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## Facing the Future: Rural Sociology in a Time of Change

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**FACING THE FUTURE:  
RURAL SOCIOLOGY IN A TIME OF CHANGE**

**By Libby V. Morris<sup>1</sup>**

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The theme for the 1997 meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association is "Rural Development and Emerging Roles of Land-Grant Universities." To reflect on this theme, I want to challenge you to assess honestly the role of rural sociology in a rapidly changing environment. While serving as your president, I viewed the great diversity and complexity of your professional work. I saw, too, the monumental challenges facing our discipline and land-grant universities. If we are to remain relevant in the 21st century, we must ask the difficult questions of our discipline, and we must face directly the challenges before us. To fail to do so will result in professional and institutional decline, if not demise. The clock is ticking, not only toward the next millennium, but also toward a public demand for accountability in higher education, especially in the land-grant system. We must assess our professional roles and be prepared with answers and actions, or we can try to deny this future and experience the consequences. I hope that my comments will spur us to envision and create a future in which rural sociology and rural sociologists are seen as essential partners in any discussion about or action on rural development.

First, I will begin with questions. If you were asked, how would you define the role of rural sociology as a discipline and as a profession? What are the defining questions of the field? Is there a core that is shared? What is our vision for the future? How do we serve the public? Where do we concentrate our research? For whom do we write? And, collectively, what does our professional work say about rural sociology as a field of study? For those of us in universities, are there connections between our research, instruction, and public service? As a group would we generally agree on the answers to these questions? Should we? In summary, does southern rural sociology make a difference? How and for whom?

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<sup>1</sup>Libby V. Morris is a Professor in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. This article is a revised version of the presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Rural Sociology Association, 1997. The author wishes to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions, comments, and contributions.

## *Southern Rural Sociology*

These questions are some of the difficult ones that land-grant universities now must face as the public increasingly stresses “outcomes” over activities, performance indicators over resource inputs, and relevance over tradition. Are we prepared in rural sociology to enunciate our goals, explain our relevance, and document the difference that this field makes in the world around us? Universities and faculties are being pressed toward accountability, not only in resource utilization but in the outcomes of our teaching, research, and public service. To clearly envision the challenges of accountability and relevance, let’s begin by looking at the South as a unique region.

### THE SOUTH AS A REGION

I grew up in the heart of the South in a small rural community in Georgia at the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. My grandparents on both sides of the family farmed; they had cotton and corn, wheat and sugarcane. They owned cotton gins, saw mills, and the community store. Their sons and daughters are now in agribusiness, and I am at a large land-grant university. As the popular phrase goes, “I know rural.” My childhood playmates were numerous cousins, other children on “Mt. Olivet,” and the children of an African-American family who lived across the field from my back door. I attended the “Mt. Olivet” school, grades 1-8, and my black friends were bused to the training school. Dirt roads, various degrees of poverty, and hard labor were no stranger to this small community. These scenes created lasting impressions in my mind.

Although numerous political, social, and economic movements swept across the South beginning in the 1960s, they often encountered persistent problems and yielded ongoing debates. For example, civil rights legislation integrated schools and colleges; yet, many historically and predominately African-American colleges survive and, in some cases, prosper (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1996). Although affirmative action increased employment and educational opportunities for women and minorities, in this decade two southern military institutions launched court battles to deny admissions to women. Across various educational and workplace settings claims of sexual harassment and reverse discrimination came to the forefront. In health care, medicare and medicaid extended care to millions who are aged, disabled, or poverty ridden; yet, the health status of the rural South continues to lag behind that of the rest of the nation, and rural populations experience persistent problems with geographic, if not

financial, access to health care (Bennefield, 1996; Morris & Little, 1996). As the workforce shifted from agricultural and manufacturing to service jobs and high technology positions, the number of farms and farmers decreased; yet, large rural populations in the South remain, and the vast rural areas hold even greater importance for the nation's environmental health and productivity. Today, the environmental conditions and sustainability of the nation's rural resources and people are central to the public debate and national prosperity (Albrecht & Albrecht, 1996; Wimberley & Morris, 1991).

