

Journal of Rural Social Sciences

Volume 03
Issue 1 *Southern Rural Sociology Volume 3,
Issue 1 (1985)*

Article 11

December 2019

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Recommended Citation

Wetherill, G.. 2019. "New Traditions: Retrospective and Prospective." *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 03(1): Article 11. Available At: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol03/iss1/11>

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NEW TRADITIONS: RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE¹

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I stand before you today a study in contrasts: To me falls the burden of delivering the first presidential address to this group. To me also falls the recognition of being the last president the Rural Sociology Section of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists will ever have. At the close of tomorrow's business meeting we will become a full-fledged professional association. I hope we will not lose the sense of family that has made our relationships in the past so successful.

Over the past 4 years while moving through our section's leadership structure, I have witnessed a vast number of changes to this organization. We have formalized ourselves, initiated a new scholarly journal, started charging real dues, discontinued the publication of proceedings, and revitalized our meeting attendance. Today, I'd like to look at where we've been, how far we've come, and where we might be going as a group.

This is my 10th year as a member of this group. I started, as did many of you, as a graduate student presenting a paper to this body. My membership has spanned six job assignments and three states. I attended nine meetings during that time, missing only the 1980 meeting in Hot Springs, Arkansas, because of the birth of my third child. As a group, we have a long and distinguished history that overshadows my 10-year association with this organization. Since the Rural Sociology Section came into being in 1969, spinning itself off from the folks in Agricultural Economics (Cleland, 1978), we have found ourselves meeting in 11 southern cities. We should know Atlanta well, having been there four times. I would like to take a few moments at this point to recognize all of my predecessors to this office, many of whom are regulars to these meetings and without whom we could not function successfully.

Following are the officers of the section since it was formed:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>President/Chair</u>
1968-69	Mobile	Dan Alleger
1969-70	Memphis	Dan Alleger
1970-71	Jacksonville	Bill Kuvlesky
1971-72	Richmond	John Dunkelberger
1972-73	Atlanta	Ray Sollie
1973-74	Memphis	Maurie Voland
1974-75	New Orleans	V. A. Boyd
1975-76	Mobile	Art Cosby

¹ Presidential address at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociology Section, Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Biloxi, Mississippi, February 1985.

The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of either the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Forest Service.

1976-77	Atlanta	Max Miller
1977-78	Houston	Virginia Purtle
1978-79	New Orleans	Harsha Mookherjee
1979-80	Hot Springs	Ed McLean
1980-81	Atlanta	Bill Boykin
1981-82	Orlando	Wolf Frese
1982-83	Atlanta	Gerald Wheelock
1983-84	Nashville	Ron Wimberley

These people are the leadership of rural sociology in the southern region. They are nationally and even internationally recognized. We are in their debt. It was their leadership that brought us to the point we find ourselves today.

I gave as the partial title of my address, "New Traditions." This is where I get out my crystal ball and try to see where we're going from here. From my perspective in Washington, D.C., the near future looks grim. Budget cuts and rumors of budget cuts fill the air. This has never been a good sign for the prosperity of rural sociology. We are tied to federal and state budgets almost to the exclusion of any other funding.

If we do not develop a spirit of entrepreneurship, I fear for our continued fiscal well-being. We are losing research opportunities to the private sector, and, in many cases, the private sector cannot do the quality job we are used to doing for ourselves and our traditional clients. I think we need to do some risk-taking in order to survive as a discipline. We need to practice making polished presentations to beat our competitors at their own game. Our networking functions are sadly lacking as a whole, though some of us are pretty good at it.

I have seen a new mandate at work in Washington. The gist is simple: There always will be room for theory and knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but the real payoff for the profession will be in the applied area. The "Golden Rule of Arts and Sciences" states: "Whoever has the gold, makes the rules." The people with the funds want to know, "What can you do for me?" Can you solve my problems in a short time?"

Maurie Voland's article in the November issue of **The Rural Sociologist** (Voland, 1984) pointed out a disturbing fact. He cited a 1977 study indicating that extension directors planned to hire an additional 20 sociologists by 1980--a number that Voland reports was reduced to only five. He asks, "What happened?" This is a question we seem to be asking ourselves more and more often. I've seen the same trend in the federal sector. The Interior Department and the USDA Forest Service both had a net loss of job-titled sociologists over the past 5 years. In the Forest Service, where once we had 10 or so job-titled, practicing sociologists, today we have only four. Assuming that the Forest Service has social assessment needs that sociologists can meet, who is doing the job? Forest planners (20), economists (18), public affairs officers (8), foresters (6), community planners (5), operations research analysts (4), program analysts (4), social scientists (3), archaeologists

(2), ethnologist (1), and 16 other job titles have been called upon to meet the need (Wenner, 1985:16). The other types of sociology-related agency needs are being supplied by a corps of 90 economists, 57 operations research analysts, 131 archaeologists, and so on. From a chauvinistic disciplinary viewpoint, this is pretty grim news.

I have spoken before this group many times previously--both in our informal discussions and through the medium of presented papers. What I have just said is no different from what I have said on a number of occasions. However, I now find myself giving this presidential address from a perspective completely different from any I have had before. My new perspective is one that looks out from the arena where policy is developed. Part of that new perspective is that whereas my leisure reading used to be **American Sociological Review**, **Rural Sociology**, and **Evaluation Review**, it now is such publications as **In Search of Excellence** (Peters and Waterman, 1982), **The One-Minute Manager** (Blanchard and Johnson, 1982), and the like. As a result of my new-found perspective as a policy development person, I find I have become very bottom-line oriented. I find I am able to understand better what might be needed from the discipline of sociology and perhaps suggest some ways that sociologists might help meet decision-makers' needs for valid social information.

One thing we should do as a discipline concerns the area of training, both for our students and ourselves. Recently I participated in a survey of applied sociologists from both inside and outside academia. We were asked the question, "What can applied sociologists do...other than social research?" (Brown, 1984:1). A total of 315 applied sociologists replied to the survey sponsored by Wadsworth Publishing. Some interesting, but not new, concepts emerged.

But isn't there more (author's emphasis) to applied sociology careers than being able to apply research skills to various local and national issues or social ills? I heartily agree that social research skills as well as theory are crucial in preparing our majors for careers in applied sociology. However, I must argue for giving much greater attention to non-research competencies as we prepare our majors for the future. After all, there are far more career opportunities within business, industry, and government in non-research than in research positions. Further, sociologists employed as researchers need non-research competencies in order to become more effective overall in their positions. Our majors need the best of both "worlds" to compete for good positions in the market place (Brown, 1984:1).

Respondents to Brown's survey made several suggestions concerning an applied sociology curriculum: need for more experiential opportunities for sociology majors; need for

better communications skills, grant writing skills, planning and coordination skills, teamwork skills; knowledge of other disciplines; ability to work with other professionals; familiarity with legislative procedures; competence in decision-making processes and problem-solving techniques. I suggest that we are doing most of these things already. However, we may not be getting the word out to our students and their potential employers that we have been teaching these things all along with our more traditional course offerings. When you as teachers do any of these things in your classes, tell your students this is what you're doing and to remember it when they are out in the "real world." I would hope that your students can translate your academic teachings into non-academic actions.

I do see hope for the discipline, despite the gloom and doom of some prophets. My message is an upbeat one even though we have some ways to go to reach our promised land.

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