

Collaboration: A Condition for Advancing Federal and State Rural Development Research

SARAH A. LOW¹

Associate Professor of Regional Economics and Heinkel Chair in Agriculture
University of Missouri

The views expressed in this article are those of the individual author/authors and do not represent the views of or an endorsement by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, or the Federal Reserve System.

To bolster the evidence base underlying U.S. rural development policy and practice, this chapter shares ideas about how to reorient and better support rural development research work underway within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Cooperative Extension System (CES). In a 2020 essay, I reflected on rural development research and policy given my own experiences.² The ideas posited in this chapter are an outgrowth of those insights and the discussions they generated.³

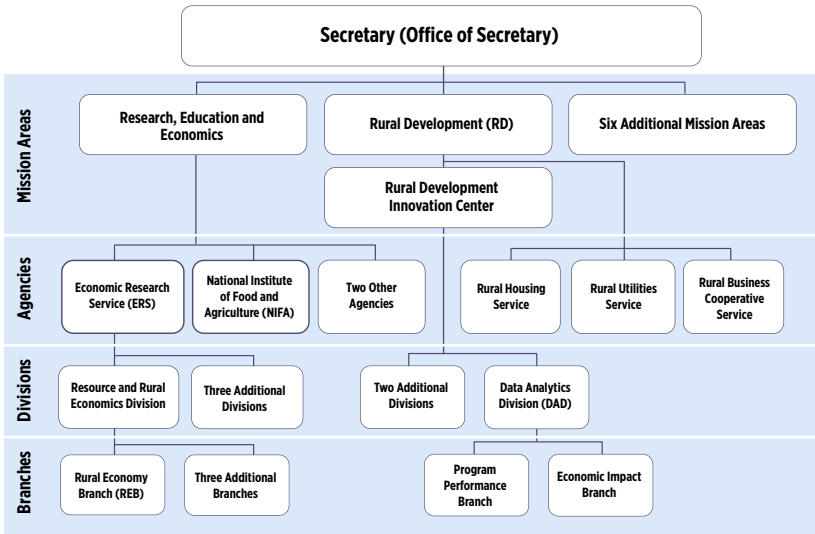
I start with ways that federal researchers who are engaged in rural development problem-solving might better serve U.S. rural development stakeholders. Then, I turn to the CES and propose that a more centralized and better-coordinated approach to rural development applied research and outreach education could ensure more equitable access to CES resources, and generate more relevant and timely research-based insights. Finally, I make a call for a systematic way to increase communication and collaboration that could enhance the U.S. rural development evidence base and practice.

The Federal Government’s Work Building the Rural Development Evidence Base

The Rural Economy Branch (REB) of the USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) and the Data Analytics Division (DAD) of the USDA’s Rural Development mission area are two federal groups working to develop the evidence base for U.S. rural development policy and practice (see Figure 1). In this section, I offer some thoughts on how ERS and then DAD could better serve rural development policymakers and practitioners. Both of these groups are currently expanding, so an incredible opportunity exists to shape rural development research at the national level.

ERS is a tremendous asset for the U.S. rural development community. It has access to several pricey proprietary data sets, confidential administrative records and a multidisciplinary research team devoted to rural development. However, opportunities exist to better leverage these assets. In short, it is difficult for ERS researchers to be as nimble (timely) and connected (available, responsive) as their extension or academic colleagues.

Figure 1: Organization of USDA Groups Working on U.S. Rural Development Research and Policy



Source: USDA and author’s personal communication.

Timeliness

ERS researchers are most rewarded for producing journal articles and technical reports—outputs that generally take years to complete and reach the end user. ERS’s review and approval process makes it difficult for staff to offer timely research to public policymakers and practitioners. Analysis or research accessible to the general public is subject to months, if not years, of peer review and managerial scrutiny. These delays are attributed in part to ERS’s status as a federal statistical agency⁴—a designation that comes with statutes that guide the relevance, accuracy and objectivity of federal statistical products. Although it is important to ensure that the analyses and conclusions published by ERS are based on sound evidence, it is equally important to ensure ERS’s work is timely enough to be relevant. Further, the federal research promotion system,⁵ as interpreted by ERS, disincentivizes the type of timely and responsive topical work that could benefit rural development practitioners most.