During the past three decades, concomitant with these changes, the South grew in national importance, in population, and in diversity. In the political realm, southern politicians are at the forefront of the nation with Clinton, Gore, and Gingrich assuming national leadership positions. In population, the south census region is by far the most populated region of the United States with over 34 percent of the nation's people. The South's 85 million exceeds the 51 million of the Northeast, the 60 million of the Midwest, and the 53 million of the West (Wimberley & Morris, 1996). Mid-1995 population estimates indicate the South is growing still larger and now numbers 91 million of the United States' population. Additionally, over half of the 30 million African-Americans in the United States, and 91 percent of nonmetro blacks, live in the South.

Even with an expanding population base, the South retains a large rural population. The South claims 43 percent, or 27 million, of the nation's rural population and 45 percent, or 22 million, of the nonmetro population (Wimberley & Morris, 1996). An examination of the age-structure of the South reveals that large segments of the population, especially in rural areas, are dependent. The ratios of elder dependents (i.e., those 65 and above) and youth dependents (i.e., those 18 and below) are larger than those observed in the general population and are related to differences in poverty and other measures of quality of life (Morris, 1994; Wimberley & Morris, 1996). These data and other findings suggest that the South is a large place with a diverse population, and that an association called the Southern Rural Sociological Association should be diverse in research issues, instructional content, and avenues for service.

The numbers above, however, are not the only way that rural sociologists and others have captured what it means to be southern. The South is the central place of interest for many historians, novelists, political scientists, and educators, whose commentary on the South ranges from the malicious and punitive to romanticized and laudatory. The region's

diversity is shown in its literature as well as in the names of the many important southerners who are symbolic of the region. It is the region of Jimmy Carter and Martin Luther King. It is the home of Thomas Wolfe and Ted Turner. It is the stories of Margaret Mitchell and Maya Angelou. It's Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee University. It's Shannon Faulkner and the Citadel. It's Emory University and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. It's Coca-Cola and R.J. Reynolds. It's Julia Roberts and Evander Holyfield. It's Ray Charles and R.E.M. It's Johnny Cash and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. It's Howard Finster and Juliette Gordon Lowe. It's Billy Graham and Johnny Walker. It's blues and jazz, gospel and rock. It's cotillions and snake-handling. It's Aunt Jemima and Martha White. It's Antoine's and the Varsity. It's grits and etouffee. It is not easy to know what it is to be "southern" nor how to discover those "truths." John Shelton Reed, director of the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill, Center for Southern Culture illustrates with humor and keen acumen this complexity in a wide range of books with such engaging titles as *Kicking Back: Further Dispatches from the South* (1995) and *1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South* (1996). As educators and sociologists, we acknowledge that numerical data and the positivist methodology that largely defines the sociological paradigm do not fully describe the area that we study, that we teach about, and for many of us, that we call home.

Although much of the South is now urbanized, the region continues to have rural people and rural roots. Millions live on in rural places and others, present company included, have "rural memories." For them, the South is the chicken houses of Georgia, the peach orchards of South Carolina, and the tobacco fields of North Carolina. The South is Cumberland Island and Mobile Bay; it's Rock City and Stone Mountain; it's the Delta and Peachtree Street; it's the Outerbanks and the Bayou. It's the Bible Belt, the Black Belt, the Stroke Belt, and the Sun Belt. The South is enigmatic to those outside and inside as well. It is a place of cultural ambiguities and, too often, economic and social inequalities. As rural sociologists, we recognize that this diversity forms the context for our teaching, research, and service. This diversity creates our challenge.

## THE RURAL SOUTH

An examination of the South, especially the rural south, shows that not all people nor all places in the South have become full participants in

the American dream. Although many people in the South enjoyed the prosperity of the 1980s and the stock market surges of the 1990s, and cities like Atlanta and Charlotte achieved international prominence in this decade, a tour of many small nonmetro places in the South, not unlike my home town, shows the people left behind, the decline of farming, the visible signs of poverty, and the consequences of the failure to attain a high school degree. I know these people. They are more than numbers in rows and columns; they are more than our data bases describe. They are good people, if an academician can use those words. Too often, however, they experience limited options for employment or personal achievement. They are part of our southern constituent base; therefore, we must ask, what does our vision of rural sociology hold for them?

