THE FUTURE OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY & RURAL-URBAN COLLABORATION

RURAL FUTURES PODCAST | SEASON 1
The Rural Futures Institute (RFI) at the University of Nebraska believes for America to thrive, our rural residents and communities must thrive. We’ve learned that growing a vibrant rural sector takes:

1. Future-focused leadership and entrepreneurship
2. Social as well as technological capital and connectedness
3. The wise use of natural, agricultural and cultural resources
4. Rich collaborations

As our high-tech, globalized world continues to collide with the values, principles and ethics of humanity, RFI breaks into the currently polarizing narratives of the rural-urban divide, technology development and the future of work through its weekly podcast, “Rural Futures with Dr. Connie.”

Hosted by Connie Reimers-Hild, Ph.D., RFI Interim Executive Director & Chief Futurist, the Rural Futures Podcast Season 1 includes 10 episodes with guest interviews of futurists, researchers and rural mavericks who are smashing barriers for a thriving rural-urban future. With Dr. Connie, guests dissect the evolving roles and tools of leadership, technology and collaboration in our exponentially changing world to help listeners explore potential solutions and embrace opportunities.

With patience, intelligence, experience and innovation, Dr. Connie believes people can come together, find areas of commonality and build toward solutions that take us to a future of abundance for all.

In many cases, solutions involve strong leadership, right-sized technology and better rural-urban collaboration. What does that mean exactly? Each guest shared ideas that often combined with Dr. Connie’s to uncover exciting new perspectives and potential courses of action.

**CONNIE REIMERS-HILD, PH.D.**
**PODCAST HOST**

Dr. Connie serves as Interim Executive Director & Chief Futurist at the Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska. She is also an entrepreneur, researcher and consultant with expertise in strategic foresight and future-focused leadership.

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One of Dr. Connie’s guests, Shelley McKinley, General Manager of Technology and Corporate Responsibility for Microsoft, suggested this moment in history is particularly suited to conversations about the future of leadership, technology and rural-urban collaboration because of the national attention and awareness of rural challenges, but also because of the opportunities and changes forthcoming.

“We are on the brink of this fourth industrial revolution,” McKinley said in Episode 2. “Really, the time is now for a lot of these issues.”

SOLUTIONS BEGIN WITH A THOUGHTFUL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUTURE

Bryan Alexander, internationally known futurist, founder of the Future of Education Observatory and the season’s first guest, said our greatest challenge in the advancement of rural communities may be that, although society has talked about what’s happening in rural America, we haven’t changed our view of the future.

"We are not really having these bold conversations that need to be had in so many ways to address this from a systems level, not just one topic or the other,” Alexander explained.
Andy Hines, author, futurist and program coordinator for the University of Houston’s Graduate Program in Foresight, also suggested we need to “influence our future in a more systematic way.”

He said he has looked for “different venues and opportunities and ways not only to introduce people to the future, but then to help them actually do something about it.”

Hines, who began his career as a historian, suggested we can use the same tools and approaches we use to understand the past to study and analyze the future. For more information visit andyhinesight.com.

Several guests emphasized that the future consists of multiple possibilities — alternative futures. And through the discipline of strategic foresight and the tools and techniques within it, we can decide which future we want and take action to make it happen.

“Strategic foresight, also referred to as ‘futuring,’ is a relatively new core leadership competency sought after by many top executives and organizational leaders. It does not predict the future; rather it helps leaders better understand current and potential situations while creating a roadmap for innovation that guides and inspires action.”

How do we more deliberately create the future we want, rather than just continuing on the same path we have been with the mindset that we don’t control what happens?” — Dr. Connie

SO, WHAT IS STRATEGIC FORESIGHT?

Hines

“We have all these tools and approaches for studying the past, and I said, ‘Well, why can’t we do the same thing for the future?’ What we’re trying to understand when we look to the future is not necessarily continuity and patterns, that’s part of it, but where are the disruptions, major surprises that might influence the future?”

Dr. Connie

“How do we more deliberately create the future we want, rather than just continuing on the same path we have been with the mindset that we don’t control what happens?” — Dr. Connie
WHO IS A FUTURIST?

