

Vision

The Rural Futures Institute (RFI) will be an internationally recognized leader for increasing community capacity as well as the confidence of rural people to address their challenges and opportunities, resulting in resilient and sustainable rural futures.

Mission

Building upon the strengths and assets in rural Nebraska, the Great Plains, and globally, the RFI, through a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, will mobilize the resources and talents of the University of Nebraska and its partners, including community partners, to create knowledge and action that supports rural people and places to achieve unique paths to their desired futures.

The Objective

To support, encourage and build local leaders who envision communities that are vibrant economically, socially, culturally, and provide a legitimate choice for young adults seeking the BEST place to launch careers, build families, and be active citizens in an environment where they can make a difference.

Issue Areas

- Job Creation (entrepreneurship, small business development)
- Natural Resource Conservation/Sustainability
- Transportation
- Community Infrastructure
- Workforce Availability
- Leadership
- Education
- Telecommunication
- Housing
- Quality of Life
- Youth Engagement
- Healthcare
- Immigration
- Law Enforcement

Current Priorities

- Building Networks: The RFI continues to build networks of community, business and organization leaders, subject matter experts, educators, development practitioners and thought leaders who are invested in positive rural futures.
- Grants: Administration of the RFI Grant Program to foster teaching and research engagement that aligns with the RFI's core values of being transdisciplinary, capacity building, creative, reflective and collaborative and bold. Over \$750,000 in project grants were awarded in year one, and a second round of grants are currently under way and being reviewed. Research and engagement grants up to \$150,000 each are awarded to help address critical challenges and opportunities facing rural areas and serve as seed grants. Teaching and engagement grants up to \$25,000 each foster civic engagement in both students and community partners and involve students working with communities.

Next Steps

- Human Resources: Increase RFI capacity with addition of key staff positions.
- Symposia: Hold regional meetings that 1) highlight successful RFI grant projects, 2) showcase a real world look at some success models, and 3) facilitate grassroots discussions that inform further guidance and prioritization of RFI work. This year the symposia will be held across the state, but subsequent years could move them beyond the state lines and to a broader reach.
- Biennial National Rural Futures Conference: Continue to host the RFI Conference every two years, which continues to build on the strong interest of people across Nebraska, the Great Plains region, nationally and even globally.
- Communications Strategies: Development of communication methods and strategies to reach a variety of audiences -- all of whom have a vested interest in the success of rural people and places.

