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Revitalizing Rural America: Focus on Rural Youth

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ABSTRACT The youth comprise a significant component of the rural population. They are rarely considered in policies, programs or strategies for the revitalization of rural America. This paper focuses on rural youth as a potential dynamic element of change in rural America. The questions addressed are: how can we help to motivate more young people to consider careers in agriculture; and how can we improve our abilities to retain and attract talented young people to rural areas. A selected review of the relevant literature suggests that current factors influencing choice of an agriculture major differ from the past and that migration away from rural areas has both economic and non-economic determinants. It is also clear that rural industrialization is not an effective strategy for retaining or attracting youth to rural areas. Suggestions for demonstrating to rural youth how their aspirations can be achieved in a rural setting are discussed.

Introduction and Overview

In many ways, one of the subthemes of the 1988 Southern Rural Sociological Association's annual meeting—"Revitalizing Rural America"—is a response to last year's theme—"The Rural South in Crisis." My distinguished predecessor has described the bleak conditions which persist throughout much of the rural South (Beaulieu 1987). These conditions include farm financial stress, reductions in nonfarm employment opportunities, declining per capita incomes, inadequate infrastructures, and continuing poverty. They still persist in spite of tremendous economic progress in some rural areas and in stark contrast to bright hopes for social and economic gains that were forecast during the boom of the 1970s.

Last year we were challenged, particularly those of us in the land-grant community and in rural sociology, to use our creative energies to identify and implement strategies to enhance the well-being and quality of life of those "left behind" in rural America (Beaulieu 1987). There are many ways to respond to that challenge, some of which involve developing and implementing policies and programs to address such problems as unemployment and poverty. But there are others too. My goal is to respond to that challenge by focusing on a component of the rural population: rural youth. This group, I believe, represents an under-utilized resource for the revitalization of rural areas.

"Rural youth" is a broad population category. In this context it is defined to include persons through age 24. Also in the context of these
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discussions, "rural" indicates residence in places referred to by U.S. Government publications as rural. It also refers to agriculture and agriculture-related careers.

There are several reasons for a focus on rural youth. Rural youth represent a significant and important component of the rural population. In 1987, persons aged 24 and under comprised 37.5 percent of the rural population of the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1988). The successful vitalization or re-vitalization of rural areas will be more difficult, if not impossible, without tapping the talents, energies, and resources in young people. They have the potential for contributing to the economy and to an improved quality of life. A similar view was echoed by Ken Deavers (1980) who said: "...the future of rural America is at least partially dependent upon how well today's youth are prepared to participate and contribute to an improved way of life in their communities."

Compared to the recent attention to other dimensions of the rural crisis and to strategies for facilitating a turnaround, relatively little attention has been given to rural youth as a dynamic element of change. They are rarely included in programs, policies, or strategies for change. Except for the occurrence of crisis situations such as teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, for example, too few resources are allocated to address problems and needs of young people. Even in some crisis instances, resources are often allocated as reactions to problems rather than as proactive measures for positive change. In recent years, even resources in these areas have decreased dramatically.

Youth are frequently referenced in discussions of problems in rural America, yet we rarely question how the changes occurring in rural America affect them. Consequently, policies and programs to address these problems often do not include approaches to counteract the negative consequences of changes in rural America for rural youth.

Young people are affected by the crisis in rural America. They react to the declining economy, lack of opportunities for rural-based careers, occupations, increasing stress imposed by their environment, and the void of social or psychic fulfillment. Too often they react by abandoning their home communities permanently or by staying away from any rural setting during their most productive years.

Young people can, however, help affect the course of events in rural communities. The challenge is to determine how to help, encourage, and motivate more of them to want to contribute to an improved quality of life in rural areas—how to attract more of them to rural-based careers and occupations and residency. Considerable research has focused on the process by which youth make decisions about careers. Factors influencing their decisions to migrate from rural areas have also been identified. My purpose is to engage in a selective review of the relevant literature. The goal is to extract from previous research information which may provide insights in addressing the following questions: "How can we help to motivate more young people to consider careers in agriculture?" and "How can we improve our abilities to retain and attract talented young people to rural areas?" Success in finding answers to these questions will also

See Ross and Green (1985) for a discussion of "rural counties to rural diversity."
yield increased participation of young people in contributing to an improved way of life in rural communities—in facilitating the process of revitalization in rural America.

The relevant literature is diverse and covers a wide range of disciplines. I draw most heavily, though not exclusively, from research conducted by rural sociologists. Some of the relevant topical areas include the following: (1) processes of status attainment and upward mobility, (2) recruitment to farming and agricultural careers, (3) migration of rural youth, and (4) rural industrialization.

