



Proceedings of the

2012 Rural Futures Conference

Held May 8–10, 2012 | Lincoln, Nebraska



rural futures

CONFERENCE

Connecting Innovation

Proceedings of the 2012 Rural Futures Conference
Held May 8–10 in Lincoln, Nebraska
Hosted by the University of Nebraska

Proceedings of the 2012 Rural Futures Conference, May 8–10, Lincoln, Nebraska.
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**“This may be ambitious;
this may be big.
But that’s what
makes it worth doing.”**

*- J.B. Milliken, President,
University of Nebraska*

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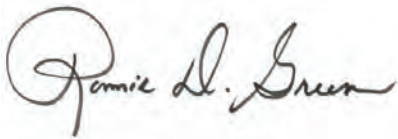
It's no secret that many rural regions in Nebraska and throughout the world have struggled in recent decades to remain vibrant and competitive as they face trends of declining population, increased median age, and other changing dynamics.

To address these issues, the University of Nebraska is committed to establishing a Rural Futures Institute dedicated to asking hard questions of how rural regions need to evolve in the future, rather than attempting to preserve a past that was built around a completely different set of dynamics than those found in today's information and technology-based economy.

In May 2012 the University of Nebraska hosted the Rural Futures Conference with support from conference sponsors – the Robert B. Daugherty Charitable Foundation and the Peter Kiewit Foundation. Their generous support provided the opportunity to bring together experts from around the U.S. and even the world, to brainstorm and discuss how to harness and help shape a vibrant and healthy rural landscape. This conference was just one piece, albeit an absolutely critical piece of a larger development process associated with the creation of a Rural Futures Institute.

The overwhelming response to the Rural Futures Conference far surpassed my initial expectations and I believe this huge expression of interest reflects how important rural futures are to so many people. Over 465 people from 28 states, the District of Columbia, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom attended the event, and registration was closed three weeks prior to the event because we had reached venue capacity. This reaffirms my belief that the time is right to build strong and meaningful collaborations, not only among faculty and staff across all the University of Nebraska campuses, but with a broad range of external partners, who have knowledge, expertise, and most importantly, a desire to build resilient and sustainable rural futures.

I hope this report piques your interest and leads you to consider ways to contribute to the success of the Rural Futures Institute and continued conversations with others who have a passion for rural futures.



Ronnie D. Green
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Photo Courtesy of SymLabs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2012 Rural Futures Conference in a Nutshell

Rural advocates from 28 states and the District of Columbia, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom were among the 465 people who gathered in Lincoln May 8–10, 2012, for the University of Nebraska-hosted Rural Futures Conference, examining the prospects and challenges for a Rural Futures Institute.

Distinguished attendees included four members of the University of Nebraska (NU) Board of Regents, seven Nebraska state senators, and representatives for U.S. Senators Ben Nelson and Mike Johanns, and Representative Jeff Fortenberry. Also on hand were 20 representatives of other land-grant universities.

The conference represented the culmination of several years of discussions, largely within the University, of how to examine challenges facing the future of rural places as the twenty-first century unfolds.

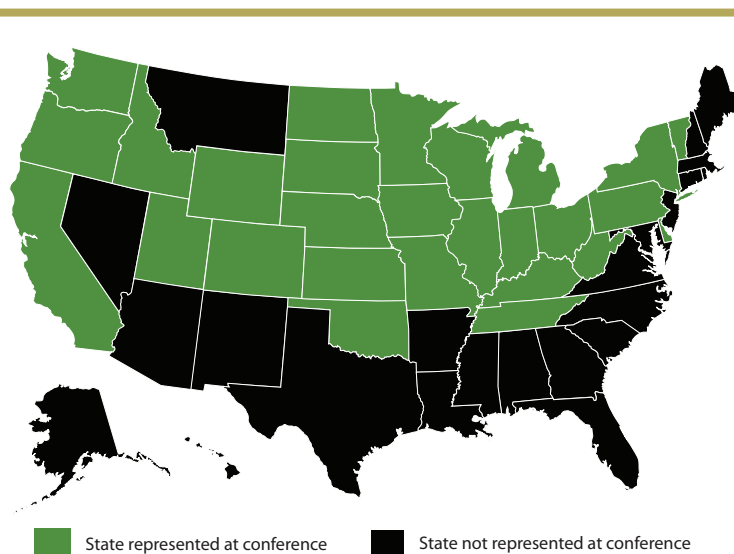
This year, 2012, marks the 150th anniversary of three seminal pieces of legislation that shaped Nebraska and the Great Plains:

- The Homestead Act, which created a land rush for settlers,
- The Morrill Act, which created the land-grant university system, and
- The Pacific Railway Act, which provided federal support for construction of the first transcontinental railroad.

Their impact changed the face of the nation, bringing newcomers by the tens of thousands to

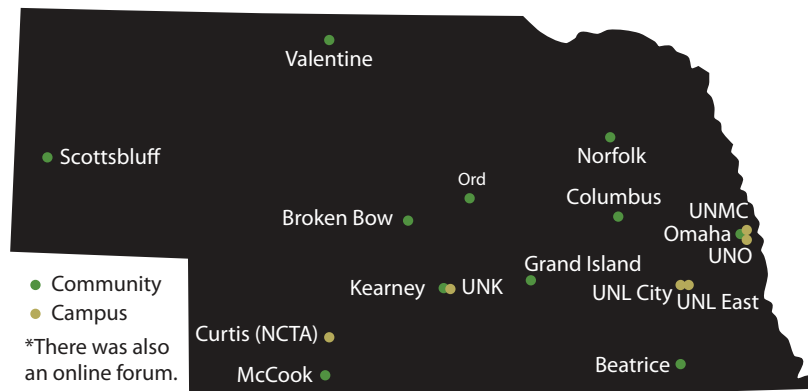
establish homes and livelihoods in a region once dismissed as the Great American Desert. But much has changed in the past century and a half, with shifts in population, economic conditions, and technology prompting reconsideration of urgent challenges facing not only the Great Plains, but rural places in general.

Out of a commitment to address those challenges grew plans for a Rural Futures Institute, with a Rural Futures Conference aimed at pulling together a wide array of stakeholders to explore how best to proceed. In an effort to gather feedback and to help plan the conference, the University sponsored community forums in eleven cities across the state: Beatrice, Broken Bow, Columbus, Grand Island, Kearney, McCook, Norfolk, Omaha, Ord, Scottsbluff, and Valentine. Additional forums were held at six campus locations: University of Nebraska at Omaha, University of Nebraska at Kearney, University of Nebraska Medical Center, University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) City Campus, UNL



Of the 465 people at the conference, 28 states and the District of Columbia were represented. There were also 4 international participants, coming from Australia (2), Canada, and the United Kingdom.

East Campus, and the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture at Curtis. Extension staff and other University personnel also participated in an online forum. All told, 340 people from across the state engaged in the conversations.



The University of Nebraska conducted eleven community and six campus forums across Nebraska to gain insight and perspective relative to planning the Rural Futures Conference and to explore the development of the Rural Futures Institute.

Led by University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken and Vice President Ronnie Green, Institute planners emphasized four key considerations in shaping the framework of the Rural Futures Institute:

1. **Transdisciplinary work is essential.** To be successful, the Institute will have to transcend traditional boundaries of academic disciplines while respecting the expertise specific disciplines contribute.
2. **Innovation and entrepreneurship are crucial.** This goes beyond private sector business considerations. The Institute should attempt to draw from the region’s long history of innovative thinking to leverage further creativity and entrepreneurial activity throughout the region, as well as within the University itself.
3. **It is more than economics.** Health care, education, civic culture, and the arts are critical elements of community life and must be part of the fabric of the Institute, even though they often cannot be measured or justified in a strictly economic context.
4. **Deep collaborations are a foundational element.** Despite challenges associated with institutional collaborations, the Rural Futures Institute will succeed only if it can foster and engage in meaningful partnerships within the University and with the many non-

academic stakeholders in the nonprofit, government, and private sectors that have resources and expertise to contribute to the issues at hand.

With those considerations as a backdrop, the Rural Futures Conference program set out to explore how to create a dynamic and effective Rural Futures Institute.

Two internationally acclaimed keynote speakers inspired imaginative thinking about issues facing rural people and places:

- *National Geographic* photographer and Nebraska native Joel Sartore shared his passion for wildlife, endangered species and landscapes and for people who pull together to solve their problems.
- Frans Johansson, entrepreneur and author of *The Medici Effect*, exhorted the audience to understand that “diversity drives innovation” and that a willingness to accept failure is critical to achieving success.

Five structured panels addressed key considerations that sparked lively audience participation throughout the conference:

- A **Dialogue Session with Young Leaders** explored needs, wants, hopes, and contributions of young Nebraskans

eager to use their talents in creating a vibrant future for rural communities.

- A panel of distinguished senior faculty members from Nebraska, Missouri, and California examined **Intersectional Approaches to Higher Education and Research**, addressing the challenges of multi-disciplinary collaboration and the rich results that can emerge from such efforts.
- **Be the Change You Want to See – Rural World Examples** featured panelists from Kearney, Neb., Fairfield, Iowa, and Gatton, Queensland, Australia, who described innovative efforts that have led to high-tech enterprises and creative tourism development in rural communities.
- In a session titled **Setting the Stage for Tomorrow: Why a Rural Futures Institute?** panelists from the University of Nebraska, Syracuse University, and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, focused on institutional and cultural challenges the Institute is likely to face as it pursues bold initiatives.
- **Witnessing and Observations by Conference Rapporteurs** featured conferees who had been assigned to observe and listen throughout the conference and who shared their observations about the passion, sense of urgency, and commitment to community that the conference attendees exhibited.

The Rural Futures Conference also featured a morning of conversations among conference attendees. About 120 people participated in focused conversations addressing specific questions and themes the conference planners sought to explore. Another 250 attendees participated in open space conversations, with discussion groups gathering to explore questions posed individually by conference participants.



Nebraska Governor Dave Heineman, who also serves as Chair of the National Governors Association, welcomed conference participants during the opening session of the Rural Futures Conference on May 8.

More than 30 open space conversations emerged, with topics ranging from agriculture to transportation to health care to the Cooperative Extension System to the role of young people in the future of rural.

Conference attendees also were invited to browse three dozen print and digital posters reflecting the University's diverse research partnerships that are examining key questions about the rural futures. Posters included various demographic analyses, approaches to marketing rural communities, climate issues, flood protection, land use patterns, rural health concerns, rural education, and challenges facing rural grocery stores.

In planned and impromptu discussions throughout the conference, participants explored a dizzying array of ideas that reflect an expansive vision for the Rural Futures Institute. As NU President Milliken acknowledged: "This may be ambitious; this may be big. But that's what makes it worth doing."



© Joel Sartore

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Future of the Great Plains and Beyond

Joel Sartore's humor and dedication drive home message about value of preserving the natural habitat



LEFT: Joel Sartore entertained conference participants during the opening session of the conference. TOP RIGHT: Residents from Mangum, Okla., host a Rattlesnake Derby each year that brings thousands of tourists and economic vitality to the region. BOTTOM RIGHT: Sartore explained that the annual crane migration in central Nebraska was once considered a local nuisance, but is now an international attraction.

You'll have to excuse Joel Sartore some eccentricities. Just a year ago, he was quarantined for a month in his own house watching for signs he'd contracted the deadly Marburg virus from bat droppings falling in his eyes in a Ugandan cave where 100,000 bats live.

With light streaming in from two sides, it was a photographer's dream, he said, mounds of guano and the need to wear protective gear notwithstanding.

To the self-deprecating, internationally acclaimed *National Geographic* photographer and author — “I just photograph things I think are interesting” — the prospect of contracting a dreaded disease or being pinned under a truck for hours by curious bison on a Wyoming ranch is all in a day's work.

Sartore, a 1985 University of Nebraska–Lincoln graduate, has photographed wildlife, endangered species, landscapes, and people in all fifty states and on all seven continents, and he shared hundreds of his images as the keynote speaker kicking off the Rural Futures Conference.

To Sartore, who lives in Lincoln, lots of things are interesting: a tiny fly that's on the endangered species list; bats killed by wind turbines; polar bears; mosquitoes crawling all over bare feet; dogs; his grandmother on her ninetieth birthday with a bottle of Jack Daniels; a cockroach tractor pull at the Indiana State Fair; families; a peculiar mother-daughter look-alike contest.

He's photographed some 2,000 species in formal studio portraits on black or white backgrounds,

beginning with naked mole rats at the Lincoln Children's Zoo. (In another zoo, a chimpanzee was an unwilling subject, ripping down the carefully duct-taped white backdrop seconds after being let into the cage-turned-photo-studio, much to the audience's delight. "That was forty dollars worth of paper," Sartore lamented.)

Sartore, whose goal is to make studio portraits of 6,000 species, said he just wants people to think to themselves: "That's interesting. I didn't know that."

One of his photos of a fly that's on the federal endangered species list is particularly troublesome to Sartore. "I believe this fly is key in saving us all," he said. "When you've got to list a fly, you should be breathing hard" because flies pollinate more fruits and vegetables around the world than bees. And in China, so many flies have been eradicated that plants have to be hand-pollinated by people using small brushes, he said.

