

EDITOR'S NOTE

The following is a report of the July 1994 international conference, *Issues Affecting Rural Communities*, which was held in Townsville, Australia, and hosted by the Rural Education Research and Development Centre (of James Cook University of North Queensland). This report comprises an introduction by David McSwan, a review of central issues by Ted Scott, a summary of emerging themes by Toni Haas, and a culminating Statement of Principle and resolutions. Conference proceedings are available by writing to the Rural Education Research and Development Centre.¹

Theodore Coladarci

Conference Report: *Issues Affecting Rural Communities*

July 10-15, 1994
Townsville, Australia

Introduction

Representatives from the disciplines of health, education, and community and economic development attended an international conference hosted by James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, on July 10-15, 1994. The conference aimed to unite the represented disciplines in a new area of study that would lead to new models for collaborative work on issues in rural communities. It was a unique international occasion for rural people, scholars, professionals, and government agencies working in rural-related areas to come together to share information, concerns, and visions of the future and to develop formal and informal networks. Delegates attended from all the states and territories of Australia and from the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, USA, Fiji, Bangladesh, and New Zealand.

Rural areas in both the developed and developing worlds are receiving more attention (and funding) than ever before. Academic, professional, philanthropic, development projects, and government programs concerned with rural issues are in place in a number of countries, but collaboration among them and across disciplines, cultures, and international boundaries is rare, limiting the results of present efforts and leading to fragmentation.

The conference provided a thematic framework to begin to coalesce discipline-based presentations on rural

issues in the areas of education, health, culture, law and policy, science and technology, social and environmental justice, communications and information equity, women's concerns, sustainability and distance learning. Specifically, the conference explored the possibilities of a relationship between rural education, health, and community development for interdisciplinary, international, and intercultural collaboration.

*Dr. David McSwan,
James Cook University, Australia*

Review of Issues

The major objectives of the conference were (a) identification of major issues in health, education, and community development; (b) exploration of cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary commonalities of these issues; and (c) application of an international and interdisciplinary perspective to the mapping and remediation of the issues identified.

The opening paper by Jonathan Sher, though focussed specifically on Australia, clearly demonstrated the universality of key issues identified at the conference. Sher began by noting the lack of an agreed upon definition of *rural*—an observation supported in other studies reported at the conference. The term *rural* was applied to small underprivileged communities in North America, isolated farmers or crofters in North West Scotland, highland com-

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munities in Gippsland in Victoria, an isolated Aboriginal community in South Australia, and to the town of Broken Hill in Western New South Wales. A closer look at the community case studies reported suggests that at least four dimensions are regularly considered when classifying a community as rural: size, geographical location, culture, and access to the services and amenities taken for granted in urban communities. To some extent, definitions of "rural" by governments, researchers, residents, and others are, like the communities themselves idiosyncratic, a factor that must be taken into account when attempting to transfer development or service strategies from one rural setting to another.

All presenters emphasised the need to rescue or revitalise rural communities in decline, which Charlie Alfero referred to as downward socioeconomic spiralling. Echoes of this downward spiralling were heard through many papers, the downward trend manifested in such critical areas as dropping farm and family incomes; uneven rewards for labour; scaling down or closing of rural support industries (e.g., closing of a cannery in a fruit growing area); reduction in community revenue, which usually supports community employment; withdrawal of government and private services (e.g., closing of a school, shutting down a bank, reducing medical services); reduced employment opportunities, particularly for young people; depopulation; and an ageing population.

Throughout the conference, there was consensus that access to services is a major problem facing rural communities. Historically, in Australia at least, delivery of services through the availability of funding has had a political bias. Dennis Griffith presented a politically bias-free formula, the Service Access Score, which can be adapted to the delivery of almost any service dependent upon funding—health, welfare, education—and which would seem to have cross-cultural application.

