Rewriting the Rural Narrative

Speak softly and carry statistics

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What is our future?

People keep leaving rural America. According to U.S. Census figures from 2010, just 16% of the country’s population lives in rural areas, down from 20% in 2000, and down dramatically from 72% about a hundred years ago. Believe me, there are stories, both of the people who left and those who stayed. In Wisconsin, one small percentage of Americans who still live in the state. There are stories, too, of people who’ve returned, drawn back to the small towns they left for myriad reasons. We want to know those stories, and the story of rural life that they tell.

We became kind of the poster child for the war on poverty, and any time somebody wanted to do a story about poor people, we were the first stop.

Sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas spent two years in a small town in Iowa trying to find out why so many young people are leaving rural America. What they found was that many small towns are playing a role in their own demise, by pushing the best and brightest to leave and under-investing in those who stay.

Rural Populations Continue to Shrink

Is Rural America Struggling? provides an excellent summary of the economic and population issues facing rural America. Key quote:

… rural America’s job growth is stagnant and the population is in decline. In fact, it’s the first time such a population decline has been recorded in the nation’s rural counties.
The slow, agonizing death of the small US town

HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE

The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

When death comes to a small town, the school is usually the last thing to go. A place can lose its bank, its tavern, its grocery store, its shoe shop. But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it.
Deficit Approach

Fixing things that can’t or shouldn’t be fixed
No More Anecdata!

anecdata (noun). *information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true*
1900-1950

- Mechanization of agriculture
- Roads and transportation
- Educational achievement and population loss
- Church closings (Delafield)
1950+

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
  - MN 432 districts in 1990 to 337 in 2010
- Hospitals closings
The rural idyll

“Agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy.”
The Media Idyll Persists

Who are you going to find in a small town when you travel to small towns in morning and afternoon?

SPEAK YOUR PIECE: JUST SAY NO TO ‘POVERTY PORN’

By Aaron Phelps | December 2, 2016 | Print article

When Fox News came calling to do a story about Appalachia, it didn’t take long to figure out what they were really after: examples of doom, gloom, and failure. Nonprofits must shift the focus away from negative stereotypes to show what's working in rural America.
Rural is Changing, not Dying

• Yes, things are changing
• Small towns are microcosms of globalization
  – Many of these changes impact rural and urban areas alike (not distinctly rural)
  – Yet more apparent in rural places
• Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life
• Research base does NOT support notion that if XXXX closes, the town dies
  – In Minnesota only 3 towns have dissolved in past 50 years
Rural Rebound

• Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%
  – Relative percentage living rural decreased

1970

26%

203,211,926
(53.6m rural)

2010

19%

308,745,538
(59.5m rural)
Rural Data

Population figures reduced by formerly rural places now designated as urban (since 1974)

- Iowa 473,312
- Kansas 417,349 rural residents now classified urban
- Minnesota 352,224
- Nebraska 170,855
- North Dakota 181,639
- South Dakota 207,790

Urban areas have grown WIDER, not TALLER
Households Moving Between 1995 and 1999:

- 44% Iowa
- 46% Minnesota
- 47% Nebraska
- 48% South Dakota
- 49% United States
- 50% Kansas
If nobody even moved in or out...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Images" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Images" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Images" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Images" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But in reality people do move…

Age 20-24

Moving out - 4

Moving in + 6

2000

Age 30-34

2010
Rural Recreational County
Core Metropolitan County
Cohort Age 30-34, Percent Change 1990-2000

Percent Change

- Loss
- Gain 0-10%
- Gain 11-25%
- Gain 11-25%
- Gain >25%
Newcomers: Why?

- Simpler pace of life
- Safety and Security
- Low Housing Cost
Newcomers: Who?

- 36% lived there previously
- 68% attain bachelors degree
- 67% household incomes over $50k
- 51% have children in household

- May be leaving their career or underemployed
- Yet, Quality of Life is the trump card
Cohort Lifecycle

Avg. American moves 11.7 times in lifetime
(6 times at age 30)
Choosing Rural

• Brain Gain: migration to rural age 30-49
  – Also 50-64 but not as widespread
  – Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
  – Happening since the 1970s

• Middle of everywhere exercise during breakout session
The New Economic Narrative

- Brick and mortar is less indicative of local economic success
- People-focused (self-employment, 1099)
- Self-employment, multiple-job holding

- **Warm-body Syndrome**
  - Recruitment is more than just the job and work-related benefits, work-life balance
  - Especially in tight labor markets
Rewriting the Rural Narrative: The Demand for Leadership in Rural America
de Tocqueville

- 1831
- **Democracy in America**

- In towns he was amazed at how associations rise up to meet a challenge and then dissipate
To name a few….
Context

- How many people do we need to run our town? (demand)

- How many leaders are available? (supply)

- We have numerous leadership programs currently training leader supply, but are we keeping up with the organization demand?
Leadership Demand

• How do we measure the demand that organizations make upon the resident population?

• In the US, there are 90,052 governmental units
  – These government units include counties, cities, townships, school districts, and “special districts” such as those providing oversight for cemeteries, highways, water/sewer systems, and soil/water conservation areas.

• We also have a vibrant nonprofit sector…

Social Life is Not Dying
Nonprofit Growth: 1995-2010

U.S. Number of Nonprofits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Growth Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995-2000</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2005</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2010</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau
Social Life is Not Dying
Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010

- Kansas gained 7% in population and gained 18% in the number of nonprofits.

- The most rural counties
  - lost 10% of population
  - number of nonprofits increased 11%

National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau
Nonprofit Change: 2000-2010

[Image of a map showing percentage changes across different regions.]
Vibrant Social Life

• Breakout – looking deeper at supply trends and the interaction between supply and demand

• Receive your custom county data profiles
Where We Live and Where We’d Like to Live
by community type

- City: 21%
- Suburb: 30%
- Small town: 23%
- Rural area: 25%

Source: “For Nearly Half of America, Grass is Greener Somewhere Else”. Pew Research Center

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Migration and the Narrative

• Migration patterns open the door to discussing the narrative

• There are varied reasons for people to move to small towns and rural places

• Our “rural” means more and more
Negative Narratives

• Would we allow this negative language to permeate a product or service we were selling?

• Why do we do it?

• Cannot continue to portray rural success as the exception

VANISHING POINT; Amid Dying Towns of Rural Plains, One Makes a Stand
The Rural Choice

These newcomers are:

• Creating groups, building their community
• Diversifying the economy
• Buying/starting businesses, working from home
• Living in a region (no longer a 1-stop-shop)
• More than warm bodies (employee recruitment)
The Rural Choice

The bottom line is people WANT to live and move here for **what you are today and will be tomorrow**, not what may have been!
Brain Gain Landing Page
http://z.umn.edu/braingain/

Symposium Proceedings
http://z.umn.edu/ruralmigration/

Rural Issues and Trends Webinars
http://z.umn.edu/ruralwebinar/