ERS Researchers Face Challenges and Opportunities

The USDA's Economic Research Service conducts objective, high-quality research to enhance private and public decision-making on various topics pertinent to rural America. In 1983, ERS had an Economic Development Division that was devoted to economic and social conditions in rural America, with 90 employees—10% of ERS at the time.⁶ Today, ERS has a Rural Economy Branch with just 13 employees—less than 5% of ERS today;⁷ most of these staff members were hired after the ERS headquarters relocated to Kansas City, Missouri, in 2019. REB produces data products and reports that are familiar to those working in rural development. This work includes “State Fact Sheets,” “County Typology Codes,” the “Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America” and defining a variety of commonly used rural terms. Similarly, ERS's annual Rural America at a Glance publication and its periodic reports on rural development issues, such as education, health, poverty and business resilience, are widely used by practitioners, policymakers and researchers.⁸

The rural development research base would be stronger if ERS more regularly produced, published and promoted timely, short, digestible analyses with recent data. Its recent “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Rural America” webpage provides a nice example.⁹ A better balance could be struck between the need for review and the need for timeliness.

Connectedness

The ERS is hindered from producing useful and insightful rural development research by its seclusion from policymakers and practitioners. Unlike extension professors, ERS economists do not have county extension agents keeping them abreast of what is happening in the field. Field visit opportunities, particularly nonfarm visits, have been limited in the past.

In mid-2019, ERS headquarters relocated to Kansas City, Missouri. Although some ERS economists were allowed to continue working from Washington, D.C., most were asked to relocate to Missouri, and most of them left the agency. An almost 80% reduction in staff occurred when only

16 ERS employees made the move.¹⁰ Although the stated intention of the relocation was to position ERS closer to its key stakeholders, the move arguably made ERS employees more disconnected from national leaders of key stakeholder groups (e.g., National Association of Counties).

Congress and the executive branch can best ensure a close connection between REB researchers and rural development stakeholders by providing adequate funding for travel and meeting expenses, and placing greater emphasis on regular interactions and consultations. To further augment stakeholder connections, REB could have its own stakeholder advisory group; members could provide periodic input from the field and foster collaboration and communication. The group could serve as a clear avenue for decision-makers to suggest research topics to ERS.

This section has focused on timeliness and connectedness as inputs to ERS research. With the help of communication professionals, ERS research outputs are already transformed into relatively simple, accessible products. For example, ERS research reports are routinely translated into *Amber Waves* (ERS e-magazine) articles, *Charts of Note* articles distributed daily via email to subscribers, webinars and social media posts. For these outputs, perhaps the next step involves extension professionals' showing their local clientele how they can use ERS research to benefit their communities or businesses—a final translational step that is beyond ERS's current purview.

USDA Rural Development: Building Its Own Evidence and Evaluation Base

In late 2017, the USDA's Rural Development (RD) mission area launched the Rural Development Innovation Center to create efficiencies and provide innovative products and services across RD's three agencies: the Rural Utilities Service, Rural Housing Service and Rural Business-Cooperative Service. One of the Innovation Center's three divisions is the Data Analytics Division, which *analyzes and evaluates program performance to support strategic investment of RD programs*.¹¹ Interestingly, the italicized text above was the DAD's total web presence at the time this chapter was written in early 2021. The division has no published personnel directory, for example. It also does not yet share any information about what programs it is evaluating or the results of those evaluations.

