

Feature Article

Negotiating Change: Adult Education and Rural Life in Pennsylvania

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Introduction

As adult and community educators many of us find ourselves working or living in rural places. This depiction is abundantly so in Pennsylvania, where 48 of 67 counties are rural, making the state one of the most rural in the nation.

Further, there appears to be no lack of interest in rural people and places. To say that the information available on rural Pennsylvania is *vast* or *complex* goes beyond understatement. The amount of material is *monumental*—somewhat *overwhelming* even. A simple search of the Internet reveals a vast array of university research papers, government publications, and special interest group analyses that address an equally daunting list of issues that have an impact on rural parts of the Commonwealth. Add to the mix the fact that these materials are produced by people who see their areas of interest as critically important to rural culture, and you may well throw up your hands in frustration. Whether addressing the environment, industry, education, healthcare, agriculture, the service sector, tourism, issues of diversity, drug and alcohol addiction, or criminal justice, the creators of this information all speak from a specific place with specific concerns.

This paper seeks to help congeal this extensive literature by asking (a) what, from the myriad alternatives offered, appear *really* to be the most pressing issues that have an impact on rural regions of the state, (b) how are these issues affecting rural communities and the people

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who live in them, and (c) what role might adult educators play in sustaining and enabling the Commonwealth's rural people and places? Such questions seem critical for adult educators working actively with rural residents, regardless of context.

Selecting “Pressing Issues”

Clearly I come to this work with my own prejudices and preconceptions about what is and is not most pressing to my rural friends and neighbors. Nevertheless, there is some method to this madness. The issues noted within this work were arrived at by analyzing and critiquing those areas identified as important by academics and policy analysts (“the literature”) and the numerous surveys circulated by university and governmental agencies, primarily the *2001 Citizen's Viewpoint* survey conducted by The Pennsylvania State University (Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, 2001) and the *2003 Attitudinal Survey of Pennsylvania Rural Residents* developed by The Center for Rural Pennsylvania (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004).

Having spent most of my life in rural parts of the state, I have come to appreciate the unique and defining qualities of rural places and to believe that certain aspects of rurality are worthy of special attention. Nevertheless, the rural Pennsylvania of my youth, with small, family-owned dairy farms; stable nuclear and extended families; and abundant extractive industries providing well-paying, lifetime work, has changed and, likely, will never return. For many rural residents that sense of change permeates their view of contemporary life. On the other hand, many rural adult educators may not be familiar with these cultural shifts or be sensitive to how they continue to affect rural ways of living. While a work such as this is far from comprehensive, it does provide a jumping off point for understanding better the issues and opportunities currently facing the Commonwealth's rural population—and this seems like a good place to begin.

What is “Rural?”

The term “rural” has been defined in various ways at various times. A lengthy discussion of this evolution, however, seems incidental to the work at hand. After an evaluation of the 2000 census data and a series of statewide meetings, The Center for Rural Pennsylvania developed a flexible-yet-timely definition which was chosen for this analysis: counties

and school districts are considered “rural” if their population densities are less than 274 persons per square mile; municipalities are *rural* if they have population densities of less than 274 persons per square mile or total populations of less than 2,500—unless more than 50% of the population lives within an urbanized area (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2003a).

Nevertheless, I feel strongly that the term *rural* cannot simply be defined by the counting of people in a given physical space. While low population density is generally descriptive of rural life, the development of more localized definitions can lead to the identification of other equally important rural qualities, such as locally-based independence, intimacy with nature, and the importance of shared values and collective responsibility (Ritchey, 2002). While this work will be limited to a discussion of rurality as defined by place, I think that it is important to note that the term is not only about *where* one lives but also about *how* one lives. At the outset, it might be helpful to provide a brief picture of rural Pennsylvania in two descriptive and often assessed areas: the demography of the state and the region’s current economic status.

Demographics

With few exceptions the demographics of rural Pennsylvania are predictable. Using the definition presented above, nearly one in four Pennsylvanians lives in a rural area. However, contrary to popular thought, Pennsylvania’s rural population has actually grown faster than its urban counterpart, increasing by 7% from 1990 through 2000, compared to a 3% increase for urban counties. In 2000 the state had some 2.9 million rural residents who were typically white, married, high school graduates, and in their late thirties. (All of the demographic data in this section come from The Center for Rural Pennsylvania [2003b] report, “Socio-demographics—So That’s a Rural Pennsylvanian.”)

Indeed, the rural Commonwealth remains highly homogenous on various levels, but it is particularly so in terms of race, where 98% are white and 99% are native-born Americans—with 82% having been born in Pennsylvania! The number of minorities living in rural Pennsylvania, however, has tripled since 1990 with Black, Hispanic, and mixed-race residents each accounting for roughly 1% of the total rural population.