Impacting Hope

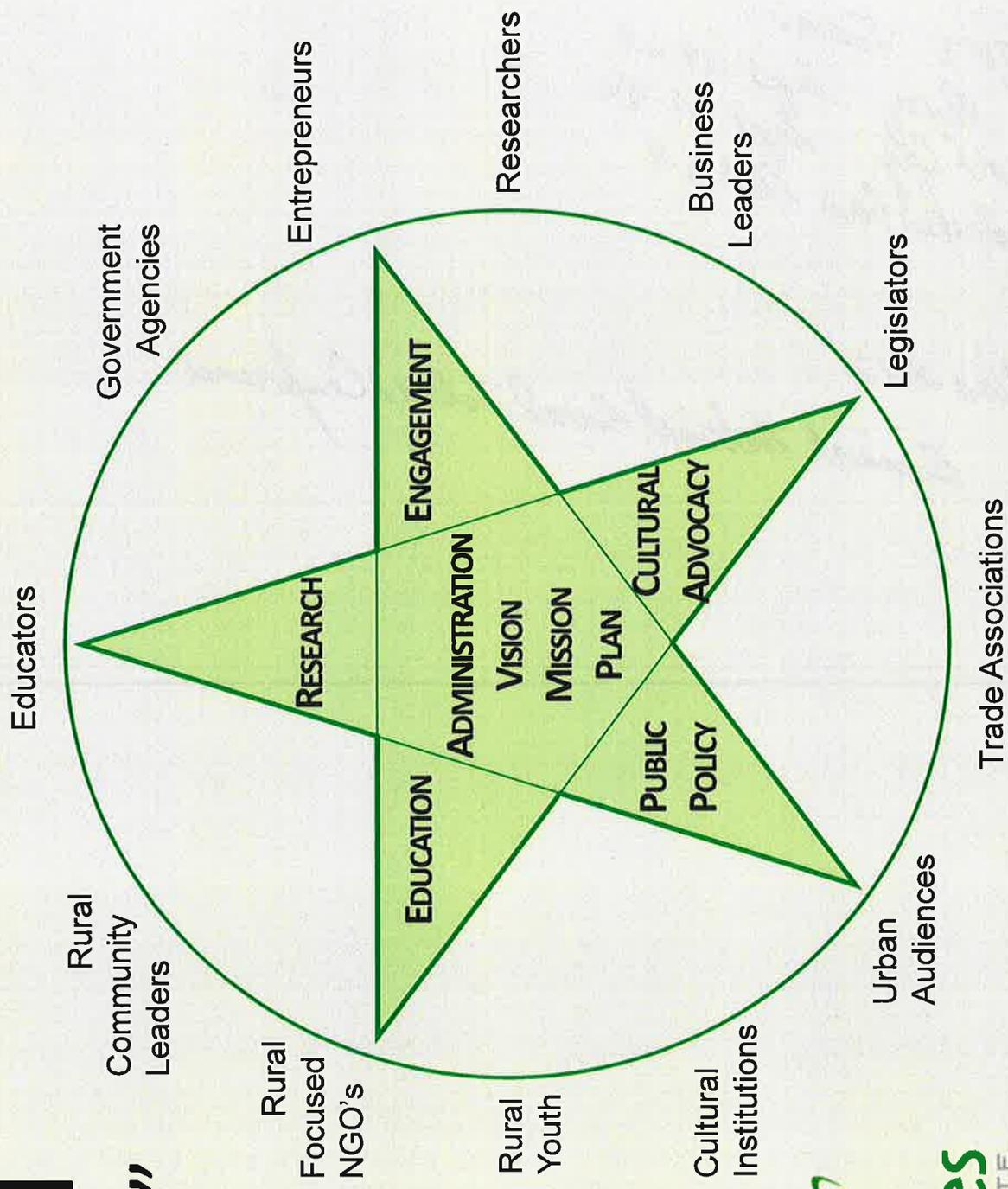
The RFI strives to impact people's hope about the rural future. People with hope have some important core beliefs:

- The future will be better than the present; and
- I have the power to make it so.
- There are many pathways to my goal; and,
- None are free of obstacles.

-- from 'Making Hope Happen' by Shane J. Lopez



The RFI "StarPoint" Structure



RFI Awards \$750,000 in Grants

TEACHING AND ENGAGEMENT

There was an outstanding response to the call for proposals with 33 applications submitted. Each application was evaluated by three reviewers. Those receiving a positive evaluation by two or more reviewers were forwarded to a final review team, who, in consultation with Dr. Green selected the following proposals to receive funding.

- **Ecotourism and Agritourism Development in Nebraska**, Lisa Pennisi, UNL with other UNL partners and Nebraska Dept. of Economic Development, GROW Nebraska, Valley County Economic Development
Teaching ecotourism with a strong service learning and community engagement component. Students will apply ecotourism principles and develop entrepreneurial, community planning, capacity building and tourism marketing skills while engaging stakeholders in rural communities.
- **Engaging Nebraska, Impacting Communities, Transforming Students**, Jeff Day, College of Architecture, UNL
Develop transformational curricula with civic engagement at its core by establishing a robust service-learning program embedded in the College of Architecture curricula. Transform twelve existing courses and develop new courses and programs that engage students in service-learning projects across the state of Nebraska.
- **Juvenile Re-entry to Nebraska's Rural Communities**, Anne Hobbs, UNO with UNK, also partnering with Nebraska DHHS and Geneva and Kearney Youth Rehabilitation Centers.
Matches college student mentors from rural towns with youth committed to the Youth Rehabilitation Centers (Kearney & Geneva). Student mentors will work with youth on educational, employment, social skills and other goals.
- **Rural Community Serviceship Program**, Thomas Field, Director, Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program, partnering with the UNL Office of Student Involvement, the Center for Civic Engagement, the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the Nebraska Human Resources Institute and the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR).
Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program and Nebraska Human Resources Institute will heavily recruit student participants interested in leadership development and entrepreneurship. Communities in Holt, Valley and Garden Counties have expressed interest in participation in the two-year pilot program. Students will be placed in rural communities in teams of at least two. These teams will assist the community with a project specified by the community leadership. Students will be expected to participate in community service activities outside of their serviceship project.
- **The Rural Public Health Undergraduate Student Research Project**, Patrik Johansson, UNMC with Chadron State, Peru State, Wayne State and UNK.
The proposed project will support faculty-led undergraduate student public health research projects at Nebraska's three state colleges in Chadron, Peru, and Wayne, and the University of Nebraska Kearney, as a means for introducing undergraduate students to the transdisciplinary world of public health.
- **Students Engaged in Economic Development of Rural Areas**, Kaye Sorensen and Marc Albrecht, UNK.
Engages UNK students in the creation and assembly of rural economic development ideas – both their own and those of members of their rural communities. The most promising ideas will be presented to the RFI.

