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Enhancing the Rural South's Quality of Life: Leveraging Development through Educational Institutions

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If there is a way to summarize what rural sociologists do, then it is working to improve the quality of life for and with people in the South. This work encompasses efforts to discover knowledge and teach others, both on- and off-campus, about it. Through applied research we believe that we can understand how the social world works in new and meaningful ways. We also believe that this knowledge must be shared with and used by others in order to complete our mission. The latter task has been the most difficult in my experience, especially in places beyond the campus community. This is because leaders in rural communities and policy wonks in state capitals use a decision-making process in which research information is only one of many considerations.

With the challenges associated with getting others to consider and use information provided by our discipline in mind, I will develop an argument for enhancing the rural South's quality of life through an emphasis on educational institutions. Among rural institutions, education is perhaps the most neglected as a focus for research projects, formal courses, and extension programs by our

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discipline.[1] Here, I focus on the role of education, specifically pub-
lic education, in leveraging local development programs that are
aimed at improving residents' quality of life. I do this because there
is good reason to believe that people who are prepared for produc-
tive careers and, more importantly, for productive public work, can
become new partners for creating sustainable communities and this
is, I believe, a cornerstone for improving the quality of life for
southerners.

      To encourage greater interest in work on rural education, I offer
supporting arguments in four parts. First, I address the meaning of a
"high" quality of life and compare conditions in the South with this
standard. Second, I compare alternative strategies for improving
conditions in the South and, based on this analysis, advocate a par-
ticipatory process that is created by programs focusing on educa-
tional institutions. Third, I describe what needs to be done to im-
prove educational institutions, especially public schools, in the rural
South. And finally, I review the appropriateness of this initiative as
the critical mission for rural sociologists in the South and recom-
mend actions for individuals and our professional association to
implement.

Quality of Life

Achieving a high quality of life is a goal that is universally sup-
ported but not well-articulated. A common approach to describe the
quality of life in the rural South is through the use of social indica-
tors. Historically, social indicators have focused on objective data
from a variety of secondary data sources. These data have included
measures which focus on employment, income, housing, health,
crime and safety, transportation, recreation, environment, and com-
munity services. Once a set of indicators has been selected, cross-
sectional comparisons or trends over time are usually used to estab-
lish the quality of life for a locality. Sophisticated weighting
schemes are sometimes used to create an index score. Money

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[1]Not withstanding Cooperative Extension's 4-H youth development pro-
grams which work extensively with schools and adult leadership develop-
ment programs, little effort has been directed at educational institutions,
per se, over the last 50 years in terms of resources expended, numbers
enrolled, or outcomes realized.

Magazine's "best places to live" epitomizes this approach but because of their sensitivity to choices about the relative weight of each indicator, they often generate considerable controversy.

The use of social indicators to measure quality of life and the resulting controversy over the "best place to live" begs the question of what constitutes a high quality of life. Most people would agree that living in a community with a strong local economy and well-paying jobs, good schools, low taxes, abundant recreation and cultural opportunities, low crime, congestion-free streets, available and affordable health care, and an unpolluted environment contribute to the "good life" (see Giovagnoli 1997). But determining the quality of life is more problematic than simply selecting from a seemingly inexhaustible list of measures. First, low rates for crime indicators or high rates for income measures do not necessarily mean that people enjoy a high quality of life. One approach has been to incorporate subjective assessments of the quality of life, which focus on questions about satisfaction with the level of services or the effectiveness of goods and services (Kominski and Short 1996; Cornwell 1999). Second, sustainability of excellence has not been central to measuring quality of life. Indicators that incorporate trends as well as cross-sectional comparisons can provide a more comprehensive assessment. Third, the distributional aspects of social indicators are seldom considered, which means that life can be quite "good" for most people and very "bad" for others in the same locality. I think, for example, that the 23 percent of Alachua County's (FL) families living in poverty would disagree with Money Magazine's rating of Gainesville as the best place to live in 1995.[2] Fourth, and most importantly in my opinion, contributions of the "community" to local quality of life need to be considered. I will elaborate on this point below.