Research in production agriculture or the basic disciplines will not meet the needs of this rural population. Neither will shifts in farm payments nor humorous articles about barbeque and 'coon dogs. Southerners are largely removed from production agriculture, and many are displaced from manufacturing. Sustained attention to their current problems and possibilities is needed.

The great diversity in social progress in the South is documented in the *Reference Book on Regional Well-Being: U.S. Regions, the Black Belt, Appalachia* (Wimberley & Morris, 1996). It shows that the South is home to a large percentage of the nation's population who live in poverty, that many are unemployed or in low wage jobs, and that a large number have not completed high school. These and other factors converge with high levels of dependence, resulting in poor quality of life for many southerners, both white and black, across the region.

For example, high school graduation has long been recognized as a necessity for access to quality employment and economic security. However, this social indicator shows that the South is home to a large percentage of people who never complete high school. Over 15 million people in the South, 11.5 million whites and 3.5 million blacks, ages 25 and older have not completed high school. This number represents 40 percent of those not graduating nationwide. Over one-third of the 15 million southerners who do not have high school diplomas live in nonmetro areas. In looking at the Black Belt region--the 623 counties stretching across 11 southern states--43 percent of African-Americans do not graduate from high school (Wimberley & Morris, 1996).

Based on the high school graduation data, it is then not surprising that a greater percentage of people in the South live in poverty. The South

has 34 percent of the U.S. population and 41 percent of the nation's poverty. Other regions outside of the South have only about half or even less of the poverty experienced in this region. For example, the South has 45 percent of the U.S. nonmetro population and 55 percent of the nonmetro poor (Wimberley & Morris, 1996). While Atlanta and its suburbs and sister cities in the South may claim corporate growth and a largely college-educated population, small towns and rural areas throughout the South have known the poverty of the loss of agricultural leadership and manufacturing decline. The Black Belt is a case in point.

The disparities observed for the South as a whole are intensified in the 623 Black Belt counties of the South (Wimberley & Morris, 1996). The Black Belt's poverty rate is the highest in the country, higher than that of any major U.S. region or Appalachia; the Black Belt accounts for 18 percent of the U.S. population but 23 percent of the nation's poverty. Furthermore, the Black Belt has 40 percent of the black population and 47 percent of all African-American poverty, 21 percent of the nation's nonmetro people and 28 percent of the nonmetro poverty, and 70 percent of nonmetro black population and 84 percent of the corresponding poverty. Whether for the general population, for African-Americans, for nonmetro residents, or for nonmetro African-Americans, U.S. poverty concentrates more heavily in the Black Belt South than in any other region of the country. Only nonmetro whites in Appalachia have a higher poverty rate than do blacks in the Black Belt. Other indicators of quality of life, such as infant mortality, reveal a similar pattern of disadvantage.

These data suggest that systematic analysis and focused objectives developed through interdisciplinary efforts and constituent involvement will be needed to bring about positive change in the rural South. When I am in a pragmatic vein, I ask of my research, "What difference does this make?" What difference has the USDA, the College of Agriculture, the College of Education, and the discipline of rural sociology made in the lives of Betty Sue and Mary? Be advised: this is not a rhetorical question; when public funds are distributed, the question definitely is not rhetorical. Our future may hinge on effective answers.

## **RURAL SOCIOLOGY AS A FIELD**

Thus, we are back to our opening questions. What is our research agenda? Which issues are at the core and on the periphery? How do we use our descriptive and explanatory work to make a difference? Would we

## *Morris*

be judged as relevant and essential in an increasingly competitive and discerning public arena? As a professional group, we are largely situated in land-grant universities that embrace the tripartite mission of research, teaching, and extension. Collectively and individually, we are active across the three dimensions of the land-grant mission. The questions that I pose today and ask you to ponder with me are these: What are the present goals and intended outcomes for rural society? Who are our constituents? How can we more effectively integrate our teaching, research, and service agendas? How can we more effectively communicate our multiple missions to each other and the public?