"If we're dooming things at the insect level, wow. That's not good," he said.

Despite the boyish grin, fast-paced delivery, and sense of humor, Sartore had a serious message for the rural advocates.

"We have what the rest of the world doesn't have," he said. "We have open space."

And space, he added, is precious to people from urban areas.

"We have what the rest of the world doesn't have. We have open space."

He urged people from the wide open space of the Great Plains to "step it up" and cooperate on economic development efforts that will take

advantage of what they already have, as people in many locations around the world are doing.

Sartore showed an array of international locations where local people are capitalizing on whatever resources they have:

- Ecotourism in Uganda and the Everglades of South America where visitors can marvel at exotic wildlife.
- Brazilian women who sell natural pharmaceuticals from the rain forest.
- A coastal town in British Columbia that markets storm watching.
- A town that markets itself as the place to find the rare Florida grasshopper sparrow. Birders go there just to listen for it. "They can't even see it," he said. Nonetheless, the bird has been an economic salvation because the town marketed it.

Other communities closer to home also have figured out to make the most of whatever they have:

- Lindsborg, Kan., puts on a big Swedish Festival every year. It's a success, Sartore said, because of hard work and cooperation. "When a town cooperates, I've got great faith in them," he said.
- Mangum, Okla., puts on a Rattlesnake Derby every year. "All they've got is snakes," Sartore said. "They saved their town with snakes."
- A bison rancher near Wheatland, Wyo., markets a bison hunt. (Most hunters don't get pinned underneath a pickup while taking photographs.)
- In Burwell, Neb., an annual rodeo has put the town on the map "because they cooperate," Sartore said. "They realize it takes a ton of people rowing the boat."
- Similarly, Wayne, Neb., puts on an annual Chicken Festival that brings out the goofiness in everyone.
- The annual crane migration in central

Nebraska, which used to be considered a local nuisance, is now an international attraction. “I’ve seen every wildlife spectacle on earth that’s any good, and this is better than all of them, and it’s right in Grand Island-Kearney,” Sartore said, adding that he’s concerned about maintaining sufficient flows in the Platte River necessary to sustain the birds’ migratory requirements.

- And there’s the annual Ainsworth, Neb., Middle of Nowhere Festival. “They don’t even have a sparrow,” Sartore quipped.

He said it’s important for people to understand that cattle, a mainstay of Nebraska’s economy, and wildlife are not mutually exclusive, and he expressed concern about a new law in Nebraska that allows for the poisoning of prairie dogs if someone complains about them. Prairie dogs, Sartore said, “represent bucks, real money.”

He recounted a conversation with a South Dakota rancher who loves prairie dogs. She advertises every spring in *Birder’s World* magazine, and people come from all over to watch the burrowing owls



© Joel Sartore

Prairie dogs, often considered a nuisance, “represent bucks, real money,” explained Sartore during his keynote address.

and other species attracted to prairie dog towns. She charges them to stay in her bunk house and charges them for meals. Then in the fall, she advertises in *Varmint Hunter* magazine and allows people to come for controlled shooting of the rodents at the end of the year.

Sartore also cited as an example the Bruce Switzer family, which operates Calamus Outfitters near Burwell. “He runs cattle, but he runs tourists, too,” Sartore said. People come to go horseback riding, river tubing, bird-watching, hunting, and camping. Switzer likes prairie dogs, Sartore said. “They make him money.” And the ranch now supports two families instead of one.

“Without ecology there is no economy.”

To Sartore, the overarching point is that “without ecology there is no economy.” And

he stressed the importance of teaching children from an early age about the value of the natural world, letting them hold a frog and get muddy.

It’s easy to get nostalgic for the 1950s, the award-winning photographer said. But the 1950s are gone, leaving behind a legacy of deteriorating farmsteads that make great pictures.

But he said he worries about the temptation to plow up every inch of the state “when you have \$10 corn and woody biomass.”

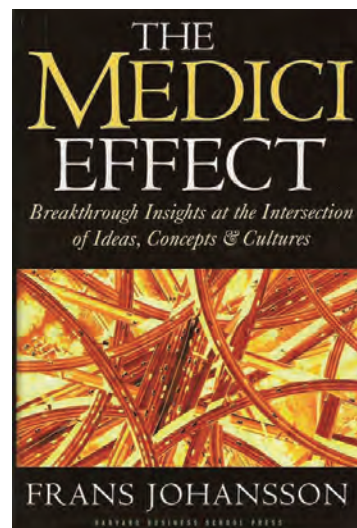
“I love this state, I love everything about it,” Sartore said. But he added that he worries about economic pressure to “strip bare the entire surface of the earth” and eradicate nature’s wild places.

“I know we have it within us to save rural America,” he said. “But we need to do it in a thoughtful way.”

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Creating Breakthrough Innovations

“Diversity drives innovation,” Frans Johansson tells rural advocates



*LEFT: The lively and interactive keynote address by Frans Johansson set the stage for the remainder of the conference — stressing that innovative ideas most often occur by combining ideas from widely different cultures, industries or fields of expertise. RIGHT: Johansson is author of *The Medici Effect*, an international bestseller that is available in 19 languages.*

Frans Johansson has more energy than a kindergarten classroom on the first day of school.

In a witty, fast-paced keynote presentation punctuated by music, videos, charts, and audience participation, the author of *The Medici Effect* challenged Rural Futures Conference-goers to think in new ways about making innovation happen.

Johansson, who holds a degree in environmental science from Brown University and an MBA from Harvard, was born and raised in Sweden, the son of an African-American-Cherokee mother and Swedish father. He started a science magazine, a health care company, and a software company before exploring the idea for his book: that people have a better chance of coming up with innovations if they combine ideas from widely different cultures, industries, or fields of expertise.

Johansson said his message is a simple one: “Diversity drives innovation.”

“If you want to drive new ideas, then bringing people together with diverse perspectives and experiences is core to making that happen.”

The ideas that emerge when disparate cultures intersect Johansson calls the “Medici effect,” a reference to the family that ruled the city of Florence, Italy, some 500 years ago. Johansson acknowledged that the Medicis were notable for nefarious behavior like political assassinations, which he said he didn’t recommend.

But they also brought to the city highly creative people in the arts, sciences, and philosophy from all over Europe and from as far away as China. “They were able to break down the boundaries between the different disciplines, between the different cultures, and ignite one of the most



LEFT: Brian Baskerville poses a question to Johansson during an interactive portion of the keynote address. ABOVE: Johansson listens as conference participants ask questions.

creative eras in Europe’s history, the Renaissance,” he said.

“It’s not about the Medici family,” he added. “But it is about the effect they created and how you can create the same effect right here.”

Johansson identified what he called “three facts of innovation.”

The first, he said, is that “all new ideas are combinations of existing ones.” He illustrated his point by highlighting the invention of the Burqini, a swimwear design created by a Muslim woman in Australia who came up with a two-piece, modest swimming suit for Muslim women. The outfit consists of ankle-length leggings or trousers and a slim tunic-length, long-sleeved top plus a hood that complies with Muslim dress codes.

What the inventor’s swimwear company didn’t expect, however, was the exploding market not from Muslim women, but from women of all kinds who are concerned about skin cancer risk.

Johansson noted that the Burqini story also makes you wonder why no one ever thought of it before. In fact, he said, “almost all innovative ideas appear obvious after the fact.”

“Almost all innovative ideas appear obvious after the fact.”

Johansson’s second fact about innovation is that “people who change the world try far more ideas.”

Pablo Picasso created more than 50,000 works of art, Johansson noted, most of which “are collecting dust in basements around the world. Do you know why? Because they sucked.”

And Albert Einstein published more than 240 scholarly papers, many of which have never been cited by other scientists. “One of the most brilliant minds for the past hundred years wrote papers that no one deemed worthwhile to reference.” He surely wasn’t trying not to have an impact; “he just didn’t know,” Johansson said. But he just kept trying.

“This is how innovative ideas happen You have to keep on trying, because you can’t sit down and logically figure out what’s going to be the breakthrough. Because if you could do it, we’d be fully awash in breakthroughs.”

Johansson’s third fact about innovation is that “a diverse team can unleash an explosion of new ideas, an exponential increase of idea combinations.”

He cited as an example the case of rock music in the 1970s when the genre was limited to three-minute songs with instrumentation restricted to guitar, drums and bass. But linking rock music with classical music opened up exponentially more combinations because classical music offers more instruments and more musical structures to choose from.

The same is true with ideas outside the music world, he said. And the farther apart the concepts are, the better will be the ideas that emerge where the concepts intersect.

“A diverse team can unleash an explosion of new ideas, an exponential increase of idea combinations.”

Johansson challenged the rural advocates to “find inspiration from fields or cultures other than your own.”

To do that, he said, you have to surround yourself with people who are different than you are, which can be easier said than done

because of people’s natural tendencies to stick with people like themselves. It’s a phenomenon he calls “the similar attraction effect.”

“So sometimes it’s not enough to have people that are different around you. Sometimes you have to force the combinations to actually happen,” he said.

He cited an example from the video game industry in which a game designer decided to put in the same office an animator next to a designer next to a programmer next to a designer next to an animator, instead of having each member

of the team in separate parts of the building sending specifications to one another.

Johansson said the video game designer thought that for the first two weeks, “they were going to kill each other.”

But then the conversations started to change. The conversations used to be of one person asking: “Can you do this?” And the other replying: “No.” But before long, the conversations became: “Can you do this?” And: “No, but I can do that.”



A long line of conference participants waited while Frans signed copies of his book, The Medici Effect, which were available for purchase after the keynote address.



Frans Johansson, Sam Cordes, and Ronnie Green share a light-hearted moment at the conference.

creating a timeline and a list of things that need to get done and an outline of steps. But that approach doesn't make sense with "intersectional ideas, ideas that we don't really know how they're supposed to work or not."

Rather than be stymied by a complex new idea, Johansson said he urges people to take "the smallest executable step," which he called the "core to understanding how to drive innovation."

And: "Interesting. I hadn't thought about that."
And "I hear you talking about it, and I want to add."

The resulting video game ultimately won numerous innovation awards, "not because they had gotten a massive R&D budget or development budget, but because they changed the way they generated ideas to begin with," Johansson said. The entire company now operates that way, and the executive's biggest job is figuring out where people are going to sit to leverage the diversity it has.

"This is true not just for companies; this is true for entire societies," he said, noting the increased demographic diversity not only of Nebraska and the United States but the entire world.

Johansson emphasized that it's not enough to come up with innovative ideas; you also have to make them happen. And usually that involves

Taking that first manageable step to execute a big new idea, he said, is the way to turn innovation into reality.

"If you wish to drive change, then stepping into the intersection is not risky," he said. "The only risky thing is doing the same thing over and over and over again."

The world is full of improbable connections leading to unimagined innovations. "But the truth is, somebody is making those connections," Johansson said. "I think it should be you."

"If you wish to drive change, then stepping into the intersection is not risky. The only risky thing is doing the same thing over and over and over again."



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PLENARY PANELS

PLENARY PANEL

Dialogue Session with Young Leaders

Nebraska young leaders offer insights into rural futures

With **Ronnie Green**, University of Nebraska vice president, panel members included:

Bob Bartee, the University of Nebraska Medical Center's vice chancellor for external affairs. Bartee was instrumental in securing support for the nationally recognized Nebraska Rural Health Education Network. He also led efforts to create the Nebraska Cancer Registry and the UNMC Health Professions Tracking Center.

Amanda Crook, a University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) graduate student in leadership studies. She grew up on a farm south of Nebraska City and credits her parents and her small town upbringing for instilling a desire to advocate for rural communities. She works for the Nebraska Human Resources Institute at UNL.

Jim McClurg, chairman of the University of Nebraska Board of Regents. McClurg was a biochemistry faculty member at UNMC. He holds a patent in the field of laboratory testing. McClurg is president of a consulting firm, Technical Development Resources Company, and serves as a director for UTDC, the corporation that oversees NU's technology transfer activities.

Caleb Pollard, executive director of Valley County Economic Development and the Ord Area Chamber of Commerce. Under his leadership, Valley County's efforts have earned state, regional, and national distinction. His goal is to create the national standard for rural economic development.

Anne Trumble, founder and executive director of Emerging Terrain, a nonprofit research and design collaborative that engages the public in shaping the built environment. Trumble is a UNL grad with a master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of British Columbia. She has designed streetscapes, parks, and plazas, working with diverse teams to achieve a common goal.

Caleb Pollard, Anne Trumble, and Amanda Crook never bought into the idea that young people should be seen and not heard.

The three young Nebraska leaders, all under the age of 35, were among the group that kicked off the first panel discussion at the Rural Futures Conference, exploring ideas about the needs, wants, and hopes of future generations.

Green set the stage for the panel discussion by asking the three young leaders to describe what was important to them about being in a rural community, and all three stressed the value of having a sense of place.

Trumble said she was away from Nebraska for 15 years. She was working for a New York design firm when it dawned on her that she felt she was wasting her life. It was difficult to know people and difficult to make a difference. In Nebraska, she said, she feels able to use her skills in a way that will make the community better. "People know me and I know them," she said.