As of the writing of this chapter, DAD had more personnel than REB (22 versus 13), but DAD had fewer trained economists (six versus 13) and was more internal facing. According to conversations with internal USDA staff, the majority of the division is part of an internal-facing performance dashboard team. DAD's second major component is the Economic Impact Branch, which will focus on evaluating RD program effectiveness. The Economic Impact Branch is currently in its startup phase, but it may eventually disseminate reports to external stakeholders. Unfortunately, DAD's largely internal-facing posture is a missed opportunity. DAD's work could significantly expand the evidence base for rural development policy and practice, but it will reach its full potential only if its work is available more widely to the rural development research ecosystem.

Cooperative Extension System's Role in Evidence Creation and Dissemination

Nationally, the CES includes many state specialists, who generally hold doctorates and are often professors who do extension work and conduct research that benefits rural development policy and practice.¹² Federal support for CES in real dollars has generally declined since 1980, while state and local funding varies tremendously.¹³ Given this, fewer land-grant universities may be able to afford retaining and hiring state specialists who focus on

Cooperative Extension System's Role in Rural Development Varies by State

The Cooperative Extension System typically uses land-grant university-based faculty, known as state specialists, as disciplinary experts to conduct practical research and translate that research into educational products and programs aimed at people, businesses and communities. Area educators or county agents—the terminology varies by state—also help solve local problems. Additionally, they provide input to prioritize campus faculty research and inform educational products and programs.¹⁴ Due in part to CES's traditional focus on production agriculture, rural development funding varies widely from state to state. Rural development extension is often but not always encompassed in CES Community Economic Development programs. Nationally, no figures for extension spending on rural development exist.

rural development. Rural development-related research and extension could become more efficient, effective and equitable if leaders pursued formal cooperation between land-grant universities and the USDA research units discussed previously. Such formal cooperation would require major changes to CES's current structure and funding model, however.

Formal extension coordination across states is very difficult due to heterogeneity in funding, priorities, structure and expectations. For example, extension evaluates professors differently in each state. Some are evaluated on number of publications, but for others, the number of workshops conducted or media citations are performance metrics. The four Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs),¹⁵ with National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) support, do a great job of coordinating extension specialists who work in Community Economic Development (CED) and rural development. Located at one university per region, these RRDCs are also subject to heterogeneous state extension director and experiment station (research) director preferences, however. The host institution has stronger influence than the member institutions on center personnel and often the center's board of directors.

Rural development extension work could greatly benefit from centralized data, research and curriculum design. Although centralization can stifle creativity and flexibility, and create additional layers of bureaucracy, the net benefits of centralizing rural development extension specialists may be worthwhile. Centralizing resources could offset state extension budget cuts, which often involve implementing long-term solutions (e.g., layoffs) to address short-term fiscal problems. Centralization could also greatly streamline expectations—something that should generate efficiencies. A nationwide, centralized rural development extension service, funded by NIFA with extension dollars, could include investments such as the following:

- A rural development “brain trust” could focus on better anticipating challenges and opportunities facing rural areas. It could then create and share knowledge related to those trends—and provide potential solutions for dealing with them—with extension area specialists across the country. This centralized group would be a resource for area specialists, but local stakeholders would ultimately make decisions about what priorities to address and what solutions to implement locally.¹⁶

- Curriculum design professionals could help the centralized group translate its in-depth knowledge into curricula and conduct effective train-the-trainer workshops for area specialists, who would bring the fruits of their labor to every interested rural stakeholder, not just those located in states that can afford such resources.
- One professionally maintained, centralized database for U.S. rural development research and analysis could create economies of scale for researchers, extension professionals and practitioner-analysts across the country.
- A professionally maintained online research hub could foster collaboration, increase research accessibility and provide curricula and evaluations for educational programs and policies.

These proposed assets are not unlike two assets of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy's Rural Health Research Gateway and Rural Health Information Hub (RHIfhub). The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy provides leadership and funding for the gateway and hub. The office is somewhat akin to the USDA ERS, though it relies on external research capacity with cooperative agreements. The RHIfhub, billed as a first stop for rural health information, and the Rural Health Research Gateway, which makes research searchable, connect related content and ensure valuable resources are not lost between administrations. They are professionally managed. This model could be adopted for rural development.

