their fullest. A key consideration lies in understanding how actions of federal, state and local governments can incentivize the best use of the land or stand in the way.
With moderator Jessica Shoemaker of the University of Nebraska College of Law fielding questions, panelists added their perspectives.

Danelle Smith, general counsel to the Winnebago Indian Tribe, pointed out that in the case of issues relating to tribal land use, there’s yet another complication. Tribal land that is held in trust by the federal government creates a particular challenge because tribes have responsibilities to provide services and infrastructure, but they lack a property tax base for support and must deal with overlapping jurisdictional responsibilities.

Bill Hopkin, who directs Utah’s Grazing Improvement Program, noted that similar issues can come into play in managing rangeland in the intermountain West, where multi-county coordinated resource management committees attempt to develop land use plans that can encompass public lands managed by the National Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management as well as privately-owned property, all while responding to pressure from the environmental community. The competing interests and regulatory regimes make it difficult to effect management changes, he said.

Moreover, the inheritance tax makes intergenerational transfer of land difficult, he said. Ranches are being sold for far more than the return of investment on cattle, he said, often to people with “romantic notions and lots of money” who take the livestock off the ranch, which in turn harms local communities and contributes to a wildlife imbalance.

Chad Nabity, planning director of the Hall County Regional Planning Commission, echoed concerns about the “disconnect between property values and production values.”

Farm ground in Hamilton County has sold for $16,000 an acre, he said, because the federal tax code, in effect, creates an incentive for investors to lose money on overpriced land.

“If I’m the local farmer living next to that ground, all of a sudden my ground's worth $16,000 an acre, and I may not be making enough money selling my product to pay the (property) taxes to support that,” Nabity said. “That turns around and impacts everything that happens in our communities. And those
Meghan Sittler, coordinator of the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance, and Johnathan Hladik, energy and climate policy director for the Center for Rural Affairs, described additional challenges and regulatory stumbling blocks that can stand in the way of wise land use planning.

Sittler noted that in Nebraska, while the land itself is a resource, so also is the water—both surface and groundwater—associated with the land. She said the Lower Platte River Corridor Alliance, a consortium of three Natural Resources Districts and six resource-related state agencies, encompasses territory that includes 24 communities and eight counties. Some of those counties are growing, others aren’t; some have zoning procedures, others don’t.

Each of the nine agencies in the alliance has regulatory authority over different aspects of the land and water resources, but the alliance is attempting to focus on the idea that the land, water and people in the region all have to work together “to help achieve a sustainable vision for that region of the state and potentially model that across the landscape,” Sittler said.

Hladik, whose major concern is tapping the economic development potential of renewable energy, said the biggest impediment to reaping benefits from wind energy is the lack of transmission lines. Siting those lines can be problematic because of concerns from environmental groups and landowners, but also because of bureaucratic inefficiency associated with getting permissions to stretch power lines across jurisdictions and across states.

“Most state governments and most state statutes don’t even really have anything on the books for connecting with another state,” he said.

Several audience members expressed concern over the short-term perspective with which land use decisions often are made.

Roger Wehrbein of Plattsmouth, Neb., said he worries about long-term loss of agricultural land, which is happening in Cass County, where he lives.

“I'm concerned that in 40 or 50 years it's going to be a problem all through Nebraska to a large extent as the coasts fill up,” he said. “But as we get further and further generations away from the land, I'm guessing the coast right now could care less if we preserve agricultural land.”
“Now is the time to be putting regulations in place to preserve farmland,” he
said. People will say such regulations aren’t needed now. “But when the time
comes that we may need them, it will probably be too late.”

Audience member Barry Dunn of South Dakota State University said one
of his concerns is that “highest and best use” of land tends to be defined in
very short terms, generally involving money. “How do we come together and
start talking about externalities like quality of life,” he asked, “because that’s
one of the reasons we live in rural America.”

That’s a good question, panelists agreed.

“The challenge is actually how you go about putting values on a lot of these
ecosystem services,” Wakeford said. “Food is an ecosystem service, and it’s
quite easy to put a value on food because there’s a market for food. But, you
know, the monarch butterfly. That’s a very important ecosystem service, but
how on earth do you put a value on that?”

Or on the value of trout streams, prairie chickens, or a sky so dark at night
you can pick out individual stars in the Milky Way?

Competing values associated with the use of land and all of its related
resources in a time of demand for increased agricultural production as well
as more space for growing cities create challenges for rural communities to
address as they envision their future.

Adding to the complexity, Wakeford suggested, is that “governments
themselves at the top level have no idea how all the different things that
they do come together again at the bottom level and are so confusing.”

But some session participants who played “Plainsopoly” indicated that the
problem-solving game gave them new food for thought about using the
land, their fundamental resource. One man said that the game forced him to
think about “my little piece of land, and then I was forced to give opinions
on what somebody else should do with their little piece of land.”

“You have to challenge yourself at that point and say, if it’s good for them,
maybe I have to reconsider my opinion about others giving opinions about
my land,” he said. “It’s a very interesting
way of taking a landowner and suddenly
forcing them to reevaluate their position
regarding their piece of ground.”

That’s a common reaction, Wakeford said.
“People who don’t normally talk to each
other talk to each other and recognize
that there are other values in society other
than the ones that they have and that they
respect those values because they’re part
of the same community.”

Session Takeaway

Rural land, its resources and people are
inextricably tied to urban places. But crafting
a strong future for both will require an ability
to balance competing, even contradictory,
interests and to negotiate bureaucratic
roadblocks that sometimes stand in the way
of the best long-term decisions about the
use of finite resources.
Concurrent Session: Tuesday, November 5
Building Vibrant Communities Through Entrepreneurship

Using the Rural Futures Institute’s statement of core values as a jumping off point, participants in the concurrent session on entrepreneurship engaged in brainstorming discussions based on the premise that putting new ideas into action creates a ripple effect in communities, just like dropping a pebble in a pond.

Participants were challenged to imagine their communities in 2020 and identify what they would be doing differently to bring about that ripple effect.

“Look to serve the entire community,” one participant said.

“Focus on the built environment,” said another, to ensure there are places where people can encounter each other informally so collaborations can emerge.

Strive to focus on the positive, individual talents already in place and build upon them, a participant said.

A willingness to take risks emerged as a theme among the discussion tables.

“I think something you could do to be bold and creative would be to create a safe-to-fail place,” one participant said, “an area where you can feel empowered to make mistakes and it’s not the end of the world.”

One audience member suggested that communities could create a ripple effect by reaching out to the poorest people in the community and those least active. Seeking their ideas would help give them a stake in what happens and, in turn it would, “just kind of build on itself.” Communities need to figure out how to hear and value the voices of marginalized residents who typically haven’t been included, a participant added.

Some of the discussion focused on practical considerations facing entrepreneurs, particularly the need for access to financing.

One discussion group highlighted a need to create an internal, grassroots funding mechanism for entrepreneurs so they don’t have to depend on grants from the government or other sources. That way, entrepreneurs young and old could have local access to loans or grants, build their businesses and then pay back into the fund, which would continue to help others.

Another audience member said communities could work on “getting a broader group of people excited about entrepreneurs and investing in them.” Just as people are encouraged to buy locally, they also should be investing locally.
One discussion group took it a step further: “We think everyone in the community should either own or at least own a portion of the business they work for. That changes the mentality of the business environment; it changes the buy-in, the focus on being successful.”

One participant suggested that adopting an entrepreneurial mindset and learning how to react and adapt to changing conditions could have wide-ranging, positive effects.

“With these kinds of attitudes going into play, we might actually see a much happier, less stressed out kind of citizen base,” the audience member said. Instead of seeing the future “hinging on a bunch of factors beyond the control of the community,” people would be more comfortable with an adaptive, entrepreneurial approach to problem solving and be willing to say, “You know, it’s really not going to be so bad.”

**Session Takeaway**

Communities can nurture entrepreneurship by envisioning the future they want to create, incorporating disparate voices and devising creative approaches to attracting local investment dollars.
Concurrent Session: Tuesday, November 5
The Essential Conversation: Linking Communities and Higher Education

Fighting childhood obesity, creating a grocery store, improving a rural community campground and garden, starting a high school entrepreneurship program, developing a community marketing plan, conducting a community housing survey and organizing clean-up days don’t have much in common.

But the undergraduate college students and the teachers and community partners who worked with them were emphatic in describing at a conference breakout session the benefits of those service-learning projects. Students gained leadership and problem-solving skills, got insights into new career prospects and learned what it’s like to be a stranger in a small town. And the communities? People started talking about what kind of town they have and what kind of town they want.