Community, as defined by Kaufman (1959:9), involves collective action such that people "should not only be able to but frequently do act together in the common concerns of life." From this perspective, the processes of community action are the core of community (Wilkinson 1991). Thus, a vibrant community is characterized by its activeness and this contributes to quality of life in several ways. First, individuals can realize improved living through

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[2]The county poverty rate is from Census 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2003).

engagement in community affairs because their activities help residents meet sustenance needs (e.g., adequate housing, full-time year-round employment, abundant and safe food, etc.).   Second, community involvement can enhance self-actualization.   Self-actualization occurs when positive contributions are made to community affairs because the self "arises, has meaning, persists, and changes in social interaction" (Wilkinson 1991:69).

Involvement in community affairs allows individuals to realize both instrumental and expressive human needs which are fundamental to a high quality of life. In other words, community serves as both a means for achieving well-being and as an end in the realization of well-being (Wilkinson 1979).[3] This is as true today as in 1909 when the Country Life Commission reported to President Theodore Roosevelt that "the development of community effort and social resources" was critical to realizing a satisfying life in the countryside (1909:45).   Vibrant communities also contribute to quality of life by their residents' capacity to respond more effectively to natural disasters and changing conditions in national or global society, as well as initiating action to improve local conditions (Luloff and Bridger 2003).

Conditions in the South

Because space is limited, I focus on three indicators to illustrate conditions in the rural South: poverty rates, adults with a high school diploma, and voting participation. I chose poverty because this income measure is intimately tied to many other aspects of life, including food security, health status, housing conditions, and educational achievement, and for the South, it presents a disturbing situation. Of the 457 U.S. nonmetropolitan counties with 20 percent or more of their residents living in poverty in 1999, most were concentrated in Appalachia, the Black Belt, and the Mississippi Delta (Figure 1). Not only are the majority of high poverty counties located in the South but many of these counties have had consistently high poverty rates for forty years (Economic Research Service, USDA 2003).

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[3]This view is echoed by Harry Boyte's (2003) discussion of the role of civic engagement in an individual's sense of purpose and satisfaction with life.

Figure 1. High Poverty (20% or higher) in Nonmetropolitan America, 1999.
Source: Author generated using data from 2000 Census of Population.

Metro
Nonmetro
High Poverty Nonmetro
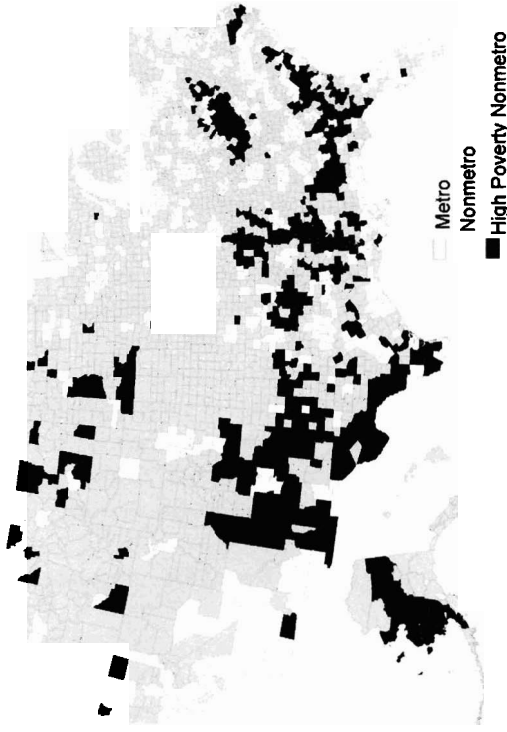
Next, I chose a measure of educational attainment -- the percent of the population (age 25 and older) who have obtained a diploma or GED (high school equivalency diploma) because education is associated with employment opportunities and civic participation. As shown in Figure 2, many of the counties with low proportion of adults attaining a high school education are located in the rural South.

