



Introduction

The University of Nebraska, particularly through the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) and Nebraska Extension, has a long history and commitment to rural community economic development. This commitment to rural communities became stronger seven years ago with the formation of the Community Vitality Initiative (CVI) within Nebraska Extension.

In 2019, the Vice Chancellor of IANR challenged all the Institute’s rural community resources to explore how we could deepen our commitment, better articulate with how we work with rural communities and expand our impact. This paper provides a preliminary conceptual framework.

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Part 1 - Imperative and Opportunity for Greater Impact

Challenged Rural Communities. Rural America represents a diverse collection of regions with their own assets, culture, challenges and opportunities. Most of rural America is experiencing stress, as chronicled in both policy papers and major media stories. The exceptions are those rural areas that are urbanizing due to micropolitan and metropolitan growth and/or high natural resource amenity areas. Stressed rural regions manifest their challenges in unique ways:

- South and Delta – Chronic multi-generational poverty.
- Industrial Northeast and Midwest – Chronic unemployment and under-employment.
- Great Plains and Rocky Mountain West – Chronic and severe depopulation.

In rural Nebraska, chronic and severe depopulation is our greatest challenge, threatening the very viability of rural communities and regions. With severe depopulation, main streets, health care, education and opportunities for development are eroded as consumers and workforce decline. In most rural counties in Nebraska, peak populations were in 1920 and 1930. Larger communities like Scottsbluff, McCook, Norfolk and Beatrice are now facing population decline as their regions have emptied out. Even metro areas like Omaha and Lincoln see workforce gaps as the rural to urban pipeline is drying up

The following U.S. Census data highlights our population challenge:

Figure 1 – Non-Metropolitan Nebraska Population Change

<i>Census Year</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>% of State Population</i>
1970	710,444	48%
2000	690,585	40%
2017	666,846	35%

Between 2000 and 2017, non-metro (rural) lost nearly 24,000 residents or declined by 3.56%. Conversely, metropolitan Nebraska grew by 229,995 residents between 2000 and 2017 or 18%.

Nebraska's Thriving Index

The University of Nebraska's Rural Futures Institute (RFI) recently released the new [2019 Thriving Index](#). This index, sponsored by RFI in collaboration with the UNL Bureau of Business Research and Nebraska Extension's Community Vitality Initiative, provides important insights and benchmarks to measure and track regional socio-economic performance. This tool is an important commitment and resource for rural community prosperity. It also provides a model that can be replicated by local counties and communities.

Prosperity Opportunity. Every community has the primary responsibility for its own development. No rural community is entitled to a future and no rural community should decline if it is willing to commit and invest smartly in its own future. Outside resources like the University of Nebraska cannot produce rural community prosperity. But we can become a more predictable, robust, valuable and impactful partner with rural communities as they pursue their futures.

A Proven Path Forward. Across Nebraska and throughout the United States, the pathway to rural community prosperity can be found in rural communities demonstrating success. Many rural communities in Nebraska are doing remarkably well and from these communities we can abstract keys to success. The University of Nebraska's opportunity to bring value to rural community development is rooted in three key roles:

1. Capture the keys to success in thriving rural communities.
2. Share these lessons with other communities.
3. Develop resources that build upon these lessons.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in Kansas City is a national and international leader in entrepreneur-led development. The Foundation is focusing on its core four-state region of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Iowa. The Foundation has been looking for innovative and successful rural communities, and it believes one is found in Nebraska with Ord and Valley County. Ord is not alone, as there are other innovative and successful rural communities that can help us find our path to greater prosperity. But the Ord story is compelling and offers lessons for other rural communities.

Solutions to Rural Community Prosperity

The solutions to rural community prosperity can be found in communities like Ord and the greater Valley County region. This community has made a deep and sustained commitment to its future. Rising from the depression caused by the 1980s farm crisis, this community is on a path to vitality as illustrated by the following progress indicators:

- 56% increase in adjusted household earnings (2000-2016)
- Population stabilization
- 54% increase in 30- to 34-year-olds (2000-2010)
- 48% increase in sales taxes
- 36% increase in K-12 school class enrollment

Part 2 - Vice Chancellor's Rural Community Prosperity Charge

The following charge was provided by Vice President/Vice Chancellor Mike Boehm to the Rural Prosperity Working Group at its kickoff meeting in June:

Charge to the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group:

The goal of the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group is to create a comprehensive strategic framework – a scaffold -- for an innovative, robust and integrated approach to rural community vitality, prosperity and resilience. This framework should reinforce the role of the University of Nebraska as a key resource with core assets to help rural communities position themselves for long-term economic prosperity.

