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ABSTRACT

At the first National Invitational Meeting on Rural Postsecondary Education (also known as the Kansas City Initiative), 28 rural specialists in lifelong learning produced an 8-item Bill of Rights and an 11-item rural postsecondary action agenda. Participants discussed organizational deficiencies in rural adult education, the sense of isolation all felt, and the need to link experiences of adult learners in different parts of the country. The essential message was that the rural lifelong learning movement was coming of age, and that its first responsibility was self-definition. The history of rural adult education, including the Extension Service, was discussed. Participants compared difficulties they faced, including natural constraints of terrain and weather, and also another kind of "weather": poverty, unemployment, despair--the social winds that buffet many small communities. To overcome the consequences of despair, also called "rural fatalism," delegates preferred three kinds of pedagogical medicine: special programming, individual counseling, and community development. The Bill of Rights emphasized the right of all rural students to equal opportunities for lifelong learning, the need for immediate national action, and the diversity of rural people's educational needs, including a need to help plan their educational programs. (MH)

PROCEEDINGS

The National Invitational Meeting on

Rural Postsecondary Education

Sponsored by:
U.S. Department of Education
Fund for the Improvement of
Postsecondary Education
Washington, D.C.

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University for Man
Kansas State University
Manhattan

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FOREWARD

Assumptions are prevalent in defining "rural." Some rural definitions relate to population counts and others to labor market bases and often have little or no relation to one another. A homogeneous definition of rural may never have been simple, but changing times make the issues more complex than ever in terms of rural people and communities. While there are many variations in natural resources and economic bases, isolation and regional differences are two of the strongest common factors to rural living. Can postsecondary education be designed and delivered to relate to the many different needs of rural adults? What does access and quality mean in rural areas where the availability of education dollars is usually appropriated on the basis of population?

The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, FIPSE, has supported and encouraged a broad range of efforts to improve education for adults in rural areas. Over the past few years the FIPSE project directors, with projects focusing on different aspects of rural education, have gathered through ad hoc sessions at the annual project directors' meetings. They shared the positive outcomes of their localized activities and their frustrations at the lack of a national context to consider the differences in delivering education to rural America. The Fund recognized that appropriate and effective local improvements were being made at various places in the country. Concern was acknowledged, however, that there was no specific mechanism for sharing and developing what was being learned in relation to the larger framework of the country.

In the spring of 1981 FIPSE staff had many phone conversations with rural educators to identify the practitioners who represented improved rural models from a variety of institutions and organizations across the country. After much coordination the organizational efforts of Sue Maes and Bill Draves were engaged to design a forum for practitioners to share the experience of their practice, to establish linkages, to address second stage developments, to strategize economic possibilities, to plan for action networking, and to assess emergency problems and practices. At the close of the First National Invitational meeting on Rural Postsecondary Education a blend of tension and enthusiasm was evident with the participants as their group empowerment and focus was realized.

We hope that this conference report will be of interest to many audiences. Local and regional practitioners and planners in particular may find this information useful in setting the groundwork for new collaborations and responses.

Catherine Rolzinski
Program Officer
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The Kansas City Initiative

by Richard J. Margolis

Twenty-eight rural educators, all of them specialists in lifelong learning, may have made history last summer simply by coming together. Certainly their three-day meeting in Kansas City, held June 29 through July 1, was the first of its kind for this generation of professionals, the women and men committed to bringing more educational opportunities to rural Americans.

The Kansas City Initiative was officially known as "The National Invitational Meeting on Rural Postsecondary Education." Sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and organized by the University for Man, a center for community learning at Kansas State University, the conference drew educators from seventeen states and from all manner of rural learning institutions. Those institutions and their programs reflected the many facets of rural adult education today, both in the problems they commonly faced and in the model solutions they had separately devised. (See back cover for a list of participants.)

This report will examine four related aspects of the Kansas City Initiative: (1) the future it envisioned, (2) the past burdens it shouldered, (3) the practical questions it raised and tried to answer, and (4) the basic principles it began to formulate.

The Future: Struggling Towards Alliance

As participants saw it, their discussions in Kansas City signified a critical step forward in the long, seesaw history of rural adult education, a step that could carry them beyond the structures of isolation (that chronic rural complaint) and closer to the blessings of cooperation (that traditional rural strength).

The virtual rural quarantine that delegates sensed and hoped to dispel had, in their opinion, reduced their effectiveness in dealing with several important groups and institutions: with professional and scholarly colleagues, for lack of an association tailored to their needs; with other rural advocates, for lack of a broad rural network; with state legislatures and the U.S. Congress, for lack of a lobby; with the press, for lack of an organized information program; and with the general public, for lack of a means to challenge the widely believed myth of inevitable rural decline.