Other presenters and workshops addressed the problems of providing health care and educational services to rural communities. Both groups recognised the problems faced in recruiting staff to live and work in rural areas and of retaining them. They also acknowledged the problem and efficacy of preservice training, induction, and continued inservice training. The papers presented by Thomas Dooland and Anna Nichols on the training of doctors for rural practice and by Col Boylan on the education and training of rural teachers highlighted the common problems faced by these professions. Case studies from America and Australia by Paul Nachtigal and Bernadette Bowie, respectively, highlighted the centrality of the school to small towns, where school closings often devastate the community's economy, identity, and morale.

Much of the conference was devoted to the theory and practice of improving the lot of rural communities. Jonathan Sher specified six priority goals, in the context of Australia,

as the foundations of rural reconstruction: (a) increasing the rural population, (b) ensuring a more equitable share for rural people of the wealth and assets derived from rural industries, (c) diversifying economic activity in rural areas, (d) increasing employment opportunities in rural communities, (e) improving the quality of rural life, and (f) developing stronger and more cohesive rural communities. Sher advocated action through four avenues: empowerment of rural communities and their individual citizens, responding to both the downside and upside of environmental considerations, entrepreneurship, and education.

Of the four avenues, empowerment received the most attention at the conference, with emphasis on drawing upon and developing both the individual and collective strengths within a community. Case studies presented by Paul Nachtigal and Jack Shelton exemplified this avenue and opened up possible strategies for use in other cultural settings. However, as Emilia Martinez-Brawley warned in her discussion of knowledge diffusion, the transfer of ideas and strategies—referred to as "gems"—from one culture or context to another seldom works unless there are sufficient contextual similarities or, at the very least, unless the gem is adapted for a "best fit" situation.

Presenters and discussants from all countries represented recognised the role of education as a precondition and enabling strategy for change. To effectively participate in citizenship, management, industry, and entrepreneurship, it is imperative to acquire appropriate cognitive processes, physical skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Thus, according to Sher, "empowerment involves reforming all rural educational institutions—from child care centres, through every level of formal schooling, to the multifaceted world of adult and community education by helping them learn how to play their most positive roles in the overall rural development process." Jack Shelton provided an example of education for entrepreneurship through relevant community projects. In general, the "what" and "how" of delivery systems were widely canvassed at the conference. The results cannot be synthesised to a paragraph or two here, but the critical issues identified include the need for curriculum reform, the role of modern teaching/learning technologies, and the role of real life experience.

Finally, the issue of evaluating the success of development strategies was addressed at the conference. Vicki Luther provided in her paper, "Clues to Community Survival," a 20-clue checklist used in her work at Nebraska. Perhaps a cross-cultural study of characteristics of "successful" or "sustainable" rural communities might become a priority project in the future.

At the conference, we were reminded again and again of the need in planning forward development to focus on the lives of people and to hear their voices. This was

heavily stressed by Alan Brawley in his paper on social and community development, in which he reminded us that economic growth should be seen as merely one among several strategies to the end of enhancing people's capabilities. In this context, it is important to note an historical oversight in the consideration of rural issues at the conference, the failure to acknowledge the role of women in rural communities and the rights and plight of indigenous people in rural areas.

Emeritus Professor Ted Scott, Australia

Emerging Themes

Three themes and three research issues emerged from this conference. They are embedded in the papers presented, the interviews conducted, and the conversations held.

Theme One: Creating Community

The first theme concerns the importance of community regarding "right action." Each of the keynote speakers struck this theme, although each had a different way of describing it. Jonathan Sher urged us to a conspiracy—or, "breathing together"—on behalf of rural places and the people who live in them. Paul Nachtigal reported that he heard people yearn to belong to and contribute to something better than themselves and their private interests. Charlie Alfero proposed a new paradigm, one that suggested the best actions were created not from individual, private interests nor even from group interests, but rather from those designed to serve the best interests of the community. Emilia Martinez-Brawley gave us a felicitous phrase: "improved ways of caring."

It is clear that the old ways of caring are not sustainable. Throughout the week in a number of informal interviews and conversations, people reported feeling tired, lonely, and hungry for validation and empathy. One social worker sighed that her work felt "like butter hitting the wall . . . we don't get anywhere." Brian Cheers suggested that these feelings of isolation result from physical distance, to be sure, but also from the unique perspective of the professional who works at the intersection of horizontal (client) needs and vertical (funding source) pressures. Conference participants reported some success in dealing with these pressures through alliances, collaborations, and efforts that span bureaucratic boundaries.