Selected Research Relevant to Rural Youth

Status Attainment and Upward Mobility

The processes through which rural youth develop their aspirations, expectations and preferences, reflected later in decisions about education, occupations, and residence, have been the focus of a number of recent studies (Cosby, Thomas, and Falk, 1976; Cosby and Charner, 1978). Relevant antecedents of these studies include the work of Blau and Duncan (1967) and Kerckhoff (1976). The basic elements of conceptual models which explain the status attainment process are outlined in these works.

In The American Occupational Structure, Blau and Duncan (1967) suggest themes which are pervasive in subsequent research: (1) the effects of early experiences on developing aspirations, expectations, and subsequently, behavior and achievement, and (2) the mediating influence of socioeconomic status (SES) and race on aspirations, expectations, behavior, and achievement. Throughout the literature, the effects of SES and race account for variations in behavior reflected in occupational choices and residential patterns.

Other illustrations of the impact of social influences on achievement and status attainment are provided in Kerckhoff's (1976) discussions of the "allocation" and "Wisconsin" models of status attainment. The Wisconsin model emphasizes the influence of background characteristics (e.g., the influence of parents and significant others) on the development of early attitudes and behaviors related to educational and occupational aspirations and attainments. The allocation model, in turn, emphasizes the importance of societal forces which "identify, select, process, classify, and assign individuals according to externally imposed criteria."

Similar themes are pervasive in the status attainment literature, which suggests that the important influences on the development of career orientation and achievement are educational and occupational aspirations developed early in life. These aspirations may be influenced by parents and significant others, as well as by school experiences (e.g., early grades and school tracks).

In recent years, much of what we have learned about how rural youth in the South develop their aspirations and expectations, which are translated into subsequent achievement, has come from the Southern Youth Study (SYS), summarized in Education and Work in Rural America: The Social Context of Early Career Decision and Achievement (Cosby and Charner, 1978). One of the goals of the study was to determine the better predictor or early adult orientations
Findings generated by the SYS suggest that career and career-related preferences, developed early in life, predict subsequent early adult behavior. For example, educational and occupational aspirations and plans developed in high school were important predictors in subsequent educational and occupational achievements. Residential preferences were also found to predict actual residence. Educational and occupational plans, however, were influenced by race, sex, and (for white respondents) school track designation.

Recruitment to Farming and Agricultural Careers

Research related to the SYS study, which has also enhanced our knowledge about the career orientations and achievement of southern rural youth, was conducted under the auspices of southern regional research project S-114, "Defining and Achieving Life Goals" A Process of Human Resource Development."

From the S-114 study we learn that today's agricultural students are very different from their predecessors of past generations. Today, the important motivators for choosing an agricultural major are preference for country life and a sense of altruism, rather than a farm, rural, or small town background. For example, evidence of a strong background in farming was not found, as has historically been the case, among persons expressing a preference for an agriculture-related career or rural residence.

The S-114 study also documents important differences between students enrolled in 1862 (historically white) and 1890 (historically black) colleges and universities. Students enrolled in 1890 colleges were much more likely than students enrolled in 1862 colleges to have taken vocational agriculture courses, to have participated in voluntary school organizations related to their agricultural goals, to have had farm work experiences and to opt for city rather than rural residence (Dunkelberger, et al., 1982).

Interpersonal contacts were also found to be more important to black than white students enrolled in agricultural colleges. Decisions among blacks involved interactions with many people, particularly their agricultural teachers and family members over a long period of time. Because they were more likely to come from limited resource families with annual incomes of $15,000 or less, black students were also more dependent upon financial assistance from sources other than parents (Cosby and Charner, 1978).

The recruitment of blacks to production agriculture is particularly problematic. As noted by Lyson (1980), "the usual agents of socialization to farming operate to shift black youth toward nonfarm careers..." Among previous generations, important factors influencing the decision to farm have included prior farm experience (Lyson, 1979; Haller and Sewell, 1967) and parental attitudes and aspirations for their children. For example, Fields (1981) reported that career aspirations of parents positively influence the occupational aspirations of their children. It was also suggested that if parents perceive limited opportunities in a career
choice, they may transmit their frustrations to their children, resulting in lower aspirations for that occupation.

Most farms operated by blacks are small and do not generate incomes sufficient to sustain desirable standards of living. When small size is combined with fluctuating economic conditions ill-advised governmental policies and institutions, which put black farmers at a competitive disadvantage, the experiences and observations of many farm-reared black youth have not served to motivate them to consider production agriculture or any agriculture-related career.

To this point I have focused on the literature related to factors which influence career and career-related aspirations and achievements, and more specifically, the processes which influence aspirations for agriculture-related careers. I want to shift now to review selected dimensions of the literature related to the residential preferences of rural youth.