Seventy-five percent of rural Pennsylvania households are composed of families (two or more persons living together who are related by marriage, birth, or adoption), 35% of which are married couples with

children and 8% of which are single parent households. Nine percent of rural residents live in poverty; however, the scenario changes markedly when we look at specific populations: 12% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty, as do 15% of single-father families and 33% of single-mother families. Figures are respectively lower for both the elderly and working age adults at 8% each.

Employment in Rural Pennsylvania

Population growth is generally thought of as a sign of economic vitality. People often relocate in pursuit of new opportunities, and additional businesses are then created to service growing communities. As noted above, Pennsylvania's rural population grew by 7% from 1990 through 2000. It is interesting to note, however, that the rural counties with the fastest growth rates over that period (Pike, Monroe, and Wayne) are located in the northeast portion of the state and can attribute much of their increase to a rapid influx of new residents from New Jersey and New York, many of whom were in search of affordable housing, not work (Shields, 2002).

As of 2001 one million rural Pennsylvanians were working in some 76,000 different businesses (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2004). During the 1990s Pennsylvania's traditional rural employers (agriculture, forestry, mining, and manufacturing) continued to struggle. Nevertheless, during that same period rural Pennsylvania added some 98,762 jobs. The lion's share of this growth, however, occurred in those areas that comprise what has become known as the "new economy"—areas like health, social, and business services and retail sales. For example, from 1990 to 2000 the health services sector added more than 16,000 jobs—a 21% increase (Shields & Vivanco, 2004). In comparison, during that same time the manufacturing industry in rural Pennsylvania, while gaining nearly 800 new businesses, lost *some 23,000 workers* (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2004). Furthermore, in 2000 the average rural worker was being paid roughly \$9,850 less than her or his urban counterpart.

Two other areas of growth in the rural economy should be noted: tourism and cable or other pay television services. Tourism accounted for 126,300 rural jobs in 2001, while the cable industry experienced 296% growth for the 10 years ending with 2000, adding over 2,500 jobs (Shields & Vivanco, 2004).

The Theme of Loss in Rural Life

Based on the description given above, we can make some observations:

- Rural Pennsylvania has *less racial and ethnic diversity* than its urban counterpart (minorities make up roughly 3% of the rural population, compared to 22% in urban areas)—but the population is changing rapidly.
- Rural Pennsylvanians *make less money* than their urban counterparts (over \$9,000 less than urban Pennsylvania workers and over \$8,000 less than the national average)—at a time when self-sufficiency and social capital, often assumed to help offset some expenses in rural areas, appear to be decreasing.
- *Many vulnerable rural residents (single parents and children) experience poverty* at rates similar to their urban counterparts—contrary to popular perception.
- *Rural populations are growing*—but not necessarily because of economic expansion.
- Rural economies continue a *long-term transition out of manufacturing* and into more service-oriented businesses—a phenomenon that continues to pose both opportunities and challenges for rural residents.

So what can we make of this picture? At first, the description and analysis given above may appear to be “old news”—and, indeed, much of it is. Nevertheless, I contend that the long-term presence of these observations in the literature is far from unimportant. Their persistence speaks both to the nature of rural change and the way that change continues to be dealt with in rural communities. The notion that “things aren’t like they used to be” pervades both the literature and my ongoing conversations with rural residents who very clearly sense that their world is altering in a variety of ways: economic, political, and cultural. As an ethnographer my analyses and critiques tend generally toward the thematic, and what appears to exist is a *theme of loss*—a theme very much attached to *change*. Indeed, for many longtime Pennsylvania residents change is simply a synonym for loss. To help clarify this assessment, let us turn to the specific “pressing issues” in rural Pennsylvania to which I alluded earlier.

Jobs

Recent surveys indicate that rural Pennsylvania residents feel that their economies are struggling and that the “availability of jobs” is the most pressing issue facing rural parts of the state (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004, p. 7). A major factor at play in job creation is the continuing transition from manufacturing and extractive industries to a service-oriented economy. That jobs are changing and that many of the newly created jobs are not in traditionally rural industries gives many residents pause for concern.

This economic shift, while critical, is hardly new. The Commonwealth has a rich history in agriculture, mining, forestry, and various industries, including steel-making, textiles, and railroading. However, over the past 50 years, each of these areas has experienced increased competition and consolidation; consequently, while they remain viable sources of employment for many rural residents, they are no longer the dominant forces shaping rural work and life. While the Commonwealth firmly joined the “rust belt” by 1970, with pervasive declines in the steel-making, railroading, and mining industries (Jenkins, 2002), and while the amount of Pennsylvania land used for farming began a steady decline in 1950 (from 14 million acres to 7.2 million in 2000) (Jenkins, 2002), rural Pennsylvanians still lament the loss of these industries and appear to maintain the belief that, in time, they will return as dominant aspects of the rural economy.