Turning to voter participation, I chose this indicator because it is a basic measure of civic engagement among the adult population and it reflects an ability to influence public policy enacted by elected representatives. Political participation also is associated with civic participation (National Center for Education Statistics 1997; Putnam 2000).[4] Robert Putnam (2000:35) reports that voters are more likely to give to charity, serve on juries, attend school board meetings, participate in public demonstrations, and cooperate with fellow citizens on community affairs. Low levels of voting participation are likely to reflect disaffection with the community or acquiescence to the agenda of powerful elites (Luloff and Swanson 1995; Gaventa 1980). Not surprisingly, many of the areas characterized by persistently high poverty rates and low high school graduation rates also exhibit lower rates of voter participation (Figure 3). These data suggest that the economic and social dimensions of quality of life for many counties in the rural South lag behind those of other counties in the region and across the nation.[5]

Strategies for Rural Development

While few would argue with the need to reduce poverty or increase voter participation, there are differing opinions about the best strategy for achieving these goals and, presumably, in the quality of life for the rural South. Some policymakers have advocated a private sector, market-based approach to addressing rural development needs, while others proposed national and state-level government programs. Private sector development efforts, however, have a

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[4]Civic participation includes membership in a local organization, at least monthly attendance at a religious service, and "on-going" community service.
[5]Putnam (2000) argues that inequality and political inactiveness are the legacy of 200 years of plantation slavery and Jim Crow politics.

Figure 2. High School Graduation (or equivalent) Rates in Nonmetropolitan America, 2000. Source: Author generated using data from 2000 Census of Population.

Metro

Over 68.0% (highest 3 quintiles)
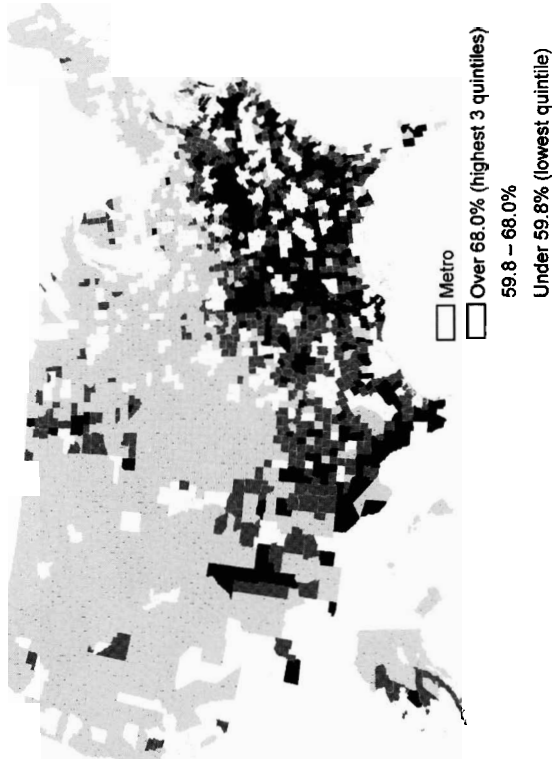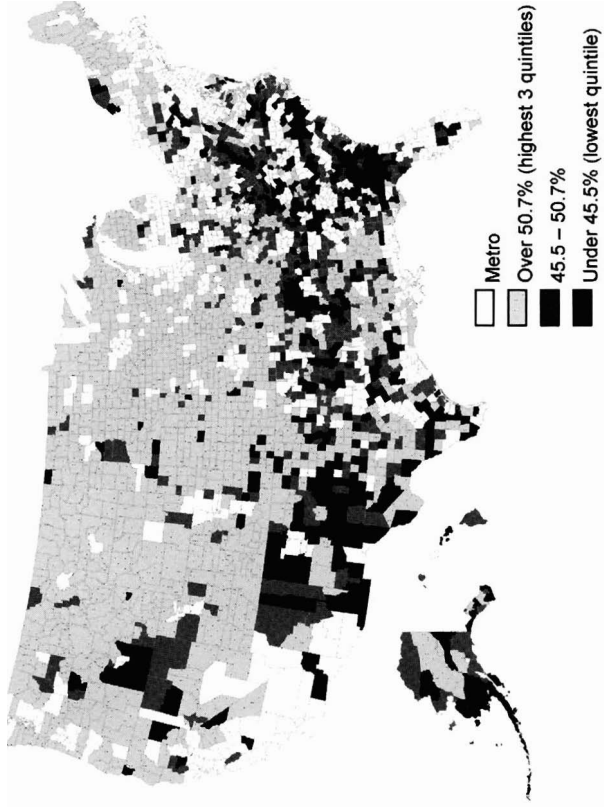
59.8 – 68.0%

