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Introduction to the Special Issues on Southern Rural Labor Markets

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Historically, economic development of the rural South has relied upon a steady demand by firms for the substantial pool of low-skill labor found in the region. For many years, the diffusion of firms seeking cheaper labor and land, as well as lower taxes, fueled an economic expansion. In many respects, this economic growth was able to provide many rural Southern workers with an acceptable standard of living. However, over the past decade, the growing decline in the demand for low-skilled workers has left the rural South with a major development dilemma. Traditional sources of employment for less-skilled rural labor force members are declining as a product of technological change and globalization. While highly-skilled jobs are being created, they are not occurring with the same frequency in rural areas as they are in urban places. Furthermore, a higher proportion of rural southerners lacks the necessary formal educational credentials to qualify for these jobs. This has created a dual dilemma for the rural South in the form of a growing mismatch between the existing skills of workers and the new skill demands of employers.

In September 1998, the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Rural Studies Program at the University of Kentucky sponsored a symposium in New Orleans to examine rural labor force issues in the rural South. It was designed to help stimulate new research by those interested in the topic. In particular, the conference organizers were hoping to build upon the excellent research that had been undertaken by a team of social scientists involved in a multi-state research project (S-259, Rural Labor Markets in the Global Economy) supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The New Orleans meeting lasted two days

and was attended by more than 20 people. TVA Rural Studies, SRDC, the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the Farm Foundation produced a document showcasing the key findings of this meeting titled *Ready or Not? The Rural South and Its Workforce* (Rowley and Freshwater 1999). The report was widely distributed to policy leaders across the rural South. However, a more permanent record of the substantive research presented at the New Orleans conference was required. Fortunately, the Southern Rural Sociological Association recognized the importance of the topic and agreed to publish 14 of the papers that were presented at the conference. Like all articles submitted to *Southern Rural Sociology* (*SRS*), the papers underwent careful peer review and were revised in accordance to the recommendations of the reviewers.

This special issue of *SRS*, coupled with the companion Volume 16, is designed to give careful attention to the changing complexion of the rural South's economy. Together, the two volumes delve more deeply into the workforce demands of employers -- particularly with respect to the education, training and skills required of workers. Moreover, they seek to assess the human resource capabilities of the region's current and emerging workforce. In so doing, they provide an important basis for determining the extent to which rural workers in the South are positioned to become active players in the new economy of the world, or whether they are destined to a life of economic insecurity.

Under the theme, "Southern Rural Labor Markets," the collection of articles contained in Volumes 15 and 16 of *SRS* examines several key questions. For example, what changes are taking place in the economic structure of the region's rural areas? What sectors are expanding, and which ones are contracting? Are the structural shifts taking place in the rural economy of the South accelerating the demand for higher-skilled, better-educated workers? And if so, to what extent are the current human capital endowments of rural southern workers adequate to fulfill the changing needs of rural employers?

Volume 15 begins with a group of papers that explore recent labor market and general economic trends in the rural South. The first article examines shifts in employment and earnings in the nonmetro South over the course of the 1990s. The second paper investigates the role of geographic space in shaping performance of labor markets in the rural South. Finally, the likely impacts of economic globalization on the welfare of rural areas of the region are considered in a third article.

The second section of Volume 15 devotes its attention to the

changing demand for workers in the rural South. Two articles give special focus to manufacturing, the sector that has been a dominant force in the rural economy of the South for more than three decades. A third piece attends to the surging importance of service industries in fueling job growth in many parts of the rural South. The fourth article examines the emergence of industry clusters, and the role such clusters play in promoting job and earnings growth in rural labor markets of the region.

In the next issue of *SRS* (Volume 16), special focus will be given to the multi-faceted issue of labor force supply. The first section of the volume assesses the role of education in shaping the labor market experiences of rural southerners. In particular, labor market outcomes realized by two groups with distinct human capital endowments are analyzed. The first explores the experiences of non-college bound youth, while the second examines those of college-educated southerners. A third article examines rates of return (i.e., earnings) among Mexican workers with varying levels of human capital in the nonmetro South.

A second group of papers examines the unemployment and underemployment experiences of rural southerners. In particular, articles contained in this section explore: (1) the labor force participation of southerners over time; (2) the compositional shifts in the region's workforce; (3) the nature and extent of underemployment in the South by race/ethnicity, gender, age, educational status and residential location; and (4) the influence of employment density and local economic conditions on rates of exit from unemployment.

The last section of Volume 16 contains a single article that investigates the role that migration is playing in reshaping the human capital resources of the nonmetro South. Findings reveal that rural areas of the South have witnessed a substantial influx of new migrants during the course of the 1990s, the historical outflow of the best and brightest from the rural South has slowed, areas with high levels of natural amenities have attracted a good share of new residents, and the rural migration rebound has by-passed most of the impoverished rural areas of the region.

An increasing number of analysts and politicians consider workforce issues to be one of the key factors driving the economic development of the South. Despite the importance attached to this issue, few efforts have been made to address, in a comprehensive and systematic fashion, the growing evidence of a mismatch occurring in the demand

for and supply of workers in the region. Given the growing importance of this subject, and the quality of the papers organized to address this topic, it is our genuine belief that the research being reported in the twin special issue volumes of *Southern Rural Sociology* can provide the critical foundation for understanding labor supply/demand issues in the rural South. More importantly, it can provide much needed guidance on the set of programs and policy strategies that could help stimulate economic and social advancement of the rural South in the years ahead.

References

- Rowley, T. D. and D. Freshwater. 1999. "Ready or Not? The Rural South and Its Work Force." TVA Rural Studies Program, University of Kentucky, Lexington.