Hines

“One of the things that we’ve learned is that most people have a view of the future that tomorrow is going to be much like today and don’t really want to think about the potential surprises and that’s kind of where the futurists come in. We are pretty good at identifying those potential disruptors.”

Alexander

“For me a futurist is somebody who helps people think about the future more strategically and with greater imagination. And this matters because, well, we’re all heading into the future. But also it matters because I think it’s very difficult for us to really think about ways the future can be different, especially in ways that are practical and matter to our lives or families, and our jobs, and our immediate political world.”

I think futurists are really essential guides to living in the near, medium and far future.” — Bryan Alexander

No matter how the future looks or where ideas come from, podcast guests agreed the effort to turn ideas into reality must begin with knowledgeable leaders who care about people in both rural and urban communities.

LEADERSHIP: WHO WILL GUIDE US TO THE FUTURE?

The discipline of leadership is changing along with the rest of the world. Not that long ago, McKinley said, Microsoft welcomed a new CEO with a refreshing new leadership style.

“I really enjoy his way of thinking about [leadership], which is: generating energy, creating clarity and delivering results,” she said.

This aligned with a change in Microsoft’s mission from simply making more products to “empowering every person and organization on the planet to achieve more by ensuring that the opportunities of technology are available to all and used to solve some of the world’s more pressing challenges.”

As you might guess, a big part of Microsoft’s new focus is diversity — acknowledging differences between people, then finding common ground and working toward highly effective solutions.

“Research has shown that diversity, in the beginning, can make teams start a little bit slower as they get used to each other, but very quickly diverse teams achieve much, much more than non-diverse teams,” McKinley said.
Podcast guest Helen Fagan, Ph.D., is an internationally known leadership and diversity scholar and practitioner. She seconds the idea that the most important element needed for humanity’s positive future is leaders who can overcome bias, manage diversity positively, bring people together and “help them innovate and create things that didn’t exist before.”

Several podcast guests underscored the need to focus on development of individuals as leaders before focusing on community leadership.

“I’m a huge proponent of developing your inner leader and leading yourself,” Dr. Connie summarized in several episodes.

Tom Field, Ph.D., director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, went so far as to suggest traditional hierarchies are passé and the key to today’s successes is empowering people to be their own leaders and masters of their lives.

“I think it takes a unique leader to be able to [keep] the team focused on the ball you’re chasing but do it in a way that invites people to the table, making decisions together,” Field said.

Hines called it “the blurring of the leader/follower line.” We may be leading one moment and following the next. He said this requires leading from a vantage point right in the middle of the “daily hubbub” rather than leading from somewhere “up on a hill.”

He suggested the way to shift to a more inclusive style of leadership is to get together with leaders in the field who already are taking steps to make the future happen.
“That’s what we like to say about the Rural Futures Podcast,” Dr. Connie laughed. “It’s for doers — people out there being mavericks in some way and creating the future, one day at a time.”

No matter what the leadership style, it is clear flexibility is paramount.

“We have to be able to think about what are the different pathways we can follow here, and you don’t want to lock yourself into one,” Field said.

In his episode, Tim Griffin, Ph.D., director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment Program at Tufts University in Boston, also suggested this kind of leadership means developing future leaders who think across boundaries. With his students, Griffin provides experiences for students to think “all the way from agriculture to nutrition to health.” That’s how innovative solutions are found, he said.

Without exception, podcast guests emphasized that all leaders along this new path need the quality of selflessness — a greater focus on others than themselves.

John Roberts, executive director of the Nebraska Rural Health Association, said he thinks of himself as a servant leader.

“My philosophy of leadership is, unless you’re willing to serve those you’re leading, you’re probably not the most efficient and effective leader,” he said. “That allows [me] to be able to get in and do the work and not really care about who gets the credit for it, but to really focus on the outcomes we want to get for rural America.”

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TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP HUMANITY GROW

Although broadband connection is still lacking or completely missing in some parts of the United States, and certainly in rural areas throughout the world, enough rural communities now provide adequate internet connection that we are seeing the rewards.

Rural Futures Podcast guests emphasized that technology advances run the gamut across industries and human needs. In the medical world, diagnostic apps help remote doctors treat isolated patients. In education, tele-classes allow rural residents to earn college degrees without leaving home.