If the future of rural lifelong learning was to surpass its present, those were the chief organizational deficiencies that had to be addressed.

Many of those present felt oddly separated even from their own constituents, the rural citizens they daily served. True, the educators did clearly identify with their rural clients, especially with the difficulties they all faced. As Janet Gamble, a teacher at the Appalachian Labor School in West Virginia, observed:

> Those of us who teach in rural settings understand that we share certain hardships associated with both traditional and nontraditional education. We are without many of the teaching tools that adult educators in urban areas take for granted.

Yet it seemed to many that identification was mostly a one-way street, that their students, by and large, lacked a national rural consciousness that could make them full partners in the ongoing struggle for educational equity. The perception was bothersome, for it implied that something significant might be missing from the "rural curriculum."

Gamble again: "We must do all we can to link the particular experiences of rural adult learners in one part of the country to those in another."

Likewise, Pam MacBrayne, of the Mid-Coast Adult Learning Cooperative in Rockland, Maine:

> Most rural people are either not aware of what is possible in the area of education or are not aggressive in demanding equal access. [Therefore,] federal and state funding policies often have an anti-rural bias. . .

Those were old rural dilemmas that had the delegates groping for new approaches. In the end they opted for some kind of alliance, searching for a common label, a "hook" on which to drape their mutual aspirations. Some called for "an action network," others for "an information clearinghouse," still others for "a professional institute."

"Rural adults and youth are the product of an educational system that has historically short-changed rural people." — President Johnson's Commission on Rural Life.

Whatever the medium, the essential message remained the same: the rural lifelong learning movement was coming of age, and its first responsibility — the one it confronted in Kansas City — was that of self-definition. Accordingly, the participants endorsed an Action Agenda to address the needs of the rural adult learner and planned a follow-up conference to set this agenda in motion. (See Action Agenda.)

The Past:
Playing 'Catch-Up' in Rural America

If the group ended with the outlines of a long-range agenda in hand, it began it deliberations in a distinctly short-term mood. The feeling was strong and general that rural lifelong learning did not have a moment to lose, that there had already been too much damage done to communities and individuals, too many wasted opportunities, too long a period of "rural lag."

In an opening statement, Dr. Rodney C. Briggs, president of Eastern Oregon State College, precisely voiced the impatient consensus. "Enhancing rural postsecondary education," he said, "cannot just be left to evolve. We must rapidly catch up so that the adult rural learners are not lost forever. It is to this task that we dedicate ourselves."

Catching up quickly was the theme that shaped all debates, the prayer that informed all dialogues, even though — in the words of another participant — "America appears tired of its commitments to the disadvantaged. . .Goals that were esteemed in the 1960s have now lost their luster."

In truth, for generations of rural educators luster had been the scarcest of items. As far back as 1911, President Theodore Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life could single out ignorance as rural America's most pressing problem. Rural people, said the Commission, recognized that "all difficulties resolve themselves in the end into a question of education." Furthermore:

> The people realize that the incubus of ignorance and inertia is so heavy and so widespread as to constitute a national danger, and that it should be removed as rapidly as possible. It will be increasingly necessary for the national and state governments to cooperate to bring about the results that are needed in [rural] education.

There followed in the wake of the Commission's report a series of educational reforms aimed at helping rural citizens, the most important of which was the founding of the federal Extension Service in 1923, the first organized attempt by our national government to "export" learning beyond the city limits. But the effort, welcome as it was, came too late and too parsimoniously to suppress "the incubus of ignorance" in rural America. Its failure was officially confirmed in 1967 by yet another Presidential Commission on rural life, this one appointed by Lyndon B. Johnson. In *The People Left Behind* President Johnson's Commission proclaimed what rural Americans already knew:

> Rural adults and youth are the product of an educational system that has historically short-changed rural people.

So history weighed heavily on the educators who came to Kansas City, as did some familiar current statistics. Although rural residents made up less than one-third of the total U.S. population, they accounted for 42 percent of the functionally illiterate and for 53 percent of the "educationally deprived" (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education). In addition, nearly half of all rural citizens over 24 years of age had not graduated from high school — a figure that prompted several conference participants to question whether they were, in fact, engaged in "postsecondary education."

"Maybe," said one delegate, "we should call ourselves something else. How about 'The Committee for a Second Chance in Rural Education?' "

Practical Questions & Answers:
Facing Up to Rural Weather

The barriers that stood between rural citizens and their "second chance" were perceived by conference delegates to be mainly geopolitical, a familiar rural amalgam of too much distance and not enough power. A delegate from Colorado noted that his college's target territory encompassed 12,000 square miles of "some of the most inaccessible and weather-buffeted high country in the world." Most described similar natural constraints on their "delivery" efforts, but they pointed as well to another kind of "weather": poverty, unemployment, despair — the social winds that buffeted so many small communities.