The implication of this theme is that we continue the community building that began at the conference via an international organisation that models boundary-spanning. Initially, its members will include professionals from

areas represented at the conference: health, education, and community development. It is our intention that membership expand to include people of all ages who make their lives in rural places. The purpose of the organisation will be to share approaches to common problems and to support one another in becoming knowledge builders.

Theme Two: "Right Action"

The second theme concerns the necessity for ethical and moral underpinnings for our work. Sher's construction of "doing the thing right" (a technical approach) and "doing the right thing" (a moral approach) would seem to present a false dichotomy. It is becoming clearer and clearer that the two are intertwined: You can't "do the thing right" without attention to "doing the right thing." Their joint nature was revealed vividly during the conference as a consensus emerged on the importance of "doing with," rather than "doing to," the people it is our intention to help. We talked about clients not only being consulted about what services they need, but also that the services will be most effective if clients are encouraged to shape them. Indeed, a fundamental shift seems in the offing, a shift in the nature of the relationship between service provider and service receiver from one that is unilateral to one that is reciprocal.

Reciprocal relationships require sharing power. Typically, sharing power means that whoever happens to have power right now gives some of it to others. We are learning that that is not a useful model, because any time one person gives something to another, the possibility exists that it can be taken back. A more sophisticated understanding of sharing power assumes that people need to recognise, take, and use the power that is rightly theirs. Helping them to do that is another "right action."

We are coming to recognise that intellectual property has value, and the process of gathering data and doing development reflects on the outcome of the work. We are beginning to understand that our work and our community are strengthened as we include diverse points of view. The process of listening to and learning from people who were formerly considered marginal opens up the possibility of redefining problems and creating solutions we could not have thought of before.

It is not always comfortable. Some of the disagreements and differences of opinion that arose during the conference are part of the price of belated inclusion. Rural people have been marginalised, as have indigenous people and women of all backgrounds, and their past contributions have gone unheralded. We are trying to change that. Our goal is to work towards sustainable, long-term, shared benefits.

The implication here seems to be that, as members of this community, we aim to infuse our work with ethical

designs and behaviour. We can support one another with continual peer review, holding one another to account, and helping one another to achieve our mutual goal. We can try to model social justice while working toward it.

Theme Three: A New Paradigm

Out of these two concerns, for community and for right action, a new paradigm for professional practice is beginning to emerge: New ways of practice will require new ways of training people for practice. We need to articulate the parameters of this new paradigm so that it can guide our future work.

Charlie Alfero devoted most of his presentation of a new paradigm for community medicine, and Richard Fell expanded such ideas to cover all our professional practices when he reminded us that we were “adults working with adults.” Working with adults implies a level of mutual regard and of reciprocity that reinforces the first two themes, but introduces an important element of mutual vulnerability. The new paradigm involves the recognition that we are inextricably linked, that we share responsibility for one another. For example, it is relatively easy to understand a community’s vulnerability to the only locum available to take over a rural medical practice, who then turns out to be a child abuser or a drunk. We are all at risk, not just the particular people with whom he or she comes in contact. Just as important to understand is that, as a community, we all are vulnerable to an incompetent teacher, nurse, social worker, or politician. Therefore, we all have a stake in setting and monitoring adequate standards of practice.

Emilia Martinez-Brawley reminded us that all knowledge is interpretative. Defining adequate standards requires the wisdom of all the people who will be served by them. Self-determination involves recognising and legitimating local knowledge, then acting upon it. We need to expand what we understand to be knowledge, what is known, and how it comes to be known. The new paradigm will continue to emerge from knowledge in action. We need to continue to be aware of the process, to think about how we think, and to articulate that to others.