Sociology can be traced to Auguste Comte, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim, among others. While they were interested in improving society, their real goal was to understand how it actually operates. As sociologists and educators, we believe in sound basic science; we know the value of fully understanding the complexity of a problem before rushing to application. We also recognize that the scholarship of discovery dominates the reward system of higher education through the weight given to publications in refereed journals in tenure and promotion decisions. Research holds the upper hand over all other forms of scholarship.

But the political and social context in which we work today makes different demands of our profession and is holding publicly-funded universities, not just colleges of agriculture, to higher levels of accountability in order to justify the investments made. The scholarship of application is growing in importance across universities and is prominent in changes occurring in the field of sociology in general. For example, the Society for Applied Sociology reports large gains in membership and attendance at national meetings. A survey conducted by the American Sociological Association and the Society for Applied Sociology found that of 265 reporting undergraduate sociology departments, 184 offer from one to eight undergraduate courses in applied sociology. Fifty-seven percent of the institutions reported having an undergraduate program in applied sociology, and at least 20 percent of those colleges and universities offering undergraduate courses in applied sociology plan to add new courses within the next three years (Ballantine et al., 1992).

I believe that rural sociology is fundamentally an applied field; however, we might ask if our research, teaching, and service reflect this orientation? Does our work, individually and collectively, reflect an applied orientation, or have our university roots moved us closer to a basic research paradigm, a “fidelity to a set of methods,” and to “an examination



of narrower, more precisely defined topics and questions” (Terenzini, 1996, p. 7). Have we moved away from the difficulties and challenges of applied work to embrace a specialization with little usefulness beyond the walls of academe? It has happened in other applied fields, as their research methodologies, questions, and reward structure developed from an internal constituent base with internal rewards and values, and little connection to public issues.

We should ask, “Do students leave courses in rural sociology with an understanding of the distinctions between questions and methodology of research aimed at scholarly theory development and policy development, and questions and methodology of research aimed at the problems of constituent groups?” Have we helped students bridge the gap between knowing the content and methodology of a field and applying those skills and understandings to real world problems? Have we communicated the connections we make between teaching, research, and service to rural development? Have we effectively communicated our expertise to a public and to an administration who increasingly look for relevance in all dimensions? We would be wise to think more deliberately about our instructional mission, our research agenda, and our involvement in service so that we may more effectively communicate what we do, why, and how, along with the importance our efforts hold for the university, the community, and the society.

## **CHALLENGES FOR SOUTHERN RURAL SOCIOLOGY**

Based on the changing environment both within and outside of universities, I offer four challenges to the profession and its adherents.

**1. To remain effective into the next century, we must clearly define the context in which we work, identify our constituent bases, and be more responsive to public needs and interests.**

Pat Terenzini (1996), a distinguished professor of higher education and a leading researcher in the field, describes in his presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education his attendance at a meeting of the Education Commission of the States. He remarks that at this gathering of state and federal higher education policy makers he experienced his “Day of Revelation”: he did not know these important policymakers and they did not know him! He admits in his address to the

leading scholars in the discipline of higher education that he knew little of the problems and issues that were being discussed, including “the strange technical terms, opaque acronyms, references to unfamiliar state and federal regulations” (Terenzini, 1996, p. 5). He quickly points out that he is not alone in this predicament. Like many others in academe, his research agenda often reflects the interests of the discipline and is not so closely coupled to the problems defined as most pressing by professionals working in the broader field of higher education.

Terenzini goes on to note that this is not an uncommon experience. Many others in applied fields in higher education are distant from the issues of their constituent base. Many applied fields have come to emulate the basic science and social science disciplines and have forgotten the connection between research and the worlds of policy and practice. As a profession, we should ask who knows us? How do they know us? What are the issues regularly faced by these constituents? How do those issues of practical importance connect to our current research agendas? How should they influence our future research and practice?

