

UNL Extension's Role in the NU Rural Futures Institute

January 15, 2013

The University of Nebraska Rural Futures Institute (RFI) challenges us to think in new and innovative ways about rural communities:

RFI Mission Statement - Building upon the strengths and assets in rural Nebraska, the Great Plains, and globally, the RFI, through a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, will mobilize the resources and talents of the University of Nebraska and its partners, including community partners, to create knowledge and action that supports rural people and places to achieve unique paths to their desired futures.

At first glance you might say "We already do that." In reality, the RFI mission challenges us to be more creative and entrepreneurial, to build and strengthen partnerships and to hold ourselves accountable to the futures our rural communities desire.

The RFI core values encourage UNL Extension to be inclusive, opportunistic and resilient, transdisciplinary, capacity building, creative, all serving, reflective and collaborative, sustainable and bold. These core values challenge us to approach our work in new and exciting ways by assessing our methods, processes and expected outcomes. Our goal is to focus and strengthen the work of UNL Extension in meeting the needs and opportunities of Nebraska's rural people and communities. The purpose of this concept paper is to create a conversation about UNL Extension's role in the RFI.

Two important questions help us frame this conversation:

1. How can UNL Extension seamlessly engage with the RFI?
2. What educational programs will UNL Extension deliver that are aligned with the RFI mission?

UNL Extension's Partnership with the RFI - Creating a Culture of Seamlessness and Collaboration

UNL Extension is *uniquely positioned* to be a key player in the RFI in the following ways:

- We have a network of 150 Extension professionals with Masters and Ph.D. degrees distributed across Nebraska's 93 counties, including major Research and Extension Centers in Scottsbluff, North Platte, Norfolk and Mead.
- UNL Extension employees are embedded in the fabric of rural communities and connected through local leadership, business, education and government. Extension Educators are recognized as members of the local community and are a key connection with the University of Nebraska system.
- Our 4-H program engages one in three age-eligible youth. This provides an important point of connection for RFI programs focused on young people and their contributions to rural Nebraska.
- UNL Extension professionals are expected to address the most critical issues in their communities. In that role, we are essentially social entrepreneurs seeking ways to facilitate and/or lead research and education projects that impact local people and communities.

- UNL Extension is part of a national Cooperative Extension system that routinely partners on programs and projects and readily shares best practices in Community and Economic Development.

Strategic and deliberate efforts are necessary to purposefully link the work of UNL Extension to the work of the RFI and vice versa. If we are not successful in building this relationship, many opportunities for synergy and value added will be missed. Such a scenario is not in the best interest of Extension or the RFI.....and most importantly, for the people and places of rural Nebraska. The people and places of rural Nebraska deserve to have the best from all four NU campuses including UNL Extension.

This culture of seamlessness needs to be promoted within NU and that is the type of relationship and culture that needs to exist between Extension and the RFI. Such an approach is also useful in that it models for communities the importance of collaboration and working together in regional and multi-community arrangements without worrying about turf and similar petty issues.

Synergistic and collaborative opportunities do not emerge effortlessly. Below are examples of the type of tactical opportunities that can be deliberately created to foster a seamless and strategic partnership between the RFI and UNL Extension:

- Have the UNL Extension Dean and Director serve in a leadership role with the RFI.
- Engage the UNL Extension Leadership Team with RFI leadership and key partners at all four campuses
- Have representation from the RFI on Extension's Action Teams engaged with RFI programs
- Engage the network of Extension faculty to serve as grass roots "eyes and ears" for those directing the work of the RFI
- Ask RFI grantees to communicate with relevant Extension faculty (and involve them as appropriate) when grantees are conducting community-based work
- Have Extension Educators (and the communities they serve) see Extension as a conduit or front door to all four NU campuses
- Expect Extension faculty to contribute to the scholarly conversation and participate in outcome-based research with rural communities. This scholarship should also include participation as RFI Fellows, attending RFI conferences and workshops, developing scholarly educational materials and publishing the results of our efforts to the Great Plains Region and global community.
- Engage UNL Extension as the testing ground for new ideas. Expect that programmatic themes will change as the scholarship tells us what works. Be open to both failures and successes.
- Expect frequent and meaningful communications at multiple levels between those most heavily involved in the RFI and their counterparts associated with the work of Extension's Action Teams
- Have Extension actively involved as the RFI pursues its mission of linking to other land-grant universities, especially those in the Great Plains Region.

What educational programs will UNL Extension deliver that are aligned with the RFI mission?