The "models" or solutions presented were remarkably varied and often inventive. The delegates recognized that many of their programs were costly, and that rural people, though eager for learning, could not bear the entire financial burden. Help would have to come from a metropolitan public prepared to share the benefits of enlightenment. A comment by Myrna Miller, a dean at the Community College of Vermont, seemed to apply across the rural board:

> The level of both skills and intellectual development that rural students possess is frighteningly low. . .Vermont is a poor rural state. Neither the student nor the taxpayer can afford the price required to bring education to the woods. Without it the cycles of ignorance and poverty will continue to grind.

To meet the challenge of geography, some pinned their hopes on telecommunications, which, as one participant commented, "can turn a vast region into a small classroom." With television or radio, said another delegate, "a teacher can cross deserts and skip over mountains without ever leaving his chair."

Others placed their faith less in technology than in social organizing. They relied on outreach and extension programs, on regional learning centers, on schools-without-walls. Several explicitly rejected electronic communications on the grounds that the technique seemed "un-rural." As one critic explained, "Television does away with social intimacy. Face-to-face relationships are still an important part of rural life."

To overcome the consequences of despair (some called it "rural fatalism"), the delegates preferred three kinds of pedagogical medicine: special programming, individual counseling, and community development. These were staples of the educators'

rural practice, often mentioned but not so often assessed. Yet it soon developed in discussions that another implicit set of ideas was being considered between the prescriptive lines. They were best expressed as philosophical tensions: individual needs vs. community needs, vocationalism vs. humanism, service delivery vs. self-government. As we shall see, the participants treated such riddles pragmatically, choosing whatever solution the occasion seemed to call for. In Kansas City, dogma was carefully spurned, and no single doctrine reigned supreme.

Special Programming: "Rural," the delegates insisted, was a word for all season and all contexts. Even within a single region, the educational needs of rural citizens were remarkably varied and sharply differentiated. Roger S. McCannon, director of continuing education at the University of Minnesota, Morris, spoke of "the dispersed population" in his area, which made necessary "a wide variety of special programming." Among the Morris offerings he listed were extension classes, conferences and workshops, a learning center, a school-without-walls, and a number

"Neither the student nor the taxpayer can afford the price required to bring education to the woods." — Myrna Miller, Dean, Community College of Vermont.

of grant-funded projects on such subjects as rural women, older adults, ethnic history and energy alternatives. It was, in short, a characteristically rural bill of fare.

Margery S. Walker, who directs the rural education program at the University of Alaska, made a similar point. "Rural students," she noted, "are extremely diverse in their interests, heritages, educational levels, life styles and economic situations, but they share a common difficulty in securing access to college and university programs suited to their current needs."

Dr. Walker offered three typical examples of rural adults who were in search of special educational programs:

> A mother of three working as an aide in her local school is required to obtain training toward teacher certification.
>
> An airline cargo handler in a small village needs accounting and business courses to maintain his job as the company merges with a larger line and raises the standards for employees.
>
> A 22-year-old high school dropout has settled into a job and wants to start on a college course for which he will receive salary increments.

"These three people," said the Alaskan educator, ". . with commitments to jobs, families or communities, are seeking postsecondary education close to home."

It was generally understood, however, that rural adult education entailed considerably more than career training. For Janet Gamble it included courses "that reflect the vitality of rural culture, a culture that has been drowned out in a mass society." It also included "helping the learner to understand the larger context of his life." For Larry Stanley, president of Southeast Community College in Cumberland, Kentucky, rural lifelong learning ran the gamut "from cake decorating to Shakespeare."

"Some of my friends back home thought a course in cake decorating was frivolous," he said. "But the women who took the course had their own ideas. They proceeded to make money by decorating cakes for weddings and birthdays. They started a whole new cottage industry."

Meeting Individual Needs

Time and again the educators in Kansas City returned to considerations of their students' individual needs. The students' very adulthood — the fact that they brought with them a rich variety of prior loyalties and obligations — seemed to call for more flexibility and attention to the unique situations faced by adults in rural areas. As a delegate remarked, "It's up to the school to bend a little, to adjust its schedule to adult realities."

Teresa Momon, of Miles College in Eutaw, Alabama, offered one of many examples. Miles College students, she said, were primarily Black, rural and poor.

> The majority of our students are working adults with family and home responsibilities. This causes serious problems. . . Individualized instructional and tutoring services are very necessary to permit the student to adapt to the pace of college life and to keep up.