I am not suggesting that we are unable individually to provide examples of projects, activities, and collaborations with constituent groups. The work that I do with Ron Wimberley, Doug Bachtel, and others on the rural Black Belt is one example of trying to understand the region and constituents we serve. I would say, however, that our work does not go far enough in involving the people of the Black Belt--their ideas, their questions, their interpretations. And, to date, our efforts to receive NRI funding for a Black Belt Development Consortium of 1862 and 1890 institutions and constituents have not met with success. Thus, it appears that the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service review panels are of the mindset of many academic faculty, that close association with a constituent group is not seen as desirable. As a result, our constituents too often remain those other academics we meet at conferences, at meetings, and in the pages of journals. They are people who “think like us.”

To increase our relevance, we need to know what our constituents think. We need to ask the question, “Who are our constituents?” How are they involved in identifying the issues, implementing solutions, and evaluating results? And more fundamentally, what are the significant issues and questions for our profession, our field, and our constituent groups? Is there an overlap between our research agendas and the pressing needs of our constituent groups? Do we have effective feedback loops that

keep us on target for activities that make a difference? Do we use advisory committees to generate ideas or rubber stamp our findings? Do we bring constituents in as full stakeholders in our work?

We need to better understand the connections to the world around us, the agencies we serve, and those who expect service. Have we mistaken our peers as our constituents? Individually and collectively, I encourage the Southern Rural Sociology Association and our journal to create new partnerships with those outside the walls of academe. Our role should be to work with our constituents, as colleagues rather than in expert-novice relationships (Christianson & Warner, 1986), to develop solutions that address their needs.

**2. To be effective in adapting to the future, we must enlarge our definition of scholarship and become more problem-focused in our work.**

Since the colonial days, teaching has been a central mission of colleges and universities. The first college founded in the new world, Harvard in 1636, was founded for the very practical reason to prepare young men for leadership in the public and to fill the pulpits of an untamed and uncivilized continent (Rudolph, 1977). Thus, the college performed a utilitarian function for the society. With the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, utility in higher education and the idea of public service were given substantial impetus (Morris & Wimberley, 1993). Following the World War II expansion in student enrollment and federal funding, however, the research mission grew exponentially in land-grant universities, and this activity consumed the dedication of most, if not all, academic faculty. Research affected the organizational structure and reward system of higher education and, ultimately, higher priority was given in promotion and tenure to activities reflecting research (e.g., contracts/grants and publication in peer-reviewed journals) than to any other scholarly activity. Thus, many faculty write for publication in peer-reviewed journals and are reluctant to be come engaged in applied, action-oriented research producing the “lower prestige” technical reports and monographs.

We should learn from history, however. Americans have never embraced the idea of the “ivory tower” and increasingly active legislatures, faced with multiple competitors for the public dollar, apply the question of utility to our universities and departments. We would be wise to explore the question of professional utility and relevance.

In *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, Ernest Boyer (1990), then President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, emphasized that scholarship as discovery is only one form of scholarship, and he encouraged us to enlarge our understanding of scholarship to include the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. Boyer's thinking may help us to redefine the activities connecting research, teaching, and service. In the scholarship of discovery we ask, "What is to be known and what is yet to be found?" In integration we ask, "What do the findings mean?" (Boyer, 1990, p. 19). We interpret the findings for later use. In the scholarship of integration we "underscore the need for scholars who give meaning to isolated facts...to make connections across the disciplines, and place the specialities in larger context" (Boyer, 1990, p. 18). It involves doing research at the boundaries where fields converge. We need to challenge traditional agencies and our colleagues to fund and reward the scholarship of integration so that we may build integrative approaches to real problems that extend beyond disciplinary boundaries.

