

Strategies to Revitalize Rural America

Strategy #4: Land Grant Universities

The Role of Land Grant Universities

Land grant universities have a critical role in revitalizing agricultural communities.

They can focus their research on strengthening family farming and ranching. They can develop outreach programs that support small business, leadership, and community development. And by making education affordable and accessible to rural people, they give them access to the knowledge they need to thrive and lead their communities in the 21st century.

Refocusing ag research

Choices about what research is done shape agriculture. The past focus of agricultural research has driven technological change in directions that reduce opportunity in agriculture and rural communities.

The emphasis has been on developing expensive new technologies for input companies to sell that enable fewer and larger farms to produce the nation's food. In many cases, private companies developed the products, and land grant universities refined the production systems to put them to use.

That has helped corporations that sell inputs to farmers capture a bigger share of the profit in the food system. As their increasingly expensive inputs replace the management and skills of producers, they do more of what is involved in producing food. And their profit share grows.

Roundup Ready soybeans for example, have replaced much of the management in corn-soybean production. Seed prices and company profits have risen. Farmers' margins have narrowed, in part because seed costs have risen and in part because the reduced management requirements have enabled large farms to grow faster and drive up cash rents and land purchase prices.

The farm and ranch share of food system profit is shrinking at a rate that would take it to zero by the year 2030, according to research by University of Maine Agricultural Economist Stewart Smith.

Agricultural research has also enabled the shift to large corporate operations by creating production systems where management can be separated from labor and moved into the office. That allows labor to be provided by unskilled low-wage workers.

The development of confinement systems with a controlled environment was the linchpin in the industrialization of hog production because it routinized the work and reduced the judgment that had to be exercised by the person in the barn.

Our land grant universities could be powerful tools to steer technology in a different direction. Every relevant poll demonstrates that most people don't want the

corporatization of agriculture and dying rural communities.

As public research institutions in a democratic society, our land grant institutions have an obligation to seek out and prioritize research that responds to the needs and aspirations of their constituents and helps create the kind of future they want.

There are promising research avenues for strengthening family farming and ranching. We need research focused on developing new knowledge and production systems that enable producers to increase their incomes by using more intensive management and skilled labor in the field and barn to reduce the need for purchased inputs and add value to their production.

Such research would build on the competitive strength of family operations relative to corporate agriculture – the presence of a highly motivated, skilled and experienced owner operator working in the field and barn.

More research is needed in new livestock production systems like hoop houses for hogs and intensively managed grass-based dairy and beef cattle systems that minimize capital expenditures and maximize management in the field and barn.

A great need exists for research in agro ecology – the study of the interactions between living organisms in the field and how they are affected by management practices. Such research would provide new knowledge and management strategies that farmers could use to minimize pest problems, enhance nutrient availability, and reduce the need for purchased inputs.

Research is needed to enable family farmers and ranchers to secure premium markets. Today, the best opportunities to increase farm income lie in responding to unique demands of consumers not met by conventional agriculture. There are a variety of high value niche markets.

Land grant universities can help family farmers and ranchers capture those opportunities by providing market research – to determine the demand, price, and key product characteristics for premium markets – and production research on how to produce for them.

Although individual researchers have responded to many of these needs, there is a profound absence of institutional leadership. It's time for land grant universities to focus their agricultural research programs on supporting the kind of agriculture most of their constituents want. There are good places to start, including:

- Create an integrated research strategy to reinvigorate family farm and ranch livestock production. Family farm hog and dairy production is particularly under siege. Rural people and the public consistently demonstrate a strong preference for family farm livestock production. Our land grant universities should respond.
- Create an integrated research program on strategies to earn a middle class income on 640 acres. Analyze the strategies being used by the farmers making it work.

- Focus research on production strategies and systems that generate more income per acre.
- Establish research centers focused on enabling family farmers and ranchers to tap high value markets.
 - Create a new research and administrative position with the responsibility of analyzing alternative directions for future research, identifying new research with potential to increase family farm opportunities, and working with land grant ag researchers to plan their future research so it strengthens family farms and ranches.

Land grant universities also have critical roles to play in small business and community development. They have broad expertise and the capacity to deliver it to rural people through their extension services.

Provide training and technical assistance to support small business formation

Land grant universities can offer small business management courses and technical assistance in business planning. They can offer courses in E-commerce to help family farms and small businesses develop strategies to use the Internet to reach new distant customers.

They can provide technical assistance in transferring small businesses from retiring owners to new entrepreneurs, including developing innovative transfer models and contracts that work for both parties. Extension programs could help link retiring business owners with prospective entrepreneurs interested in taking over.

Support rural development initiatives and enhance the effectiveness of rural leaders

Land grant colleges can provide community-based educational programs on alternative development strategies, assist communities in analyzing development options, and link communities to development resources.

They can provide technical assistance in community planning that engages the public and develops broad buy-in. They can deliver leadership development programs in rural communities to help rural leaders hone their skills.

Provide rural people access to lifelong learning through distance education

If rural small businesses and family farms and ranches are to compete with large corporate enterprise, they must have access to educational opportunities. If rural communities are to thrive, rural citizens and leaders must have opportunities to build their knowledge and skills in community development and governance.

The Internet makes it possible to deliver college courses directly to the homes of rural people. But it is expensive and time consuming to develop distance education courses.

By making distance education a priority, identifying the educational needs of rural people and making those courses available, land grant universities can help build a future for rural people and communities.

Keep higher education affordable and accessible

A well educated citizenry and work force is a critical development asset to any community. That is no less true in rural communities, where a higher proportion of people are expected to be leaders – in their own businesses and in community institutions. But incomes are lower in rural areas, making the rising cost of education a greater burden and barrier.

Land grant universities were created to make education affordable and accessible to ordinary people. Fulfilling that mission is critical.

By keeping tuition at affordable levels and providing financial aid to low and moderate income students, land grant colleges can ensure rural people access to the education that can help rural America thrive in the future.

One innovative approach would be to provide college loan repayment assistance to students who work or start businesses within the state but don't make enough money to make their student loan payments.

Currently, students who have to borrow heavily to get through college are almost forced to move to metropolitan areas (often out of state) where pay is higher.

People's universities

Land grant colleges were created to be the people's university – to help people build better lives and stronger communities. That mission is as critical to rural America today as at any time in history. It should remain a priority of land grant universities.