Crook said her sense of place is strongly tied to the land, her family, and hard work. She described Nebraska City as a town with "vibrant organizations" that empower people who believe in the community, "good leadership" of people who are passionate about being where they are, and a sense of identity. "Half the town is named after Arbor Day," she said.

Pollard, who grew up on a southeast Nebraska farm with corn, soybeans, and 500 feeder calves, said he and his wife moved to Ord four years ago because it was rural, it evidenced a belief in its future, and it's a place where "people actually depend on each other for survival." Pollard said he worked on the East Coast for a while, where no one seems to depend on anyone.

Bartee noted that people who have a rural or small-town upbringing generally find it easier to return to such an environment.

Considerable research shows that it's almost impossible to get someone raised in an urban environment to go to a rural place, which has critical implications for medical care in rural areas, he noted. UNMC attempts to address that concern by identifying rural children as young as fourth grade and exposing them to the sciences and health professions. Additionally, every medical student spends time in a rural area as part of the required medical education.

Too often, Pollard said, rural places don't appreciate their own value.

"One of the things rural communities did for a long time was apologize for their existence," he said, noting that he had to experience city life before he understood "the

"Too often, rural places don't appreciate their own value."

value of having a contractual relationship over a handshake."

"Young people want to live with meaning and purpose," Pollard said, and rural communities are places where you can do that.

McClurg said a challenge for rural areas is figuring out ways to bring new money in from outside the community.

That's where tax incentives aimed at corporations and businesses can help, but so could incentives for individuals, Bartee said.

But public policies need to be people friendly, not just business friendly, Pollard said. Public policies need to support a culture that values people. "We spend all of our time on career placement; focusing on taking people and plugging them into jobs."

That jobs focus is misplaced, he said, criticizing what he called a "monolithic mindset that all we have to do is create jobs and that will bring people back." Policymakers have been trying to do that for years, he said, and it hasn't worked.

Pollard said his community talks a lot about the difference between having opportunities and filling a job. "We don't offer young people jobs; we offer them opportunities," he said.

And one of those opportunities is the opportunity to fail, Trumble suggested. There's value in failure,



From left to right, the panel included Anne Trumble, Ronnie Green, Amanda Crook, Jim McClurg, and Caleb Pollard. (Not pictured, Bob Bartee.)



TOP: Thanks to the efforts by Emerging Terrain, a prominent grain elevator no longer used for its original purpose now adds beauty to the Omaha landscape and depicts the interrelatedness between land use, food, and agriculture. RIGHT: A ribbon cutting in Ord, Neb., demonstrates community pride in new business development and entrepreneurship. The county's economic development efforts have received state, regional and national distinction.

and it's easier to manage — and bounce back — in a small town. “A small community supports you, even when you fail,” she said, and failure can lead to the next innovation.

Green asked the panelists if the Rural Futures Institute was something the University ought to be doing. “This is a risky thing,” he said. “Is it too big?”

To the panelists, the answer was an emphatic “no.”

McClurg said the University is in a perfect position to address issues affecting the rural futures.

Trumble said the University will need to face the challenge of how academia often is perceived in rural communities.

Bartee agreed. “People are researched to death,” he said. “We don’t need another research study; we need solutions.”



Some of those solutions include creating capstone courses that would put more students into rural communities, Crook suggested. And she challenged everyone in the audience to do their part by mentoring young people who can move a community forward. “It’s grassroots; it’s simple.”

Pollard agreed with the importance of getting students and professors out of the classroom and into communities. If the University is not engaged in addressing rural issues, it will have failed in fulfilling its land-grant mission, he said, adding: “If the University is not involved, no one else will be ... there is no other driver of long-term, sustainable innovation and development.”

PLENARY PANEL

Intersectional Approaches to Higher Education and Research

Professors describe challenges, benefits of intersectional research

Think big. Place many small bets. Expect some failures. And collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.

Those were among the key messages from a panel of distinguished professors who told the Rural Futures Conference attendees about challenges they've faced and challenges they envision for the Rural Futures Institute.

The panelists stressed the need to think in terms of scholarly collaboration across disciplines and among multiple institutions.

“One of the greatest agents for change is to either have an enormous problem or to have a huge disruption,” Keasling said. Either phenomenon “can be one of the greatest ways to motivate collaboration.”

He pointed to “big physics” as a model, in which huge, international teams of scientists collaborate to solve big problems. It's an approach that will continue to expand in other fields as funding agencies increasingly underwrite large teams of researchers to address critical issues.

But such an approach comes with its own challenges, he said. “You have to get somebody who's really invested at the top, who's willing to put their career on the line in order to see that research come to fruition.” It's also a challenge to create incentives for people to participate in such large collaborations and determine how to give them credit for what they contribute.

Keasling pointed to his work on turning biomass into biofuels as an example of “a huge problem and it's going to take huge teams of people to solve this.” But it's also a huge opportunity for rural America, he said. “We could maybe make

The panel, moderated by **Chuck Fluharty**, founder, president, and CEO of the Rural Policy Research Institute, a collaborative effort between the University of Missouri, Iowa State University, and the University of Nebraska, included:

Shane Farritor, professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), whose areas of research include space robotics, surgical robotics, and sensors. He has started two companies to move his research to commercialization, including one in collaboration with a surgeon at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. A native of Ravenna, Neb., Farritor holds degrees in mechanical engineering from UNL and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jay Keasling, professor of chemical and biomolecular engineering and bioengineering at the University of California, Berkeley, who also serves as senior faculty scientist and associate laboratory director at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Keasling, who grew up in Harvard, Neb., is working to develop cost-effective biofuels to replace gasoline. He also has been recognized for using synthetic biology tools to develop an affordable version of the most powerful anti-malarial drug.

Fred Luthans, the George Holmes distinguished professor of management at UNL who has been in Nebraska since 1967. Luthans taught leadership at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., and his research interests focus on a behavioral approach to management and to the study of what he calls “positive organizational behavior” and “psychological capital.” For the past 30 years, he has done teaching, research, and consulting in Eastern Europe, China, and Southeast Asia.



Jay Keasling (left), Shane Farritor (center), and Fred Luthans (right), all agreed that scholarly collaboration across disciplines and among multiple institutions will be crucial as the Rural Futures Institute moves forward.

the Midwest the new Mideast if we can produce enough fuel.”

Farritor advocated adopting a mindset that focuses on “what big problem you’re tackling and who are you trying to help with your work,” not what department you’re in.

Luthans, too, emphasized the critical importance of collaboration. “The ‘we’ is greater than ‘me’ is kind of a takeaway that we can all have in judging how we do things,” he said.

The growing importance of cross-disciplinary collaboration means faculty members need to rethink some aspects of how they teach, the professors said.

“The way we educate students today is, first of all, that there’s only one right answer,” Farritor said. “But if you all think about your own jobs, when was the last problem you tackled that really only had one right answer? It’s just non-existent in the world beyond those sheets we fill out with a No. 2 pencil.”

Moreover, Luthans said, students need to get used to working in teams. Good students may hate it

because they do all the work and the whole team gets the credit. But when they graduate, they need to be able to work in teams. The challenge is to create structures that incentivize teamwork.

“If we want to get teamwork, we have to reward teamwork.”

“If we want to get teamwork, we have to reward teamwork,” he said. “And if we want communities to get together, we have to reward communities to get together.”

The panelists also expressed strong support for the Rural Futures Institute being willing to seed many small entrepreneurs and innovators, recognizing that not all will be successful.

Entrepreneurs, Luthans noted, are the ones who start small businesses that create jobs.

“Entrepreneurs and innovators think differently than most folks do,” Farritor said. They’re willing to gamble, knowing they won’t win every bet, but they look for small wins.

“There’s a humility involved,” he said. “There’s an acknowledgement that I don’t know where the wins will be, but I’m going to try a lot of different things, and I know that I’ll come up with wins in this way.”

Keasling suggested that there is an important advantage to getting young people involved in a small grants program to address problems that have been identified because young people “don’t have all this bias about what hasn’t worked in the past.”

“I think just making them aware of the problem and letting them come up with some innovative solutions, we might come up with some things we never thought of,” he said.

The panelists also noted the many pluses of rural places, not the least of which is teaching young people how to work hard.

“I happened to grow up on a pig farm, and I scooped a lot of pig manure as a kid,” Keasling said. “And it was a great lesson for the future, because almost nothing looks like hard work anymore. So maybe more kids scooping hog manure would be good.”

“We have to try to build a global mindset in our young people and a global mindset in this Institute ...”

Whatever the advantages of shoveling manure, the panelists suggested that advocates for rural communities and rural life need to recognize that rural settings also have disadvantages. And one of

them, Farritor said, is a lack of what he called “conceptual diversity.”

“If I think of Ravenna, everybody went to the same high school in Ravenna, and had the same history teacher in Ravenna, so everybody knows the same history in

Ravenna, and that could be a challenge,” Farritor said. In cities, by contrast, with their greater population density, it’s easier for people with disparate backgrounds to mingle and learn from each other. So rural communities “need to look at ways we can increase conceptual diversity,” he said.

Luthans emphasized the importance of the Rural Futures Institute taking a big-picture view.

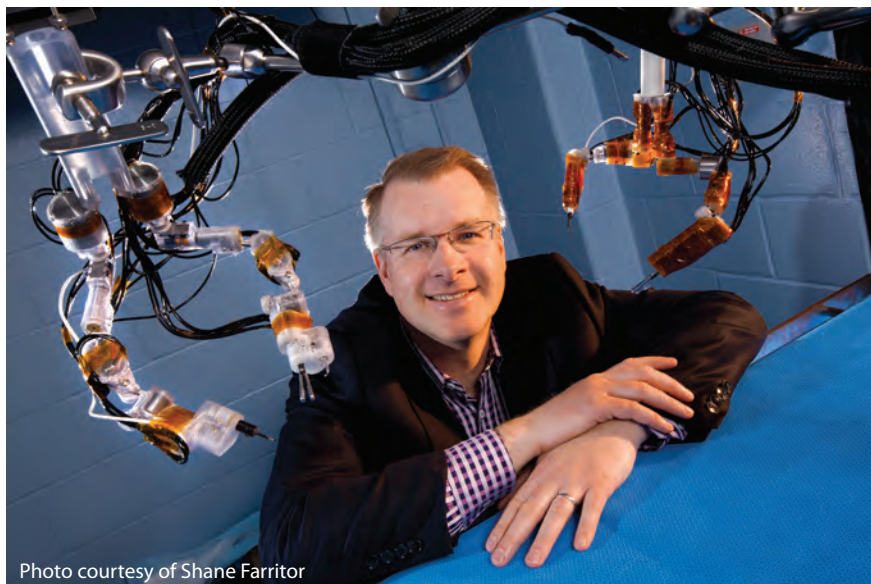


Photo courtesy of Shane Farritor

Shane Farritor’s research has led to new collaborations as well as two new business startups.

“I think we have to try to build a global mindset in our young people and a global mindset in this Institute, a global mindset in this state,” he said. “Even though we’re sitting here in the middle of the U.S., we still have to understand that the future is global.”

PLENARY PANEL

Be the Change You Want to See – Rural World Examples*Rural communities find creative thinking makes a difference*

Moderated by **Susan Fritz**, University of Nebraska associate vice president for academic affairs and research, the panel included:

Jim Cavaye, associate professor of rural development at the University of Queensland, Australia. Cavaye has 30 years of experience in working with rural and regional communities as an educator, researcher, and community development consultant throughout Australia, where he has assisted more than 150 communities with community appraisals, community engagement processes, community planning, and economic development strategies. No stranger to the Midwest, Cavaye holds a doctorate in community development from the University of Wisconsin.

Burt Chojnowski, managing partner of BrainBelt Consulting, Inc., in Fairfield, Iowa. He is president of the Fairfield Entrepreneurs Association and has started numerous businesses and an institution of higher education, Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, which touts everything from one full-time course per month to organic vegetarian meals. He prides himself on his disparate efforts to spark innovation and entrepreneurship to capitalize on communities' human potential.

Paul Eurek, president and CEO of Xpanxion in Kearney, Neb., a software engineering firm with offices in Atlanta, Ga.; Loup City, Neb.; Ames, Iowa; and Pune, India; in addition to Kearney. The firm writes software for a number of major corporations, including Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines and Cox Media. Eurek, a UNL graduate, has founded, served on the boards of, and invested in numerous high-tech companies over the past 25 years. Eurek, who notes that he and his wife could live anywhere, moved back to Nebraska because of the quality of life.

From “rural sourcing” high-tech jobs to capitalizing on “gray nomads” in Australia, creative developments that are making a difference in rural communities were the focus of a Rural Futures Conference panel discussion titled “Be the Change You Want to See – Examples from the Rural World.”

Eurek told the conference-goers that he considered his company a “poster child” for the conference. The global software engineering firm took advantage of numerous tax and other incentives the state offered, which enabled it to grow in the past five years from a small software testing operation in Kearney to computer program development and product management.

Xpanxion chose Kearney for its rural technology center because the city is a university town and because it is far enough away from Lincoln and Omaha not to have to compete for the labor pool from those larger cities, Eurek said.