Technological benefits go far beyond shiny new software and hardware, according to McKinley.

“IT’S ALL OF THESE ADVANCES IN TECHNOLOGY, LIKE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, THAT ARE ALLOWING US TO TAKE BIG DATASETS AND USE MACHINE LEARNING AND COMPUTING ON THEM IN ORDER TO DEVELOP INSIGHTS AND TAKE INTELLIGENT ACTION, THINGS WE COULDN’T PERCEIVE BEFORE AS HUMANS,” MCKINLEY SAID.
Dr. Tyler Ideus is a part-time Nebraska farmer, a doctor of physical medicine and an instructor for Dynamic Neuromuscular Stabilization, a leading rehabilitation approach developed in the Czech Republic. During his podcast interview with Dr. Connie, he pointed out the influence of technology on agriculture and agriculture on health.

“They’re talking about putting up hydroponic plants on the ocean,” he shared, “and vertical farming — we have a lot of cool stuff happening. They are bringing sensors and AI and drones and robotics into agriculture to make it more sustainable.”

“We have some of the best people in the world [in Nebraska] that understand how to grow things, and we have some of the best climates and the soils in the world right here to do that, so there is a huge opportunity for us to be leaders.” — Tyler Ideus

Again, health care is probably the most visible area where technology has helped rural communities.

“Look at the last five years,” Dr. Connie said, “and the amount of venture capital that’s gone into health. And these aren’t health-related organizations. It’s investors like Microsoft and Sysco.”

The reason for this accelerated investment is that health care is a necessity for residents everywhere, in both rural and urban communities.

In addition to improving medicine, Field said technology has become part of a new learning approach. He said universities are figuring out how to use technology to “create a network of learning — more importantly, a network of deep curiosity that connects across ages and socioeconomic barriers and slays those barriers, allowing curious people to go to work on things they care about.”
With these technology-enabled networks of learning, he suggests, solutions will take care of themselves — because this new approach can unleash entrepreneurial spirit.

In almost every way, technology is transforming human work. Artificial intelligence and automation are helping us do things faster and better. Dr. Connie pointed out that technology through remote work is even making clocking in and out an obsolete idea.

Many skills needed to work in this environment are different than in the past, but podcast guest Seth Derner noted it’s not really all that different from other historical technology changes society has endured. Derner is co-founder and co-CEO of Vivayic, a learning solutions design company that helps organizations reach their human potential.

“When the first tractors were introduced — talk about automation — that was a gigantic change in society,” Derner explained. “And even the telephone and the ability to communicate. So, I don’t know that our challenge is any different than past generations. Technology is going to supplant some jobs. But we’re committed to helping people be as successful as they can be, and communities as well.”

McKinley acknowledged that one of society’s greatest challenges is “reskilling” people. She said studies show the combination of people and technology is more effective than either on their own, which, by the way, supports the idea that machines are not likely to make people obsolete.

Derner encouraged listeners to focus beyond technology itself. He said the key to making technology work is giving people an experience.

“We don’t say technology solves the problems; technology gives us the venue to solve the problems.” — Seth Derner
“Just because technology makes something possible doesn’t make it effective,” he said. “It’s putting people in situations, challenging them to think differently, giving them a chance to get their hands on a real-world situation and figure out how to solve the problem.”

Dr. Connie likes to call this juxtaposition of technology and humanity the “high-touch, high-tech” aspect of RFI’s work.

Podcast guest Hines shed more light on this: “There’s a graveyard of really cool, innovative technology concepts that failed to pass what we’ll call the ‘people test.’ Ultimately, technology has to be used by people to survive, right? And as we explore the future, one might argue, it’s actually the people and social needs that are the more compelling and interesting.”

THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

American rural and urban communities historically have operated under an “us-and-them” approach when it comes to things like culture, education and federal funding.

Dr. Connie pointed out during one podcast that this divide actually presents “an opportunity for our continually globalized world to grow together.” Rural areas produce most of the world’s food, she noted, and the earth needs the wide-open spaces of rural areas for environmental sustainability. Conversely, rural residents need resources, knowledge and opportunities found in urban areas.

People everywhere have already begun using technology to connect rural and urban interests.