The Extension Foundation, a nonprofit membership organization affiliated with the CES, created a website in 2015 to be a one-stop shop for stakeholders who want to tap CES resources.¹⁷ The goals of the website are similar to those of the RHIfhub, but it has some key differences. Other than offering a very popular local foods webpage, the website has largely not worked for rural development stakeholders or researchers for multiple reasons, not just funding. An online hub with dedicated, centralized funding and professional staff who have technical expertise in rural development research, policy and extension would likely look very different from the current website.¹⁸

An example of a successful centralized extension hub is that of the Crop Protection Network (CPN).¹⁹ The CPN—composed of land-grant university members—aims to produce unbiased and collaborative outputs on issues affecting field crops. Participating universities (the CPN website lists 29)

share materials designed to help producers of those crops make decisions.

As I mentioned earlier, putting these ideas into practice would require revamping how we fund the CES and reward extension professionals. It would also require greater agreement on the roles of state Community Economic Development specialists and area specialists.

John Lawrence and others wrote, in 2019, that effective extension education is built on trust and relationships. Importantly, they note that those who have trust (i.e., extension area educators) can serve as a bridge between stakeholders (e.g., practitioners with a problem to solve) and those with the needed expertise (e.g., specialists and researchers). Centralized extension specialists could reduce demand for those holding doctorates at land-grant universities and increase demand for specialists holding master's degrees in science who have the knowledge to speak intelligently on a variety of CED topics and who know when and whom to call when outside expertise is needed. Of course, this is just my assessment of how such a change would affect demand for different types of expertise. More work is necessary to determine how the centralized rural development brain trust would affect extension staffing in different states.

In Summary: Possible Collaboration and Communication Improvements

Better collaboration among university, government and private-sector resources could enhance rural America's knowledge base. It could ensure that the necessary analysis is ready to go when policy questions or emergencies, such as a derecho or civil unrest, arise. Nurturing relationships and fostering a systematic way to connect could allow researchers and policy-makers to better anticipate future questions and solutions, and those actions could enable on-the-ground professionals to share percolating issues.²⁰ Of course, local-specific questions and needs would be more difficult to address in a centralized system and could increase reliance on area specialists.

Better collaboration and communication among rural development researchers and their key stakeholders could be achieved with the following investments:

- Form a centralized, evidence-producing body as part of the Cooperative Extension System—a so-called brain trust. Accomplishing this would

require significant changes to extension funding allocation and evaluation. It could, however, greatly benefit extension educators and rural development practitioners in states without the resources for rural development specialists, and particularly 1890 land-grant extension services. Free and widely available resources could make rural development more inclusive and equitable. Consistent and formalized forums for stakeholders to inform the research process (e.g., advisory councils) could also enhance equity.

- Create a centralized hub for distributing evidence produced by rural development researchers in academia, nonprofits, CES and the federal government. This should include a distillation of research into something extension professionals, state and local government stakeholders, and economic development professionals can use. The hub could be responsible for disseminating the user-friendly materials via webinars, conference sessions, social media, videos and written products.
 - » This hub could also be a resource for connecting researchers to one another; linking researchers and practitioners; and sharing best practices to increase education, assessment and evaluation. A discussion forum can facilitate asking questions and sharing resources, and a professional hub manager could archive important topics, resources and discussions to make them accessible in the future.
 - » Hub-based rural development curriculum design specialists could work with researchers to translate their in-depth knowledge into curricula and conduct effective train-the-trainer workshops for area specialists.
 - » Evidence-based evaluation and support for evaluating policies and programs could also be part of the hub and augment work being done within DAD on RD program evaluation.
- Make DAD products, including all evidence-based program evaluations, available to interested stakeholders. Also, make DAD economists accessible to the greater rural development research community by listing their contact information and focus areas online through a public web directory.
- Increase travel funding for USDA rural development groups, and allocate more resources to cooperative agreements to enhance collaboration. In a similar vein, pre-1984, the USDA ERS had researchers stationed

at land-grant universities²¹—just as some USDA Agricultural Research Service researchers currently work from land-grant universities.