We propose a new Extension Action Team focused on Community Vitality. This new team will generate programs and projects specifically focused on developing the strengths of rural

communities. In addition, this team will collaborate with other Action Teams on projects that help rural communities thrive. Because the program outcomes of the current Entrepreneurship Action Team are aligned with many of the proposed outcomes of the proposed Community Vitality Action Team, these two entities may choose to merge.

The overarching goal for this new Community Vitality Action Team:

UNL Extension will increase the intersections of ideas and resources resulting in innovation that improves the vitality of rural communities.

To reach this overarching goal, we propose three signature programs.

Signature Program #1 - Develop and/or grow rural Nebraska businesses

Outcomes:

1. Support entrepreneurs to develop and/or grow businesses that create jobs and bring young people to rural Nebraska. One opportunity is the development of food systems and natural resources profit centers. To achieve this outcome, we must consider local, regional and global opportunities.
2. Produce, process, and market local foods and agricultural products to increase food access/quality and create new jobs that will retain and bring young people to rural Nebraska.
3. Develop agritourism and other business ventures that bring people to rural Nebraska. In addition to economic impact, people attracted to rural Nebraska may choose to stay.
4. Facilitate the transfer of businesses, land and natural resources to retain wealth and provide capital to entrepreneurs and support rural community sustainability.

Signature Program #2 – Engage youth and young adults in rural communities

Outcomes:

1. Youth will be engaged with adults in meaningful leadership experiences that help them become more connected to rural community leadership needs and opportunities.
2. Youth-serving professionals, volunteers and community partners will possess the skills to create learning experiences that increase young people's community connectedness.
3. To help develop our future workforce, rural youth will discover viable career choices and gain measurable career/job skills consistent with the needs and opportunities in rural communities.
4. Young adults will own and/or manage more businesses.

Signature Program #3 – Create 21st century communities that attract and retain young people

Outcomes

1. Engaged leadership that is inclusive of the people, interests and opportunities of the community and generates more diverse ideas/projects/goals.
2. A larger and better-educated workforce that attracts new and/or expanded businesses.
3. Community infrastructure (including technology/connectivity) that supports entrepreneurship and business development.
4. Rural communities that provide the social, cultural, physical and health assets that attract and retain young people in rural communities.

To be successful, UNL Extension professionals need to discuss the following.

- Strategies to develop a strong reciprocal connection to the leadership of the Rural Futures Institute and the leadership of UNO, UNK and UNMC.
- UNL Extension's role with other NU campus faculty and the delivery of their programs
- Extension's organizational culture around Community Vitality work
- Establishing a new Community Vitality Action Team populated with expertise and focused on signature programs relevant to rural communities.
- The job responsibilities of a point person (Program Leader?) to coach and facilitate the development of the Community Vitality Action Team.
- Who in Extension has responsibilities for delivering Extension programming in Community Vitality/RFI work.
- Ways to strengthen UNL research capacity to support this Action Team. This includes engaging current faculty with relevant research expertise and the development of a new cluster focused on Community Vitality in the next round of tenure-line faculty hires.
- Securing operating resources to help initiate programs. Once implemented, revenue from program fees, donations, partnerships and grants are expected to fund this Action Team's operations.
- Establishment of genuine partnerships with key players.

Next steps

- Review this concept paper with IANR and current RFI leadership
- Conduct Adobe Connect videoconference conversations (<https://connect.unl.edu/rfi-conversation/>) with UNL Extension professionals:
 - 2:30 pm CST, Friday, January 25
 - 3:00 pm CST, Tuesday, January 29
- Accept comments through Friday, February 1, 2013
- Revise and resubmit to UNL Extension professionals by February 8, 2013

Our look forward

We view UNL Extension's role in the NU Rural Futures Institute as very exciting and a tremendous opportunity for our organization and the rural communities we engage. Listed below are key reasons for this optimism and why Extension is positioned for success:

- The UNL Extension and RFI's missions are closely aligned. The RFI core values are important aspirations for UNL Extension.
- UNL Extension professionals will contribute new knowledge and important perspectives to inform the RFI conversation.
- UNL Extension has significant capacity to catalyze important work in rural Nebraska. And, we are willing to continually innovate the ways that we engage rural people and communities.
- Our ready connection with Nebraska's youth will leverage important work with the next generation of rural Nebraska residents.
- UNL Extension is anxious to pursue Extension's goal to increase the intersections of ideas and resources resulting in innovation that improves the vitality of rural communities.