At least one project, in which students from the University of Nebraska at Kearney helped high school students in Cody (population 154) develop a business plan and start a grocery store from scratch, transformed an entire community.

“You cannot imagine what this project has done for this community,” said Janet Shelbourn, the work-based learning teacher at Cody-Kilgore Unified Schools.

Moreover, it has transformed young people in Cody, she said, citing as an example a high school student who works in the store and who told a teacher, “We built a store; we can do anything.”

“Starting a library, reviving a movie theater and figuring out how to get more housing and develop community infrastructure are now on the agenda in Cody, Shelbourn said.

Michael Lechowicz, a UNK marketing major and vice president of a campus entrepreneurial club, said the Cody residents approached UNK after a village organization already had obtained grants to start the store. The UNK students helped the Cody team create a business plan for their store and stayed in touch with them periodically by video conference as the store took shape.

“This involvement has really helped me with taking what I’ve learned in the classroom and applying it to real knowledge,” Lechowicz said.

More than 400 miles away from Cody, two undergraduates at Peru State College discovered the challenges and rewards of their effort to combat childhood obesity in the rural southeast corner of Nebraska with an aim toward improving public health.
Allie Buesing, a sophomore exercise science major, and Lindsay Toman, a junior education major, described the CHANCE Initiative, created with Peru State College associate professors Kyle Ryan and Sheri Grotrian-Ryan. “CHANCE” stands for Children’s Health Activities and Nutrition Community Engagement. Buesing and Toman are both AmeriCorps Service Scholars.

The students first conducted 15- to 25-minute nutrition lessons in classrooms, but abandoned that approach the second year of the project because “it really took away from standardized test preparation,” Buesing said.

With grant support from various sources, the initiative also bought pedometers for kids to track their activity levels and organized a youth field day and a 5K community run. Buesing and Toman also organized after-school games two afternoons a week at Auburn and Johnson-Brock Schools.

But the project has faced both structural and cultural barriers, Buesing said, noting that the rural communities lack parks, fitness facilities and sidewalks and people have limited access to affordable, healthy foods and tend to eat diets that are higher in fat and calories. Even the space for after-school activities is limited because the sole school gym also is used for sports practices and theater. Additionally, students rely on school buses to get home and can't just linger after classes are over.

Despite the challenges, Buesing said the project steered her on a new career path from imagining she would teach health and physical education to now wanting a career in public health.

Another service-learning project that also focused on encouraging outdoor activity was described by Abbey Rudd and Alisha Markle, both senior agronomy majors at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kan.

Their horticulture class made improvements at Camp Pawnee, a former Girl Scout camp in Larned, Kan., that has been transformed into a nearby community destination for family campouts and other outdoor activities. The Fort Hays students installed a drip irrigation system and planted trees along a camp walkway. Rudd said some of the students also were involved in making improvements to the community garden in town, installing a weed barrier and mulch in the garden’s vineyard.

Jenny Manry, an associate professor at Fort Hays State and a grant-writing volunteer with Larned Pride, said the Fort Hays State University-Larned collaboration has been
an important part of the community’s efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle and community innovation. Larned Pride started a community wellness program, bought 400 roller skates for its community center from a rink that was going out of business, and started its help-and-take garden.

“You help in our garden, you’re welcome to take from it,” she said. The garden started out with the basic crops, but soon added 35 orchard trees, a vineyard, strawberry beds and herb beds.

The community also pitched in to renovate a dilapidated park, she said, in two makeover weekends that tallied more than a thousand hours of volunteer service.

Another three groups of presenters from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln described their service-learning experiences through a project called the Rural Community Serviceship Program. The program placed pairs of students in Red Cloud, Holdrege and Seward in an internship capacity to work on projects the communities identified.

Jeff Story, a junior political science, English and pre-law major from Omaha, went to Red Cloud, where he was involved in conducting a community housing survey and in organizing two community clean-up days that drew on volunteers from the FFA chapter, the hospital, nursing center and other groups in the community.

“Going into this small of a community was kind of a challenge for me and something I was a little afraid of,” Story said. But the experience eased his apprehensions about small-town life, and he said moving to a small community isn’t out of the question for him after he completes law school.

Bethany Blackburn of Bassett, a junior agriculture education major at UNL, had the opposite reaction. She worked in Seward, which, at about 30 miles from Lincoln, she did not consider a remote rural area. Seward has a Walmart, she noted, and the town “is way bigger than Bassett, so I thought I was in the city.”

Blackburn and her partner, Morgan Netz, working through Seward County extension educator Dennis Kahl, were asked to create an entrepreneurship program involving students from all three high schools in the county.
One day a month throughout the school year, the students visit places of business, hear from community leaders and learn what it takes to develop a business plan. The goal, she said, is to “create a link between our students and high schools with the business and community members.”

At the end of the school year, Blackburn said, the high school students will participate in a quick pitch contest to present the business plans they’ve been developing through the program.

For Jordyn Lechtenberg of Ainsworth, a senior agribusiness and entrepreneurship major, a summer in Holdrege with the assignment of developing a community marketing plan was eye-opening.

Lechtenberg said she and her teammate Sydney Hansen had never been to Holdrege until they got the internship assignment. So they had to do a lot of listening and ask a lot of questions to identify what differentiated Holdrege from other communities. They used that research to develop a marketing plan for residents, potential residents and businesses.

They also created a community Facebook page, a promotional video, a logo and a slogan, and they got to see community members engage in more positive conversation about Holdrege in just the eight weeks they were there, she said.

“It was the community really leading that initiative the entire time and us really just doing the leg work behind that,” Lechtenberg said.

She also said the experience led her to revise her expectation of what it means to be a young newcomer in a small town.

“I’d always thought the community’s role should be to help integrate and help newcomers feel welcome,” she said. But she soon realized that the newcomer has a responsibility, too, to engage with the community, get to know people and be willing to serve. “It shouldn’t be my expectation for them to be the ones to approach me.”
Jean Karlen, professor emeritus at Wayne State College, was the campus service-learning coordinator from 1999 to 2010. She emphasized that service-learning needs to meet a community need and must supplement work done in the classroom.

But service-learning is “a risky business,” she said, “because once you step out of the classroom, you give up control, and who knows what may happen on the street. It’s exciting, and it’s scary as hell.”

And it’s also an example of precisely what land grant colleges should be doing, not only to improve communities, but also to improve the academy, said Scott Peters, a professor in the cultural foundations of education department at Syracuse University. Peters, who also taught at Cornell University, is leading a national initiative about the future of the land grant system’s extension and public engagement work.

“When colleges like Nebraska are in relationships with communities, when they see communities as sources of knowledge and wisdom and not just clients or customers to be served, ... that can result in better colleges,” he said.

But he cautioned attendees to understand that their efforts are going against the academic grain.

Too often, he said, “work with ordinary folks in communities is seen by many people as embarrassing, beneath the dignity of a world class research university.”

“We need to learn how to gain the respect and credibility for this work by accomplishing good things, by telling good stories about it, by doing the work well, not by demonizing anybody else,” he said.
Peters said there’s a place in social science research for random controlled trials and evidence-based programming, but such an approach “takes away the freedom of people to create their own programs.”

He noted that the stories presented during the breakout session were about “people creating things, improvising, innovating, learning from mistakes and trying it again.” That’s something scholars in the academy need to learn from communities.

“This wonderful testimony from Cody, ‘we built a store, we can do anything,’ encapsulates what I think is the most important thing I’m taking from this,” Peters said, and he urged participants “never, ever, ever, ever stop creating spaces to tell stories about what you’re doing. It’s extraordinarily powerful and important to share these stories.”

**Session Takeaway**

Put together creative college students, willing faculty supporters and communities with a task in mind or a problem to solve, and then get out of the way while they get to work. Service-learning projects may encounter obstacles beyond their control, but the impact they have can transform lives.
If your passion runs to envisioning what rural communities could look like tomorrow or next week or next year or 10 years from now, the concurrent session titled “#Visioning4aNEWfuture” was the place to spark new ideas.

Shifting among various discussion tables, over 80 participants brainstormed responses to key, thought-provoking questions posed by a group of young Nebraskan leaders and facilitated by Deb Burnight. And the ideas kept coming.

First, the groups considered: “What would the ideal rural community/job market need to look like in 15 years for my children or my neighbor’s children to want to come back to it?”

Audience members replied:
- High speed Internet and opportunities for telecommuting;
- Energy and excitement from people already in the community;
- Access to a public library;
- Diverse things to do;
- Being health and fitness oriented, like having parks and trails, co-op gardens, gym access “and maybe even chickens in your backyard,” one said;
- Child care, quality housing, health care, grocery stores, gas stations and restaurants, which one participant called the “meat and potatoes” quality-of-life issues;
- Jobs with benefits;
- Good schools that connect with the community and access to postsecondary education;
- A commitment to preserving the natural environment and rural landscape;
- A futuristic leadership;
• Welcoming diversity and embracing youth, and leaders that don't use phrases like “they, them, lazy and useless,” one participant said;
• Strong churches; and
• A community spirit that one participant called “a can-do attitude.”