The third element of scholarship described by Boyer is the scholarship of application. The scholar asks, "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? How can it be helpful to individuals as well as institutions?" (Boyer, 1990, p. 21). This is the merging of research and service to serve an identifiable constituent base. Examples drawn from my work include a needs assessment study for the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (Morris, 1997), a study of North Carolina's Black Belt counties for a N.C. task force (Wimberley, Morris, & Heuer, 1997), and studies of the supply of and demand for health professions for use by the Georgia Student Finance Authority and health-related educational programs (Morris, 1987; Morris & Little, 1996). All of this work began with the scholarship of discovery and moved through the process of integration and application. It is without hesitation that I say that the aforementioned studies have high external value and utility, and those monographs and reports have influenced public policy and opinion. Yet, these same studies command little academic prestige and few rewards. Thus, to satisfy an internal audience and secure the rewards of the academic community, basic research in these areas appear in the *Journal of Allied Health* (Morris & Palmer, 1994) and the *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, (Morris, 1989).

Why do we as a profession value the scholarship of discovery and devalue the scholarship of application? Our public does not hold the same

perspective on refereed and non-refereed publications. And, I must say, no research is more difficult to conduct and challenging to report than that with a waiting constituent audience. We are challenged in the land-grant universities to assign higher internal value to those documents that have external significance; otherwise, our insular standards may result in our downfall.

We should remember that the land-grant universities, as well as institutions such as Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University of Chicago, were founded on the principle that higher education must serve the interests of the larger community. Yet, the culture of universities has not held the scholarship of integration and application in high esteem. However, despite the organizational bias towards the scholarship of discovery, to address the issues of poverty, unemployment, and the environment--leading issues in rural development--we will need an interdisciplinary framework of applied sociology, plus the scholarship of integration and application. Many of the roadblocks that we face today come from the isolation of research from service and the isolation of teaching from both.

Boyer's (1990) fourth dimension of scholarship is the scholarship of teaching, in which the best practices of research and service are brought together in instruction. In our undergraduate and graduate instruction, we can emphasize discovery, integration, and application through practicums, internships, and field-based work. When I include students in service work in which we must propose solutions and options for client-based problems, they see the field in a new light. They see me challenged, puzzled, and learning, as theory and practice interact. They see concepts that appear so one-dimensional within the classroom become dynamic and complex as we inquire within the limitations of time, resources, and the givens of a real problem. This active learning teaches students in ways that lectures or discussions around simulated problems will never accomplish. Field-based work allows faculty to model problem-solving, critical thinking, and negotiation and requires students to integrate their previous knowledge, because real-life problems cut across the artificial dimensions that we have established as disciplines. Finally, field-based work allows faculty to remain relevant and current by addressing problems of consequence, for real clients, in actual settings.

We need to assist our universities and colleges and the next generation of scholars in redefining scholarship. We need to assist our current students and colleagues in seeing the relevance of their study and

work to the larger society. Realistically, the interests of the larger community may no longer be ignored by the community of scholars. Recent attempts to eliminate tenure may be viewed by some as efforts to increase accountability and reinstate relevance in college and university activities. As noted by Ron Wimberley (1995) in his address to the North Carolina Sociological Association, it is time to “move beyond academic sociology or risk being ignored.” In short, we must start with our own practice--by seeking opportunities for interdisciplinary work that includes integration and application, as well as discovery.

**3. To maintain and broaden support for our profession both within and outside of academe, we must focus more on the outcomes of our instruction, research, and service.**

Some fields, such as agriculture, the professions, and art, lend themselves to observable outcomes. We can see a better grass, a new computer program, or a sculpture. In the social sciences, the outcome is often less tangible, and the antecedents and contributors to change are more difficult to identify. However, the difficulties with defining and measuring outcomes do not relieve us of the responsibility to more clearly articulate our goals, to project the outcomes and impact of our work, and to assess the quality of both the process and product.

To increase relevance in what we do, we must re-examine the relationship between societal expectations and outcomes in our activities. To teach another generation of students discipline-specific knowledge without their understanding the relationship of the concepts and theories to public interest, public need, and measurable outcomes is to avoid the reality that is upon the university and each field. What are the intended outcomes for research, service, and teaching in rural sociology? What are our sources of evidence? What are the issues of importance? What are the priorities of our sponsors, customers and ourselves? Are we excellent in the unimportant and mediocre in the relevant? Are we doing things right or are we doing the right things? The public has been the beneficiary of many positive outcomes in agricultural research and extension. A changing public wants the same success in social and economic issues. The establishment of a network of research and extension personnel by the Southern Rural Development Center to examine welfare reform and its impact on rural areas is the kind of focus on outcomes that can make a

difference. To bring about changes in outcomes, we must learn how to form interdisciplinary teams around issues that matter the most.