The implications of this theme reverberate throughout our day-to-day practice and in our training programs. Together, we can create more supportive ways of practice—behaviors that are informed by these themes and energised by one another’s encouragement. Ongoing communication is an obvious first step. Another is to reduce professional isolation by designing and carrying out joint research and development projects. A third is to increase the involvement of practicing professionals in the design and implementation of training programs—to take as a professional responsibility the role of helping those just entering the profession. Sabrina Knight and Anna Nichols presented some useful ideas in this area.

Meta-issues for Research

We have begun important work together. And it comes from what we have learned at work in the areas of health, education, and community development. But I now turn to some of the things about which we appear to know little. They can be clustered into three meta-issues for research: Two are philosophical questions, one is technical, and I will make a sandwich of them.

The first set of philosophic questions are: How do we expand the canon of official knowledge to include formerly invisible topics; alternative, context-specific methodologies; and new types and levels of evidence that satisfy demands for rigour? Also, how do we invent an empowering education, creating tools for analysis that allow people to use information for their benefit? Finally, how do we develop metrics that count the real costs?

The technical issue also concerns counting and costs. How do we educate ourselves and funders about designs for work that reflect appropriate scope, scale, and timelines so that efforts are meaningful and sustainable? How do we invest new models for support so that chasing funding does not occupy an inappropriate amount of researcher’s and/or developer’s time? How do we redesign the award system to recognise and reward quality, not quantity (i.e., the size of the grant)? And the hardest notion of all: How do we think about social change without large amounts of outside funding? We are becoming more sophisticated about the strings that come with outside resources and may have fallen into the “bigger is better” trap, when our experience tell us that too much money can choke small but meaningful initiatives and can be a distraction.

The final issue is also philosophic. As we move toward a better understanding and appreciation of the synergy that comes from collective action, how do we retain room for maverick individual insight and remain open to the possibilities for discontinuous change?

Dr. Toni Haas, USA

A Statement of Principle

The conference, *Issues Affecting Rural Communities*, resolved to adopt the following statement of principle developed by Professor Emilia Martinez-Brawley, following analysis of the various group reports presented throughout the week.

“Conference recommends that:

- an active focus on rural issues be encouraged by government and private sectors, by the com-

munities themselves, by academic institutions, groups, and citizens concerned with development and quality of life;

- a wide variety of views and new ways of thinking on how best to ensure the economic, social, cultural, educational, environmental, and physical well-being of rural communities be encouraged and supported in commissioned reports, in academic papers, in conferences, and in gatherings of citizens;
- included in all efforts should be the opinions of the spectrum of rural citizens, local community leaders, indigenous people, rural professional, and other involved parties;
- efforts be made for all rural citizens to work at the interface of cultures in awareness that diversity enriches us all; and
- the views of women, indigenous people and other groups who have been marginalised be incorporated to help shape policies and programs even when their views represent a different way of looking at the world—a paradigm different from that which is current. Concretely, it is apparent that rural communities need their strong voices to rise and be heard, and that they want to:

—secure a more equitable distribution of government and other resources going to rural and urban areas;

—create a cadre of academics and professionals who understand and are committed to serve rural areas in their practice and research; and

—keenly show the disproportionate needs of communities who have been historically underserved and unrepresented in the centres of power.”

Conference Resolutions

Conference adopted the following resolutions:

- That support be given to promotion and development of government policies and operating procedures which focus upon the selection and support of professionals trained specifically to work in rural areas.
- That the preparation of professionals for rural and remote areas must include a variety of models for good practice.
- That evaluation of student progress is one critical component of the educational process. Standardised testing must be only one of several measures, including hands-on, cooperative learning, teacher produced and problem solving based upon rural-relevant criteria.
- That all academic researchers inquiring into issues affecting rural communities be encouraged to incorporate into their research design procedures which link the findings and recommendations from the research into the policy and political decision-making processes.
- That Conference support the development of an international doctoral program in rural studies at James Cook University “with emphasis on mid-career practitioners, professionals, scholars, and educators as candidates in the program.”
- That Conference support the establishment of an international faculty to accommodate undergraduate and postgraduate studies being conducted in a range of institutions concerned with issues affecting rural communities.
- That Conference support the establishment of an international association of educators, practitioners, scholars, and professionals engaged in rural and remote health, education, and community and economic development and that a steering committee be established to create the association.
- That governments and communities should join in the development of strategies which bring together local agriculture, business, professional and community groups in rural and remote areas towards assuring opportunities for individuals to seek self-fulfillment and sustainable, high-quality communities. All efforts should be multifaceted, addressing the overall community, including the social, economic, educational, cultural, health and human resources, safety and justice, and environmental aspects of development.¹
- That labour intensive technologies, practices, and programs must be considered and prioritized while developing heavy- and large-scale industries. National and multinational companies which generate job opportunities by establishing large-scale industries must be regulated for maintaining the environment against pollution, labour misuse, and destruction of local