- At USDA ERS:
 - » Incentivize stakeholder collaboration and communication, and create timely and topical research-based insights by re-envisioning the promotion system—within Office of Personnel Management parameters.
 - » Evaluate peer-review coordination council parameters, managerial reviews and policy reviews to gain efficiencies, and release products more quickly without compromising quality.
 - » Ensure REB economists are not secluded from those in Washington, D.C., or rural stakeholders by fostering collaboration and conversation.
 - » REB could have its own stakeholder advisory group to foster collaboration, coordination and discussion on future rural development research topics and results dissemination. Already, one ERS economist sits on each RRDC’s board, which is a valuable mechanism for two-way communication between extension/universities and ERS on rural development topics. REB having its own stakeholder advisory group would bolster this.

A convening of evidence-based rural development partners would be a productive next step. The RRDCs are well-positioned to initiate that convening, though support would be necessary. Finally, we rural development researchers need to better engage internationally with our Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development peers to discuss best practices for creating inclusive, resilient and vibrant rural regions.

References

Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (website). See aplu.org/members/commissions/food-environment-and-renewable-resources/board-on-agriculture-assembly/cooperative-extension-section.

Coppess, Jonathan; Zulauf, Carl; Paulson, Nick; and Schnitkey, Gary. “Farm Bill Food for Thought: Research and Extension.” *farmdoc daily*, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Aug. 23, 2018, Vol. 8, No. 158. See farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2018/08/farm-bill-food-for-thought-research-and-extension.html.

Crop Protection Network (website). See cropprotectionnetwork.org.