Participants then looked at the flip side of the first question: “What currently impedes young people from locating in rural communities?”

In addition to citing lack of general amenities previously identified and lack of good-paying jobs, the groups highlighted a message rural youth too often hear, either directly or indirectly. “They're being told to get your degree and never come back,” one participant said.

Some participants suggested the root of that attitude stems from the farm crisis of the 1980s, when people saw only a diminishing future for rural places and encouraged high school graduates to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

One participant noted, however, that leaving your small hometown for a few years can be a good thing.

“You can get some really good opportunities by leaving for four or five years and then bring in new ideas, innovative ideas, the global perspectives to your community to add value to that,” the participant said, suggesting that otherwise, communities run the risk of becoming stagnant, which limits their potential for new ideas.

Too often, young people face a stigma that they've failed if they return to a rural community, some said. “They didn't succeed because they're not in Omaha or Lincoln doing huge things,” one participant said.

If that's the case, some said, the solution may lie in redefining what it means to succeed in life. “Success maybe was in a metropolitan area at one time,” one person observed, “but success can happen anywhere, and it’s what kind of success you want for yourself.”

Women face a particular stigma if they have an advanced degree or professional aspirations. “If you come back, it’s often expected that you're
either going to get that bank teller position or clerk position, or else where you're going to waitress at,” one said.

Some participants expressed concern about an excessive focus on steering kids to four-year colleges.

“We need to reinforce the idea that it's OK to go to a tech college or a community college,” one said. “In high school, you don't need to push university down their throats because we need mechanics, we need those jobs, but they're going to get those skill sets from possibly a community college that they can afford.”

The session facilitator then shifted the focus to another question: When young people do return to a rural community, “what prevents them from assuming positions of leadership?”

Participants were ready with answers:

- The retiring baby-boom generation is accustomed to a top-down leadership style, while young people are more collaborative and have grown up learning to work in teams or groups.
- Younger people want “instant gratification,” and if their ideas can't be implemented immediately, they don't want to be involved.
- Young people who are asked to take on leadership positions and suggest new ideas get tired of being expected to do things “how the last 10 presidents have done it,” one said, and having ideas shot down because they didn't work 20 years ago.
- Young people get put on committees as a token youth but never really are given true leadership opportunities. “It's a huge, huge mistake people are making,” said one person who has been that token youth committee member. “If you’re going to invite somebody from a younger group to be part of your committee or your group, they need to be as equals at the table.”
- Sometimes young newcomers “get worked to death” because they do become involved and then are overwhelmed, one said. Another added:
“I hadn't even closed on my house when I was approached to be on the city council board. They saw a new young person and they went after me like crazy.”

- One young participant said there's value in younger people being willing to understand the older generation and their motives so both can work together.

For their final group challenge, participants brainstormed specific ideas that could draw young people to rural communities. The suggestions that emerged included:

- Using computer applications to connect entrepreneurs in rural communities with resources they might need;
- Developing statewide marketing plans to sell rural America;
- Creating educational initiatives for young people who want to become skilled workers, not university graduates;
- Offering incentives for young people moving to rural communities;
- Changing perceptions that a community is closed to new ideas young people bring; and
- Creating a toolkit for communities to implement ideas that emerged in the day's discussions.

**Session Takeaway**

Young people are drawn to communities that have appropriate amenities, embrace new ideas, include newcomers and give them a serious role to play and resist defining personal success as requiring a college degree and job in the city.
Concurrent Session: Tuesday, November 5
The Rural Commons

Community housing needs, workforce issues and what to do about animal rights groups were among the disparate themes that emerged from Rural Futures Conference attendees who participated in the Rural Commons concurrent session.

Using an open space discussion format, the handful of attendees who joined the Rural Commons raised questions about a wide variety of issues affecting rural places and people. Then, based on their interest in the posed topics, they had roundtable discussions to explore the topics.

Questions and themes the participants explored included:
• How to effectively educate consumers and defend farmers and ranchers against deceptive practices of the Humane Society of the United States and other organizations the participants characterized as “animal terrorist groups.”
• How to encourage water conservation and incorporate consideration of drought in community planning.
• How to attract and embrace younger people and help them have a meaningful life, not just a job.
• How to share ideas among rural communities about various housing issues.
• How to develop effective regional systems to help rehabilitate children in need.

The group also raised questions about several workforce and education issues, with some participants expressing their opinion that all youth do not need a four-year college degree and that skilled trades and robust
community colleges need to be encouraged. One participant noted that in Columbus, teacher in-service days include visits to local manufacturers to make educators aware of local job opportunities for youth.

Baby-boomers who can't afford to retire also need part-time jobs that businesses could offer, others said, noting that existing rural community businesses, not just new ones, also have workforce needs.

Questions also emerged relating to community planning, with the suggestion that communities need to have internal discussions about what they want to look like 40 years from now. Some communities may not care, one participant noted. But others will, and they should have effective access to university and other resources as needed.

Effective planning, some noted, also should include non-territorial regionalism in which people from neighboring communities collaborate for the benefit of all.

Session Takeaway

People who are passionate about the future of rural communities are willing to collaborate, be creative, take the long view as well as deal with immediate concerns and will roll up their sleeves to get the job done.
Innovative Approaches to Rural Health

Rural areas are a lot like inner cities when it comes to access to health care and insurance coverage to help pay for it. But schools, hospitals, telemedicine services and health care providers are attacking some of the most vexing issues, including the process of sorting through the impact of the federal Affordable Care Act and the health insurance options it creates for often uninsured rural people.

Tim McBride, professor of public health at Washington University in St. Louis and a leading health policy analyst, told participants in a breakout session on rural health innovations that it’s important to understand some of the economic issues affecting health care in rural areas, where lack of health insurance has been the reality.

The reasons for that, he said, include lower incomes overall, higher poverty rates, a greater likelihood that people work in small businesses that are less likely to offer generous health insurance and the prevalence of high-risk businesses like farming.

“Rural areas are more like inner city areas in those statistics,” McBride said.

But an array of presenters focused on a number of efforts that are chipping away at health problems in rural communities and suggested new approaches designed to improve health care in underserved areas, such as focusing on prevention, managing chronic disease, using telemedicine services and drawing rural youth into health care professions.

Kate Heelan, professor of exercise science at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, described the Greater Nebraska Physical Activity Initiative, which is attempting to address the state’s obesity epidemic.

In the past 15 years, adult obesity in Nebraska has increased about 40 percent, she said, and in the past three decades, the obesity rate for children aged two to five has more than doubled. Fifteen years ago, Heelan said, obesity prevention efforts focused on third through fifth grade children. Now preschoolers and pregnant women are the focus.

But obesity alone isn’t the problem, Heelan indicated. It also is associated with related health complications like diabetes and high cholesterol levels at much younger ages. All told, “obesity-related health care costs in Nebraska amounted to an estimated $823 million in 2013,” she said.

Heelan described an effort begun in the Kearney Public Schools in 2006 to address the challenge of overweight and obese children, which in that year amounted to nearly 32 percent of the enrollment. But that proportion has gone down to about 26 percent through a combination of activities that have drawn national attention to the Kearney schools for their success.
The efforts include enlisting UNK students to work with school nurses to screen children's height and weight when school budget cuts threatened to eliminate the time-consuming screening process. They also created a Web application to compute appropriate body mass index (BMI) percentiles for children given not only their height and weight but also their age and gender.

The project also worked to create better parental awareness about normal weights at specific ages and the health risk factors associated with weighing too much.

But it does no good to tell parents they have an obese child unless there are resources to help address the problem, Heelan said, so the project created a Building Healthy Families 12-week obesity treatment program.

“If you have an obese child, the entire family comes,” she said. As a result, not only have children been able to get to a normal weight, but parents also have lost more weight than in most adult obesity programs.

“It's not a diet program but a lifestyle change,” Heelan said. “We don't advocate dieting, but just healthy eating and healthy choices.”

The schools have also adjusted their food environments, she said. Teachers no longer hand out food as rewards, and fund-raising activities don't focus on bake sales. Teachers are also more likely to incorporate physical activity as they teach math, for example, and classroom chairs have been replaced by fitness balls as a way to develop core body stability.

Heelan said aspects of the Kearney project have expanded to Lexington, Holdrege, Scottsbluff, Alliance and other communities across the state.