¹The agenda for the proposed international association and/or faculty should be encouraged to include these issues in their research, education, and action agendas. The coordinating organisation should periodically request information, research results, and examples of applications for dissemination to communities, governments, and members.

resources. Infrastructure development must be sustainable in terms of natural resources, environment, and agriculture. Farm diversification along with prioritizing the government assistance to small and marginal farms need to be emphasised. Status be improved of cottage industries, handicrafts, small-scale business, entrepreneurship, and rural marketing. Both bottom-up and top-down planning should be integrated for balanced growth and development. Local resources and indigenous technologies must be identified and be used with refinement. Community-based organisations and government agencies must act together for planning, implementation, monitoring, reviewing, and evaluating of programs and projects. Government policy and community programs should address health, sanitation, and housing issues setting appropriate standards.

- That governments develop programs and strategies that support, rather than supplant, rural community development and that are derived through meaningful collaboration with rural communities and their citizens.²
- That any policy emphasis on development which has rural in its title must include an indigenous component and indigenous participation.
- That if rurality is concerned with land usage, land, living space, and a place in human consciousness, then by definition it must be recognised that indigenous people are rural. The conference recognises Indigenous Knowledge and Ways of Knowing. Government agencies must acknowledge the validity of this knowledge and provide opportunities for indigenous people to make decisions concerning

rural health, education, and socioeconomic development.³

- That this conference encourage government to accept the establishment of an infrastructure for communications technology in rural and remote areas as a social responsibility.
- That there should be equality of access to appropriate quality education and training in all rural and remote areas.
- That women in rural and remote areas need greater access to appropriate further education.
- That inequitable gender relations in rural and remote areas must be publicly challenged to allow women to achieve positions of power in rural society.
- That local government, producer representative bodies, and other organisations based in rural and remote areas should include women and broaden their focus to include issues affecting rural women.
- That the processes of construction of knowledge about issues affecting rural communities must be informed by an adequate analysis of gender issues.
- That locally-based affordable and appropriate child care services, including provisions for those unable to access community-based services, are necessary to support people in rural and remote areas so that they may fully participate in employment or other activities.
- That use of chemical technologies in rural production must take account of health and social issues. Women must be part of the debate around the use of such chemicals.
- That governments at all levels facilitate the integrated, coordinated delivery of human/health services through appropriate and equitable funding mechanisms based on rurally-tailored funding formulae.
- That future conferences with rural/remote themes should ensure that every effort is made (and, if possible, sponsorship is obtained) to enable a meaningful level of participation by those people from groups most affected by social and economic disadvantage and that the location of such conferences be chosen with such cost-related issues of justice in mind.

²Programs and service provision strategies that create or continue dependency relationships are harmful to rural people and their communities. This conference resolves to develop descriptors of ways in which existing programs create/continue dependency relationships and to propose program features which would be more appropriate to strengthening rural community capacity. Dr. Jack Shelton and Dr. Jackie Spears will take responsibility for disseminating a questionnaire, asking for examples of best practices/inappropriate practices, collating the responses, and sharing the results with conference participants and other interested rural practitioners. Conference participants are then responsible for sharing this information with appropriate agencies in their respective countries.

³We ask members of this conference to identify themselves as members of indigenous and rural communities in all countries and to carry this message to their applicable agencies, communities, and institutions and that these couriers be included as members of the International Network of Practitioners.