Much has been written concerning the entry of rural areas into the “new economy,” a world with “businesses competing in a worldwide marketplace where high-technology and information-based goods and services are increasingly important, and knowledge and information have increased value” (Shields & Vivanco, p. 5). What is troubling is that many of the jobs associated with this shift—many tied to health, education, and various human services—pay significantly less than the manufacturing jobs they are replacing. Here is an example where the theme and the reality of loss collide. Indeed, from 1990 to 2000, rural Pennsylvania’s greatest employment growth was in jobs earning less than \$22,000 annually, or what Shields and Vivanco term “the low category” of average income (p. 10).

Such information is sobering because the per-worker earnings of a region’s most rapidly growing fields provides some indication to the overall health of the marketplace. The wages paid by service industries, if they are to constitute the foundation of our future rural economy,

must pay wages sufficient to support the other industries in their wake, including the various entrepreneurial and cottage businesses that are such a part of many rural communities.

Health Care

Rural Pennsylvania is aging, and an aging population generally demands additional healthcare, particularly long-term care. The number of rural residents over the age of 65 grew by more than 9% from 1990 to 2000; the population older than 85 grew by an amazing 43% (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, 2002). As you will remember, this increase juxtaposes with a total rural growth rate of about 7% for the same period.

While the provision of healthcare services was the largest source of new jobs during the decade ending in 2000, the availability of health-related services remains a primary concern for many rural residents (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004). This concern appears to be well-founded. In June, 2004, the Pennsylvania Rural Health Association reported a “lack of support systems for medical and allied health personnel; lack of equipment, technology and medical/surgical providers; policy and regulations that limit the scope of practice for non-physician providers of care; and lack of social and educational opportunities” for healthcare workers in rural parts of the Commonwealth (Pennsylvania Rural Health Association, 2004, p. 5). Once again, loss and change appear closely linked in Pennsylvania’s rural communities. While rural areas have always contended with limited healthcare, the unprecedented graying of the rural landscape brings additional stress to an already inadequate industry.

Crime

According to the U.S. Department of Justice,

Heroin trafficking and distribution are the [U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)] Philadelphia Division’s top enforcement priorities, especially as investigations reveal that trafficking organizations, in the search for new customers and higher profits, are relocating from inner city neighborhoods into some of the smaller cities and rural areas in Pennsylvania. This trend remains a significant concern to state and local law enforcement, community,

and treatment officials, who are worried about the increasing violence and number of overdose deaths that accompany the spread of heroin into their neighborhoods. (U.S. DEA, 2005, p.1)

Furthermore, “DEA and state law enforcement continue to discover and dismantle clandestine methamphetamine laboratories throughout the state, especially in rural northwestern Pennsylvania, which is becoming known to local officials as the ‘meth capital of Pennsylvania’” (U.S. DEA, 2005, p. 1). As in urban areas, lack of opportunity and a weakening of social connections and communal activities may be providing a fertile ground for illegal activities to flourish and expand. In addition, many older rural residents are less likely to confront or otherwise resist criminal activities in their communities for fear of reprisal (Ritchey, 2002). Indeed, as the social networks binding rural communities weaken and supports for collective action become more tenuous, active resistance of crime becomes more individualized and, perhaps, less likely.

The Environment and Land Use

As noted earlier, one of the primary images associated with rurality is open, physical space. In our collective minds’ eye, the term “rural” conjures up visions of rolling fields, thick forests, and deep quarries. Land, work, and family are linked intimately to rural life; thus, protecting and enhancing the environment remains a pressing issue for most rural residents.

However, land use is also about money. A new housing development containing many children can provide a windfall of municipal tax revenue, as well as the peripheral jobs that help create and support rural communities, including contractors, teachers, and daycare workers. Indeed, community and regional planning is driven largely by the expenditures and revenues associated with the use of space. A recent study on land use in 11 rural Pennsylvania townships states that “residential land on average contributed less to the local municipality and school district than it required back in expenditures” and “commercial, industrial, and farm- and open land provided more than they required back in expenditures” (Kelsey, 1997, p. 2). As the farm economy has contracted, rural communities in the Commonwealth, most of them desperate for well-paying jobs, have competed for limited

industrial and commercial business—a process that, among other things, has fostered the dramatic growth of prisons in rural parts of the state.