2014 RFI Awarded Grants

TEACHING AND ENGAGEMENT – There was an outstanding response to the call for proposals with 24 applications submitted. Proposals selected to receive funding include:

- **Rural Community Engagement and Leadership Program** – Gina Matkin (PI), University of Nebraska-Lincoln with co-PI from the Agricultural Leadership and Communications Department at UNL. Additional partners include Nebraskans for Civic Reform.
Undergraduate students will engage with rural high school students to identify issues in the students' community, leading to the creation of a service learning project to address those pre-identified issues. This project will build the leadership capacity of rural high school students and increase their ability to positively impact their respective communities while also filling a community need.
- **Justice by Geography: Issues that Inequitably Impact Rural Youth** – Anne Hobbs (PI), UNO with partners from the Nebraska Juvenile Justice Association, the Nebraska State Bar Association, the Nebraska Association of County Officials, the Nebraska Juvenile Services Division, and the Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice.
This service learning project will educate University students interested in the juvenile justice field on the unique juvenile justice and legislative issues facing rural communities. Students will be placed with a rural juvenile justice professional or agency for two months to gain hands-on experience. The project will create greater interest for juvenile justice professionals to actively pursue careers in rural areas.
- **Addressing the Rural Shortage of Mental Health Providers Through a Virtual Mentorship Network** – Howard Liu (PI), University of Nebraska Medical Center with co-PI UNMC College of Nursing. Additional partners include the Region III Behavioral Health Services.
This project will connect rural students and members of their communities with behavioral health professionals through a virtual network. Students and behavioral health mentors will discuss behavioral health topics of interest. Students will benefit from the mentor-mentee relationship and learn more about behavioral health professions with the hope of creating a greater connection between behavioral health providers and rural communities.
- **Principles of Community Engagement in Public Health: Service Learning, Community-Based Participatory Research, and Civic Engagement** – Kyle Ryan (PI), Peru State College with co-PIs College of Public Health at UNMC and the Rural Health Education Network.
This project will create an online public health curriculum and course work for undergraduate students enrolled at rural Nebraska campuses. It will be offered as an option to those students who are interested in the health profession.
- **The Great Question Challenge** – Shane Potter (PI), University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension and co-PIs from the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at UNL and DuPont Pioneer.
This project will mobilize rural youth to take an issue of global importance, identify the affects it has on their rural community, and implement a solution. In 2014, the Great Question theme revolves around food insecurity. Student teams will attend a spring workshop to learn more about the issue on a global scale, identify what food insecurity issues exist in their community, and develop a project to address this issue. This project creates a culture of civic engagement led by rural youth.
- **Community Gardens and Farmer's Market for Curtis, NE** – Brad Ramsdale (PI), Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture (NCTA) and co-PIs from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension
Expanding upon an existing Farmer's Market course at NCTA, this project will include a community garden being developed to enhance student service learning by making the garden available for the community and 4-H members. Undergraduate students will be available to mentor 4-H members which will strengthen the relationship between NCTA and community members, and provide a model for rural communities to establish gardens that foster growth in citizen relationships and youth engagement.