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## Rural Leadership and Legacy: Partnering for Progress

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The 2006  
Southern Rural Sociological Association  
Presidential Address

**RURAL LEADERSHIP AND LEGACY: PARTNERING FOR PROGRESS\***

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Preparing to address a group of current and future rural social science leaders is an exciting yet daunting task. As I reflected on the task at hand, I was guided by a desire to encourage our members to continue providing research-based, educational, and collaborative leadership dedicated to strengthening the well-being and vitality of rural America.

Through our few days together most of us will be sharing the fruits of our labors. Months and years of investment and training will be summarized in brief presentations: intriguing snapshots of the rural people, places, and issues that have captured our attention. I hope that we will learn from one another and through the exchange of our ideas we will develop new collaborations to further seek answers to challenging questions that have piqued our interest.

As we look at southern rural America, there is no shortage of opportunities to apply our theoretical models to develop research-based strategies to address social and economic issues. Through partnering with stakeholders, profoundly enhance our communities, institutions, and quality of life.

As I prepared for this address, I relied on the tools that I use to help train our public service and leadership undergraduates at the University of Kentucky. In our leadership courses we strive to engage our students as they learn and apply key leadership principles.

So, back to my original quandary, how do I draw from my research that has focused on social capital, social & economic well-being of rural families, as well as my leadership development training and teaching expertise to address the topic at hand?

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\*Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Rural Sociological Association, Orlando, FL, February 6, 2006. Address correspondence to Patricia H. Dyk, University of Kentucky, Department of Community and Leadership Development, 709 Garrigus, Lexington, KY 40546-0215. Email: pdyk@uky.edu.

As Stephen Covey (1989) would recommend I *began with the end in mind*. What would I like Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA) participants to focus on throughout our annual meeting? What do I see as an important lens of inquiry? As the SRSA Council tweaked the conference title back in June 2005, I wanted to be sure we incorporated four key concepts: four terms that have been important to my research, teaching, and outreach: *Rural Leadership*; *Legacy*; *Partnering*; and *Progress*. These four terms are embedded in the conference theme and represent the lens through which I challenge you to examine our scholarship.

### RURAL LEADERSHIP

Let me begin with *Rural Leadership*. Simply put, leadership is the process ordinary people use when they are bringing forth the best from themselves and other people to effect change.

Good leaders are those who recognize good ideas, are willing to support these ideas, and are willing to commit to seeing the ideas implemented. The term “leader” implies “followers.” Leaders are people who enable others to act and do good work as well. A leader is a person who can influence others to be more effective in working to achieve their mutual goals and maintain working relationships among members. They are *possibility* (not probability) thinkers.

I would like us to expand our notion of leadership beyond individual leaders, to *communities themselves as the leaders*. How are some of our southern rural communities leading the nation? We certainly have had examples of resiliency emerge from hurricane and flood devastated communities. How can lessons learned in rural America have impact guiding decisions, policies, and opportunities in the nation and global economy? Certainly our health and well-being as a nation are dependent upon the quality and quantity of our food and fiber production. How do, can, should, issues in rural America set the standard, stage, or sustainability of policies for all Americans to follow?

### LEGACY

Let us look at the second lens, legacy. We commonly consider legacy to mean anything inherited or passed down from ancestors or predecessors.

My students soon learn that I value legacy as a significant concept. It is important that I impress upon young adults that they did not get to where they are today on their own accord. However, they have the opportunity to be college students as an outcome of choices and challenges faced not only by them, but also by their parents and grandparents, and ancestors. They are indeed a product of

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their socialization (instilled values, norms, customs and ideologies), social location (e.g., race, class, gender, and nationality) and historical context. They are challenged to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before them equipped with additional knowledge, 21<sup>st</sup> century tools and endless opportunities to become engaged citizens committed to improving their communities. I stress that the future of our society rests upon their choices and challenges for they will shape the societal legacy they leave to future generations.

For us as social scientists, one way to operationalize the concept of legacy is in terms of *quality of life*. What is the quality of life (QOL) that we are leaving for future generations?