Furthermore, while rural Pennsylvania residents still value the preservation of open space, they also believe that state and local governments should play a very limited role in the regulation of land use through zoning regulation and restriction (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004). Although rural residents continue to value limited growth, they do not see the need for increased government regulation of most ecological issues like monitoring and regulating drinking water quality, preserving wilderness/woodland areas, and strengthening regulation of mining and drilling (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004).

This lack of support for an increased planning role by local and state government is juxtaposed with an overwhelming desire by rural residents for government to become involved in the creation of jobs and economic opportunities in rural places. Fully 87% of respondents to the *2003 Attitudinal Survey of Pennsylvania Rural Residents* stated that “higher priority should be focused on fostering the availability of jobs” by government (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004, p. 7).

Technology

Many academics and policy analysts see the expansion of technology as a major means for revitalizing rural communities while maintaining the integrity of rural life. Glasmeier and Wood (2003) note that “advanced telecommunications infrastructures are decisive factors in today’s business decisions and are essential to attracting new business and industries to rural areas in the future” (p. 1). Furthermore, they state that rural business owners see Internet use as vital to their operations. While telephone service is provided universally in rural Pennsylvania (according to the 2000 census, 98% of Pennsylvania rural residents had telephones in their homes), business and industry require broadband access for the transmission of large amounts of data.

Furthermore, rural education providers and rural learners are limited by this lack of adequate access. E-learning opportunities become more cumbersome and less enticing when slow or failed connections make on-line work frustrating and time consuming. Various organizations at the state and federal level are engaged actively in the promotion of broadband in rural parts of the Commonwealth; however, a comprehensive plan and timeline for creating this network does not exist.

Interestingly, while educators and legislators see technology as critical to the long-term success of rural Pennsylvania, rural residents appear to feel otherwise. Recent research indicates that few rural residents (22% of those surveyed) feel computer/internet training should be emphasized by government-sponsored programs and that “people were less likely in 2003 than in 2000 to give high priority to increasing the technical skills of workers . . . and promoting Pennsylvania’s international trade” (Willits, Luloff, & Higdon, 2004, pp. 12-13). For many in rural Pennsylvania entry into the new economy continues to be a difficult and slow transition.

Family and Rural Ways of Living

Over the past several decades the nation’s population gradually has decentralized. This decentralization has been fueled by various things, including a boom in new construction, low interest rates for financing, and a corresponding increase in the cost of urban living. The conflict that has arisen from this sprawl is more than just an issue of land use; it has an impact on issues of class and context as well. MacTavish and Salaman (2003) note that many rural communities experiencing residential growth through decentralization have also seen significant population segregation as new homes are constructed and existing communities isolated and overlooked. In these regions—including some with which I am personally familiar in central portions of the Commonwealth—upscale developments are constructed to attract wealthy newcomers who bring with them their suburban expectations and sensibilities. These developments generally are constructed at the peripheries of small, rural enclaves that then contain “poor families in what are emerging as rural slums” (Mactavish & Salaman, 2003, p. 78). In addition, as rural areas become more suburbanized, formally agrarian lifestyles focused primarily on family are replaced by typically suburban ways of living with long commutes and evenings spent transporting children to dance and music lessons or competitive sports.

Many longtime rural residents are also making long commutes for work as local employers close or consolidate operations. Such long drives can add additional stressors to already challenging lives, including the need for daycare or eldercare, increased transportation expenses (including maintenance costs), and the loss of traditional activities like family meals, helping with homework, or attending community events.

Discussion and Conclusions

That rural Pennsylvania is changing is, indeed, “old news”—it has been and always will be changing in one way or another. Furthermore, that this change involves loss also appears true on a variety of levels. Rural Pennsylvania needs long-term employment opportunities that pay a livable wage and provide reasonable benefits. Rural Pennsylvania needs increased healthcare opportunities as both a source of well-paying jobs and as a response to increased need among an aging population. Rural Pennsylvania needs to manage its land in a way that protects its distinctive qualities while providing incentives for the relocation of business and industry. To that end rural Pennsylvania needs to increase access to broadband as a means of attracting new jobs, enhancing medical care, and expanding educational opportunity.

However, in a larger world that has grown so comfortable with change (so much so that change has become accepted almost universally and uncritically as *good*) rural Pennsylvania has been a point of resistance and, as a result, has maintained a distinctive permanence that is both its treasure and its burden. This resistance has not sheltered it from many of the social ills that are thought of typically as urban issues; alcoholism, teen pregnancy, and abusive behavior of various kinds have always been present in rural communities. These problems were, perhaps, dealt with in different ways, but the postcard image of rural places never has existed fully.