Migration of Rural Youth

Analysis of Census data indicates that consistently, young adults are the most mobile segment of the rural population. Between 1983 and 1984, 33 percent of young adults between 20 and 24 years of age moved, many from rural to urban areas (USDA, 1985).

It is often commonly assumed that the primary factors fueling youth out-migration from rural areas are economic. But studies of migration patterns have consistently shown, for teen and young adults, that while economic factors are important, they are not necessarily primary reasons for migration from rural areas. Work by Beale (1973), Swanson, et al., (1979), and Murdock, et al. (1984) suggests that the search for economic opportunities may have little to do with decisions of rural youth to migrate.

Community satisfaction has been identified by Swanson, et al. (1979) as a factor affecting decision to migrate. They suggest that "low (community) satisfaction may facilitate migration or increase the willingness to move whereas high satisfaction may increase subjective and pecuniary investments in the community and may therefore, discourage migration" (1979:723).

In their study of the relative effects of economic and noneconomic factors in age-specific migration between 1960 and 1980, Murdock et al. (1984) found that while economic factors are the most powerful predictors of migration for age groups over 40, socioeconomic factors (e.g., quality of life and other amenities) are the most powerful predictors for persons 10 to 29 years of age. Similar findings were reported by Beale (1973:16) who found that "self respect and esteem of peers may be unattainable for normally ambitious rural youth without migration."

When race is considered as a factor in migration, the literature suggests that rural blacks are more likely than rural whites to migrate to urban areas (Cheong, et al., 1986). Higher rates reflect greater frustration in efforts to translate their preferences into actual behavior, particularly with respect to education and occupation. Thus, they are likely to incorporate a special locality condition in their achievement orientation. Blacks often perceived their opportunities so limited in rural
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areas that they viewed migration to urban areas as a necessary condition for attainment" (Cosby and Charner, 1978:200).

Rural Industrialization and the Retention of Rural Youth

Following the passage of the Rural Development Act in 1972, many rural communities, particularly some located in the southern states, envisioned that rural industrialization would provide a means for retaining more youth in rural communities. Increased opportunities for employment were perceived to diminish the attraction of jobs in urban areas. Employment of local young people was emphasized as a key advantage of rural industrial development in many rural communities.

In general, however, the strategy of retaining rural youth through industrial development and increased opportunities for employment has not yielded the benefits expected. Often, the jobs were in low-skilled, low-wage manufacturing plants. Thus, in spite of the new jobs created, they did not provide the motivation for achievement-oriented youth to remain in their communities (Rosenfeld).

Different results from those in "low-tech" jobs were expected from "high-tech" (e.g., energy-related, extraction) industrial development efforts. High-tech industrial development was promoted as providing "good" jobs. The high-wage jobs requiring highly-skilled and highly educated employees would raise the income levels and quality of life of entire communities. Additionally, high-tech industrial development would encourage more youth to remain in rural communities.

In recent years, however, even benefits of high tech industrialization for rural areas (the "beneficial retention" hypothesis) have been questioned. The "beneficial retention" hypothesis assumes that employment opportunities offered by industrial expansion and development will be viewed by local youth as a reason to stay in their home communities (Seyfrit, 1986). But Seyfrit's study of high school seniors in rural Utah counties, as well as her rigorous review of the literature, yielded evidence to refute the beneficial retention hypothesis. Her studies indicated that youth from rural areas experiencing rapid growth in extractive employment were just as likely to migrate as youth from other areas. Similar findings were reported by Freudenburg, 1982; 1984) whose research suggested that youth may perceive the growth associated with industrial development to be so disruptive that the community may seem less attractive.

In summary, this selective review of the relevant literature has revealed the following: (1) career aspirations and expectations (career orientations), as well as residential preferences developed early in life often influence actual career/occupational achievements and residential choices; (2) current factors influencing choice of an agricultural major may differ from the past; (3) especially because of differences in social experiences and background characteristics, the recruitment and retention of blacks to agriculture and rural areas are particularly problematic; (4) historically, young people have migrated from rural areas in large numbers; this migration has had both economic and noneconomic determinants; (5) rural industrialization is not an effective strategy for retaining rural youth; and (6) there are strategies of intervention which can modify choices made.
Discussion: attracting youth to rural communities and to agricultural careers

It is fair to assume that, in most cases, youth have legitimate aspirations and desires. These aspirations and desires may be jobs, income, prestige, status or a particular style of life. The key to attracting these youth to rural communities is to identify their aspirations and desires and propose ways to achieve them. The challenge is to demonstrate how their aspirations can be achieved in a rural setting or through commitment to an agriculture-related career. Selective review of the relevant literature suggests some points of departure for accomplishing these goals.