- Alexander told of a visit to a Finnish medical school that reconstructed a rural living room, complete with carpet, a TV in the corner and a sofa, to teach students how to interact with remote patients.

- McKinley described rural centers for technology where people work remotely. Communities will flourish, she said, if they can use technology and help rural people get good, high-paying remote jobs.

- Griffin, who teaches in an urban setting at Tufts University, said he talks about agriculture every day in the context of providing food to the world.

  “I’ve had many conversations with students about not having preconceived notions about who the stakeholders should be in the room,” Griffin said. “Really interesting things come when you have unconventional partners.”

Dr. Ideus admitted that managing the rural-urban divide will involve getting out of our comfort zones.

“You have to be willing to put in the work,” he said. “At the end of the day, sick people are just expensive, and it has to get paid for one way or another. So if we can do things in agriculture and growing food that is going to be really healthy for people, I think we’re all going to come out ahead.”
He said he believes if we can look at the world’s problems together, we will all benefit — not just with enriched lives, but also financially.

“So, you can really see this from a place of abundance,” Dr. Connie concluded.

Fagan said it’s critical that society move away from polarization toward a more inclusive, global, win-win culture.

She asked listeners to consider: “How do we take what’s so wonderful about rural and bring it as part of our urban setting, and vice versa?”

Hines pointed out the very definition of rural and urban is changing. One “signal of change,” he said, is “Winnebago Warriors” — people who move around and spend time in different places.

“"There's this intersection of rural and urban where we could lift all boats together, if we really had some strategy around that, and some foresight,” Hines said. “Think of the possibilities.”

Dr. Connie said the interaction between rural and urban doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game.

“What makes humans unique is the ability to imagine what it would look like if we collaborated, cooperated and helped each other out,” she said.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

The challenges and opportunities surrounding rural-urban issues, technology and leadership are many, as evidenced by the rich conversations between Season 1’s podcast guests and Dr. Connie. The podcast provides listeners with ideas that might help humanity cope with a rapidly advancing future — and in doing so, strengthen our resolves for successful rural and urban communities. The question is, where do we begin?

"Be willing to engage with people whose perspective is different from yours. It takes effort, intentionality, a new way of thinking about culture and inclusion and differences.” — Helen Fagan
McKinley urged listeners to hire people who have different perspectives from your own.

And Derner echoed Fagan’s call for leaders to begin with themselves and seek solutions from a presumption of abundance.

“Be intentional about your purpose and your character, and lean into that,” Derner said, “and then, when another town has a success, celebrate that and then learn to say, ‘Well what did they do that we can learn from, that could help us be who we want to be?’”

Alexander encouraged people to focus on a future different from our past, to use technology to reach out and connect with people and to intentionally advocate for the rural world.

Dr. Connie agreed that the rural conversation needs to be elevated to not only demonstrate the value of rural but also share the amazing cutting-edge innovation happening in rural areas.

Field encouraged a focus on figuring out which problems really need to be solved.

“They don’t have to be big, sexy ones,” he said. “They can be simple problems that just need a clear solution. Find markets that are underserved. Find resources that are not utilized correctly and begin to just work in that space.”

Providing opportunities for people to partake in the changing world is what Griffin says will make a difference. He suggested thinking broadly about what is innovative instead of coming up with win-lose solutions. He reiterated that this will take a new, future-focused type of leadership.

At the end of the season, Dr. Connie invited her 11-year-old daughter onto the podcast to demonstrate a valuable leadership skill: visualizing the “Future User.” She asked her daughter questions about how she sees herself in the future.

“Future User can be used to identify and anticipate the needs of target markets by examining changes to a customer segment over time,” Dr. Connie explained. “What will they need? How can we anticipate these changes?”

Ultimately, she said, it comes back around to the need for leaders who can analyze needs, visualize something different from the expected and lead the rest of us in a strategic, measurable right direction. That’s why the Rural Futures Podcast showcases the topic of leadership in every episode.

**Dr. Connie encouraged listeners to become the leaders humanity needs through her definition of leadership: Lead oneself while bringing out the best in others to make a positive contribution to our shared future.**
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NOMINATE A GUEST
Know a rural maverick or entrepreneur, a researcher or a futurist we should bring on the show? Is it you? Let us know!

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