Within this context the challenge for adult educators is more subtle. From a practical standpoint, rural places must continue to change, and adult educators must seek out opportunities to encourage and facilitate that change in ways that strengthen traditional rural ways of living while shattering those aspects of rurality that isolate and debilitate. Such work is not limited to context and can take place as easily on the shop floor as it can in the church or food bank.

To begin, rural Pennsylvania simply must come to terms with the diversity that is our contemporary culture—diversity that is racial, sexual, political, and religious. Perhaps no other aspect of rural community—real, genuine, long-term community—is more important than overcoming the suspicion and fear rural residents have concerning people “not from around here.” As a rural person this comment is painful to me, and I do not wish to perpetuate the equally mythic “Jed Clampett” image of rural residents. Nevertheless, as our rural areas diversify,

adult educators working in every context will have ample opportunity to open their students to the richness that diverse cultures bring to our world and to participate in how that diversity is negotiated in new forms of rural community. Indeed, this opportunity is one of facilitating the creation of a new rural landscape where the debate is more cultural than economic, a world that remains grounded in local ways of living and learning while incorporating the lived experiences of an ever-changing and expanding population.

Second, adult educators must take this work beyond the confines of their paid professions and into the public square where border crossing can have substantive effect. At my university the campus gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered (GLBT) organization sets up a booth at the local county fair. The booth serves two functions—to educate local residents on GLBT issues and to counsel GLBT residents in this very rural area. Their presence is not meant to be confrontational (although it might be viewed as such by some) but rather to begin a discussion that presses toward a richer, more inclusive form of rural life. Such work, however, takes courage, and rural adult educators will be at the forefront of these efforts.

Adult educators must also have greater sensitivity to the role that technology possesses—and continues to play—in rural parts of the state. Our uncritical abandonment to technology as a universal good ignores the potential that it holds to alter significantly some of the fundamental social connections that define rural life. In discussing e-learning Carr-Chellman (2005) points out that, very often, technology “tends to disconnect people rather than connect them” (p. 150). Many rural residents have seen the isolating effects of technology in their own communities and, understandably, are suspicious of its long-term effects on how people interact and spend their non-working time.

As a rule, educators tend to problematize their practice, venturing into rural communities to “fix” or otherwise enlighten students—a dichotomy that begins with the presumption of their fundamental deficiency or neediness. We must begin to assess more thoroughly our educative role in rural places and to serve as mediators or facilitators in these cultural shifts. The task calls for the creation of something new that demands that we appreciate and incorporate both rural and non-rural perspectives.

Finally, achieving all of the items listed above demands that adult educators take the time to understand better the contexts in which they work and the changing landscape of their communities. Such an

understanding is necessary in order to bring all voices into the rural community discussion and to help negotiate something richer and more sustainable. It is my belief that much of the resistance to change in rural places has come from our “putting the cart before the horse” and assuming that rural residents would simply differ with our well-reasoned and empirically produced arguments. As a result, the economic, technological, and social issues discussed earlier often have been addressed without a thorough appreciation for local life.

Such a process is not about assimilation but, rather, negotiation and will demand that educators make such conversations a priority in their work. It will demand that time be given for cultural conversations even in those areas where the primary focus is skill training and development. From ESL educators to extension agents, from religious educators to e-learning providers the process will involve both content and contextual knowledge that is blended to encourage, not assimilation or enculturation, but the creation of something new, vibrant, and focused on possibility not loss.

The face of life in rural Pennsylvania is, indeed, changing, and providing some direction to that change will require the efforts of adult educators everywhere—in rural and urban settings alike. The energy and excitement of this enterprise is limited by our ingenuity and passion for those people and places we serve and seek to empower. The preservation of rural life requires less “either/or” thinking and the promotion of a “both/and” process of development. It requires that we spend as much time developing local knowledge as we do developing content knowledge. It requires that we care enough about rural people and places to offer them a glimpse of the larger world without insisting that they abandon their cultural and historical moorings. It speaks to a reexamination of what Brookfield (1995) called our “paradigmatic assumptions” (§ 6) concerning what adult education is for and can be in rural places, and it demands the compassion and care not generally found in a spreadsheet or textbook.

More than anything, the literature reveals the slow process of change in rural places. As mentioned earlier, such a pace is unique to rural life and, while frustrating, can say more about our “non-rural” world and its frenetic (even chaotic) pace than anything else. The preservation of rural culture will be possible only if we are able to take the time necessary to understand and appreciate the unique qualities in all our stakeholders and to promote in them new ways of working and living. The

accomplishment of this goal will require time, patience, and a broad understanding of what makes rural life unique and worth maintaining.

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