Under 59.8% (lowest quintile)

Figure 3. Voting Participation Rates in Nonmetropolitan America, 2000.
Source: Author generated using data from Lublin and Voss 2001.

Metro

Over 50.7% (highest 3 quintiles)

45.5 – 50.7%

Under 45.5% (lowest quintile)

legacy of enriching the elite (usually external owners), exploiting the local populace, and degrading the environment (Swanson 2001). There are few stories of businesses putting people first when times got tough and too many of workers arriving at a locked gate, only to be given an unemployment notice. While multi-national corporations make an easy target for criticism, the businesses which comprise the local "growth machine" have often performed no better -- that is, population growth has not led to an improved quality of life for the community as a whole (Flora, Flora and Fey 2004).[6] In sum, businesses, whether multi-community or multi-national, usually place owners' interests first, management's second, workers' third and communities' last.

The legacy of public sector rural development programs is no better. Since 1930, federal rural development policies have been largely equated with agricultural development and resource extraction, though interest and resources for rural development within the USDA have increased some in recent decades (Swanson 2001; Wilkinson 1986). Since 1980, responsibility for many federal programs has been shifted to state and local governments (Swanson 2001). Furthermore, land grant institutions have maintained historic patterns of neglect. State Agricultural Experiment Stations' research agenda and associated resources have been largely unconnected with Cooperative Extension's rural development programs (albeit these are small scale). In short, federal and state rural development efforts have been either mis-directed or underfunded and poorly coordinated.

Unfortunately, the persistence of poverty in the South shows a history of failure by both market- and government-sector programs. This led one policy group (Study on Persistent Poverty in the South Project Team 2002:13) to conclude, "While numerous valiant attempts have been made to 'lift up' the region, they have been largely ineffective in breaking the cycle of persistent poverty. New innovative investments, building on the varied assets of the regions, are imperative." The need for new investments is also driven by the rapid rise of information technologies in public and private life.

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[6]Growth machine businesses include real estate agencies, land developers, bankers, builders and contractors, construction suppliers, and related organizations who benefit from population growth.

This presents enormous challenges for people living in many areas of the rural South.

Building Participatory Rural Development

Historically, problem definition and solution selection are driven by external elites. These strategies have some advantages, such as being able to act quickly, but a key disadvantage is that local people have limited psychological investment and their capacity to sustain development efforts is perceived to be limited. To build a sustainable commitment, local people need to be involved early and often in development programs. This includes working on boards of state and regional rural development organizations and collaborating with grass-roots organizations that are already working with residents to implement local projects and programs (Southern Food Systems Educational Consortium [SOFSEC] 2003).

If efforts to engage local populations in the region are to be successful, then a renewed focus on educational institutions is needed. This is because education produces human capital which serves as the base for a dynamic local economy and vibrant community life (Beaulieu and Israel 1997; National Center for Education Statistics 1997).[7] Often overlooked in the discussion of education's role is how it can also contribute to developing community agency, which refers to a local population's capability for collective action (Luloff and Bridger 2003). Moreover, I believe that people must learn about how their community works, develop skill in making contributions to community projects and increase their sense of empowerment.[8] Martin and Wilkinson (1985), for example, provide evidence that leadership education programs can increase

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[7]Rural development strategists have articulated the strengths and weaknesses of efforts to strengthen human capital in rural areas. The central critique has been that improving educational achievement and enhancing skills, on the one hand, leads to out-migration of a community's best and brightest individuals (Lichter, McLaughlin and Corwell 1995; Nord and Cromartie 2000) and, on the other, college preparation classes in schools and technical training programs are often ill-matched with regard to available job opportunities (Ilvento 1990).