He praised University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) Chancellor Doug Kristensen for being a great salesperson for the University and the community and credited Tim Burkink, dean of the UNK College of Business and Technology, for spurring creation of classes that prepare students to work for the company. “If we have the universities teaching their students what we need them to know, that’s one of the greatest successes we can have,” Eurek said.

Young people need some place to go and something to do, he said, adding: “We have to give them some hope that they don’t have to

get the diploma in their hands and they're heading out of state to go try and find a great job."

Eurek said his clients like working with people in Nebraska. "I would put our people and our employees toe to toe with any place in the world," he said. Nebraskans are ethical and intelligent, they do what they say they'll do, and they work hard. And it doesn't bother him at all to know that some of his employees likely will go out and start their own companies someday.

Eurek indicated the company's success in Nebraska could lead to more "rural sourcing" that in time could replace, at least in part, the trend of companies sending high-tech jobs overseas.

But he cautioned that as rural areas seek development opportunities, they do so in a way that doesn't degrade the quality of life. "We need to not only be able to grow, but we need to have a proper growth and not really affect what makes Nebraska so great," he said.



Paul Eurek works on a project with a University of Nebraska at Kearney student intern, Nathan Coleman.

Taking a different approach to innovation and entrepreneurship in Fairfield, Iowa, Chojnowski described for the audience the importance of what he called "economic gardening," or nurturing community entrepreneurs, and "asset

"We have to give them some hope that they don't have to get the diploma in their hands and they're heading out of state to go try and find a great job."

quilting," or creating new collaborations of people, money, institutions, and other resources in a community, which, he noted is one of the accomplishments of the Rural Futures Conference.

For starters, Chojnowski said, communities need to create a "culture of trying and failing and trying again, and hopefully you'll have some success along the way."

He noted that small, start-up companies are the major drivers of job growth and that many of those small businesses are in rural communities. But small entrepreneurs often have a difficult time obtaining adequate financing to get off the ground. Because of that, he said, he was instrumental in helping to create the Iowa Microloan Program to focus on rural entrepreneurs.

Chojnowski said that in some ways, he considered Iowa like a third world country and argued that financing mechanisms like micro-enterprise loans and micro-equity arrangements available in the developing world also should be available to support a new generation of entrepreneurs in rural communities, which are "a desert for venture capital." He also suggested that university foundations should be challenged to steer investments away from Wall Street to support Main Street.

While Nebraska and Iowa are halfway around the world from Queensland, Australia, the home of panelist Cavaye, many of the issues affecting rural communities everywhere are identical. “Many of the issues are so universal that we could be sitting in Australia talking about exactly the same things,” he said.

“Many of the issues are so universal that we could be sitting in Australia talking about exactly the same things.”

Cavaye suggested that as a first step, rural communities need to turn around their own attitudes about themselves and about how they’re perceived by outsiders. “There are a lot of people who talk things down and say, oh, we’ve got nothing, everything is terrible, it’s hopeless, when in fact, there are enormous assets there,” he said.

“Enthusiasm and passion is really what drives community improvement,” Cavaye said. “Sure we need infrastructure; we need services. But

we need enthusiasm and passion and motivation. And I’ve done the sums. I reckon an enthusiastic person is worth about \$150,000 worth of funding if you want to get things done.”

Cavaye cited the Queensland town of Barcaldine, a remote town of 3,400 people on the edge of the Australian Outback, as an example of a community that rethought its development opportunities. During the winter dry season, the town is popular with elderly retired people who travel there in their caravans, which Americans would call travel trailers.

Barcaldine decided to harness the “gray nomads,” as they are called, as community volunteers. First, they undertook simple projects, like painting fences. Then, they started mentoring local businesses. The gray nomads have refurbished an old movie theater and are now doing an historical interpretation of the community cemetery.

It was a way of rethinking older tourists, whom Barcaldine residents once “cursed as they held them up on the highway, to being a real asset to



From left to right, Susan Fritz moderated the panel consisting of Jim Cavaye, Burt Chojnowski, and Paul Eurek. All three panel members shared examples of successful collaboration between higher education institutions and community partners.

their community,” Cavaye said. And it has also created rural-urban links between Barcaldine and the cities where the gray nomads come from.

Cavaye emphasized the importance of multi-community collaboration. Instead of communities being envious of one another — “they’ve got a swimming pool, we want a swimming pool; they’ve got a tourist attraction, we want a tourist attraction” — rural communities need to figure out ways to collaborate if they want to be sustainable.

He also noted that in addition to challenging communities to be creative, universities also need to be innovative. Too often, Cavaye said, universities exploit communities by using them as subjects of research that turns into a published academic paper but never does the communities any good.

“The experience of many people is, when you go out into rural communities and say, ‘hi, I’m from the university and I’m here to engage with you,’ the overwhelming reaction is, ‘oh, well, you’re irrelevant,’” he said. He added, however, that



Photo courtesy of Jim Cavaye

Community residents in rural Australia break into small discussion groups to “tackle” issues facing rural areas. Panelist member Jim Cavaye told conference attendees that the issues facing rural America are the same as issues halfway around the world in Australia.

often there are no incentives for universities to seek genuine engagement and partnership with communities to address local issues and needs.

Ultimately, Cavaye said, the success of collaborations between universities and communities depends on grassroots relationships.

“Enthusiasm and passion is really what drives community improvement.”

“What causes a large university to work with a business or community is the fact that this person knows that person and they get on,” he said. “And that’s what makes things happen.”

PLENARY PANEL

Setting the Stage for Tomorrow: Why Rural Futures?*Panelists explore challenges Rural Futures Institute likely to face*

Moderated by Chancellor **Harvey Perlman**, the 19th Chancellor of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), the panel included:

Alice Diebel, program officer for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, a Dayton, Ohio, research organization whose overarching research question is: “What does it take for democracy to work as it should?” She holds a doctorate from Michigan State University in resource development.

Timothy Eatman, assistant professor at Syracuse University and research director for Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life. An educational sociologist, Eatman’s research examines the relationship between institutional policies, programs, and student development in higher education.

Ronnie Green, who, before joining the University, was senior director of Pfizer Animal Health, overseeing global technical services in animal genetics. Before that, he was national program leader for animal production research for the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service. Green grew up on a mixed beef, dairy and crop farm in southwestern Virginia. He holds animal science degrees from Virginia Tech and Colorado State University, and a Ph.D. in animal breeding from UNL.

Tom Osborne, UNL athletic director and former three-term U.S. congressman from Nebraska’s Third District. The Hastings, Neb., native holds master’s and doctorate degrees from UNL in educational psychology. In his 25 years as head coach of the Husker football team, he accumulated more football Academic All-Americans during that time than any other football program in the nation has produced in its entire history.

Advocates for the Rural Futures Institute face significant institutional challenges within the University and beyond, a panel of distinguished educators told conference-goers. But that shouldn’t stand in the way of pursuing bold initiatives, the panelists said.

“I don’t want this opportunity ... to get lost on the road kill of good ideas,” said Ronnie Green, NU vice president and vice chancellor of UNL’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The panelists offered their ideas of what should be high on the Rural Futures Institute’s agenda and the possible land mines that it should avoid.

Green explained that when he took the UNL post in 2010, University officials asked him what he would do to build on the University’s Rural Initiative that had been ongoing since 2002. An external review team had analyzed the Initiative’s first five years of progress and concluded that the Rural Initiative “was the right idea to be a catalyst to help rural communities see the future and grow the future, but that it wasn’t enough, that it was too small, that it was almost a shot in the dark ... at a big, huge set of ideas,” Green said.

The external reviewers said “that we needed to think about whether we were willing to engage in a much higher level” of effort to advance rural interests, he said.

So that’s what led to the idea of engaging all the University campuses — in Lincoln, Omaha, Kearney, the Medical Center and the technical agriculture program in Curtis — plus their partners, and stakeholders, including lawmakers and communities across the state, in a concerted effort to focus on the rural futures, Green said.



TOP: Harvey Perlman, moderator (far left) and panelists (left to right) Tom Osborne, Ronnie Green, Alice Diebel, and Tim Eatman, discuss the institutional challenges that the University will face with the development of the Rural Futures Institute. RIGHT: Over 450 people gathered in the Grand Ballroom to hear keynote speakers and conference panelists.



Among the biggest challenges, Eatman said, is coming to grips with the overarching metaphor of academe: the ivory tower. “It is a celebration of being removed from the community,” he said, which, by definition, establishes a divisive mindset between the University and the communities it seeks to serve.

A critical issue, he suggested, is creating policies that reward “publicly engaged scholars of all kinds

— tenure track, non-tenure track, contingent faculty. People who have one foot in the academy and one foot in the community.”

“I think tenure ought to be a priority, having a conversation about changing the criteria for promotion and tenure in particular,” he said.

Diebel said the cultures will have to change in both the academic world and the communities scholars seek to serve.

“Imagine someone from a premier land-grant institution going out to a community and

“I think tenure ought to be a priority, having a conversation about changing the criteria for promotion and tenure in particular.”

saying, 'I don't know what to do.' I mean, you're approaching the community without an answer."

That would be a good thing, she suggested, because it would help build the community's capacity to solve its own problems. "They get to say, 'these are

the things that I would like, can you help me with this,' instead of you saying, 'here's what you need to solve your own problem,'" she said. "So it's sort of doing with instead of for."

Diebel and Eatman emphasized the importance of a transdisciplinary focus, including the arts and humanities, as part of the rural landscape.

Osborne suggested that Nebraska has unique land and water resources and we need to focus on finding "more ways to leverage the agriculture sector."

Relative to making an impact on rural communities' futures, Osborne said, "it is not hopeless, it can be done but you have to be very intelligent and very hard working in how you do these things."

"The University, as a land-grant institution, absolutely has to be engaged in this issue," he said.

"The University, as a land-grant institution, absolutely has to be engaged in this ..."

Diebel noted the examples of successful rural entrepreneurs cited throughout the conference, but suggested that there's more to the rural futures than entrepreneurship.

"There's a need to rely on the assets ... that are in those communities and helping people recognize that it's not just the one bright kid with a good idea that is an asset, but everybody is an asset," she said, adding that the Rural Futures Institute should focus on helping communities solve their own problems and "gain control over their own futures."

One way to do that, Osborne said, would be to focus on rural leadership development.

"In a lot of rural communities, people are sitting around sort of waiting for either somebody to get a large donation from somewhere or else they're waiting to die," he said. "And you don't see a mindset out there that we can do this, we can make it work."

Moderator Harvey Perlman (left) prompts discussion from panel members Tom Osborne (center) and Ronnie Green (right) regarding the ability for the Rural Futures Institute to address controversial issues.





Panelists Alice Diebel and Tim Eatman share their wisdom with conference participants as they discuss key points that the University should consider as the Rural Futures Institute is developed.

“There’s some towns that are doing very well and some that are five miles, ten miles away that aren’t doing well,” he said. “And usually it just goes back to leadership.”

Audience member Daphne Greenwood of the University of Colorado challenged the panel to “be realistic” about the fact that sometimes powerful political and economic interests in a state “are not going to necessarily want the same thing that the people in the communities might want.”

“How are you going to maintain your integrity and stay focused when those challenges come?” she asked.

Perlman replied: “I have no doubt that if this Institute does its job correctly, many of the things that it does will be very controversial. You don’t effectuate change without interfering with established

“I have no doubt that if this Institute does its job correctly, many of the things that it does will be very controversial.”

interests. And that’s going to be a problem.”

But, the UNL chancellor said, that requires University leaders to be transparent about what they’re doing, honest about why they’re doing it, and clear about the rationale behind the decisions. The track record in recent years when that has happened is that “people in Nebraska have been pretty good about understanding, even though they don’t always agree with us,” he added.

Green said he was aware that moving forward with the Rural

Futures Institute would require courage and risk-taking and a willingness to address controversial issues.

Green expressed his optimism for addressing the challenges facing rural communities and the Rural Futures Institute.

“It’s the way you frame these things,” he said. “If we frame it negatively, if we think that rural America is declining, guess what? Likely it is.”

But Green said he believes the time is right to view rural Nebraska and the rural Great Plains as “about to experience a renaissance. I really believe that.”

PLENARY PANEL

Witnessing and Observations by Conference Rapporteurs*Panelists find enthusiasm tempered with realism about the Institute*

Moderated by **Sam Cordes**, RFI senior advisor and Purdue University Emeritus, the panelists were:

Esmeralda Cruz of Purdue Extension in Frankfort, Ind. A 2010 Purdue graduate, she is working on a master's degree in youth development and agricultural education and directs the Afterschool Tutoring Program for the Community Schools of Frankfort. Cruz, who came to the U.S. from Mexico when she was eight years old, is the first member of her family to graduate from high school.

David Procter, Kansas State University professor of communication studies and director of the university's Center for Engagement and Community Development and Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy. Procter has worked with communities on a wide variety of issues, including economic development, emergency management, school consolidation, land use planning, and arts development.

Matthew Rezac, director of rural community partnerships at the Sherwood Foundation in Omaha. The foundation's primary focus is on social justice initiatives related to early childhood education, public schools, and community development in Nebraska's largest city, but more recently it has expanded its efforts to partner with communities to help local people strengthen the places they call home.