Scott Alwin, an administrator at Box Butte General Hospital in Alliance, Neb., described similarly home-grown efforts to improve community health.

Box Butte General Hospital is a 25-bed critical access hospital that not only is "a lifeblood" of rural health care in the area, Alwin said, but that is also a major employer in the community, as hospitals often are in rural towns. But
the hospital also is undergoing a major expansion to create a community wellness center, that not only will expand access to skilled physical therapy but that also will create a 24-hour fitness center for employees and other community members.

Alwin, himself a physical therapist before becoming a hospital administrator, said the hospital’s wellness program for its employees has resulted in measurable health improvements and lower insurance premiums for individuals who meet their goals.

The hospital also has aggressively addressed longstanding concerns about attracting health care workers to rural areas with a program “to help grow our own,” Alwin said.

Working with schools in Alliance and surrounding communities, the hospital created a Health Professions Club in which students learn about various health professions and shadow a range of workers, including physicians, radiology technicians, laboratory workers, nurses, housekeeping staff and family practice clinicians and can apply for internships for more focused experiences in the various fields.

“The fruit of that is that we now have nurses, we have PAs, we have physicians and we have physical therapists that are now back working in Alliance at Box Butte General Hospital because of the Health Professions Club,” Alwin said.

Just as rural hospitals are addressing health care worker shortages, so also should communities be concerned about oral health, dentist Jessica Meeske of Hastings told the breakout session attendees. Meeske, who has focused on pediatric dentistry in Hastings and Grand Island for the past 15 years, said too many rural Nebraskans are in poor dental health.

Teachers in preschool and Head Start programs will tell you that dental problems are one of the main reasons kids miss school, she said.

Meeske said a lack of water fluoridation in many rural communities contributes to dental problems.
“When you have a community that has water fluoridation, you can prevent tooth decay to the tune of about 30 to 40 percent right off the top,” she said, adding that water fluoridation is cheap compared to the cost of treating tooth decay with fillings, crowns, root canals and tooth extractions.

Meeske said poor oral health is also related to a maldistribution of dentists in the state, many of whom are baby boomers looking to retire. People also start preventative dental visits for their kids too late, after problems already have developed.

The dental profession also needs to be more willing to expand the scope of work performed by dental hygienists and dental assistants “so I can work in a collaboration agreement to send these folks out to rural areas and satellite clinics and Head Starts.” With the aid of the smartphone, a dental hygienist could take a picture of a child’s tooth problems, send it to a dentist like Meeske and figure out what needs to be done, she said.

“If they need the expertise and the care of a dentist, then I'm here to do that,” she said. “And if it's something that is more routine and simple, we need to be delegating that ... Medicine figured that out decades ago.”

Just as rural areas face a shortage of dentists, so also do they face a shortage of nurses, particularly nurses with bachelor's degrees, Mary Cramer, professor of nursing and public health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, told the attendees.

“The prevalence of chronic disease in rural areas, particularly obesity and diabetes, for example, reflects a need to envision a new model of health care that relies on various health practitioners working as a team, not just a single health care provider,” Cramer said.

Cramer went on to say, nurse practitioners and physicians assistants could handle 60 to 70 percent of doctor's office visits because they deal with helping patients manage chronic diseases like diabetes through monitoring and education.

Mental health care also continues to be in short supply in rural areas, she noted. UNMC has an advanced degree program to equip nurse practitioners with the skills to provide mental health care, but state-imposed legal barriers make it difficult for mental health nurse practitioners to work in rural areas, she said, so many graduates leave Nebraska to practice elsewhere.

Part of the solution to rural health care needs is telemedicine, which physicians in some communities have been using for 20 years, said Tammy Hatting, business development manager for the telemedicine company Avera eCARE of Sioux Falls, S.D.

“Telemedicine helps to lower cost, it helps improve quality and access to care, and it supports the rural workforce,” she said, noting that access to telemedicine services decreases the sense of isolation and professional burnout that doctors in small communities otherwise might feel.
Hatting said emergency room personnel in 80 communities now have two-way video access to board certified emergency medicine physicians that are at another location. The company also has partnerships with eight long-term care facilities and four of the South Dakota state prisons.

“The value there is to be able to treat the person where they are” rather than having patients travel for several hours to get the medical care they need, she said, adding:

“The sky’s the limit with technology, with how we can use it to better serve rural America to improve health care in the future,” she said.

Panelist Kyle Klammer of Ainsworth, a second-year medical student at UNMC, is an example of that future as a budding physician who intends to return to a small community to practice family medicine.

Klammer described the medical school’s Student Association for Rural Health and its advocacy for team-based health care. The association includes students studying medicine, nursing, pharmacy and allied health professions like physician assistants and physical therapists who all share a common passion for rural Nebraska, he said.

The group has visited rural hospitals, has monthly speakers on a variety of topics and is considering a project to help educate people in rural Nebraska about what the federal Affordable Care Act will mean to them.

“We're dedicated to promoting rural health on campus at UNMC,” Klammer said. “And I'm just really excited about getting out in rural Nebraska and practicing in the future.”

Session Takeaway

Educators, health care providers and others in rural communities are taking advantage of technology and new models of health care to creatively address rural health challenges ranging from childhood obesity, inadequate mental health services and poor oral health to managing chronic diseases like diabetes, all with an eye toward creating healthier rural places.
Conference Contests

Network Beyond Boundaries
Big ideas swirled through the Rural Futures Conference during the quick pitch spotlight: helping young farmers and ranchers get access to land; expanding access to higher education; boosting tourism; addressing teacher and lawyer shortages; improving nutrition and food access in rural communities; developing regional economic growth plans; and investing in early childhood development in rural areas.

With a three-minute timer running, advocates for 16 big ideas that could impact rural people and places pitched their ideas and received feedback from the Rural Futures Conference audience and contest judges. Moderator Haley Harthoorn, an Ainsworth, Neb., native and University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) student, said judges would evaluate the presentations based on originality, concept sustainability and alignment with the values of the Rural Futures Institute.

The ideas reflected widely varying tactics for addressing ongoing challenges facing rural communities, and many of them focused on creating opportunities to improve lives and livelihoods for rural youth.

- Katie Meiklejohn of Helmville, Mont., described the Agrarian Freedom Project, intended to help young ranchers acquire land and focus on maintaining high standards of land, water and livestock stewardship.
- Bob Stowell of the Valley County Economic Development Board described an effort by Valley County to create...
a framework for receiving and managing donated agricultural assets to help jumpstart the careers of aspiring farmers and ranchers.

- Greg Ptacek, director of the Neligh Economic Development office described a plan to use “augmented reality” technology to spark young people’s interest in rural museums, thereby enhancing opportunities to increase and attract tourists.

- Scott Moore y Medina of Blue Star Studio Inc., described a Lakota Nation Building project on the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota involving a planned community with affordable housing, on-site food production, a business incubator and other features, all with an eye toward sustainability and maintenance of cultural values.

- Katie Samples and Logan Hoyt, University of Nebraska College of Law students, described a collaboration among a law student group, the state bar association and economic development groups to address the shortage of attorneys in many rural communities.

- Philip Sigillito of South Sioux City, Neb., described a plan to address geographic isolation in rural communities by improving online infrastructure so youth could more easily pursue entrepreneurial ideas and find mentors.

- Sandra Williams of UNL described ideas for using the arts to engage students in understanding their environment and cultural heritage, with an interdisciplinary partnership between the University’s Cedar Point Biological Center in Keith County and the Department of Art and Art History.

- Lukas Fricke of the Alliance for the Future of Agriculture in Nebraska described ideas for boosting protein production by engaging more youth in animal agriculture to meet increasing world demands for meat, milk and eggs, thereby building the state’s economy.

- Steven McFadden, author of The Call of the Land, described an effort to expand the urban-based Community Supported Agriculture movement into rural areas, many of which lack ready access to supermarkets or sources of fresh food.

- Scott Mickelsen of the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) in Curtis, Neb., described options for local high schools, area
businesses or economic development
groups to partner with the NCTA to
offer for-credit courses leading to
associates degrees or specific courses
for an area’s workforce, such as feedlot
management or agribusiness skills.

- Wendy McCarty of the University
  of Nebraska at Kearney described
  a transitional teacher certification
  program that allows people in rural
  areas who already have a bachelor’s degree to become qualified
teachers, enabling them to fill teacher shortages in local schools.

- Lowell Schroeder and Alyssa Silhacek of the Northeast Nebraska
  Economic Development District described a regional strategic planning
  effort in an 18-county area of northeast Nebraska that focuses on
economic development, regional branding and marketing, workforce
training needs, disaster mitigation planning, housing needs, building
codes and regional transportation plans.