The charge to the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group includes, but is not limited, to:

- Conducting a thorough review of successful approaches to rural community prosperity as reflected in best practices in Nebraska and elsewhere.
- Engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders both within and external to NU to develop a comprehensive view of possibilities and options to move forward with a vibrant, strategic approach to rural community prosperity.
- Exploring how the visions of the Rural Futures Institute, Nebraska Extension, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication, Department of Agricultural Economics and other IANR and UNL resources may be integrated into a more strategic rural community economic development focus.
- Considering how NU System-wide resources may be most productively engaged.
- Fully considering organization, staff, space and funding needed to fulfill this enhanced mission.

The framework, including three to five 'big ideas' and a cogent recommendation for how best to structure rural development assets that fall within the scope of the NU Vice President and IANR Vice Chancellor's remit, should be submitted to VP/VC Boehm by November 15, 2019.

Members of the Rural Community Prosperity Working Group

- Chuck Hibberd, dean and director, Nebraska Extension and Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources Leadership Team
- Mark Balschweid, UNL Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication and Rural Futures Institute
- Theresa Klein, Rural Futures Institute
- Don Macke, Community Vitality Initiative – chair of the working group
- Amy Struthers, UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communication
- Larry Van Tassell, UNL Department of Agricultural Economics
- Milan Wall, Heartland Center for Leadership Development
- Kim Wilson, UNL with Nebraska Extension Community Vitality Initiative Appointment

- *Connie Hancock, Nebraska Extension Emeritus, Community Vitality Initiative providing support.*

Part 3 – IANR Commitment to Rural Communities

The Rural Community Prosperity (RCP) Innovation Hub represents a renewed IANR commitment to rural community economic development:

Deeper Commitment – Better Articulation – Stronger Accountability

The future of all 500-plus rural communities in Nebraska primarily rests with the leaders and residents of each of these communities. However, this initiative is committed to becoming a more impactful partner with rural communities with the following vision for how we can contribute to a more prosperous rural community future:

Rural Community Prosperity is committed to building the capacity of rural communities to achieve sustainable economic vitality. We seek to demonstrate the potential for desired transformative change through deeper relationships with our partner rural communities across Nebraska. These model communities will inspire and motivate all rural communities that are willing to make serious commitments to achieve greater prosperity.

Current Inventory of Relevant Assets. Based on current IANR staffing and resource asset mapping, the following personnel could be aggregated into the new RCP hub:

- Estimated Total RCP Team Size – 45-55 Team Members
- 30-35 Direct Reports to the RCP ED (most, but not all, are full-time)
- Up to 10-15 Co-Reports to the RCP ED

These numbers include both existing staff and potential new hires.

Proposed Strategic Partnerships. The following strategic partnerships have been curated:

1. Department of Agricultural Economics
2. Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication
3. Nebraska Business Development Center
4. Nebraska Community Foundation
5. UNL’s Bureau of Business Research
6. UNO’s Center for Public Affairs Research (e.g., State Demographer)
7. Others

University Innovation Connectors. There are multiple existing and emerging hot beds of University innovation. This initiative aspires to create “bridges” between University innovation and rural communities and entrepreneurs. Targeted opportunities include: Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program – www.engler.unl.edu; Raikes School of Computer Science and Management – www.raikes.unl.edu; Johnny Carson Center for Emerging Arts – www.arts.unl.edu; Nebraska Innovation Studio and its “maker spaces” initiative – www.innovationstudio.unl.edu; Nebraska Food Processing Center – www.fpc.unl.edu; and Industrial Agricultural Products Center – www.agproducts.unl.edu.

Other potential “hot beds of innovation” are located at UNK, UNO, the Med Center and Curtis.

Community Prosperity Framework. There is growing agreement that this initiative will embrace and employ the **Rural Community Prosperity** development framework to guide our work with rural communities.

