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Rural Adults and Postsecondary Education

by Jacqueline D. Spears, Sue C. Maes
and Gwen Bailey

Approximately one-fourth of those involved in adult learning live in rural areas. With the support of the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the Action Agenda Project has spent the past three years exploring the educational resources that serve this population. What we wish to share is a synthesis of current writing in the field, some exploratory research conducted on programs, and the insights shared by some 200 participants at regional conferences on rural adult education held throughout the country this past year.

Before examining the state of the art in rural adult education, we need to make a few introductory remarks about the diverse disciplines from which rural adult education has evolved and the tensions this diversity has spawned. As a distinct discipline, rural adult education draws together practitioners from both higher education and public school education, from both service and academic traditions, from both formal institutions and informal grassroots organizations, from both professional and occupational education, from both rural improvement and economic development concerns. In the face of such diversity, it seems hardly surprising that multiple viewpoints emerge.

In a sense each provider sees rural America through a different lens. Seen through the lens offered by cooperative extension and community development corporations, rural adults need the knowledge required to create an economic base and provide basic services required to sustain a community. Seen through the lens offered by colleges and universities, rural adults offer a new market to help compensate for declining enrollments. Seen through the lens offered by the public schools, rural adults are a generation of Americans shortchanged – a generation whose lack of basic skills inhibit their own and their children's development. Seen through the lens offered by grassroots organizations, rural adults articulate interests and needs that remain unmet or misunderstood by traditional educational organizations. Seen through the lens offered by supporters of the lifelong learning movement, rural adults are a segment of the population isolated by virtue of distance or topography from the educational services they will continue to demand throughout their lives.

These multiple images create some tensions or ambiguities that must be acknowledged at the outset. Providers and researchers alike differ with regard to whose interests

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are to be served, what unit to consider in evaluating need and what criteria to use in judging educational quality. Issues related to whose interests are to be served and what unit is to be considered are related. Issues of educational quality remain a concern for adult education in general.

Historically, rural adult education addressed the needs of agrarian communities. In addition to increasing the agricultural output of the nation, cooperative extension networks sought to strengthen and preserve rural communities. The "rural turnaround" that resulted from the urban outmigration in the 1970s has led many to predict that distinctions between rural and urban may fade by the turn of the century (Treadway, 1984). Educational providers remain divided between concerns for preserving rural communities and lifestyles and desires to facilitate what they see to be the inevitable urbanization of rural life. Related to this is an ambiguity regarding the unit of analysis. Traditional institutions typically survey the needs of individuals in designing educational services. Some grassroots and community organizations analyze the community as a whole, arguing that the welfare of the individual depends on the health of the community. Historically, land-grant colleges and cooperative extension networks were designed to address a national need for increased agricultural production. Educational providers remain divided on the unit of analysis – individual, community or nation – which best serves the needs of rural areas.

Finally, issues of quality loom ever large. Adult education in general faces concerns with quality assessment of both credit and non-credit courses. Of late, attention has been focused on assuring quality in credit courses (Cross and McCartan, 1984). Questions of quality assume yet another dimension when viewed through the lens offered by grassroots organizations. Tax dollars flow through credentialled institutions and student aid is tied to degree-seeking goals. Yet frills, like cake decorating, can turn into successful business ventures, illiteracy can sometimes be conquered more easily away from the classroom, and an experienced small business owner can provide more valuable information than a fully accredited business administration course. Issues of credit and degrees pale in comparison with the pressing needs for rural empowerment.

Educational Providers and Programs

Educational practice in rural adult education can be described as diverse – diverse in provider, content and method of delivery. In a survey of model programs in rural adult postsecondary education, Karen Hone (1985) described continuing education programs, community college programs, job training programs, professional development programs, community education programs, adult basic education programs, rural focused curricula and community development programs. Sponsoring agencies include four-year colleges and universities, governmental agencies, nonprofit associations and organizations, private schools, regional libraries, research institutes, state departments of education, student cooperatives, community colleges, vocational-technical institutes and variety of consorcial arrangements. In the wake of such diversity, we can only hope to offer a brief sketch of educational practice in rural adult education and draw some generalizations from their successes.

By virtue of longevity alone, the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has been an acknowledged leader in rural adult education. While their programs have focused traditionally on agriculture, the CES in some states have ex-

panded their programs to encompass a broader mission. In Iowa, the CES offers a series of programs and services directed at the economic development of communities. Idaho has involved their CES in offering a computer literacy course in rural communities. Kentucky's CES has established the SOS Learning Network, a system of community learning and development programs in 16 communities. Thousands of Kentuckians have become SOS teachers/learners, spreading nonformal learning throughout the state. With a staff in excess of 18,000 operating in 3150 counties in the United States (Killacky, 1984), CES provides states with a valuable resource for serving rural adults.