Performance indicators, student outcomes assessment, and post-tenure review largely are administrative efforts to hold the university and its faculty accountable and to implement societal, not academic, expectations for our professions. It would behoove us to more clearly define the outcomes of our professional work or become subject to an agenda that we may not wholly embrace.

**4. To effect change, we must write more for public consumption to inform policy-makers and public agencies about the relevance of our work to the issues of society.**

Southern rural sociology might best be characterized as multiple in purpose, interdisciplinary by nature, and diverse in research and theory. Academic faculty ask questions, propose hypotheses and theories, and share the results through publication in refereed journals. On the other hand, extension and service faculty are often overwhelmed with requests for consultation and technical assistance, leaving little time for writing or publishing. Therefore, our primary journals, such as *Social Forces*, *Rural Sociology*, and *Southern Rural Sociology*, are refereed and have become highly specialized. These journals, along with others that I have not named, contain the core of our profession's knowledge and research base, and yet, few people beyond our inner circle read or have heard of these journals. Our constituents have become ourselves.

Several associations and leading researchers are beginning to note this phenomenon and are calling for us to make our speaking and writing more relevant and accessible to the public at large and to policymakers, specifically. Examples of writing for the public may be found in editorials, newsletters, or in publications like the *Georgia County Guide*, developed and edited by Doug Bachtel since 1981 (Boatright & Bachtel, 1997). These and other publications educate the public and are widely used by legislators and business people for assessing problems and coming up with answers. Yet, again, the internal currency for this type of writing is often low, while the external circulation is high and the value to the recipient unsurpassed. Again, we must be willing to change our own perspectives of what is important to change faculty behaviors and faculty rewards. We must intensify our personal commitment to be a part of bringing about and supporting the change.

The Provost of Emory University wrote in *Choices and Responsibility* (1994), a report based on a year-long dialogue with faculty and other constituents, that the successful university will have to favor more cross-disciplinary and integrative scholarship and be more sensitive to its public responsibility and relationships. This responsibility includes finding “better ways to bring academic expertise to bear upon social issues” (*Choices and Responsibility*, 1994, p.4). I would suggest that this is a major challenge faced by our colleges and universities. After years of rewarding the scholarship of discovery and isolating service from instruction, the melding of the three is indeed difficult. I would suggest that casting our research and service in publications for public consumption is a major step to communicating our expertise in rural development and in fulfilling our responsibility to bring our academic expertise to bear on issues of public importance.

The challenge is for individuals to strike a balance among the dimensions of his or her scholarly work while, collectively, scholars learn to evaluate and reward individuals on the basis of their assigned responsibilities in teaching, research and service. This challenge can be overcome, in part, by developing unit and individual mission statements and involving an external advisory group in regularly scheduled “peer” reviews of programs to ensure their relevance, usefulness and effectiveness. For too long, we have relied on internal audiences to set our agendas. Our current difficulties in obtaining state and federal funding reflect how poorly we have communicated with our constituents.

## SUMMARY

In conclusion, the title of our program this year is “Rural Development and Emerging Roles of Land-Grant Universities: Research, Teaching, and Public Service.” I hope this program challenges you to think about southern rural sociology, your professional work, and the role we play in the larger academic and societal context. The good news is we still have work to do in the South; the bad news is many southerners are still poor, poorly educated, and under- or unemployed.

Clearly, the public is looking for academic expertise brought to bear on societal problems. Increasingly, we will face the need to justify our field—our research goals, our teaching outcomes, and the effectiveness of our professional service. We will be required to show the connections between our research, instruction, and service to a critical public that does



not wholly embrace nor understand the academic values or organizational culture of a university. A public dialogue with our colleagues and constituents about the goals and agenda for rural development will increase understanding among all participants and will be important to how we define and practice rural sociology in the 21st century.

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