As my colleagues in the International Society of Quality of Life Studies will attest, quantifying quality of life is a challenge. One particularly useful tool gaining acceptance is the Calvert-Henderson QOL Indicators (Flynn, Lickerman, and Henderson 2000). They have identified twelve domains of social, economic and environmental quality of life. Consider how your work cuts across these 12 domains: Education, Income, Employment, Infrastructure, Energy, Environment, Health, Shelter, Human Rights, Public Safety, National Security and Re-creation. How can you contribute to the knowledge base to highlight and explain rural trends that impact daily life? In what ways might your research or practice inform the choices rural residents make in their education, work, leisure pastimes and civic engagement?

## PARTNERING

That brings us to our third lens, partnering. I am particularly drawn to this concept as it captures an ongoing engagement of participants akin to some key aspects of social capital.

Social capital refers to connections among individuals: social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. Looking at social relationships through this lens resonates with me. I am convinced that we are not designed for isolation. We develop our sense of self in social interactions. Our lives are made more productive by social ties. Most productive people are well-connected individuals in a well-connected society. These are citizens rich in both *bonding* and *bridging* social capital.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam notes that bonding social capital is:

“inward looking and tends to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples include our families, ethnic fraternal

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organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations." (Putnam 2000:22)

These social capital concepts have been helpful in understanding some of my own research results from the Rural Families Speak project (Dyk and Kropczynski 2008). This is a 16-state panel study analyzing interactions among welfare policy, community infrastructure, individual and family circumstances, functioning and well-being for more than 400 low-income rural families. We have examined multiple dimensions of quality of life and social capital.

Family social support, a form of bonding social capital, is one such example (Seiling, Bauer and Dyk 2001). We have found that low income rural families, particularly those who are unemployed, turn first to this type of social capital before seeking other forms of public assistance (Braun, et al. 2002). Bridging social capital was evidenced in employed families who expanded their social networks beyond the extended family to access additional resources. There is something important about work connections that improve families' quality of life beyond increased income (Dyk and Kershaw 2002). These families report access to reduced costs for family photos (e.g., a work buddy's wife works in the Wal-Mart photo department and keeps them apprised of discount offerings) and car repairs (e.g., a co-worker's brother is an auto mechanic so vehicles can be repaired for the price of a few beers and good conversation.) "Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40" (Putnam 2000:23) that facilitates broader opportunities to enhance our quality of life.

Thus as we partner with others, I concur with Putnam that our goal should be to enhance "the positive consequences of social capital—mutual support, cooperation, trust, and institutional effectiveness" and minimize "the negative manifestations—sectarianism, ethnocentrism, and corruption." (Putnam 2000:22)

## PROGRESS

Our fourth lens, progress, reminds us of the importance of visioning the future. As individuals with high levels of human capital (e.g., education, training and experience), we are poised to be change agents in our society.

In preparation for this and other upcoming meetings, I recently reread the 2001 National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges report:

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*Returning to Our Roots: Report of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities.* Many of us here have spent part, if not all, of our careers in the academy and many in the land grant system. The report highlights the challenge of bringing our expertise to bear on community problems. “Among the significant problems facing society today are challenges of creating genuine learning communities, encouraging lifelong learning, finding effective ways to overcome barriers to change, and building greater social and human capital in our communities” (NASULGC 2001:17). We are challenged to be engaged in our communities.

Later this month I will be participating in the ESCOP (Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy) Social Science Subcommittee as we chart a course for the social sciences at our land grants. We will be hearing presentations from leaders in entrepreneurship, childhood obesity, vulnerability research, and economic and community systems. Throughout these SRSA meetings I am listening for additional information gleaned from your presentations that I can contribute to the discussion. So if your expertise speaks to these areas of progress please seek me out and share your ideas with me.

I trust that throughout our next day of sessions you will use these four lenses of Rural Leadership, Legacy, Partnering & Progress to focus your attention on your role in contributing to the strengthening of rural people and places.

Now that I have cast my vision for your engagement in the 2006 SRSA meeting, I would like to further explicate a model of leadership development with implications for strengthening rural community social capital. I cannot resist an opportunity to enhance your potential for being effective change agents in your spheres of influence. My hope is that you will leave this luncheon with at least one new insight into developing your own leadership capacity and motivation to engage others in the leadership development process. I will be building upon a familiar framework, James Kouzes and Barry Posner’s (2002) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. Today I will be drawing upon the first (Model the Way), second (Inspire a Shared Vision), fourth (Enable Others to Act) and fifth (Encourage the Heart) practices.