Figure 2 - Rural Community Prosperity Framework - The Five Essential Missions

<p>2 – Economy</p> <p>Diversification through Entrepreneurship</p> <p><i>All the relevant economic development resources would be clustered into this mission area including, for example, Nebraska Entrepreneurship Initiative with both SourceLink and eCommunities, Nebraska Food Systems, the Coop Center and Latino Business.</i></p>	<p>3 - Place</p> <p>Quality of Life Placemaking - Community Building</p> <p><i>This is the one mission area where significant development is needed. Exploratory work is underway to potentially partner with Community Environment to enhance our capacity in community building and placemaking.</i></p>
<p>1 – Field Team</p> <p>Building on CVI’s Accountability Regions Team – Up to 12 Field Staff 50% - Community Outreach - 30% - Resource Provider - 20% - Local Engagement</p>	
<p>4 – People</p> <p>Demographic Health - Diversity People Attraction, Retention & Development</p> <p><i>All the relevant people development resources would be clustered into this mission area including, for example, Marketing HomeTown America, ECAP and SET.</i></p>	<p>5 - Community Capacity Building</p> <p>Possibly Branded as the Heartland Center for Leadership Development</p> <p>Leadership Development Organization Development Community Capacity Building Visioning – Strategic Planning</p>

Other Operational Mission Areas

<p>Community Analytics</p> <p>Rural Poll RFI’s Thriving Index Community Research</p>	<p>Community Engagement</p> <p>CE Networker Students – Faculty – Staff Building on RFI’s Fellows</p>	<p>Communications</p> <p>Communications Story Capture Impact Capture</p>
<p>Nebraska SourceLink</p> <p><i>Partnerships between the Small Business Development Center, Nebraska Extension, RFI and others both within and external to the University are developing Nebraska SourceLink with U.S. SourceLink to create web-based access to available University and non-University resources for community economic development.</i></p>		

Part 4 - Connecting with Our Customers

RCP is committed to bringing all possible University resources to support transforming rural community economic development in Nebraska. However, like any resource, RCP must balance its capacity to help with community expectations. We are recommending moving from the current “push” marketing approach to a more strategic “pull” marketing approach.

Push Marketing Approach. *Under a push marketing approach, a resource like Marketing HomeTown America (MHA) is developed, field tested then offered statewide to communities. In other words, we are “pushing” this resource out into the market. This approach works well if we have scalable capacity to respond to all market demand. Additionally, with a push approach, significant time is spent educating communities about the resource and determining if it fits.*

Pull Marketing Approach. *A “pull marketing approach” can be more strategic and better able to balance demand with capacity. For example, if we have a five-person MHA team capable of providing three to five MHAs every 18 months, then we want to find the communities where this resource has the potential for real impact. By pull, we mean we will listen, identify matches and invite communities to work with us.*

Using our Field Network

In addition to our 12 field educators (formerly CVI accountability region staffing) we will have Engagement Zone Coordinators and the entire Extension/IANR field network. By focusing our field team to actively work with our partners to identify and curate community needs and opportunities we have the ability to target potential communities where a resource like MHA is an optimal fit, thereby allowing us to balance demand with capacity and optimize our engagement and impact.

Real Time Resource Networking and Deep Community Engagement. We are proposing that RCP provide both real time resource networking assistance while focusing much of our capacity on deeper community engagements. If our vision is transformative, deeper engagements are essential. Let’s illustrate the difference between these two types of assistance:

Real Time Resource Networking. *As RCP’s field staff are out in communities, they will identify point in time assistance needs and opportunities. For example, a community like Mullen, Nebraska may hope to improve the attractiveness of town entry points and the main drag along Highway 2. Our field educator for Mullen would network Mullen to a Community Placemaking Resource that could advise on entryway design and the right kind of plantings.*

Deep Community Engagement. *By deeper community engagement, we will work with a smaller portfolio of communities across Nebraska to help these communities envision and sustain transformative change. These communities can in turn become models, through field days, motivation and education for other communities. An example might be Entrepreneurial Communities, with 18 to 36 months of more intensive community coaching and assistance to help a community develop an impactful entrepreneurial ecosystem and sustained strategy.*