Roni Reiter-Palmon, professor of industrial/organizational psychology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research focus is on the effect of individual differences, specifically personality and cognitive thought processes, on leadership and leader development, creativity and innovation in organizations, and on team performance and collaboration.

Ellen Weissinger, senior vice chancellor of academic affairs at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Her background is in educational psychology with expertise in quantitative research methodology. She previously served as dean of graduate studies, associate dean of Teachers College, and associate director of the Buros Institute for Mental Measurement.

If anyone doubted that now is the time for the University of Nebraska to create a Rural Futures Institute, an array of speakers, panels, and informal conversations over 48 hours should dispel those concerns, a panel of conference rapporteurs told Rural Futures Conference-goers at a final wrap-up session.

Five men and women with disparate perspectives on rural and academic issues were assigned to listen and observe carefully during the conference, and they shared their impressions in a discussion led by moderator Sam Cordes, RFI senior advisor and recently retired associate vice provost at Purdue University. His academic career, which focused on rural policy and community and economic development, included stints at Penn State University, the University of Nebraska, University of Wyoming, and University of Wisconsin in addition to Purdue.

Cordes asked the panelists what they perceived as the single most exciting thing they observed throughout the conference.

To Cruz, it was the fact that rural advocates at the conference seemed convinced that something will come out of it. She said she perceived a sense of hope and a sense of urgency that the Rural Futures Institute will be able to get things done.



In summation, conference rapporteurs Roni Reiter-Palmon, David Procter, and Matt Rezac, explained that patience and taking note of small successes will be important to the Rural Futures Institute.

Reiter-Palmon said she was struck by an out-of-state participant who said, “There is a sense of community in the room.”

Rezac said he was impressed by the three young leaders on the opening night panel who have “taken the path of commitment to their home.” What’s more, he added, “They really aren’t the exception.”

Weissinger cited a comment from a conference participant who suggested the idea of “rural vitality test plots,” much the way crop test plots help advance agricultural production by studying seed varieties, fertilizer, and production methods. “We already know how to do this,” the man said. “We just need to take that model ... and apply it to even more areas of rural life.”

But the panelists also indicated that conference participants were clearly realistic about how much heavy lifting would be involved in addressing issues related to the rural futures.

“We’re going to have to be patient when we fail,” Weissinger said.

Moreover, Procter added, the Rural Futures Institute needs a clear vision, or there is a danger that it would overpromise what it can do.

Reiter-Palmon said the repeated emphasis on collaboration presents a significant obstacle because the University’s bureaucratic system of organization “is not designed for interdisciplinary work.”

Rezac said that to an outsider, the University system is a labyrinth, which he said raises the question of whether the Rural Futures Institute will become merely “another corridor of mystery for people from the outside.” The ability of the Institute to thrive and grow will depend on maintaining relationships based on trust and respect among all parties, he said.

Another challenge, Cruz said, is dealing with fear of change. “How do we prepare communities ... to be ready for change?”

Cordes asked the panelists for their recommendations, based on listening to the conference attendees.

Cruz suggested priorities should include instilling in children a sense of pride in their rural communities, recognizing that the face of rural America has changed, and committing to reach out to all sectors of diverse rural communities.

“We’re going to have to be patient when we fail.”

Procter said planners need to recognize that the Cooperative Extension System “is the greatest vehicle for helping to address rural problems that we have in our states.” He also emphasized that the Institute needs to include the arts, humanities, and social sciences, not just agriculture and business.

Reiter-Palmon stressed the importance of collaboration and using resources that are already available. “There are a lot of good things already happening, but the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing,” she said.

Rezac said it’s important to remember that innovation doesn’t start with focusing on what’s missing, but on making the most of what you have.

Weissinger noted a comment from a conference attendee from England who suggested that the University needs to mainstream the focus on rural life. She said the University leadership has already made clear that focusing on rural concerns is a priority across the system. It’s not a hard concept to sell, she said, because University faculty already find meaning in the fact that they work in Nebraska, an attitude not universal among public universities in other states.

“We need to remind ourselves that there is a higher calling for us as scholars at a public university.”

People at public universities “ultimately have to see ourselves as public servants,” Cordes said, adding: “We need to remind ourselves that there is a higher calling for us as scholars at a public university.”

Cordes cautioned Institute planners to “go slow before you go fast,” be willing to forgive mistakes, expect neither too little nor too much, and remember that everything can’t be done right away.

“The genie is out of the bottle,” he said. “We’ve just given birth to the Rural Futures Institute.”



TOP: Sam Cordes and Ellen Weissinger share a bit of humor and enthusiasm as they discuss final thoughts about the conference. BOTTOM: Panelist Esmeralda Cruz continues the conversation after the panel presentation with an interested conference participant.



CONFERENCE CONVERSATIONS

CONFERENCE CONVERSATIONS

Open Space and Focused Conversations

Conference discussions shed light on big picture as well as small details

Take about 250 people who are passionate about rural issues. Ask them to brainstorm ideas that matter when they envision a Rural Futures Institute. And for two hours, several dozen clusters of men and women will pull chairs into circles or make space for more people around tables so everyone can put in their two cents about the disparate, audience-generated topics that emerged in the open space discussions.



Teresa Posakony (right) facilitated the open space session where conference-goers were allowed to convene around topics of choice. Here, Diane Vigna (left) proposes a topic.

The open space conversations were facilitated by Teresa Posakony from Seattle, Wash., and Tenneson Woolf from Pleasant Grove, Utah. Both have several years of experience working with groups to facilitate strategic planning and open space discussions. The two have traveled the U.S., often times working in tandem to facilitate collaborative discussions among diverse groups of people.

Teresa and Tenneson began the session by explaining the process of open space technology and let participants know this was their opportunity to “have the floor” and choose what the agenda topics would be. The facilitators posed the question to the group “How can we create a successful Rural Futures Institute that inspires you, Nebraska, and the Great Plains?”

Any audience member who wished to do so could announce a discussion question, and 31 people did. (For the full list of topics, see Page 48).

Each was assigned a table or conversation area where conference-goers who were interested in that question could congregate and discuss the topic. Everyone was free to come and go as they chose and contribute or just listen. Each group was asked to fill out and turn in a discussion log documenting the conversation’s key points and recommendations, and the groups reported the highlights of their discussions back to the full conference.

They talked about engaging youth. They talked about the role of the Cooperative Extension System. They talked about transportation and communication and leadership and health care and engaging underserved populations, particularly Native Americans. And they asked questions. What would be the role of agriculture in a Rural Futures Institute? How do we address concerns about climate change? How will natural resources be protected as part of the process?

What other interest groups are addressing similar issues and how would a Rural Futures Institute engage with such efforts?

Conference-goers attending the open space conversations challenged each other as they mulled over ways to attract entrepreneurs to rural areas — or nurture their own entrepreneurs. How do we repopulate rural areas, some asked. For that matter, how much repopulation is desirable? Others wondered how to get people in the most densely populated parts of the country to care about what happens in rural areas.

While the morning's discussions swept over a broad landscape, two overarching themes seemed to emerge:

- The success of the Rural Futures Institute will depend on its ability to include *everyone* with a stake in the future of rural people and places.
- The Rural Futures Institute will face overarching challenges both within the University and within the existing physical, social, and legal infrastructure.



Open space discussion groups filled out logs documenting the conversation's key points and recommendations.

Including all stakeholders

The importance of including young people in shaping the rural future was of paramount importance to many conference participants. Some suggested that one way to accomplish that would be to establish a youth advisory board for the Rural Futures Institute that could assure young people would have an ongoing voice as the Institute's work evolved. Others expressed concern that while communities often say they recognize that young people are their future, members of the old guard in established leadership positions — both elected and volunteer — often are unwilling to relinquish positions of leadership to young people who are willing and able to serve. One discussion group succinctly recommended: "Listen to youth (and not judge!)." Another suggested: "Make youth realize we appreciate their talents." The group put two stars beside that sentence in its report.

Participants suggested a variety of ways to engage with young stakeholders, from creating a database of information about rural businesses for sale that young people could purchase to contacting 18- to 30-year-olds in a community and simply asking them: "Do you want to be involved?" Then, perhaps, the local chamber of commerce could follow up and find roles for willing young people.

Still other discussion groups focused on the challenges facing K–12 education in thinly populated rural areas. Another group highlighted the importance of connecting the generations in rural areas and also suggested connecting rural and urban youth, perhaps with service learning opportunities. One participant offered the idea of creating rural work or internship experiences for young people from cities.

Other critically important stakeholders also need seats at the table, the open space conversations emphasized. One of the stakeholder groups that was identified was agriculture, which remains



Once discussion topics were identified, conference participants self-selected which conversations to participate in. A spokesperson was identified from each open space session to report discussion highlights back to the larger group.

an economic mainstay of rural communities, the State, and the Great Plains region. Opportunities clearly exist to develop many new rural-based entrepreneurial businesses and prominent among them are value-added agriculture enterprises. By engaging with them, farmers, agribusinesses, and commodity organizations can be important players in future community development efforts.

Some discussion circles focused on natural resources and the environment in the largest sense. Water issues remain a major concern. So does the impact of climate change, particularly drought and its effects on crop production. Likewise energy concerns and development of alternatives like wind energy and biomass resources should be on the table for the Rural Futures Institute, some recommended. Raising insects for food in a global export market emerged as one suggestion in a climate-change discussion.

Discussion groups also identified other stakeholders whose special resources could contribute constructively to the Rural Futures Institute. State colleges, community colleges,

and tribal colleges have important advantages over the University, several participants noted. Those smaller institutions of higher education are typically more nimble and face fewer administrative hurdles in adapting to change. And they also tend to be closely linked to the communities they serve, which puts them in an ideal position to create collaborations and experiment with new programs and services, some participants suggested. Likewise, other land-grant institutions across the region may be well positioned to play important roles in shared areas of expertise as well as contributing unique assets in advancing the Rural Futures Institute.

Several of the open space conversations focused on assuring that underserved populations got a place at the table in moving the Rural Futures Institute forward. Native American communities in particular, some participants noted, face a widening gap in education and economic development. Developing relationships of trust with underserved communities is key to successfully engaging with them, one discussion group said, suggesting that partnering with local organizations and recruiting staff from

underserved populations could contribute to developing that trust. “It takes time!” the group warned in its open space report. Another group noted that “diversity is critical to innovation.” But it also said: “Diversity is essential, but it must feed into a common cause to move forward.”

Participants in one open space conversation asked how the Rural Futures Institute would address issues of integrating newcomers — whether immigrants, returning natives and their spouses, or other new residents — into the community. Small towns often think of themselves as friendly, welcoming places, yet often they are anything but, some participants noted. The future of rural communities, however, depends on the constructive participation of everyone and the recognition that all residents have contributions to make, whether they just moved from Omaha or from half-way around the world. Indeed, recognizing the value of newcomers who contribute to community vibrancy is in keeping with the immigrant heritage of the region.

Facing challenges within the University and beyond

Several open space conversation groups focused on specific challenges facing the University as the Rural Futures Institute takes shape. The role of the Cooperative Extension System was a particular highlight for many. The longstanding role of Extension educators as trusted links between the University and the communities they serve suggested to some participants that a model already is in place for creating the community collaborations it would take to make the Institute successful. But some Extension educators expressed concern that their unique role is not fully appreciated on all University campuses. Extension educators are

generally highly regarded in their communities, discussion group participants said, but they’re already stretched thin and have limited time to take on new tasks.

Some conversation groups raised questions about what incentives would be created to get University faculty to buy into the Rural Futures Institute’s efforts. How will the University work to erase disciplinary boundaries that can inhibit collaboration? How would a faculty member’s participation in a Rural Futures project affect that person’s quest for promotion and tenure, if the activities fell outside the usual expectations for teaching and research?

Another recurring theme was how to address the challenge of structuring the new Institute so as to make use of existing organizations and services within the University and beyond, that already address pieces of the rural futures puzzle. Open space conversation groups repeatedly admonished, “Don’t reinvent the wheel.”

Open space conversations also drew attention to an underlying perception in that the University does not always see other entities as equal players when it comes to addressing public issues.



Several discussion groups recommended engaging youth in the Rural Futures Institute.

In addition to challenges the Rural Futures Institute will have to address within the University, open space participants also highlighted social, physical, and legal realities that must be addressed. For example:

- Many rural communities face critical housing needs, particularly for the elderly and for young people.
- Transportation needs, including air and rail service, are essential in a region with geographically dispersed population centers. One open space group noted that the State of Nebraska, for example, has a Department of Roads, not a Department of Transportation, which hampers the development of multi-modal transportation systems. And lack of public transit can mean that the elderly and people younger than 16 are essentially trapped.
- Universal access to high-speed, broadband technology is critical for commerce, education, and health care delivery. And it needs to be fast, reliable, and affordable, one open space group emphasized.
- Access to health care services and affordable health insurance is particularly critical in rural areas, but legal barriers limit the ability of intermediate-level health care workers to provide necessary services, a challenge the Rural Futures Institute can't address by itself.