- Richard Wakeford of Birmingham City University in the United Kingdom
  challenged the audience to consider ways in which public policies shape
land use and how that affects rural development.

- Jordyn Lechtenberg, a UNL student and Mat Habrock with DuPont
  Pioneer described The Great Question Challenge, a collaboration
among DuPont Pioneer, UNL Extension and the Engler Agribusiness
Entrepreneurship Program to engage young leaders in identifying and
solving food security issues in rural areas as well as addressing other
global problems.

- Rebecca Swartz of UNL described a need for rural communities to
invest in efforts to enhance early childhood development with access to
quality child care, health services and ongoing support so young rural
families can thrive.

- Larry Weixelman of UNL described a plan to enable communities to
coordinate tourist events and use contemporary communications
technology to create digital travel guides and other means of marketing
to tourists.
Projects focused on engaging young people in rural life received top honors from judges and the audience in the quick pitch spotlight.

Katie Meiklejohn of Helmville, Mont., was named a winner by both the judges and audience for the Agrarian Freedom Project, aimed at helping aspiring young ranchers and slowing the conversion of rural land to development.

Bob Stowell of the Valley County Economic Development Board was named a winner for Jump Start New Farmers with Philanthropy, a plan to create a framework for managing donated agricultural assets to help young farmers and ranchers get started.

The judges also recognized:

Wendy McCarty of the University of Nebraska at Kearney for her project, Discovering Hidden Treasures: Qualified Teachers in your Back Yard, a transitional teacher certification program that enables people to create second careers as classroom teachers without leaving their own communities; and

Jordyn Lechtenberg of UNL’s Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program and Mat Habrock of DuPont Pioneer for The Great Question Challenge, which seeks to engage young rural leaders in identifying and finding solutions to problems of rural hunger and inadequate nutrition.
Undergraduate and graduate students, along with faculty and partners, presented an impressive group of posters that asked “big questions” that go “Beyond Boundaries” and described research that creates knowledge and action that leads to resilient and sustainable rural futures in Nebraska, the Great Plains and beyond.

Posters featured research currently underway or ideas for future research that exemplified the Rural Futures Institute’s core values. Poster abstracts were pre-submitted and those selected were showcased at the Conference. From topics such as green waste to demographic challenges facing rural Nebraska, these posters covered a large expanse of topics and research questions that were of interest to conference participants.

Twenty undergraduate teams showcased a poster along with 15 graduate teams and 29 faculty and partner teams had posters represented at the conference.

During the featured poster session, the room was buzzing with rich conversation around topics such as youth engagement, entrepreneurship, and co-parenting for successful kids.
## Undergraduate Student Division Winners

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<th>PLACE</th>
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| **First (Co-winners)**| **Building Community Capacity Through a Fifteen-Week Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Studio in Rural Nebraska and Lessons Learned**  
Heather Tomasek, UNL College of Architecture  
**UNK ENACTUS Team Rural Revitalization Poster**  
Michael Lechowicz, UNK |
| **Third**             | **Holdrege, Nebraska Marketing Project**  
Jordyn Lechtenberg and Sydney Hansen, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program |
| **Honorable Mention** | **Ethnic and Racial Diversity: A Detriment to Social Capital and Community Improvement in Nebraska Communities**  
Stefani Perez-Zamarripa, UNK  
**Exploring the Value of Rural Life: Providing Curricula Opportunities**  
Adam Ripp and Shelby Rowan, UNK  
**How Can a Community Create Awareness Among High School Students About the Entrepreneurial Opportunities that are Available in a Rural Community?**  
Morgan Netz and Bethany Blackburn, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program  
**Microbial Diversity in High Alkaline-Saline Lakes Present in Sheridan County and Garden County**  
Parth Chaudhari and Julie Shaffer, UNK  
**Nemaha County Welcomes the CHANCE**  
Allie Buesing, Lindsey Toman and Preston Sunneberg, Peru State College  
**Rural Futures Institute Internship in Red Cloud, Nebraska**  
Jeff Story and Jared Knobbe, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program |
## Graduate Student Division Winners

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<th>PLACE</th>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>The Impact of Teacher Motivation for Intervention on Rural Student Behavioral Outcomes</td>
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<td>Amanda L. Witte, Michael J. Coutts, Shannon R. Holmes and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Supporting Family-School Partnerships in Rural Communities: Preliminary Results of a Randomized Trial</td>
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<td>Shannon R. Holmes, Amanda L. Witte, Michael J. Coutts, Tyler E. Smith, Susan M. Sheridan and Gina M. Kunz, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools</td>
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<td>Third</td>
<td>Providing Specialized Services to Rural Educators: An Introduction to Conjoint Behavioral Consultation via Distance Delivery (CBC-D)</td>
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<td>(Co-winners)</td>
<td>Michael J. Coutts, Shannon R. Holmes, Tyler E. Smith and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools</td>
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<td>A Quantitative Synthesis of Family Engagement Interventions: A Preliminary Examination in Rural Context</td>
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<td>Tyler Smith, Amanda Moen, Zach Myers, Elizabeth Kim, and Susan Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honorable Mention</td>
<td>Advancing Rural Education Research: Importance of Interdisciplinary Research Partnerships</td>
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<td>Mary A. Hellwege, Maureen A. O'Connor, Gwen C. Nugent, Gina M. Kunz and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools</td>
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<td>Innovations in Rural Health Care: CAPTUREing the Challenges and Successes of Implementing Interprofessional Fall Risk Reduction Programs in Nebraska's Critical Access Hospitals</td>
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Undergraduate Student Posters

Adventures in Red Cloud, Nebraska
Jana Steiner and Nicole Partusch, UNO Goodrich Scholarship Program

Are Farmers Good Environmental Stewards? Debunking the Traditional Myth of Bad Environmental Stewardship by Farmers and Ranchers
Douglas Cole Fenske, UNK

Building Community Capacity Through a Fifteen-Week Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Studio in Rural Nebraska and Lessons Learned
Heather Tomasek, UNL College of Architecture

A Daily Graphic Narrative of the 2011 Missouri River Flood Levels: Building Community Capacity with Accurate Flood Data
Nathaniel Marvin Krohn, UNL College of Architecture

The Effects of Mitigating Factors on the Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status and Children’s Academic Success
Claire Tolstedt and Jody Van Laningham, UNK

Ethnic and Racial Diversity: A Detriment to Social Capital and Community Improvement in Nebraska Communities
Stefani Perez-Zamarripa, UNK

Exploring the Value of Rural Life: Providing Curricula Opportunities
Adam Ripp and Shelby Rowan, UNK

Green Waste
Ashley Buescher, Amy Hauver, Kelli Doeschot and Toni Rasmussen, UNL Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Leadership Learning Community

Historical Population Shifts and Architectural Implications
Kylie Kusleika, Jenna Krueger and Brianna Murphy, UNL College of Architecture

Holdrege, Nebraska Marketing Project
Jordyn Lechtenberg and Sydney Hansen, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program

How Can a Community Create Awareness Among High School Students About the Entrepreneurial Opportunities that are Available in a Rural Community?
Morgan Netz and Bethany Blackburn, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program

Issues in the Livestock Industry
Britton Troyer, Brody Vorderstrasse, Andrew Stanek, Eleanor Wagner, Nick Green, Skyler Adamek and Tyler Haun, UNL Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Leadership Learning Community

Microbial Diversity in High Alkaline–Saline Lakes Present in Sheridan County and Garden County
Parth Chaudhari and Julie Shaffer, UNK

Nemaha County Welcomes the CHANCE
Allie Buesing, Lindsey Toman and Preston Sunneberg, Peru State College
One Day - Many Minds - Infinite Opportunities
Elizabeth Lutz and Kelsey Foster, UNL Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Leadership Learning Community

Public Transportation – Solutions Between East and City Campus
Kyle Sayers, Jeff Hornung and Colton Lopez, UNL Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Leadership Learning Community

Relationship Between Eating Behavior and Food Choice Within a Rural Mexican-American Mother Population
James T. Kuster and Trina Aguirre, UNMC College of Nursing

Rural Futures Institute Internship in Red Cloud, Nebraska
Jeff Story and Jared Knobbe, UNL Rural Community Serviceship Program

Teaching to Serve Agriculture
Autumn Lemmer, Emily Long, Harlee Phillips and Hayley Bledsoe, UNL Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Leadership Learning Community

UNK ENACTUS Team Rural Revitalization Poster
Michael Lechowicz, UNK

Historical Population Shifts and Architectural Implications
Kylie Kasleika, Jenna Krueger (pictured), and Brianna Murphy, UNL College of Architecture