[8]Luloff (1990), Hobbs (1989), Putnam (2000) and SOFSEC (2003) make similar arguments.

participation in community affairs for adults who have not been actively involved before.

Colleagues who are involved in community development have used different procedures to create change at the local level, with some processes involving the local population more than others (Christenson and Robinson 1989). The self-help process can work well in places with capable leaders, inclusive decision-making, and linkages to outside resources while a conflict process is needed in situations where elites control the agenda and public discourse, stifle participation, and limit access to resources (Flora et al. 2004). The technical assistance approach involves an outside agent who often works within the existing community structure without upsetting the power structure (i.e., this approach often maintains the status quo). In recent years, some technical assistance programs have emerged which emphasize inclusion through the use of dialogues, community-wide conversations, and other dispute-resolution strategies (see Hustedde 1996; Ilvento 1996). Irrespective of the process, community developers must be "on tap, not on top" (Boyte 2001) if local people are to sustain gains made in expanding community agency.

To this point, I have advocated a science-based solution to the "problem" of education in the rural South. I concur with Larry Busch (1999) that this approach can be mis-applied in the same way that state-sponsored and market-based strategies often are — that is, programs are often imposed on a population without their input, consent, and participation. Scientism, as Busch argues, falls short when problems are identified and programs implemented without the consulting people who pay the costs or reap the benefits. Similarly, Lacy (2000) notes that science and technology can involve a continuum of participatory processes, ranging from advisory groups for broadly-stated research agendas to citizen driven, designed, conducted, and evaluated research projects. But as Busch (1999) and Lacy (2000) point out, the trend toward science-, state-, or market-based policies is increasingly undemocratic. With the increasing dependence on this form of policy-setting process, it is no surprise that we have seen social inequality expand in recent decades.

Busch (1999) advocates the development of "networks of democracy" for the workplace, schools and universities, government, civic and social organizations, churches, synagogues and mosques, the media, and families. These organizations, termed intermediate institutions by Boyte (2003), provide an important arena for people

to learn about and develop skills in collective action. Such net-works, Busch argues, also spread the weight of moral responsibility from the individual to a larger (but still manageable) group. Creating networks of democracy is easier said than done since many of these organizations have large entrenched elites with little interest in sharing power and becoming more democratic.

Creating more democratic institutions, in the ideal case sustain-able, capable communities, requires an on-going commitment of people who see the importance and value of a commonwealth. Harry Boyte (2003) stresses the notion of public work – efforts to address issues of common concern as the central component of citi-zenship. According to Boyte, citizenship historically was "not high-minded, virtuous, and leisure-time activity of gentlemen…it was the down to earth labors of ordinary people who undertook projects of public benefit and who showed the nation what they could do." For example, public work with the schools can (and should) include parents, students, and other community members in addition to edu-cational professionals. When the former are put down as amateurs, treated as dependents, or labeled a "customer" instead of being part-ners, Boyte argues that educational processes and outcomes are negatively impacted. Public work connotes a greater value to the contributions of people, whatever their station in life. Moreover, as Putnam (2000:346) observes, engagement in community affairs matters because "citizens in civic communities expect better gov-ernment, and (in part through their own efforts) they get it."

While caution about overstating the impact of participatory ini-tiatives in the increasingly vertical, multi-national corporate econ-omy is needed, in my view, there is ample evidence to support the idea that the actions of individuals and groups matter. Saul Alinsky's (1971) work showed how organizing dis-empowered peo-ple can bring significant change to local conditions.[9] Likewise, case studies of American communities are filled with stories of leaders who organized local improvement projects or resisted actions by external agents which would adversely impact the community

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[9]Though individuals often lacked the power to make changes, Alinsky showed that the assembly of a group of individuals could wield consider-able influence because the aggregate could mount challenges on their terms rather than on those of targeted elites.