One open space participant pointed to a characteristic common among rural people themselves that can be a hurdle for the Rural Futures Institute to overcome. The independent nature of rural people and the dispersed nature of rural populations make it difficult to organize to achieve common goals, particularly if those goals require political action to effect change.

While the open space discussions were underway in two large convention rooms, about 120 additional conference participants were



Two University of Nebraska students, Haley Harthoorn (right) and Melissa Keys (left), were excited to share highlights from their open space discussion group.

engaged in focused conversations on a variety of predetermined topics. (See complete list of questions addressed on Page 49.)

More than 50 internationally recognized leaders from throughout the United States and from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia joined a similar number of Nebraskans for a morning of focused conversations about crafting the Rural Futures Institute.

The energy, creativity, and passion of some 120 participants was harnessed by skilled facilitators who led ten discussion groups that focused on specific questions conference planners sought to explore. The focus groups addressed a total of 14 questions, including:

- How to create an environment that supports deep and sustained collaborations.
- How to determine priorities for the Institute.

- What kind of organizational and governance philosophy makes the most sense.

Before addressing the group’s assigned questions, the facilitators asked participants for their general impressions of the Rural Future Conference and the Rural Futures Institute so far. “Refreshing”, “encouraged”, “very exciting”, “thrilling”, and “timely” were among the accolades. Others were very impressed with the commitment from the senior leadership levels at the University of Nebraska and thought this was setting a new standard for other universities, especially land-grant universities. An expert from the United Kingdom observed: “If Nebraska can make a success of this bold initiative it will be a catalyst for others throughout the world to do the same.”

The participants also talked about sharpening the Rural Futures Institute vision and mission statements, appreciating rural and urban interdependency, and recognizing the need to reform tenure and promotion criteria for faculty. Some wondered how broad the geographic scope of the Institute should be and others worried that the traditional bureaucracy within a public

institution like the University of Nebraska would create problems for the Rural Futures Institute.

Most of the focused conversations revolved around these four themes:

- What type of culture should guide the Rural Futures Institute?
- What programmatic considerations are of special importance?
- What should be the governing philosophy of the Rural Futures Institute?
- What organizational structure makes the most sense?

Culture

The overarching theme, emphasized repeatedly, was the need to create a culture of inclusiveness in the Rural Futures Institute. Participants stressed that the rationale for inclusiveness had nothing to do with political correctness and everything to do with the recognition that “all of us are smarter than some of us” in addressing challenges facing rural people and places.

A number of participants called special attention to the importance of the youth voice and how young people often are overlooked. Some noted



From left to right, Esmerelda Cruz, Jane Leonard, Chuck Hassebrook, and Paul Eurek participated in focused conversations where predetermined questions were discussed.

the irony of not including the specific cohort that has a greater stake in the future than any other age group. Suggestions for incorporating young voices included:

- Engaging university students
- Working with youth in rural communities
- Helping local residents engage and appreciate the youth voice
- Creating internship opportunities
- Engaging communities with how to retain or attract young professionals
- Having youth representatives play a critical role in the Rural Futures Institute formation.

Participants suggested one Rural Futures Institute operative principle should be: “Don’t talk about us without talking with us.”

In a related consideration, focus group participants noted the importance of achieving widespread support and buy-in for the Rural Futures Institute. They complimented efforts in that direction, citing the community forums, campus forums, development of an electronic platform, and the Rural Futures Conference itself. Social networking avenues were also highlighted as a particular method for engaging

young people. Robust and continuous communications send the signal that the Rural Futures Institute operates with transparency and authenticity, which leads to trust, the single, most important consideration in any collaborative effort.

Some of the conversations focused on the flipside of the communications coin: listening. Participants said the Rural Futures Institute must create a culture of listening carefully at all times to community partners, institutional partners, and other collaborators. In addition to generating trust and respect, they said, careful listening will provide critical information needed to determine program direction and priorities.

Careful listening leads to what some focus groups called a demand-driven approach by the Rural Futures Institute in which goals and priorities are determined, or at least heavily weighted, by interaction with external stakeholders, especially rural communities themselves. Some participants noted that getting complete information at the community level often requires using diverse and creative mechanisms. One group member cautioned “Do not go to a rural community with

the answers in hand — it won’t work.” Another agreed saying “The University cannot bring in the ‘answers,’ they need to help facilitate the community to ask the questions that they want answered.”

Others injected a note of caution about a demand-driven approach. The listening framework should not be translated into a philosophy of doing something *for* the community but rather doing something *with* the community. Even the most isolated and impoverished rural areas have



Left to right: Connie Hancock, Dennis Berens and Angie Hawk Maiden review the proposed Rural Futures Institute vision statement and suggest revisions.



Alan DeYoung (left) and Jerry Diechert (right) reference a Nebraska map during focused conversation discussions.

assets, and the key is to help local communities link, leverage, and align their local resources to achieve their desired futures. Focus groups translated that programmatic philosophy as ABCD: Asset-Based Community Development.

Participants in the focused conversations acknowledged that the University of Nebraska and its potential collaborators have significant assets, but suggested it might not be easy to mobilize those assets effectively. They identified two particular areas of concern: the University's reward or incentive system and the role of the Cooperative Extension System.

The focused conversations stressed the importance of creating a culture and an incentive system that supports people who work in transdisciplinary settings linked to broad-based collaborations and community partnerships and people who may engage in participatory research or other important work that may not match up well with the University's existing reward system, including tenure and promotion.

Discussion participants also noted the critical role Extension could play in the Rural Futures

Institute, in part because of its statewide network of Extension offices. But some were skeptical about Extension's ability to rise to the occasion. They said their concerns stemmed from the perception that the area of work envisioned by the Rural Futures Institute has not been a high priority historically for Nebraska Extension. Moreover, they noted, many of the academic resources most relevant to the Rural Futures Institute are not part of UNL's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, to which Extension is tightly linked.

Another cultural consideration the focus groups raised relates to managing expectations. Participants said they recognized that many of the ideas under discussion will require time and patience, whether it is affecting change in communities, changing the institutional culture in higher education or building robust and sustainable collaborations. Rural Futures Institute leaders, particularly at the outset, should be careful not to over promise. They also should strive for some quick, early successes, however modest. Participants suggested that pilot projects, small grants or convening small groups of stakeholders could foster early successes.

Leaders will need to acknowledge at the outset that new and ambitious efforts like those of the Rural Futures Institute inevitably will encounter failures, which will require strong and supportive senior leaders as well as a risk management strategy.

Participants in the focused conversations also emphasized the importance of a culture that is both reflective and reflexive, in which the Rural Futures Institute can constantly reassess and adjust its role in a changing world. Many participants suggested that the limiting factor is not scarce resources but a shortage of great ideas. Bold ideas, they said, will attract resources, creating a culture of social entrepreneurship

rather than the more common culture of waiting passively for the next round of grant opportunities to be announced.

Programmatic considerations

The three traditional functions of the land-grant university system — teaching, research, and extension — all can be incorporated into the Rural Futures Institute’s programmatic portfolio, the focused conversation participants concluded. The groups identified two distinct types of roles across those three functional areas: a catalyzing or incubating function and directly funding or undertaking specific projects.

The catalyzing or incubating role is process oriented, not linked to a traditional concept of “deliverables.” In this role, the Rural Futures Institute would focus on convening, facilitating peer exchange, brokering, identifying best practices, and serving as a central resource or clearinghouse for information and ideas. Participants urged careful consideration of the relative importance of that role alongside the more traditional role of sponsoring specific projects.

Participants again stressed the critical need to involve students in purposeful, deliberate ways. Opportunities abound across virtually all fields and majors, including the arts and humanities. Service learning, internships and practicum experiences all could have a rural dimension, and some suggested linking high school students with community projects that might be structured to yield dual credit for college.

Representatives of other land-grant institutions were enthusiastic about the prospects of the Rural Futures Institute, including its ability to link existing assets, serve as an information



Lindsay Hastings (left) and Charlotte Narjes (right) work diligently to record key points during one of the focused conversation discussions.

coordinator, build teams across institutions, and become an incubator for experiments and pilot projects. Focused conversation participants reminded each other, however, that other potential partners will want assurance that the University of Nebraska is making a serious and long-term commitment in creating the Rural Futures Institute.

Participants highlighted a broad array of organizations and institutions in Nebraska and elsewhere that could be potential partners with the Institute, which raised yet another question: What is the geographic scope of the Rural Futures Institute? The conversation groups readily agreed that it should reach beyond Nebraska, but they wondered how far. The Great Plains? The United States? Around the globe? While the Institute needs a global dimension, some participants expressed concern about the potential risk of the Institute trying to become too broad too quickly. Practical considerations dictate a building block approach, first focusing on Nebraska and the Great Plains and then leveraging success at that level into a more aggressive national and international focus, they concluded.

Yet another geographic consideration, some

participants noted, is the concern that rural issues not be conceived in isolation. Rural and urban communities are interdependent, and the Institute should strive to build connections with urban areas and stakeholders. “If rural is going to make it we need to include urban along with the rural efforts,” said one of the participants. Some noted that developing initiatives that employ a multi-county regional approach could be one way to bridge the geographic divide. Others said the arts, hospitality, food, water, health care, and energy are topics that link both rural and urban communities.

Governing philosophy

Rural communities need to foster innovation and entrepreneurship, and so should the Rural Futures Institute, focused conversation groups said. As an institution, the Rural Futures Institute needs to be flexible, nimble, and pro-active, setting it apart from other kinds of University efforts. Some participants suggested that to be effective, the Institute must not be encumbered by some of the bureaucratic constraints often found in institutions of higher education. Other participants suggested that the Rural Futures Institute could maintain a level of independence from the University if it were established as a

separate tax-exempt, 501c(3) organization linked to the University but not embedded in it.

Organizational structure

Four themes consistently emerged from the focused conversation discussions that addressed organizational structure.

First, the groups said, the structure must be designed to support a nimble and flexible Rural Futures Institute.

Second, instead of a traditional hierarchical approach, a more workable structural framework would tend to be horizontal, built around a web of networks or a hub-and-spoke model.

Third, the Rural Futures Institute needs to be seen from the start as a University system-wide initiative, with all four NU campuses making critical contributions to its success. Accomplishing that will require strong leadership from NU’s central administration, participants said. Lacking that, the Rural Futures Institute will be perceived as important only to UNL or the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR). Further, if Extension is expected to be a major contributor, it must see itself as linking strongly to all four campuses, not just IANR.

Fourth, the focus groups suggested that as long as the first three elements are in place, it would be unwise to devote too much effort to organizational structure. Rather, the initial structure should simply be evaluated during the first two or three years and adjusted as necessary.



Gordon Scholz (left) looks on as Lisa Kowalski (center) takes notes while Chris Gibbons (right) responds to a discussion question.

CONFERENCE CONVERSATIONS

Topics Generated During Open Space Conversations

Community

1. How can we create unstoppable stakeholder civic engagement, with exemplary civil discourse as a hallmark?
2. How is community motivation generated and developed to create the future?
3. How do we encourage community leaders to follow their aspirations and achieve their goals?
4. How are we reaching underserved communities, specifically Native American communities?
5. How do we develop solid community partners?
6. How will the Rural Futures Institute address the issue of integrating newcomers into communities?

Human Capital

1. How do we attract entrepreneurs to rural Nebraska?
2. How do we repopulate rural Nebraska?
3. How much repopulation do we want?
4. How do we engage the interest of the most densely populated areas of the country in the problems/initiatives of the least densely populated areas?
5. How can we reframe who counts as a leader and how leaders think and behave with others?

Nature and Natural Resources

1. What are the future scenarios for rural landscapes in the Great Plains?
2. How will the Rural Futures Institute address climate-related issues? (drought, etc.)

Providing for Rural

1. What role does technology play in rural futures?
2. How do we sustain, improve, and incentivize rural health and healthcare?
3. What is the role of transportation?
4. How do we meet the housing needs of a growing rural population?

The Rural Futures Institute, University Involvement, and Partnerships

1. How can we structure the involvement of scholars from other universities?
2. What is Extension's role in the Institute?
3. How do we ensure diverse voices are encouraged and welcome in the Rural Futures Institute?
4. How are the desired outcomes determined and resourced?
5. How can we move beyond the conversations? [strategic doing]
6. How do we determine what regional groups already exist that address Rural Futures Institute issues so we can begin weaving together a core Rural Futures Institute group?
7. What is the role of commodity groups, government agencies, non-profits, and agribusiness?
8. What is the role of agriculture in the Rural Futures Institute?

Youth

1. How do we make rural Nebraska exciting to youth?
2. How can youth (pre-K–college graduate) be involved as we work toward their rural future?
3. How do you create youth (1) engagement/ownership in a community and (2) mentorship opportunities?
4. What about youth? (building youth leaders)
5. How will we educate our K–12 students in low population counties and areas?