Colleges and universities have developed a variety of strategies to reach rural areas. Having been formed with a mandate for community service, community colleges often act as primary educational providers in rural areas. Some offer mobile programs in industrial arts, career education, dental hygiene - circulating equipment throughout the regions they serve. Others coordinate a series of regional centers, offering rural areas access to low cost postsecondary education. Continuing education programs at colleges and universities offer a variety of outreach services. Some offer technical services to the businesses and industries in their areas. Others extend a variety of formal and nonformal programs to area residents. Some take advantage of technology to deliver educational services to remote sites. Among the more comprehensive models based on technology is that offered by the University of Alaska. Serving 250 communities of which only 30 are accessible by road, the University of Alaska provides programs broadcast through the LERN Alaska Instructional Network, the Audio-Conferencing Network and Teletext systems.

Community based organizations are yet another category of educational providers serving rural areas. These programs are more difficult to locate, primarily because they operate on shoestring budgets and a long list of volunteers. But their impact in rural communities is substantial. Taking advantage of resources from within the community, these programs are successful in linking community resources and in acting as a catalyst for other community development activities. In many communities, these locally initiated organizations offer the swiftest means of getting information and help to rural adults. More than other educational providers working in rural areas, community based organizations reflect rural community needs to gain some control over their lives and their futures.

Given the importance that economic development plays in the very survival of rural communities, we could not complete our quick survey of rural adult education without highlighting some of the more innovative models. Nowhere is the integration of education and community development more obvious than in attempts to foster economic development in rural areas. Traditional educational providers, like colleges and universities, have been successful in offering courses in entrepreneurship or technical assistance to small businesses. But in some regions of the United States, the barriers of economic development have been so longstanding and persistent that more integrated models have been developed. Community development corporations like the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) take on the role of change agent, incorporating the analysis and training functions provided by educational institutions with the seed monies necessary to introduce incremental change into the local economy. School-based enterprises offer another innovative model for promoting the economic development of rural communities. These programs foster economic growth through busi-

ness enterprises initiated by schools. The enterprises serve a dual function - offering a practical environment in which to teach skills and providing the local community with a needed service.

While the models serving rural areas are diverse in content, organization and purpose, Hone (1985) attempted to identify some characteristics common to those models that have been most successful. Three of those characteristics include: (1) response to a specific societal need, (2) response to the adult learner's expectations, and (3) extensive cooperation with other agencies.

Successful programs seem to literally grow out of the community. The link between purpose and product is tight, responding to a specific need embraced by the community as a whole. Community members take an active role in shaping the programs developed and controlling the outside resources called upon. This close connection between need and educational product is, in part, what has led to the diversity of educational providers in rural areas. Community based organizations are often successful because their origins lie deep in the communities they serve. More traditional educational providers can also be effective, once they join hands with the community as willing partners in the educational process. The programs most successful are the programs "owned" by the rural community.

Successful programs respect adult autonomy and cultural differences. At the very least, the program recognizes and respects the values and lifestyles of rural people. In rural communities where many cultures coexist, successful programs respect the differences that exist among cultures. Programs that address the learner's expectations, that accommodate adult lifestyles and responsibilities, and that share control over content and method with the learners are also more likely to be successful. They embrace the belief that adults inherently have the capacity to learn and solve their own problems - they need only the proper resources.

Policy Concerns

Ultimately, policy issues are tied to outcomes in financing and funding. Financing and funding are major barriers to those wanting to serve rural areas. Rural adult education can be addressed either through rural policy or adult education policy. A review of both fields raises a number of issues of concern to rural adult educators.

The Lifelong Learning Act passed as part of the 1976 Higher Education Amendments lent credibility and visibility to adult education imperatives, but appropriated very little money (Cross and McCartan, 1984). Press releases regarding input solicited for later hearings on reauthorization of the Higher Education Act gave testimony to the considerable input provided by adult education advocates, but offer little encouragement that these suggestions will actually be implemented (Palmer, 1985). The Commission on Higher Education and the Adult Learner (1984) has outlined specific suggestions aimed at increasing federal support of adult education programs and reducing financial barriers to adult learners. Similarly the National University Continuing Education Association has offered revisions designed to strengthen aid offered to postsecondary institutions which take on the task of serving adult learners.

However, in all these deliberations little distinction is made between urban and rural learners. Concern for the problems of rural adult learners are addressed primarily through proposals to support the development of innovative delivery mechanisms. To the extent that these proposals remove barriers and offer support equally to rural and urban

learners, they are supportive to rural adult education. To the extent that they continue a long tradition of volume-driven funding, these proposals ignore fundamental issues regarding equity of access in the wake of increased costs to deliver services to rural areas. To the extent that they offer disproportionate support to formal educational institutions, they ignore the fact that rural needs may not be amenable to solutions posed by traditional institutions. Without wanting to dilute the solidarity forged on behalf of adult learners, it is important to remember the extent to which an urban bias has dominated in the past.