(Adams 1969; Flora et al. 2004; Israel and Beaulieu 1990; Solheim, Faupel and Bailey 1997).

The success of local groups also must be tempered with the realization that doing things must include big things (that is, at the regional, state or national levels) as well as little (local) acts. That is, planting native trees in a town's watershed is an important step for a local group, but without moving state and national policies affecting global warming, for example, the giant steps for mankind are missed. This suggests that multi-community and regional collaborations need to be developed to address issues that affect adjacent localities and those with common interests but situated miles apart. This strategy can be successful when collaboration among diverse people -- an increasingly common condition in modern society, is created.

Improving Educational Institutions and Outcomes

If one accepts the notion that local people should decide what programs to implement and how to do so, then educational institutions[10] must play a central role in preparing people for participation in this process. This is because schools have the primary responsibility, after the family, for the socialization process (Ilvento 1990; Warren 1978; Wilkinson 1991). More importantly, there is clear evidence that civic participation and leadership is more common among persons who have more formal education than for those with less (National Center for Education Statistics 1997; O'Brien et al. 1991; Putnam 2000).

Current policy and public debate have focused mainly on education as a means of preparing people for jobs — hence the argument over whether Johnny and Juanita can add, read and write. This has led to a reliance on standardized test scores, as mandated as part of the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (U.S. Department of Education 2002), to measure individual progress and demonstrate school performance. There is little question that testing is profoundly impacting education practice. Relatively little is said, however, about whether Johnny and Juanita can vote, serve in public office, or carry out community-wide projects. If a democratic society is to be a

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[10]Educational institutions refers to K-12 schools, community colleges, and 4-year universities. These also include both public and private institutions.

reality, then the foundation rests on our educational institutions which help to develop well-rounded, thoughtful citizens. Such citizens will be more (rather than less) engaged in political discourse that is conducted in a civil, fair, and deliberative manner (Lacy 2000).

Thus, the focus of educational institutions must be two-fold: first, to build skills for productive careers in the local economy and, second, to build skills for productive public work. The former is needed because good jobs and profitable businesses require educated workers and astute entrepreneurs (see Flora et al. 2004). Productivity in public work requires additional skills in communicating and organizing people with different backgrounds and experiences and who share the commonality of living in the same town or city. This builds capacity for development *of* the community (Luloff and Bridger 2003; Wilkinson 1991).

Not withstanding out-migration patterns of well-educated persons from rural areas, increasing human capital is important to the local economy. For individuals, the higher the level of education attained, the greater the likelihood of obtaining a job in the primary tier labor market (a full-time, well-paying job with benefits, see Beaulieu and Barfield 2000). Increased educational attainment (aggregated at the county level) also is associated with higher per capita income growth, which might be induced by enhanced entrepreneurial activity and labor productivity, as well as the attraction of new businesses that need a higher skilled labor force (Henry, Barkley and Li 2003). Though rural America has nearly matched the rate for high school completion among adults (25 years of age or older) in urban areas, the gap remains for college attendance and completion (Beaulieu, Israel and Wimberly 2003). Educational attainment for nonmetro African Americans and Hispanics also continues to lag substantially behind both whites and metro minorities. These facts are symptomatic of the challenges faced by educational institutions and the communities where they are located. Public education in the South, in particular, has a legacy of limited funding at the local level (Ilvento 1990), which probably reflects the historic cost of dual school systems -- private academies for whites and public schools for Blacks.

With the rapid rise of information technologies in the "new economy," the structural deficiencies of rural communities will require sustained commitments and resources to develop necessary

and sufficient skills in adults and children. Adults must be included in order to realize progress in the near term. Children and youth must be included to sustain this over the long run.