In general, it can be said that most of the participants in Kansas City espoused a traditional American philosophy, which holds that the most effective way to improve society is to improve each member in it, one at a time. On the other hand, delegates were also aware of alternative philosophies and of useful small group educational techniques. Some expressed their concern that too much individualization, expecially complete reliance on television or independent study without the human touch, would lead to a "lonely learner syndrome."

"Our students," said a participant, "are very conscious of their membership in one of several groups. . .Their needs for education are often expressed in the context of how to be a better member of that group and their participation is often motivated by their need for a group affiliation."

Community Development: The delegates' aggregate view on community development ran something like this: Rural people tend to think locally and to act socially. Therefore, the best way to reach them is through local programs that the whole community has a stake in.

"No town or community is too small to support a program of lifelong learning," declared Sue Maes and Bill Draves — both with the University for Man — in a paper prepared for the conference. "We need to integrate learning programs with social and community development."

The Maes-Draves model depicted educators as village enablers helping local citizens to plan and manage their own learning programs. Not all of the delegates endorsed all of that model, but most were sympathetic, even when they themselves managed more traditional "service delivery" systems. Margery S. Walker probably came closest to expressing the group's democratic inclinations when she observed that rural people want "a sense of ownership" in their learning programs:

> Having a say is a political as well as an educational issue. It bespeaks the right to participate in the planning, to contribute to the definition of programs and processes, to take part in the evaluation of the outcomes. Rural residents want to be assured that the educational services offered in their communities respond. . .to their priorities and needs.

Towards a Set of Principles

Although participants in the Kansas City Initiative did not have time to frame a formal statement of purpose (a task they will doubtless tackle at the follow-up conference), they did reflect through much discussion some generally held principles — the beginnings of which could be called a Bill of Rights. . .

Bill of Rights

1. People have a right to the benefits of lifelong learning regardless of age, race, income or place of residence.
2. Rural students are entitled to equity, both in the quality of education offered and in the variety of choices available.
3. Rural education has been short-changed for many generations. Therefore, the time to improve learning opportunities for rural Americans is now.
4. If the development of rural adult education is a national necessity, it is also a *national responsibility.*
5. The financing of rural lifelong learning cannot be borne exclusively by rural citizens; that obligation must be equitably distributed.
6. Rural people's educational needs, no less than those of their metropolitan brethren, are multiple and diverse. No single program, philosophy or technique can possibly satisfy their manifold requirements.
7. The best kind of education is one that the learners have helped to plan, execute and evaluate. Rural people want "a sense of ownership" in their educational programs.
8. Lifelong learning programs can strengthen rural communities, help dispel rural isolation, reduce rural poverty and sustain rural democracy.

Rural Postsecondary Action Agenda

1. Establish a permanent professional alliance that would serve as a Clearinghouse for Adult Rural Education.
2. Advocate an institute for small, rural educational institutions.
3. Undertake a comprehensive national study of rural adults and their educational needs.
4. Design strategies to focus national media on rural educational needs.
5. Undertake "consciousness raising" about rural concerns in local regions.
6. Develop a means of linking with educational telecommunication projects around the country.
7. Establish a steering group to plan for professional development activities among rural postsecondary educators.
8. Stimulate rural postsecondary education publications through professional organizations.
9. Develop rural concerns advocacy in professional associations.
10. Develop contact sources for funding rural programming.
11. Develop ways to disseminate ongoing progress.

The National Invitational Meeting on Rural Postsecondary Education

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The Education Amendments Act of 1972 authorized the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare to improve postsecondary educational opportunities by providing assistance to educational institutions and agencies for a broad range of reforms and innovations.

To implement this authority, the Secretary established the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, a separate organizational unit now within the Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education.

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University for Man (UFM) is a community based center for learning in Manhattan, Kansas. UFM's Outreach Program provides technical assistance to individual communities interested in beginning a free university/community education program in Kansas or the greater Midwest.

During the past seven years, more than sixty programs have been set up in communities as large as Abilene, KS., population 8,000, and as small as Olsburg, Ks., population 170. The programs offer noncredit classes to the general public in which citizens share their ideas, skills and knowledge about themselves.

"The philosophy behind these developments is simple: people in rural areas are often their own best resources." — Rural America.

Every town, no matter how small, has a wealth of untapped human resources within it. Teaching and sharing among neighbors and friends not only promotes learning, but enhances the sense of community in a small town, increases social cohesion, and can lead to projects and community development activities that go beyond classes and group meetings.

The Outreach Program also disseminates the UFM model through existing delivery systems, such as public libraries and Cooperative Extension Services, on a regional basis.

NEXT STEP

This report embodies the beginning of an endeavor by educators from a variety of disciplines to call to national attention the pressing needs of educational delivery services to rural adults. As can be seen in the Action Agenda the task is only beginning. If you or a representative of your organization wish to become part of this process please convey your interest to Sue Maes at the following address.

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