The past decade has witnessed a resurgence of interest in rural problems, but those knowledgeable about federal policy express frustration with fragmented efforts. Treadway (1984) speaks to the need for a federal policy that distinguishes between rural and urban learners, specifically in issues regarding equity and appropriateness. Current federal criteria for allocating resources ignore the higher costs of delivering services to rural areas and overestimate the local resources available to support such services. Nearly all concerned with rural development speak to the need for a federal policy that recognizes the extent to which adult education must be integrated into community development. Blakely (1983) calls for a rural policy based on the development of human resources, not natural resources. Isolating educational policy from rural policy is to ignore the interrelationships between human resources and rural development.

Because of widespread differences among states and institutions, it is difficult to generalize about state and institutional policies affecting rural adult education. But many of the concerns in traditional education institutions can be lumped into two categories: (1) the volume-driven model by which educational programs are funded and (2) the stand-alone model within which most adult education and outreach efforts must operate.

Most state funds are allocated to institutions and institutional funds to programs on a per student-credit-hour basis. This allocation procedure is urban biased, motivating institutions to offer services in urban areas where the applicant pool is large and the costs are relatively small. This is exacerbated by state or institutional policies that require adult education or outreach efforts be self-supporting. Urban adults may have up to 50 percent of their costs covered by tax dollars while their rural counterparts foot the entire bill. In the wake of decreased federal involvement, rural providers are united in their concern that states assume responsibility for assuring that educational opportunities equal to those found in urban areas be extended to rural areas.

Another concern raised was that state policies must recognize the need for different strategies in addressing the educational needs of the already well-educated as contrasted to those who lack basic skills. State policies that encourage the use of technology and restrict duplication of programs in rural areas result in programs for the well-educated – those familiar with the educational system and aggressive in locating services. Adults who are illiterate or who lack basic skills are more easily reached through softer programs provided locally – community-based efforts, school-based programs or recreational programs. While technology can be effective in extending educational services to rural adults, states should not view it as the “rural solution.”

Perhaps the most supportive role state policy can play in improving services extended to rural adults is to: (1) engage in reciprocity arrangements with neighboring states

and (2) promote inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration. In some rural areas, residents are more isolated from educational resources within their states than from those in adjacent states. Out-of-state tuitions create unnecessary hardships. Reciprocal arrangements, like that between Minnesota and Wisconsin, remove this artificial barrier. Encouraging cooperation was cited as yet another way state policy could assist rural education. The range of educational providers active in rural areas reflects the diverse character of rural residents, not inefficiency. Most providers call for state policies that promote and reward inter-institutional collaboration and cooperation among educational providers rather than policies that eliminate programs under the guise that duplication is occurring.

The Special Needs of Rural Adult Education

In an effort to both summarize and synthesize the information about rural adult education, we would like to close by examining two questions. What, within the discipline of adult education, is special about rural? What, within the discipline of rural education, is special about adult? It is along this boundary between existing disciplines – adult education and rural education – that the special needs of rural adults fall.

In many respects, rural adult learners share the same characteristics as urban adult learners. They prefer courses that are directly relevant to their life situations, need flexibility of scheduling and course location, respond best to content that is learner driven. But there are substantial differences. The realities of distance and isolation make services more difficult to deliver – access is severely restricted. Second, expectations are lower. Richard Margolis (1985) speaks earnestly of the “incubus of ignorance and inertia” in rural America. Having seen themselves only through urban eyes, some rural Americans have been robbed of their pride – feeling condemned to an inferior life by virtue of their rural status. The urban exodus, if it continues, will simply exacerbate the problem. Resources will be directed to the professionals, to the technologically literate, to the already well educated, to the urban outmigrants.

A third difference lies embedded in the very fabric of rural poverty. Current efforts in linking economic development and postsecondary education (See for example Charner, 1984 and Charner and Rolzinski, 1985) explore important new ground for education – yet they are dominated by urban models. Seen through the lens of rural needs, economic development models must help adults create jobs, not simply train for them. As innovative as many of the collaborative models in economic development are, they pale in comparison to the more deeply integrated models needed in rural areas. Education must chart new territory if it is to have an impact in rural areas.

What, within the field of rural education, is unique about adults? Certainly adults face the same problems of access and equity, the same need for a rural curriculum that helps them regain self-respect. What sets adults apart from young people is the characteristics of adult learners. Adults require education that is experience based, relevant to their life, at times and places manageable within adult responsibilities, and over which they have some control. Secondly, our review of successful programs suggests that no single provider is well suited for all rural communities or to serve all educational needs of a given community. Rural education must concern itself with these realities, involve these other providers in its deliberations, and explore collaborative relationships if it intends to reach the rural adult.

What is the agenda for rural adult educators? For all,

the day to day work in reaching out to rural areas, in extending educational opportunities to rural adults remains paramount. But the problems faced by rural America deepen. Perhaps traditional concepts of rural education need to give way to notions of rural empowerment. Perhaps our real concern for rural America must become the development of its human resources - using whatever form education must take.

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