- Effland, Anne B. "The Evolution of a Public Research System: The Economic Research Service and the Land-Grant Universities," in *Service as Mandate: How American Land-Grant Universities Shaped the Modern World, 1920-2015*. University of Alabama Press, 2015, pp. 115-51.
- Extension Foundation (website). See extension.org.
- General Accounting Office. *Agricultural Economics Research and Analysis Needs Mission Clarification, Report to the Secretary of Agriculture (RCED-83-89), Jan. 31, 1983*. See [gao.gov/assets/rced-83-89.pdf](https://www.gao.gov/assets/rced-83-89.pdf).
- Guarino, Ben. "USDA Relocation Has Delayed Key Studies and Millions in Funding, Employees Say." *The Washington Post*, Oct. 2, 2019. See [washingtonpost.com/science/2019/10/02/usda-relocation-has-delayed-key-studies-millions-funding-employees-say/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2019/10/02/usda-relocation-has-delayed-key-studies-millions-funding-employees-say/).
- King, Dave. "Hey, Siri, What Is the Future of Extension?" *Journal of Extension*, Oregon State University, Sept. 1, 2018, Vol. 56, No. 5, Article 18. See tigerprints.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1564&context=joe.
- Lawrence, John; Hadley, Gregg; and Henderson, Jason. "The Future for Extension Farm Management Economists: The Director's Cut." *Choices*, Agricultural & Applied Economics Association, 2019. See choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/theme-articles/the-future-of-farm-management-extension/the-future-for-extension-farm-management-economists-the-directors-cut.
- Low, Sarah A. "Rural Development Research and Policy: Perspectives from Federal and State Experiences with an Application to Broadband." *The Review of Regional Studies*, Sept. 4, 2020, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 311-22. See rrs.scholasticahq.com/article/17092-rural-development-research-and-policy-perspectives-from-federal-and-state-experiences-with-an-application-to-broadband.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency* (6th ed.). Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Committee on National Statistics, National Academies Press, 2017. See [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK447392](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK447392).
- USDA. "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Rural America." ERS, July 12, 2021. See ers.usda.gov/covid-19/rural-america.
- USDA. ERS Publications (webpage). See ers.usda.gov/publications.
- USDA. ERS Staff Directory (webpage). Accessed March 6, 2021, at: ers.usda.gov/authors/ers-staff-directory.
- USDA. Rural Development Innovation Center (website). Accessed Feb. 26, 2020, at: rd.usda.gov/about-rd/offices/rural-development-innovation-center.
- U.S. Office of Personnel Management. *Research Grade Evaluation Guide*. September 2006. See opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/functional-guides/gresrch.pdf.
- Wang, Sun Ling. "Cooperative Extension System: Trends and Economic Impacts on U.S. Agriculture." *Choices*, Agricultural & Applied Economics Association, 2014, Quarter 1. See choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/submitted-articles/cooperative-extension-system-trends-and-economic-impacts-on-us-agriculture.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am indebted to Andrew Dumont, Steven Deller, Catherine Isley, Maria Kuhns, Alice Roach, Anne Effland and others at the USDA for their assistance with this chapter.
- ² See Low.
- ³ These are my own reflections, not those of my employer. This chapter draws on my professional and personal experiences. I spent 10 years at the USDA Economic Research Service as an economist and also served a detail to the secretary of agriculture's office, 2017-18. I spent two and a half years at the Center for the Study of Rural America, which was part of economic research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City until the center closed in 2006. I'm currently a professor at the University of Missouri, with a research and extension appointment in regional economics. I grew up in rural Iowa and rural southwest Scotland villages; my upbringing fostered my desire to improve the lives of disadvantaged people in rural areas.
- ⁴ See National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine for an excellent summary of the federal statistical system, which includes information on the 13 federal statistical agencies.
- ⁵ Like most federal government scientists, ERS employees have a promotion and pay grade system based on the *Research Grade Evaluation Guide*. See U.S. Office of Personnel Management.
- ⁶ See General Accounting Office.
- ⁷ See USDA, ERS Staff Directory.
- ⁸ See USDA, ERS Publications for a list of publications in reverse chronological order.
- ⁹ See USDA, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Rural America."
- ¹⁰ See Guarino.
- ¹¹ See USDA, Rural Development Innovation Center.
- ¹² Extension provides practical education to people, businesses and communities via a partnership between the USDA and land-grant universities. Funding originates from federal and state governments and other sources, including local governments, fee-for-service projects and grants from groups such as philanthropies. See Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.
- ¹³ See Coppess et al., and Wang.
- ¹⁴ See Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities.
- ¹⁵ With annual funding from NIFA—currently just shy of \$500,000 per year—and additional funds, the four RRDCs link the Cooperative Extension System and research station leaders, researchers and educators to build rural development capacity throughout the land-grant university system. For example, the centers facilitate regular CED program leader meetings in each region. Enabling legislation requires each center to have a board of directors with representatives from the region; one ERS researcher serves as an ex officio member on each RRDC board. These are the four centers: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development hosted at The Pennsylvania State University, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development hosted at Purdue University, Southern Rural Development Center hosted at Mississippi State University and Western Rural Development Center hosted at Utah State University.

- ¹⁶ See Lawrence et al.
- ¹⁷ Dave King wrote that his 1990s work on what would become eXtension began with a simple question: How does information gain value in a digital world? I suspect eXtension, now the Extension Foundation, hasn't been as fruitful as some had hoped. See King.
- ¹⁸ See Extension Foundation.
- ¹⁹ See Crop Protection Network.
- ²⁰ For example, my MU Extension colleagues and I created a "Connect Strategy" tool for our county-based CED educators. The tool allows educators to engage with CED stakeholders and submit monthly issue statements to campus that contain percolating issues and research needs. In a similar vein, we send educators biweekly tidbits from the national and state level to ensure that information gets to the counties. The process has enhanced the timely flow of information between campus and the field.
- ²¹ See Effland.