Adult education. Adult education provides an immediate impact on local capacity because participants can be recruited that can, upon attainment of the requisite skills, make new contributions to civic affairs. Community education programs, Cooperative Extension programs, community colleges, nonprofit organizations, and private consulting firms provide myriad educational opportunities. This is more the case for formal education and job training. On the other hand, some programs have focused on building skills for civic engagement. For example, North Florida Community College had developed partnerships with local groups, as well as the University of Florida, to implement the Rural North Florida Leadership program to build skills for public work. The need now is for greater coordination among existing programs and expanded outreach to those that have not typically been enrolled in leadership training efforts.

In addition, curricula must focus on building knowledge and skills related to community participation. Given that citizenship and leadership are developmental processes, individuals will need an array of experiences to help move them from specialized contributors to generalized leaders (Israel and Wilkinson 1987). Educational programs are needed for adults who have different levels of knowledge and skill. At the beginner level, people will learn "the basics" on participating and conducting meetings, lobbying skills, and steps for conducting a project (e.g., initiation, organization, decision-making, resource acquisition, and resource mobilization). At an intermediate level, they will learn to organize interest groups or work within an existing group on a project. At the advanced level, they will learn how to engage in multi-organization, community-wide projects within both consensual and conflictual situations (Ilvento 1996).

Though many leadership development curricula cover the first two levels, few get to the third. And this level is critical to building community agency. Citizens' ability to engage in community-wide projects can be enhanced by learning techniques for conducting civic dialogues, organizing community projects in new ways, providing access to all groups, creating ways for more people to lead, and incorporating long-term goals into current activities (Beaulieu

2003; Morse 1998). Enlightened local leaders may not want to wait for external organizations to offer training programs and, instead, organize their own education efforts that focus on the different levels of skill in community affairs. Local schools can provide the facilities and expertise (at least with regard to the beginner level).

Children and youth. The education literature suggests that schools can do many things to enhance educational achievement, but that the latter also reflects what families and communities (Beaulieu et al. 2003; Israel, Beaulieu and Hartless 2001). A large number of family, school and community factors or assets which influence achievement have been identified and as these are increasingly present, students exhibit higher levels of achievement (Scales and Roehlkepartain 2003). Less well understood are the causal mechanisms for these factors. My colleagues and I also have outlined a number of ideas from a social capital perspective for improving educational outcomes in terms of staying in school, excelling in high school, and attending college, but more work is needed to test these recommendations and get local leaders and state policy-makers to consider implementing improvement projects based on this evolving research literature.

In addition to improving achievement for all children, educational curricula also must build the foundation for sustainable development. Schools need to teach students about their community and how it works because effective citizenship requires that people understand their community and its place in the larger society (Boyte 2003; Putnam 2000). Daryl Hobbs (1989) succinctly makes this point in saying, "It strains credibility to believe that rural community development can travel very far on ignorance of the locality and how it works."

A critical dimension of public education in fostering engaged citizenship is the infusion of civic education into the design and use of curricula. Civic education evolved from the community service learning perspective and it involves students in community development projects which help address a local issue while providing experiential education in the workings of community affairs (see Boyte 2003). Community service learning can teach youth how to be an effective actor in policy making or other aspects of community action (Boyte 1991). Empowering youth can be hard to do because relationships between youth and adults must change. Youth must be accepted as active members of a team which decides on and

carries out programs as opposed to simply passive recipients of in-
formation (Kurth-Schai 1988). In addition, it will be important for
schools to develop active partnerships with local businesses,
governmental departments and civic organizations in order to create
an effective community service learning experience.

There are many successful models for civic education programs.
The FFA's Building Our American Communities projects was an
early example (National FFA Organization 1995). More recently,
Janet Ayres and colleagues (1993) developed the *Partners in Com-
munity Leadership: Youth and Adults Working Together for Better
Communities* 4-H curriculum and I worked with Tom Ilvento on
involving youth in community needs assessment projects in Florida
and Kentucky (Israel and Ilvento 1995; Israel, Ilvento and Stringfel-
low 1996). With regard to the latter, the projects' design empha-
sized youths' contributions to multiple activities and building a
community-level perspective, which would serve as a foundation for
future involvement. A new initiative, called Public Achievement"
which was developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship
and others, has been implemented in 60 locations and involved
2,200 youth and 300 coaches (Boyte 2003). Although these pro-
grams provide important experiences for young people, there are
millions of students and thousands of communities across American
who would benefit from such initiatives.