CONFERENCE CONVERSATIONS

Questions Addressed in Focused Conversations

Culture and Philosophical Underpinnings

1. How can the Rural Futures Institute be successful in becoming transdisciplinary and what behaviors and changes need to be put in place to transform existing conditions and cultures to accomplish this? What are the key ingredients and “best practices” for creating this type of culture? What are “the rules of engagement” between academe and the non-academic partners that support the culture we envision?
2. “The ultimate welfare of the community does not depend on the balance-sheets of a few industries, but on the character of the people, the moral issues, the nature of home life, the community pride, the public spirit, the readiness of responses to calls for aid, the opportunities of education and recreation and entertainment and cooperative activity as well as of increased daily work and better wages.” *Liberty Hyde Bailey, Universal Service (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Co., 1918), pp. 151-152.*

What is the role and responsibility of the Rural Futures Institute to impact “the ultimate welfare of the community”? How can the Rural Futures Institute become integral to the civic, life-long learning, cultural, and artistic life of rural people and places?

3. What needs to change to ensure that “deep and sustained collaboration occurs” at each of these four levels: across NU’s four campuses; between NU’s campuses and other institutions of higher education; with non-academic institutions; and with rural regions/communities. Examples of such attempts already exist in Nebraska, e.g., the Partnership for Rural Nebraska and the Nebraska Development Network.

Support and Focus

4. As the Rural Futures Institute continues to move through its developmental phase what strategies and tactics are critical to achieving a broad base of support and buy-in?
5. How can the interdependencies between rural and urban become better understood and appreciated and how can the Rural Futures Institute contribute to this understanding?
6. In the short-term, what specific activities can the Rural Futures Institute undertake to be of most value to rural communities and to relevant partners within Nebraska and the Great Plains? What does success look like and how are the initial priorities assessed?

Structure, Governance, and Scope

7. Most organizations are organized in a hierarchical fashion, but “flat” networks of hubs and nodes are another way of organizing an effort such as the Rural Futures Institute. What are other organizational options that the Rural Futures Institute should consider? What are the critical pieces of organizational dynamics and infrastructure that are needed to operationalize this optimal organizational approach?
8. How should Rural Futures Institute priorities be determined? What criteria should be used to establish long-term and short-term priorities? What process(es) should be used to help guide the priority setting process?

9. Although the Rural Futures Institute is committed to a broad, inclusive and diverse set of collaborative partnerships, there is a special historical connection to our land-grant brethren in the Great Plains states. What benefits do they see to their respective state(s) and institution(s)?

Overarching Questions

10. True to its land-grant roots, the Rural Futures Institute needs to be linked to: students and curriculum; research and discovery; and extension/engagement. What needs to happen in order for all three components to be simultaneously addressed and integrated into the Rural Futures Institute?
11. What can be done to increase the level of engagement of campus-based faculty and staff with rural communities/regions? What role do existing entities such as Extension and the Nebraska Development Network play in helping to make this happen?
12. Other institutions of higher education have launched large and ambitious initiatives that may be somewhat comparable to the Rural Futures Institute, albeit the focus may not be on rural people and places. Can you help us identify some of these high-level initiatives?
13. What needs to be done differently that will create an even greater impact than has already been achieved by other academic-based “rural development” efforts that are in current operation or that have been tried in the past?
14. What are the most important qualities or characteristics that need to be considered when hiring the first director of the Rural Futures Institute?



POSTER SESSION

POSTER SESSION

Digital and Print Posters

The Rural Futures Conference featured both digital and print posters during a late afternoon poster session and reception. Presenters confronted key issues, while also providing core content to inform the next day's conversations. Digital posters were solicited to provide a high impact, graphic vision of the future, while also showing the University of Nebraska's breadth of interests, capacity to conduct research and programming, and partnerships. Print posters accepted for display showed how faculty and university partners are addressing topics key to rural futures. The research and information presented in these posters will continue to inform the development of the Rural Futures Institute.

DIGITAL POSTERS

Key issues addressed by digital poster presenters included biofuel production and its impact on rural economies, rural education, the future of forests, alternative flood control options, the challenges facing grocery retailers, securing high quality broadband internet access, the innovative use of GIS, and the impact of climate change. Presenters focused on the land and its use for tourism, conservation, ecosystem services, and sustainable agricultural production. Information about the impact of railroads, Great Plains geography, rural manufacturing, population dynamics, public trust and engagement, the Rural Poll, workforce recruitment, and urbanizing fringe areas was presented to provide core content on these key issues.

Achieving the Win-Win Goals of Sustainable Agricultural Production and Strategic Environmental Conservation in Nebraska Rural Areas: Successful Stories in the Rainwater Basin

Zhenghong Tang, Yao Li and Nan Zhao,
Community and Regional Planning Program,
UNL

Alternatives to Levees: Flood Protection Along the Elkhorn River

Sarah Thomas Karle and Eric Silvey, Landscape
Architecture Program, UNL

Atlas of the Great Plains: A Map Sampler

J. Clark Archer, Geography Department, School
of Natural Resources, UNL

Atlas of the Great Plains: Population Distribution

J. Clark Archer, Geography Department, School
of Natural Resources, UNL

End of the Line: Urbanism in the Great Plains

David Karle, Architecture Program, UNL

Fueling the Future of Rural Nebraska

John Hay, Loren Isom and Deepak Keshwani,
Biological Systems Engineering Department,
UNL

Integrated Biorefineries that Improve the Future Rural Environment and Economy of Nebraska

A.K. Watson, E. Noel, G.A. Oyler, T.J. Klopfenstein, S.C. Fernando, J.L. Van Etten and G.E. Erickson, Nebraska Center for Energy Sciences Research, UNL

Livable and Sustainable Community: Enhancing Citizen Engagement in Community Assessment

with Innovative GIS Technology
Yunwoo Nam, Community and Regional Planning Program, UNL

Manufacturing and Rural Nebraska

Eric Thompson, Bureau of Business Research, UNL

Marketing Rural Communities to Attract and Retain Workers in a Changing Economy

Connie Hancock, Becky Vogt, Randy Cantrell, Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, Charlotte Narjes, UNL; Dave Peters, Iowa State University; Mike McCurry, Dan Oedekoven, Kari Fruechte, Peggy Schlechter and Dave Olson, South Dakota State University; Larry Leistritz, Sharon Smith, Kathy Tweeten and Nancy Hodur, North Dakota State University; Irene Fletcher, City of Wayne, Nebraska; and Becky Bowen, City of Underwood, North Dakota

Nebraska Mapping and Planning Initiative

Connie Hancock and Charlotte Narjes, UNL Extension, Nebraska Department of Economic Development, Nebraska Information Technology Commission, Nebraska Public Service Commission and AIM Institute

Population Dynamic

Jerry Deichert and David Drozd, Center for Public Affairs Research, UNO

Public Engagement on Budget Issues and Trust and Confidence in Government: A Model for Communities

Mitchel Herian, Lisa PytlikZillig, Nancy C. Shank and Alan Tomkins, University of Nebraska Public Policy Center; Rick Hoppe, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office, City of Lincoln

Rural Climate-related Risk and Resilient Rural Communities: An Exploration of Linkages and the Role of the High Plains Regional Climate Center and the National Drought Mitigation Center

Natalie A. Umphlett, Nicole Wall, Tonya Haigh, Michael Hayes and Martha Shulski, National Drought Mitigation Center and High Plains Regional Climate Center, UNL

Shifting Thresholds: The Future of Development at the Suburban/Rural Edge

Anne Trumble, Sara Heib and Nick Rebeck, Emerging Terrain

Abbreviation Key

UNK : University of Nebraska at Kearney
UNL : University of Nebraska–Lincoln

UNMC : University of Nebraska Medical Center
UNO : University of Nebraska at Omaha

The Challenges Facing Rural Grocery Retailers

Shawn Kaskie, Center for Rural Research, UNK;
Tim Burkink, College of Business and Technology,
UNK

The Conservation Reserve Program and the Future of Rural Nebraska: An Interdisciplinary Case Study

Noelle Chaine, Danielle Haak, Kerry Hart and
Trisha Spanbauer, National Science Foundation
Integrative Graduate Education and Research
Traineeship, UNL

The National Center for Research on Rural Education

Gina Kunz, Nebraska Center for Research on
Children, Youth, Families and Schools, UNL

The Nebraska Rural Poll: Seventeen Years of Change and Progress in Nonmetropolitan Nebraska

Randy Cantrell, University of Nebraska Rural
Initiative; Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel and Bradley
Lubben, UNL Extension; Rebecca Vogt, UNL
Center for Applied Rural Innovation

The Unrealized Tourism Potential of the Oregon Trail Landscape

Bret Betnar, Landscape Architecture Program,
UNL

What is the Future of Nebraska's Forests: Using Cutting Edge Technology to Answer Age-Old Questions

Adam Smith and Joe Stansberry, Nebraska Forest
Service, UNL



Poster presenters had an opportunity to interact with conference participants during the digital poster session and reception held during the conference.

PRINT POSTERS

Key topics addressed by print poster presenters included infrastructure, land use, natural resources management, entrepreneurship, food production and distribution, and rural health, in particular the needs of women and the Hispanic community.

A Model for Building an Entrepreneurial Culture in Rural Communities

Robert E. Bernier, Nebraska Business Development Center, UNO

A Satellite-based Decision Support System for Rangeland Management: The Example of the Sandhills Region of Nebraska

Andy Boateng, Sharmistha Swain, Donald C. Rundquist, School of Natural Resources, UNL

A Strategy to Lower the Median Age in Rural Places: Teaching Youth and Communities about Entrepreneurship using ESI, Community Connections, and the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program

Diane Vigna, Textiles Clothing and Design, UNL; Tom Field, Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, UNL; Nancy Eberle, Phyllis Schoenholz, Dennis Kahl, Marilyn Schlake and Vernon Waldren, UNL Extension

Adaptive Infrastructure Management: Sustainable Development of Rural Community Water Systems

Wayne Woldt, George Meyer, Tom Franti, Xu Li, Derrel Martin and Yusong Li, Biological Systems Engineering and Civil Engineering Departments, UNL

Connecting Nebraska

Jacob Taylor, Landscape Architecture Program, UNL

Enhancing the Competitiveness of Rural Food Enterprises through Research Based Innovation and Commercialization

Rolando A. Flores, Steven W. Pharr, Gayaneh S. Kyureghian and Mark A. Hutchison, The Food Processing Center, UNL

Land Use of Nebraska

Patti Dappen, Ian Ratcliffe, Cullen Robbins and James Merchant, Center for Advanced Land Management Information, School of Natural Resources, UNL

Nebraska's Natural Resources Districts Celebrate 40 Years of Protecting Lives, Property, and the Future of Nebraska's Natural Resources

Alyssa Smola and Pat O'Brien, Nebraska Association of Resources Districts

Abbreviation Key

UNK : University of Nebraska at Kearney
UNL : University of Nebraska–Lincoln

UNMC : University of Nebraska Medical Center
UNO : University of Nebraska at Omaha

**Nine Opportunities for Success +
NxGen Entrepreneurship = Affordable,
Standardized Training and Intervention
Providing Economic First Aid for Rural
and Inner-City Urban Communities and
their Small Business Economy**

Odee Ingersoll, Nebraska Business Development Center, UNK

**Recognizing Demographic Shifts in Rural
Nebraska: Examining the Increasing
Need for a Culturally and Linguistically
Competent Health Profession Workforce
to Address the Unmet Needs of the
Hispanic Population**

Patrik Johansson and Sonja Russell, UNMC

**Shifting Thresholds: The History of Land
Use and Ownership in Sarpy County,
Nebraska**

Sara Hieb, Emerging Terrain

The Future of Rural Health in Nebraska

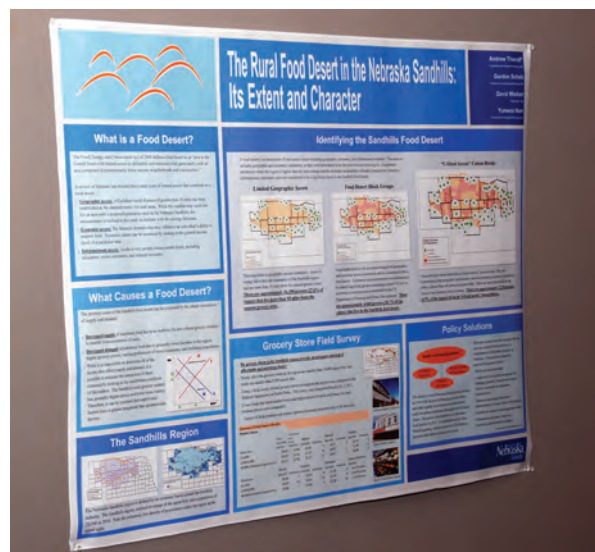
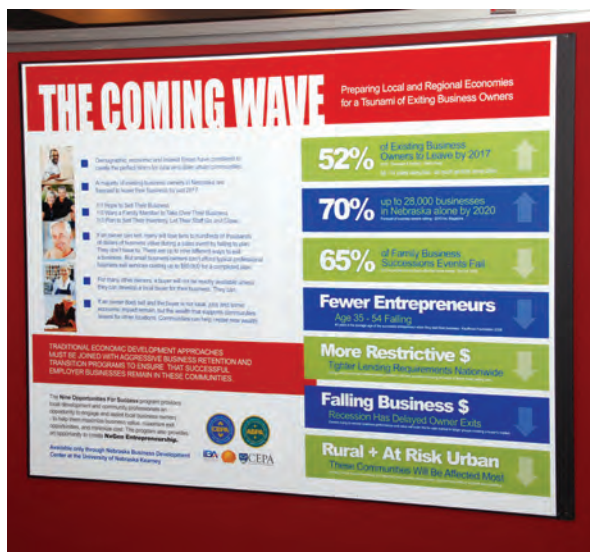
Yunwoo Nam, Rachel Jones and Terry Lage, Landscape Architecture Program and Community and Regional Planning Program, UNL; Thomas Rauner, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

**The Rural Food Desert in the Nebraska
Sandhills: Its Extent and Character**

Andrew Thierolf, Gordon Scholz and Yunwoo Nam, Community and Regional Planning Program, UNL; David Wishart, Geography Department, School of Natural Resources, UNL

**Use of Partnerships and Technology to
Improve the Health of Midlife and Older
Rural Women**

Patricia A. Hageman, Carol H. Pullen, Melody Hertzog, Bunny Pozehl and Susan Noble Walker, UNMC; Linda S. Boeckner, Panhandle Research and Extension Center, UNL



Print posters informed conferees on topics that are relevant to the Rural Futures Institute.