LEADERS...

*Model the Way*

To lead you must find your own voice, and give voice to your values. How do we find our voice? First, we do so by self-examination, making time for self-reflection, and sharing with a trusted group of individuals who will provide honest feedback and support.

I have had the privilege of participating in two outstanding leadership development programs over the past three years: as an ESCOP/ACOP<sup>1</sup> Leadership Development (now LEAD21) Fellow through NASULGC and a selected participant of the Circles of Power: Women in Leadership Development Program sponsored by the University of Kentucky President's Commission on Women. From these experiences I have distilled four key questions. Please reflect on your personal responses to these queries as I share my own.

*Who am I?* How has my family of origin influenced me? What is my social location? I am a White Polish-American Christian woman, raised in a middle-class California home by a first-generation Catholic father from New York City who spoke nine languages fluently and a Protestant mother from a low-income farming family in the San Joaquin Valley. Hence I grew up in a home where diversity was valued, ethnicity embraced, and hard work fueled by commitment, despite financial reward, was honored.

*What experiences and opportunities have shaped me?* In my case, what experiences and opportunities have ignited my passion for encouraging civic engagement? As a high school student I was fortunate to have been a voting member of the Santa Clara County School Board. Hence early in life I learned a great deal about boards and process, the tug between self interest and community well-being, the essentialness of including stakeholders at the table, and the value of giving voice to youth. As an undergraduate agricultural economist at the University of California Davis I was a leader in student government and organizations as well as a university ambassador. In these roles I had a wide range of experiences from mobilizing students to address key social issues to engaging in discussions with alumni and industry representatives on key concerns for future economic viability of agricultural enterprises. Though these two examples occurred decades ago, I share them to encourage you to consider how you are civically engaging the young adults you are teaching and how intentionally you are bringing teens and young adults to the table in your communities.

*What is core to me?* What am I not willing to give up? For me, it is my commitment to God and family, respect and appreciation for all individuals despite social location or circumstance, and willingness to approach all tasks with a "can-do" attitude. Reflect on what are the non-negotiables in your life. How does this

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<sup>1</sup>Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy/Academic Programs Committee on Organization and Policy

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compliment or conflict with your work situation, the people closest to you and your life goals?

*How do I want to make a difference?* One challenge we issue to our leadership students is to begin developing a personal mission statement. That is, building from what is core to you, what do you want to use as a guide to focus your energy, actions and choices to become a contributing member of society? I am confident that each of you here wants to accomplish something significant through your life's work and likely something that no one else has yet achieved. Consider what you gain energy from doing; what you find intrinsically rewarding. As an example, my personal mission statement stemming from my values and desire to see families, organizations, communities and nations equipped to tackle obstacles to their health, liberty, utilization of gifts and talents, and pursuit of their dreams is: *To help others identify and overcome barriers that keep them from achieving their potential.*

#### *Inspire a Shared Vision*

As leaders we can “envision the future by imagining exciting and ennobling possibilities” (Kouzes & Posner 2002:22). For example, a question at the core of many rural community discussions is: What does a vital, sustainable community look like? We can join the conversation by envisioning such a place: where citizens are valued (assets are maximized); where people have opportunity to exercise their gifts and talents; where the weak are supported by the strong and the weak support the strong; and where hard work pays off.

Many of you are actively engaged bringing key stakeholders to the table to develop the shared vision. Several of you are involved with Visioning, an outreach program of the Cooperative Extension Service, wherein you are helping communities identify their strengths, values, goals, and strategies for sustainability and growth.

Others of you here are participating in the Rural Community College Initiative. The Southern Rural Development Center articulates the shared vision of this collaborative effort (<http://srdc.msstate.edu/rcci/index.html>, retrieved January 15, 2006):

Leadership strategies are important because in many distressed rural areas, there is no widely shared vision for the community, and power is held by a narrow group. Civic alignment—shared commitment among key stakeholders to improving the quality of life for the whole community—is often weak or absent. By preparing new people for leadership roles,



introducing new ideas about economic development, and initiating a broad-based dialogue on the region's future, colleges can bring about alignment in their communities and help create a foundation for equitable economic development.