In reviewing the relevant literature, the scarcity of studies which focus on rural youth, as compared to other elements of the crisis faced by rural America, becomes obvious. The studies generally have been conducted under the auspices of only a few regional research projects. Consequently, there is a lack of detailed information to guide the development of programs and policies aimed at addressing the specific needs of rural youth. More effort needs to be devoted to empirical studies to determine what young people need, want, and expect of their communities. When the success of a community development strategy is dependent upon retaining and attracting youth to rural communities, the needs of youth should become an integral part of the strategic planning process.

There are many reasons why rural youth migrate to urban areas. More information is needed, not just on who moves, but also why.

A crucial concern in the agricultural community relates to the recruitment of young people to the food and agricultural system. The recruitment of talented and highly motivated youth is essential to the sustenance of a viable, competitive food and fiber production and distribution system. Concern about the next generation of farmers and future generations of agricultural managers, administrators and scientists is underscored by declining enrollments in colleges of agriculture, the decreasing "quality" of agricultural students and (particularly among blacks) such dramatic decreases in the number of farmers that the survival of even a small number of blacks in production agriculture is in jeopardy.

There appear to be several strategies for encouraging more young people to consider occupations and careers in the food and agricultural sciences. One is to provide more positive exposure to these fields of work. There is a special need to provide exposure and experiences which refute the negative image often associated with agriculture, especially production agriculture. Just as today's agricultural students possess characteristics which are different from those of previous generations, farming today is a lot different from what it was a decade ago. To be a successful farmer today requires the application of sophisticated skills and abilities, demanding high levels of formal education and training are required. No longer can all the skills required in farming be acquiring from on-the-job training, though this is still important.

Once young people learn of the variety of jobs, sophistication and challenges of modern production agriculture, more might be encouraged
to consider it as an occupation. In the case of the disappearing black farmer, it is especially important to develop programs and policies to make production agriculture attractive to young blacks. The programs and policies should aim at putting them on an equal footing to compete in the food and fiber system.

There is a wide range of other career and occupational opportunities in agriculture about which youth are unaware. Agricultural professionals and the agricultural establishment must do a better job of promoting themselves among youth. The image that many youth have of agriculture is shaped by the popular media. This image is often negative and does not showcase the variety of career opportunities, financial and other non-pecuniary rewards associated with agriculture.

At all levels in the academic setting, more and better counseling and career guidance are needed. Scientists, extension personnel, teachers and educators have a role to play in informing and guiding youth into agriculture.

The SYS and S-114 project and other research have provided evidence suggesting that there are points of intervention at which career orientations and residential choices developed early in life can be modified. Programs are needed that influence and change negative attitudes about agriculture.

In closing, I want to briefly discuss one such program. This is the High School Research Apprenticeship Program (HSRAP), sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research Service. The program was initiated in 1980 and is available to all Land-Grant Institutions in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Guam.

The goal of the HSRAP is to encourage more students, especially minority students, to consider careers in the food and agricultural sciences. Preliminary findings of an evaluation of the HSRAP (Beauford and Whitehead, forthcoming) suggest that the program has been a very effective intervention program. As a result of experiences working with research scientists in an academic setting, 77 percent of the apprentices who participated in the evaluation survey indicated that the program was effective in changing previously negative attitudes about the food and agricultural sciences. Other positive influences of the program included the following: increased awareness of agriculture as a career alternative (58%) and a re-evaluation of educational and/or career goals (59.2%). As a direct result of the program 17.3 percent of the apprentices considered or actually changed their college majors to an area in the food and agricultural sciences.

The effects of the program were greater when race and gender were considered. More blacks and "others" (Hispanics, Asian-Americans, American Indians) experienced a positive change in their attitudes toward agriculture than did whites; similarly, more females than males experienced a change in attitude toward agriculture.

As currently administered, apprentices enter the program following the completion of 9th, 10th or 12th grade (most have just completed 11th or 12th grade). Even at this later stage, however, 42 percent indicated that earlier exposure to the program would have changed or influenced their educational and/or career goals.

The High School Research Apprenticeship Program is but one example of a successful intervention strategy which can influence career-oriented and residential preferences of youth. More programs of
this type are needed to attract youth to the food and agricultural sciences and subsequently, to residence in rural areas.

Paraphrasing C. S. Lewis: All people want change, all people can change, all people will change...if they understand the change, and if the change does not worsen their relative position.

The challenge to those of us in the land-grant community is to identify and develop more strategies which influence the career aspirations and residential preferences of rural youth. Hopefully, our influence will facilitate changes which result in the successful recruitment of more youth to agriculture-related careers and rural communities. The successful revitalization of rural America is dependent upon more attention to rural youth as a dynamic element of change.

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