Mission and Roles for Rural Sociologists

Rural sociology has a long tradition of application and advocacy. It
is grounded in addressing the "problem" of rural life and is based, in
part, on the work of the County Life Commission (1909). The
Commission's call for the establishment of extension "to reach
every person on the land ... with both information and inspiration."
Furthermore, the Commission argued that,

> Care must be taken in all the reconstructive work to see that
> local initiative is relied on to the fullest extent, and that fed-
> eral and even state agencies do not perform what might be
> done by the people in the communities. The centralized
> agencies should be stimulative and directive, rather than
> mandatory and formal. Every effort must be made to

develop native resources, not only material things, but also of people. (1909:47)

Though we might use different words today, the ideas in the Commission's report provide the philosophical foundation for nearly 100 years of work by rural advocates. More recently, the Kellogg Commission (2001:16) called for a renewal of the engaged university with its purpose "is not to provide the university's superior expertise to the community but to encourage joint academic-community definitions of problems, solutions, and definitions of success." Partnerships with communities show that our institutions value informed citizenship and espouse civic responsibility among our students, faculty and public partners (see Kellogg Commission 2001). Clearly, this means that rural sociologists labor in a value-laden environment -- one which also recognizes that rurality encompasses structural advantages and disadvantages for individuals' life chances and community development.

With this in mind, one important role for the Southern Rural Sociological Association and its members is to create organizational change, both internally and externally. I continue to believe that the future of our discipline (and land grant institutions where many of us are housed) depends in no small way on our ability to make significant contributions to addressing public problems. Internally, we must develop a focus on education. To this end, I propose to establish an SRSA Task Force on Rural Education which will conduct a meta-analysis of rural education research, assess the status of rural education in the South, and identify community, state, and national policy recommendations. In addition to the task force, SRSA members will be encouraged to increase the study and dialog about educational issues by organizing sessions at meetings, engaging colleagues in discussions, recruiting new members with similar interests, finding new partners for research and application, and creating press releases and policy briefs. For example, some members have worked with the Southern Rural Development Center to publish a number of widely read and influential policy briefs.

Externally, we need to create changes in our institutional structures, including universities, community colleges, and rural development organization to expand or include a rural education focus. Strategies for doing so include securing external funding to leverage internal support, building partnerships with other organizations, and

promoting rural educational issues within academic departments and colleges. These strategies are critical to expanding the knowledge base about educational institutions and their processes, as well as developing outreach programs to transfer new knowledge for improving educational outcomes and engagement in public work.

A second important role is local leadership. I reject the philosophy voiced by Charles Schulz's Charlie Brown who said that "those who can't do, teach." Instead, I believe that we build credibility with others when "we walk the talk." This means that you and I must become engaged with others in our communities to address educational issues by writing letters to the editor and public officials, speaking at public meetings, talking with members of civic organizations, and creating ad hoc groups to take action. Recently, I have shared my research with the local Kiwanis club and spoken at a public meeting about the effects school re-zoning on student achievement. While these were baby steps for me to "walk the talk," they were a start. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to take action in your community.

Concluding Comments

This address began with the assertion that SRSA's mission is to improve the quality of life of people in the rural South. I have explained why vibrant communities are a key element in the quality of life for residents living in the rural South and that much needs to be done to build community agency in many localities. Furthermore, I have presented reasons for increasing emphasis on work involving educational institutions, which in turn improve the human capital of residents for use in the local economy and engagement in public work. I described specific programs for enhancing adults' and youths' assets that are likely to yield short- and long-term improvements in the quality of life, respectively, as residents participate in community projects.

Making these outcomes happen requires a commitment by the SRSA and its members to a renewed vision for the programs and structure of this association. We face challenges to change what we do professionally and personally. If we can walk the talk and help others to do the same, then we will have taken an important step in making the dreams of rural Southerners come true.

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