REFLECTIONS AND SUMMARY

REFLECTIONS

Rural Futures Institute Reflects Land-Grant Mission

J.B. Milliken, University of Nebraska President

Public universities in the twenty-first century will be carrying out the land-grant tradition if they harness their talent and resources “around the great challenges we face,” University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken told the Rural Futures Conference.

But they cannot do it alone. They must serve as catalysts for efforts by government, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations to collectively solve pressing problems, he said.

Just as land-grant universities helped build the nation when the Morrill Act was passed in 1862, Milliken said, today their role as catalysts for solving the great challenges of the day is what distinguishes them from private universities.

The University of Nebraska, he noted, is already addressing some critical issues in a major way: water, food security, disease eradication, and early childhood development and education.

Now, he suggested, the University can also be a place for leadership in addressing the challenges of rural futures, not just for Nebraska, but across the nation and around the world. “This has to be much bigger than Nebraska or we will miss out on a huge opportunity for leadership and attracting talent,” he said.

Milliken said the idea for the Rural Futures Institute grew out of an external review of the University’s existing Rural Initiative, which challenged University officials to think about

“This has to be much bigger than Nebraska or we will miss out on a huge opportunity ...”



University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken talks about the importance of the Rural Futures Institute to the University, the state, and beyond, during opening remarks on the final day of the conference.

taking a leadership role in addressing rural issues in a more visionary way and with a structure to support such an effort.

When Ronnie Green was interviewed for his current position as NU vice president and vice chancellor of UNL’s Institute of Agriculture and

Natural Resources, Milliken said he asked Green about the idea. Not only has Green embraced it, Milliken said, but he has brought energy, an organizational ability, and a sense of vision to it.

Milliken highlighted key elements necessary for the Rural Futures Institute to be successful:

- Transdisciplinary work is essential because innovation and creativity occur where disciplines intersect.
- Innovation and entrepreneurship in all areas are essential.
- It has to be about more than economics; health, education, civic engagement, and culture are all important elements of rural futures.
- Deep collaborations within the University and externally are key.

If the University succeeds in creating a global center focusing on rural futures, “Nebraska will be a tremendous beneficiary,” he said.

“I’m interested in creating a rural environment that is so vibrant, exciting, rewarding, and enriching that not only do people want to stay, but other people want to be there.”

“This may be ambitious, this may be big,” he said. “But that’s what makes it worth doing.”

Some people talk about the importance of “keeping our best and our brightest,” an approach Milliken called defeatist. “I’m not particularly interested in framing the idea that way.”

Rather, he added, “I’m interested in creating a rural environment that is so vibrant, exciting, rewarding, and enriching that not only do people want to stay, but other people want to be there.”

The NU president, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University, acknowledged that thinking big about the Rural Futures Institute invites the prospect of encountering big challenges.



LEFT: J.B. Milliken (left) chats with Keith Heuermann (center) and Ronnie Green (right) during one of the conference breaks. RIGHT: J.B. Milliken addresses guests who attended an evening banquet, hosted by the President, at the Lied Center.

SUMMARY

Key Lessons From the Rural Futures Conference

Recognize assets, embrace diversity, collaborate widely

When you fill a hotel ballroom for 48 hours with 465 people who are passionate about rural issues, you're bound to generate ideas. And the ideas that emerged at the Rural Futures Conference made clear that advocates for the Rural Futures Institute aren't promoting a return to rose-colored memories of yesteryear on the farm or along Main Street.

Dynamic keynote speakers, thought-provoking panels, and discussions among attendees themselves challenged Institute planners to consider three overarching requirements that will be critical to the success of the Rural Futures Institute:

- Recognize that tremendous assets already are in place.
- Adopt an expansive mindset that embraces diversity in all of its forms.
- Collaborate, cooperate, and engage at all levels and with all stakeholders.

Recognize assets in place

Conference sessions emphasized time and again that Nebraska, the Great Plains, indeed all rural places already have tremendous assets that are the foundation of the rural future.

First among those assets are rural people, particularly rural youth. Young leaders participating in a panel discussion stressed that they and their cohort want to make a difference in their communities because they value what rural life offers for themselves and their families. Rural economic development efforts should not focus solely on creating a business-friendly environment, they said. Rather, rural communities need to assure that they are people-friendly places, as well. And that means not sacrificing the quality of rural life for the sake of economic development, other panelists suggested. Young people also bring something else to the table; they are not encumbered by biases about what has and hasn't worked in the past.



Conference attendees listen intently to the presenters. The overwhelming interest in the Rural Futures Conference resulted in a capacity-filled venue.

The agriculture sector of the rural economy is another asset already in place whose role must be recognized and leveraged, conference-goers emphasized. Land and water use policies, biofuels, and crop and livestock production are all integral elements of the rural futures and cannot be ignored.

Likewise, some presenters noted, the land and water resources that make for a thriving agricultural sector are also resources that can contribute to the rural economy in other ways. Wildlife can coexist with agriculture, photographer Joel Sartore emphasized. Indeed, he said, the annual crane migration in central Nebraska, once seen as a local nuisance, now attracts birdwatchers from around the world. And people who call the Great Plains home should never underestimate how urban dwellers value wide open spaces.

Another asset already in place is the plethora of rural individuals and organizations already engaged in widely varying efforts to address rural issues, whether local chambers of commerce, commodity organizations, nonprofit advocacy groups, or major institutions like the University of Nebraska. Rural Futures Conference participants repeatedly stressed the importance of recognizing and capitalizing on what's already underway and not trying to start from scratch.

One critical asset already in place — the Cooperative Extension System — stands out as a model for addressing rural futures, many attendees stressed. The century-old model that has evolved with the times relies on Extension educators who are generally highly regarded by people in the communities they serve. They may not, however, be as highly regarded across the University, some suggested, a situation that should be remedied if the Extension model is expanded.

Adopt an expansive mindset that embraces diversity

Think big, think positively, and embrace new people and entrepreneurial ideas. That's how rural communities and the Rural Futures Institute will spark innovation, conference speakers and other participants stressed. But they recognized that big thinking can have drawbacks that need to be acknowledged at the outset.

Keynote speaker Frans Johansson pointed out the importance of “bringing people together with diverse perspectives” to drive new ideas. Within a University setting, that translates into working in transdisciplinary collaborations across colleges, campuses, and institutions.

Johansson also urged conference-goers to be willing to fail, try again, fail, and try yet again. That's how innovative ideas emerge. And succeeding at big goals always starts with taking a small, manageable step, he stressed.

Conference participants reminded one another repeatedly that the face of rural communities has changed, with an increasingly diverse population that has diverse interests and needs. But some rural places may suffer from a lack of what one panelist called “conceptual diversity,” the phenomenon that grows out of the fact that people in a small town with one history teacher in the one high school, for example, may be exposed to a more limited range of perspectives than students in a more populous community might be.

The Rural Futures Institute itself, not just rural communities, needs to be willing to take on big issues, even if it means engaging with entrenched and powerful economic and political interests that may not share the goals some rural communities seek, participants suggested.

The Institute also could have a global impact if it recognizes the universality of rural issues and not limit its view just to Nebraska or the Great Plains region, some conference-goers stressed. One presenter from Australia noted that many of the issues under discussion would resonate with rural communities in his home halfway around the world.

Collaborate and cooperate

Conference keynoters, panelists, and audience members returned repeatedly to the theme of collaboration and cooperation, which underlies both ideas of marshaling assets already in place and embracing diverse perspectives.

But participants made clear that for many stakeholders in the rural future, accomplishing such collaboration will require the University to shed an ivory tower image that often stands in the way of sincere cooperation between the University and other academic and non-academic players. One way to do that, some suggested, would be to get students and faculty into rural communities, not to conduct yet another study, but to do real work that helps communities fulfill their own needs.

To be successful, the Rural Futures Institute must incorporate collaborative efforts among the

University and community colleges, smaller state schools, and other land-grant institutions as well as various non-governmental organizations and the private sector, participants suggested.

But equally important, the University must collaborate within itself, despite bureaucratic structures that make such efforts difficult, many said. As an institution, the University should reevaluate standards for faculty tenure and promotion, for example, which now may stand in the way of faculty members spending time with rural communities. Institutional barriers also make it challenging for transdisciplinary efforts to emerge, but such efforts that involve the arts and humanities as well as agriculture and business, for example, are critical to the rural futures, some people noted.

Ultimately, several speakers suggested, the Rural Futures Institute must be seen as a twenty-first century fulfillment of the nineteenth century promise of land-grant colleges and universities. As a public educational and research institution, the University of Nebraska is uniquely positioned to take on the challenge of leading an effort to build vibrant rural futures by serving as a catalyst for change.



**MOVING
FORWARD**

MOVING FORWARD

Input from conference attendees led to the refinement of the vision, mission and core values of the proposed new Rural Futures Institute.

Vision

The Rural Futures Institute will 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 and sustainable rural futures.

Mission

Building upon the strengths and assets in rural Nebraska, the Great Plains, and globally, the Rural Futures Institute, through a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, will mobilize the resources and talents of the University of Nebraska and its partners, including community partners, to create knowledge and action that supports rural people and places to achieve unique paths to their desired futures.

Core Values

The core values of an organization can be thought of as those belief systems which form the foundation upon which the work is performed. In an ever-changing world, core values remain constant and represent the basic elements of how an organization goes about its work. The core values of the Rural Futures Institute are described as:

- Inclusive
- Transdisciplinary
- Creative
- Reflective and Collaborative
- Bold
- Opportunistic and Resilient
- Capacity Building
- All Serving
- Sustainable

What Does the Rural Futures Symbol Represent?

Combining a highly stylized 'r' and 'f' results in a symbol that alludes to the infinity sign. This symbol is dynamic, representing a pathway or the crossing of paths with a visual desire to connect the two end points of the symbol. Overall, the result is a feeling of progress, direction and opportunity.

Why Green and Gold?

Green is the color of nature and health, and represents environment, money, fertility and safety. It also symbolizes life, growth and renewal. Gold is a precious metal, thus it is no surprise that gold symbolizes wealth used wisely, but it is also the symbol of good health and optimism.





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CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

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Abbreviation Key

DED : Department of Economic Development
 DEQ : Department of Environmental Quality
 DHHS : Department of Health and Human Services
 NBDC : Nebraska Business Development Center
 NCRCRD : North Central Regional Center for Rural Development
 NCTA : Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture
 NERCRD : Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development
 NRCS : Natural Resources Conservation Service
 NU : University of Nebraska
 UNK : University of Nebraska at Kearney
 UNL : University of Nebraska–Lincoln
 UNMC : University of Nebraska Medical Center
 UNO : University of Nebraska at Omaha

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The four short promotional videos may be viewed at:

Life :: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpS4l_n5lu8&feature=plcp

Dreams :: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rLOELmNF1U&feature=plcp>

Looking Forward :: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5ovxElGudU&feature=plcp>

Leadership :: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb3AxggrwKo&feature=plcp>

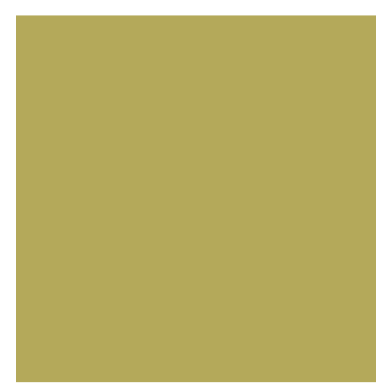
The “Voices of the Rural Future” video may be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zx96hUzbl7w&feature=plcp>

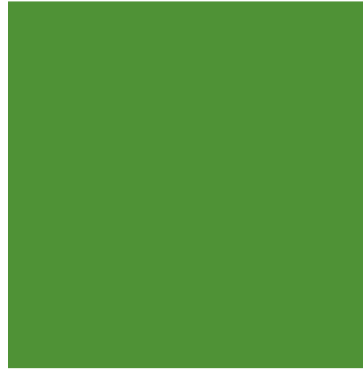


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