A Daily Graphic Narrative of the 2011 Missouri River Flood Levels: Building Community Capacity with Accurate Flood Data
Nathaniel Marvin Krohn, UNL College of Architecture
Graduate Student Posters

Advancing Rural Education Research: Importance of Interdisciplinary Research Partnerships
Mary A. Hellwege, Maureen A. O’Connor, Gwen C. Nugent, Gina M. Kunz and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Characteristics of Work Time Allocation Among Nebraska Behavioral Health Professionals
Sarbinaz Bekmuratova and Marlene Deras, UNMC

Do Rural Backroads Lead to Competitively Priced Grocery Stores?
Krystal Drysdale and Hikaru Peterson, Kansas State University

Elementary and Secondary Teachers Attitudes Towards the Education of English Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom in Rural Schools
Adam N. Sempek and Jeanne Surface, UNO

The Impact of Teacher Motivation for Intervention on Rural Student Behavioral Outcomes
Amanda L. Witte, Michael J. Coutts, Shannon R. Holmes and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Innovations in Rural Health Care: CAPTUREing the Challenges and Successes of Implementing Interprofessional Fall Risk Reduction Programs in Nebraska’s Critical Access Hospitals
Victoria Kennel, Katherine Jones, Roni Reiter-Palmon, Anne Skinner, Dawn Venema and Regina Nailon, UNO

Mental Health Challenges and Parenting Attributes in a Rural Early Head Start Sample
Amanda L. Moen, Shannon R. Holmes, Sonya A. Bhatia and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Pharmacist Shortage Areas in Nebraska: Current Status and Future Implications for Rural Areas
Aastha Chandak, Soumitra S. Bhuyan, Marlene Deras and Jim P. Stimpson, UNMC

Providing Specialized Services to Rural Educators: An Introduction to Conjoint Behavioral Consultation via Distance Delivery (CBC-D)
Michael J. Coutts, Shannon R. Holmes, Tyler E. Smith and Susan M. Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

A Quantitative Synthesis of Family Engagement Interventions: A Preliminary Examination in Rural Context
Tyler Smith, Amanda Moen, Zach Myers, Elizabeth Kim, and Susan Sheridan, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Shared Experiences Beyond the Border: A Look at Vulnerability in Rural Ethiopian and Armenian Households from a Gendered Perspective
Anne M. Cafer, Gary Glass Jr. and Amanda Sims, University of Missouri Rural Sociology Graduate Student Association
Spatial and Social Determinants of Access to Primary Care: Evidence from Nebraska
Soumitra Bhuyan, Wen Neng and Jim Stimspon, UNMC

Supporting Family-School Partnerships in Rural Communities: Preliminary Results of a Randomized Trial
Shannon R. Holmes, Amanda L. Witte, Michael J. Coutts, Tyler E. Smith, Susan M. Sheridan and Gina M. Kunz, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Using Case-Based Learning to Develop Leaders in Rural Nebraska
Stephanie Sands, Dave Kocsis, Roni Reiter-Palmon, Gina Scott-Ligon, Douglas Derrick, Lynn Harland, Gert-Jan de Vreede, Susan Jensen and Abdulrahman Alothaim, UNO

Women and Health in Rural Uganda: Understanding How Collective Action Impacts Health Perspectives
Andrew Fritz and Elliot Meador, University of Missouri
Faculty & Partner Posters

2013 Dakota County Workforce Development Assessment: An Analysis of Skill Gaps
Thomas P. Krumel Jr., South Sioux City Area Chamber of Commerce

Beyond Boundaries in Regional Economic Development: Honoring the Cultural Boundaries of Hutterite Colonies and Karen People During Stronger Economies Together Work in the James River Valley Region of South Dakota
Kenneth Sherin, South Dakota State University Extension

Building Resilient Rural Communities in Nebraska with Diverse Agriculture Systems
Elizabeth Sarno, UNL

Building Small Town Social Capital Through Youth Engagement and Youth Voice
Elaine Johannes and Bryant Miller, Kansas State Research and Extension

Clues to Rural Community Survival
Milan Wall and Vicki Luther, Heartland Center for Leadership Development

Co-parenting for Successful Kids: Supporting Nebraska Families Through Online and In-Person Divorce Education
Rebecca Swartz and The Learning Child Team, UNL Extension

Communities Creating Their Own Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Entrepreneurial Communities Activation Process (ECAP)
Connie Hancock, Phyllis Schoenholz, Nancy Eberle, Charlotte Narjes, Diane Vigna, Dennis Kahl, Rebecca Vogt, Carroll Welte, Randy Cantrell and Anita Hall, UNL Extension

Demographic Challenges Facing Rural Nebraska
Jerome Deichert, Robert Blair and David Drozd, UNO Center for Public Affairs Research

Developing a Partnership to Implement a Weight Maintenance Study Targeting Rural Midlife Women to “Keep It Off”
Teresa Barry Hultquist, Carol Pullen, Kay Oestmann, Sarah Williamson and Fallon Leahy, UNMC College of Nursing

Entrepreneurship Based Economic Development
Robert E. Bernier, UNO

Entrepreneurship: Prepare Connect Inspire
Equine Business Network
Kathy Anderson, C. Skelly, K.L. Martinson, K.L. Waite, P.M. Auwerda, G. Heyboer, UNL and eXtension

ESI & Beyond: A Continuum of Entrepreneurship Education for Youth from Third Grade through Their University Degree
Diane Vigna, Tom Field, Nancy Eberle, Kim Pickering, Dennis Kahl, Marilyn Schlake, Phyllis Schoenholz and David Ulferts, UNL

Focus on Citizenship - Youth Engaged in Community Change
Megan Burda and Linda Dannehl, UNL Extension

Justin Smith Morrill Scholars: Leadership for a Sustainable Future
Deepak Keshwani, Andrew Uden and Sue Ellen Pegg, UNL Extension

Keys to Create Digitally Connected Communities: A Nebraska Broadband Initiative Update
Charlotte Narjes, Connie Hancock, Roger Terry and Becky Vogt, UNL

Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture & Nebraska Community Foundation Partner in Promotion of Rural Community Career Development Curriculum to Rural Nebraska Communities
Krystle Friesen, Paul Clark and Jeff Yost, UNL Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture

Nebraska Regional Labor Shed Pilot Study
Melissa Trueblood, Nebraska Department of Labor, Nebraska Department of Economic Development

Parenting Information in the Palm of Your Hand: UNL Extension’s UR Parent Mobile App
Rebecca Swartz and The Learning Child Team, UNL Extension

Partnering with Rural Nebraska to Understand How the Air We Breathe Affects Lung Health
Lisa Chudomelka, Debra J. Romberger, Jill A. Poole and Todd A. Wyatt, UNMC Pulmonary, Critical Care, Sleep & Allergy Division and Central States Center for Agricultural Health & Safety

Preserving Nebraska’s Rural Schools Through Alternative Teacher Certification
Wendy McCarty, UNK

Renewable Energy Development and Wildlife in Nebraska: Striving for Co-existence
Caroline Jezierski, Eric Zach, Craig Allen, Michelle Koch, Joseph Fontaine, Rick Schneider, Tim McCoy and Ben Larson, UNL Nebraska Cooperative Fish & Wildlife Research Unit

Rural Sourcing: A Pilot Project in Nebraska - UNK, Xpanxion LLC, and Nebraska Alumni Association Seek to Draw Out-of-state Professionals Back to Rural Roots Using RFI Grant
Abbie Wecker and Shawn Kaskie, UNK Center for Rural Research and Development
Strengthening Our Communities - Ripley County
Sharon Gulick and Terry Hackney, University of Missouri Extension

Technology-Based Support for Rural Teachers’ Science Classroom Instruction
Gina M. Kunz, Gwen C. Nugent and Jon E. Pedersen, Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools

Transportation-Oriented Development: Flattening the World for Rural Nebraska
Steven A. Schulz and Rod L. Flanigan, UNK

The Water for Food Challenge and the Role of Rural Nebraskans
Dana Ludvik, Robert B. Daugherty Water for Food Institute at the University of Nebraska

We Need Lawyers! Increasing Access to Justice in Rural Places
Brett C. Stohs and Jessica A. Shoemaker, UNL College of Law

Working Towards Rural Community Resiliency and Sustainability with the Assistance of Boundary Organizations
Jessica G. Jones, UNL Extension

Parenting Information in the Palm of Your Hand: UNL Extension’s UR Parent Mobile App
Rebecca Swartz and The Learning Child Team, UNL Extension

Entrepreneurship: Prepare Connect Inspire
How does a community attract young professionals and get them involved? What can a community do with dilapidated housing—or not enough housing? How can the arts be used to link generations and cultures in a community? What can a community do to encourage people to focus on personal health? How can communities balance competing interests of livestock producers and local residents?