Perhaps you noticed that in my introduction I articulated what I assumed were shared aspirations of this meeting as I framed what I hope is a common vision for our organization:

Shared Aspirations:

- learn from one another
- develop new collaborations to further seek answers to challenging questions

Common Vision:

- To develop research-based strategies
- To address social and economic issues
- Through partnering with stakeholders profoundly enhance our communities, institutions, and quality of life.

#### *Enable Others to Act*

We apparently cannot accomplish individual goals by ourselves or face new challenges by relying solely on strategies that were effective under different circumstances. Leaders facilitate the process of bringing together teams of people to tackle presenting problems or accomplish a shared vision. They seek ways to enhance the bridging type of social capital by fostering trust and collaboration between individuals, groups, and organizations as they work together to achieve desired results.

A recent collaboration that the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture Center for Leadership Development and Cooperative Extension Service staff were engaged in was the Unbridling the Leadership of Kentucky daylong conference for Kentucky leaders. Through partnering with a group of community and educational organizations and businesses we could bring a high profile leadership speaker to Lexington.

This collaborative offering not only provided opportunities for professional networking, but youth engagement. One staff member of the Center for Leadership Development approached the television production class at a local elementary school. The class consisting of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders produced a series of video clips wherein they interviewed key leaders: coaches, superintendents, and city officials.

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As the clips aired before several thousand Kentucky educators and business and community leaders, these children were shown mutual respect for their insightful questions and high quality production. This was an experience that will shape these youth, our future leaders.

From this example we can see the critical role of service learning and engagement in education. Still fresh in my mind is the material we covered fall semester in my Community Interaction undergraduate class, a core Public Service and Leadership course I developed focusing on the intersection of social psychology and group dynamics applied to civic engagement. One of my long-standing goals has been to equip students with tools—terms, theories, and assessments—on how to identify inter- and intra-personal characteristics. Students keep self-reflective journals—to recognize application of concepts and develop their sociological imaginations. Group projects in class provide opportunities to participate with all 50 classmates and observe and experience group dynamics. The capstone assignment is their service-learning project. The students meet as a small group with their selected community organization, learn how its mission and vision are articulated and operationalized, and engage in a volunteer project related to the mission and goals of the organization. Some examples of their projects include:

- Starting a 4-H Horse Club;
- Cooperative Extension Service Get Fit initiatives—assisting with planning and leading an afternoon of developmentally-appropriate physical activities with senior citizens;
- Mentoring programs at elementary and high schools including working with children with disabilities; and
- Kid’s Café—an evening meal program for low income children sponsored by a regional food pantry.

It is exciting to listen to the students’ end of term presentations as they share their experiences and lessons learned: “They (middle school students) thought we were adults”; “They relied on us”; “We made a difference”; “It was a really worthy cause”; and “They need our support.” These students got it—volunteerism and civic engagement were important and *their* responsibility.

*Encourage the Heart*

I believe I speak for most of us when I say I am encouraged and spurred on to invest more of my time, talent and energy in a particular pursuit when someone else

recognizes my achievements. I have adopted the principle and find myself often repeating a phrase that my husband Warren Dyk implemented many years ago as a guiding principle in personnel management: *reward what you want replicated*. Thus, it behooves those of us in leadership roles to be mindful of celebrating the accomplishments and milestones of those in our spheres of influence. We need to be identifying ways to do this in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our social organizations, in our communities, and in our professional associations.

Indeed, we have done that today during our awards luncheon by rewarding excellence in Research, Teaching, Extension and Public Service. We will continue to recognize successful collaborations here during the SRSA meeting through presentations from the Rural Education Initiative, the Black Belt Initiative, and later this afternoon from the Kentucky Entrepreneurial Coaching Institute program. We celebrate our accomplishments to encourage future endeavors.

I hope that I have impressed upon you today that leaders must always keep the future in their sights. This point is highlighted by Kouzes and Posner (2002:xxviii): “The leader’s unique legacy is the creation of valued institutions that survive over time. The most significant contribution leaders make is not simply to today’s bottom line; it is to the long-term development of people and institutions so they can adapt, change, prosper, and grow.”

My hope is that you share with me this vision for our role in a prosperous southern rural America and are willing to provide leadership for the collaborative efforts we will need to sustain a legacy of continually improving quality of life.

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