Representatives of communities small and large posed those and 15 more questions to fellow Rural Futures Conference attendees at the Monday evening poster session and reception. The informal conversational mash-up was intended to enable communities to showcase themselves and connect with students, faculty, service providers and other interested partners to create problem-solving collaborations.

Communities of place as well as communities of shared interest were invited to pose questions that matter to them as they envision their future. Twenty questions addressing a wide variety of challenges for rural communities were selected, and representatives from those communities had a chance to engage one-on-one with others interested in finding out about or responding to those challenges.

**Conference Contests: Community Questions**

**Conference-Goers Explore a Variety of Questions Posed by Community Teams**

Participants Urged To Make Connections That Build Community

Before the community question/academic poster mash-up session began, Matt Rezac, who served on the conference planning committee, took a moment to summarize the charge for the Monday evening social event. “I find myself at this conference and Tom Koulopoulos had this great quote where he says something about the thing that has allowed us to sustain over time is the ability to make connections and the ability to make connections that actually build community.”

“And then I started wondering, ah, it’s not just any kind of connections – connections by themselves don’t do it – it’s a certain kind of connection, just like the connections that are happening here at this conference,” Rezac said. “Are we doing a good job of making connections that really build community or not?”

“I would like to humbly invite you for the rest of this evening and as the conference continues tomorrow … to try to help make connections that really build community,” urged Rezac.
COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST

How can communities plan for livestock production so that it has a positive impact on the community as a whole?
The Nebraska Pork Producers Association is a grassroots, incorporated, non-profit organization established in 1961. It was developed to promote the pork industry through the enhancement of consumer demand, producer education, and research.  
  
  Representing the community: Kyla Wize, Ali Steuer and Willow Holoubek

Rural communities depend on a sense of place to provide cohesion between generations and across cultures. How can we provide experiences with art that preserve and acknowledge a community’s existing cultural heritage and at the same time integrate new cultures?
The University of Nebraska–Lincoln Department of Art and Art History is forming a partnership with the Biological Station at Cedar Point with the following goals: to consider possibilities for growth and understanding, broaden our perceptions of the natural world and rural communities, strengthen our work to build networks for future recruitment of students and engagement with diverse communities. These benefits are long-term, both as we become cultural interpreters of where we live and as teachers who hope to share values about art and humanities with a broad audience.  
  
  Representing the community: Sandra Williams, Wendy Katz and Sara McDonald

How can we encourage greater awareness of personal health in rural communities?
Valley County Health System is a critical access hospital located in Ord, Neb., that has been providing access and availability of healthcare services to Central Nebraskans for more than 45 years. The health system also maintains three satellite clinics, which offer an extensive range of healthcare services not often found in a rural hospital.  
  
  Representing the community: Becky Ries and Tracy Reiner

How do communities balance opposing interests between livestock producers and residents living in the community?
The Nebraska Pork Producers Association is a grassroots, incorporated, non-profit organization established in 1961. It was developed to promote the pork industry through the enhancement of consumer demand, producer education and research.  
  
  Representing the community: Larry Sitzman, Al Stephens and Leanna Gubbels

COMMUNITIES OF PLACE

How can we ensure essential community infrastructure needs are met while also providing quality of life amenities?
Macy, Neb., a reservation town with a population of 1,200 is in need of a grocery store and healthy water supply which is something that neighboring town Santee has, along with a quasi-grocery store. Bancroft is a town of 500 people with some operational businesses; however it is lacking a grocery store. The communities are close in proximity but are lacking some of the essential life elements.  
  
  Representing the community: Michael Oltrogge and Jeff Hart
How can rural communities preserve their historical roots while also fulfilling the needs of future generations?
Larned, Kan., is a town with a population of 4,000 in central Kansas. Due to its location, it has always been an agricultural community, but the state facility located outside of town makes it a medical hub also.

Representing the community: Lauren Long, Lindsay Long and Allison Bentley

How can a community embrace technology to generate higher paying, higher skilled jobs, strengthen the local economy, and attract younger professionals?
Scottsbluff, Neb., is the largest city in Western Nebraska. It has a population of 15,000 and is adjacent to Gering with a population of approximately 8,000, making it a retail hub. Its largest employer is Regional West Medical Center. Minorities make up 30 percent of the population, primarily Hispanic and the overall median income is $35,000 annually.

Representing the community: Marcy Mendez, Jessie Lopez and Eli Aguilar

What are best practices for integration of digital technology in a rural business community?
Cozad, Neb., is a community of about 4,000 with access to technology from Cozad Telephone Company. The community will soon have fiber to every residence and business within the city and community residents would like to see maximum utilization and integration of the fiber.

Representing the community: Robyn Geiser, Judy Eggleston and Lindsay Erickson

What unique social/economic incentives or opportunities can aging rural communities use to successfully attract the younger generations?
Thayer County, Neb., is a rural region with approximately 5,200 people living in 11 communities. The population has been consistently declining in all but one of these communities for the past 20 years. As business owners age and near retirement, there is an enormous opportunity for new entrepreneurs and young leaders.

Representing the community: Jeremy Voss, Deb Craig and Jeannine Voss

How can people involved in rural development programs avoid duplication of effort?
Valley County, Neb., is a progressive community that is passionate about the development of a sustainable future for the area. Residents are aggressively involved in every aspect of rural development including business development, access to higher education, youth retention and workforce development.

Representing the community: Trevor Lee and Bob Stowell

How can communities capitalize on civic celebrations as a way to build a sense of community pride, honor the past, and capture the future?
McCook, Neb., is a service center for Southwest Nebraska and Northwest Kansas. With a population of nearly 8,000 it is everything you could hope for in a community. Friendly people, well-kept city parks, plenty of outdoor recreation, community events throughout the year, excellent educational and medical services — it all combines into a great place to live and work.

Representing the community: Cloyd Clark, Rex Nelson and Maggie Repass
How can a progressive community with ample skilled and professional workforce opportunities establish partnerships to aggressively recruit new talent and provide rural relocation incentives?
Valley County, Neb., is a progressive community that is passionate about the development of a sustainable future for the area. They are aggressively involved in every aspect of rural development including business development, access to higher education, youth retention and workforce development.

Representing the community: Kristina Foth, Crystal Ramm and Joel Kokes

How do small communities deal with problems associated with dilapidated housing?
Fillmore County, Neb., has a population of 5,771 and the median resident age is 46.8. The county has three quality K-12 schools and an array of businesses and industries that offer a variety of opportunities for its citizens. U.S. Highway 81 runs through Fillmore County and is located south of the interstate allowing for quick access and transport.

Representing the community: Eric Kamler, Christin Lovegrove and Patt Lentfer

What financial and other resources exist for the demolition, disposal, or rehabilitation of vacant homes and lots in rural communities?
Bassett, Neb., the county seat of Rock County, is located in north central Nebraska and is framed by the unique and majestic Sandhills and lies in one of the most scenic areas of Nebraska, the Niobrara Valley. Bassett is 43 miles from the South Dakota border and is prime country for agriculture.

Representing the community: Kristine Gale and Homer Buell

How do we create or build a sense of belonging in our rural communities that will engage all ages, income levels, races and religions?
Gage County, Neb., is located south of Lincoln. With a population of approximately 23,500, the community is standing strong with little population change in the last 50 years. Like the majority of rural communities, the largest employers are agriculture and health care.

Representing the community: Christina Lyons, Jane Esau and Nicole Stoner

How can agricultural-based communities partner with the RFI to better identify and promote entrepreneurial opportunities that target young farmers/ranchers who have a need for additional resources and a desire to farm/ranch?
Valley County, Neb., is a progressive community that is passionate about the development of a sustainable future for the area. Residents are aggressively involved in every aspect of rural development including business development, access to higher education, youth retention and workforce development.

Representing the community: Bryant Foth and Luke Kovarik

How do you ensure that all new young professionals feel welcome and integrated in your community? Are there different strategies for recruiting alumni versus non-alumni to your community?
West Point, Neb., located in the northeast is home to approximately 3,600 residents. It has seen an influx of alumni returning into the community. Although the community relies heavily on agricultural resources, it also has a diverse industry sector including manufacturing, healthcare and education making it an ideal place to live and work.

Representing the community: Tina Biteghe Bi Ndong, Sheena Kamp Schneider and Chris Kreikemeier
How do small communities transition from older housing and get developers and investors to build affordable single-family and multi-family housing so they can grow?
Sidney, Neb., is a fast growing community with over $300 million in new economic development projects completed over the past 15 years. Sidney is in western Nebraska, with four major highways and three railroads, and is nine miles from Colorado and 59 miles from Wyoming. With more jobs than people, the town is growing in population, particularly in young singles and young families.

Representing the community: Connie Hancock

How do you structure a sustainable regional development effort so that all communities and their diverse members and partners share in the benefits?
Columbus, Neb., is a regional trade center with a population of 22,000. The community has some 6,000 manufacturing jobs requiring a growing regional labor pool. The region has a rapidly growing immigrant population which has provided opportunities and challenges.

Representing the community: K.C. Belitz, David Bell, Allan Vyhnalek and Dee Hanson

How can rural communities facilitate partnerships that empower and encourage sustainable local funding mechanisms to support local growth and development?
Valley County, Neb., is a progressive community that is passionate about the development of a sustainable future for the area. Residents are aggressively involved in every aspect of rural development including business development, access to higher education, youth retention and workforce development.

Representing the community: Dahn Hagge, Heidi Proskocil and Jean Stowell

The mash-up session provided opportunities for people to connect around shared interests.
Reflections

Dream Beyond Boundaries
Conference Reflections

Key Takeaways From the Conference

Concerned about the future of rural people and places? Don’t be.

The energy, enthusiasm and determination on display at the Rural Futures Conference suggest that the rural future is in good hands and that the Rural Futures Institute is positioned to harness, challenge and capitalize on the dedication of people who are passionate about rural places and the natural and human resources that give them value.

A recurring theme among the discussions by presenters and some 500 participants at the conference emphasized that securing a vibrant future for rural people and places is most emphatically not about a return to an imagined, idyllic Mayberry. For rural places today are inextricably linked to world commodity markets, financial markets and the marketplace of ideas instantly accessible on a teenager’s smartphone.

Rural places are also the home of entrepreneurial experimenters, of people who went away for a few years but now want a place where their kids can ride bikes safely and see the stars at night, of men and women and kids willing to pitch in and create community gardens, annual town festivals and even a grocery store in a straw-bale building they built themselves.

But rural places are also where you can find dilapidated housing, inadequate child care, unhealthy diets, inactive lifestyles, limited access to medical and mental health services, conflicts over use of natural resources, and, sometimes, community leaders who aren’t particularly eager to welcome newcomers and the new ideas they bring. After all, we’ve always done it that way.
Attendees at the 2013 Rural Futures Conference were reminded repeatedly about the importance of being willing to take chances.

Thomas Jefferson bought the Louisiana Territory from France sight unseen and dispatched explorers to discover what was there. In their day, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set off on an expedition to the Pacific Ocean that was far more uncertain than Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin’s expedition to the moon.

Jefferson, portrayed at the conference by humanities scholar Clay Jenkinson, told the audience, “We mustn’t lock ourselves into an undue reverence for the past.” America began as an experiment, he said, and subsequent generations must keep alive that willingness to embark on new, untested paths.

Futurist Tom Koulopoulos challenged conference-goers to recognize that past practices may have worked to get them and their communities where they are today. But success in a rapidly changing present requires a willingness to set aside what no longer seems to be working the way it used to and to imagine a new future, recognizing that creating such a future requires taking risks. And risks present the possibility of failure.

Conference panelists and breakout session discussions repeatedly suggested that advocates for the rural future and for the Rural Futures Institute do not intend to be deterred.

Meghan Bown of Grand Rapids, Minn., a young leader and community health coordinator in Itasca County, told attendees that whenever people tell her a group tried something before and it didn’t work, she’s determined to find out why. “Half the time when they say it didn’t work, it’s because they didn’t have the right people at the table,” she said. Bown is one who has made it her business to find the right people and get them to the table.

Enthusiasm notwithstanding, conference participants were realistic about the challenges associated with creating vibrant rural communities.

Two undergraduates from Peru State College whose service-learning project aimed to address childhood obesity and poor nutrition in southeast Nebraska learned that nutrition lessons during the school day took away time from standardized test preparation. And after-school games for kids competed for limited space in the school gym and with scheduled buses kids needed to get to their rural homes.

Hastings dentist Jessica Meeske noted the lack of fluoridated water in many rural communities that contributes to poor dental health, as does the maldistribution of dentists.

And many graduates of the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s program to train mental health nurse practitioners leave the state because of legal barriers that limit their ability to practice in rural areas, Mary Cramer, UNMC professor of nursing and public health told conference-goers.

Legal barriers also create struggles for people who want to tap Nebraska’s undeveloped potential for generating renewable wind energy. Proposals
for siting transmission lines can raise objections from landowners and environmental groups, Johnathan Hladik of the Center for Rural Affairs told a breakout session. But if you want to stretch power lines across multiple jurisdictions within a state and across state boundaries, you also will face bureaucratic complexities you didn't imagine.

Presenters and participants spoke candidly about the stumbling blocks they've encountered in trying to shape the future of their rural places. But rather than hand-wringing, they exhibited a determination to create new solutions.

Presenters repeatedly emphasized that creating the future a rural community wants requires people to be willing to engage and enlist the energy of everyone in the community—newcomers, long-time community members, technology-savvy kids, people whose language and customs and life experiences are different, farmers, ranchers and Main Street business owners, 20-somethings who went off to college and then came back as well as those who never left. And it requires a willingness to try something new.

Worried that you can't get other young health professionals to consider coming to your small-town hospital?

Then take a look at what Box Butte General Hospital in Alliance, Neb., did. It created a health professions club for kids in schools throughout the area to show them firsthand what being a doctor or physical therapist or nurse or radiology technician was like, thus growing their own health care workers, hospital administrator Scott Alwin reported.

In some rural towns, you'll be hard pressed to find a lawyer to conduct routine transactions, so a group of University of Nebraska College of Law students have embarked on an effort to collaborate with the state bar association and local economic development groups to get more young lawyers on Main Street.

Throughout farm and ranch country, it's tough for a young person to get started in agriculture, but the Valley County Economic Development Board is trying to create a framework whereby donated agricultural assets could help jumpstart a young farmer's career.

And if your rural place is like the Village of Cody, Neb., maybe you'll be so frustrated with having to drive nearly 40 miles to buy groceries you'll solve the problem by just building your own store, with help from everyone in town, including high school students and in conjunction with college students in an entrepreneurial club at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. And, if you're like one of the high school girls who works at the Circle C Market, you'll say: “We built a store; we can do anything.”
Conference Participants
Collaborate Beyond Boundaries
### Conference Participants

**NBDC:** Nebraska Business Development Center  
**NCTA:** Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture  
**RUPRI:** Rural Policy Research Institute  
**SDSU:** South Dakota State University  
**UNK:** University of Nebraska at Kearney  
**UNL:** University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
**UNMC:** University of Nebraska Medical Center  
**UNO:** University of Nebraska at Omaha  
**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture  

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<td>Ginger Ady</td>
<td>North Platte Visitors Bureau</td>
<td>Lionel Beaulieu</td>
<td>Purdue Center for Regional Development</td>
<td>Haley Bledsoe</td>
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<td>Stacey Agnew</td>
<td>Nebraska FFA Foundation</td>
<td>Addisen Beck</td>
<td>Cuming County Economic Development</td>
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<td>Eli Aguilar</td>
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**NBDC:** Nebraska Business Development Center  
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**RUPRI:** Rural Policy Research Institute  
**SDSU:** South Dakota State University  
**UNK:** University of Nebraska at Kearney  
**UNL:** University of Nebraska–Lincoln  
**UNMC:** University of Nebraska Medical Center  
**UNO:** University of Nebraska at Omaha  
**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture
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NU Vice President Green took a few moments during the conference to recognize and thank two servant leaders “who have stepped up historically behind what’s now become the Rural Futures Institute.” Green first applauded the work of Sandy Scofield, whose leadership and guidance of the Rural Initiative was instrumental in some of the groundwork that led to what we now see as the RFI. “She’s often called an unsung hero … She put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into this initiative,” said Green as he encouraged everyone to recognize her leadership with a round of applause.

Green went on to recognize another unique servant leader. Mark Gustafson was part of the Rural Initiative with Sandy for a number of years, but a few years ago the University of Nebraska asked him to step up in a servant leadership role and be the founding director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, which he did for the first two years of existence. “About the time that gig was ending, I needed somebody to step up and take on the role of being the interim founding director of the RFI,” said Green.

Mark was willing to do that with energy and with enthusiasm and with servant leadership, explained Green. As Gustafson was called to the stage, NU Vice President Green, with assistance from newly-appointed Founding Director Chuck Schroeder, presented a Joel Sartore signed print “with great wishes to you, Mark. Thank you so much for what you have done to get the Rural Futures Institute to where it’s at.”
Photo Gallery
Engage Beyond Boundaries
Photo Gallery