

Rural Conversations

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**“The investment
in the youth by
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Youth Engagement

Special Issue—

“A rural community’s greatest asset is its youth.” (Haller & Monk, 1992). Therefore, when the message sent to rural youth is that it is best to leave their rural community for better opportunities, the community is “depriving itself of talent and vitality that contribute to the development of a desirable future for these communities.” (Haller & Monk, 1992). The investment in young people by the community not only promotes youth development but also promotes community development and ensures the continuation of a healthy civil society.



While participating in ECHO, students learn the importance of teamwork in the healthcare environment.

At various venues over the past year, rural community leaders and practitioners have been sharing best practices related to rural youth engagement. This special issue is to highlight some of the youth engagement practices and programs.

The issue includes examples from the East Texas Area Health Education Center regarding communicating with rural youth about careers in science and health, two interns experiences with the

Texas Rural Internship Program, the Ogallala Commons Program featuring youth engagement on the High Plains, the Center for Rural Studies project coordinators sharing a photo-literacy program implemented with rural students in Anderson-Shiro and preliminary outcomes from the Lee County Community-Youth Development Program.

There are many more local youth engagement programs that are not featured in this issue. I encourage you to learn

more about these programs and other initiatives; Let’s begin to rethink youth investment and engagement when it comes to rural community development.



Erica Alexander, a 2012 TRIP Intern in Nocona, Texas

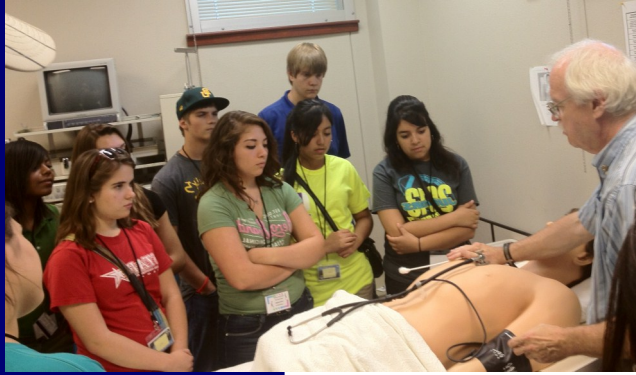
The investment in the youth by the community not only promotes youth development but also promotes community development and ensures the continuation of a healthy civil society.

-Cheryl Hudec, Associate Director of the Center for Rural Studies, Sam Houston State University



Communicating with Rural Youth

Does More Contact = More Engagement?



Texas Area Health Education Center East Waco Region ECHO students were shown different Sims and how each operates.

“When I reach out to the rural students my goal is to maintain that contact and develop a positive relationship. When I do, I have better success...”

Since TAE was working with students living in predominantly rural areas, staff maintained regular contact to get them involved in activities. According to Jody Sanders, Senior Program Coordinator, Texas AHEC East - Victoria Region, “When I work with kids from rural areas, I have to remember that the distance from the school sometimes inhibits participation. These students can often be at least an hours drive from the school so it can be hard to get them to come back to the school to participate in activities at night or on the weekends. When I reach out to the rural students my goal is to maintain that contact and develop a positive relationship. When I do, I have better success in getting them to show up.” TAE staff maintained regular contact in various forms of communication methods including text blasting, email, phone and in person meetings. In addition, some staff utilized social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace to maintain contact with students.

At the end of each school year,

For some high school students, the future seems daunting and too far off for planning. Based on the tendency to put off today what can be done tomorrow, Texas Area Health Education Center East (TAE) spent some time working with high school students, especially minorities living in rural communities, who are interested in careers in science and health to help

them devise a plan for their futures. Over the course of two school years, TAE worked with approximately 681 high school students from 72 schools throughout East Texas; sixteen percent of these students were African American and 41 percent were Hispanic. In order to engage rural minority students, TAE used dynamic extracurricular activities like job shadowing, community service and health careers summer camp.

TAE compared the number of contacts staff had with students and the number of activities students in which student’s participated. Fifty percent of the students who participated in two activities were contacted twice, but 84% of the students who participated in six activities were contacted six times. When staff increased contact, they were able to increase participation.



Texas Area Health Education Center East Waco Region ECHO students had the opportunity to participate in a number of activities including the pictured geriatric prescription activity. Participants wore vision impairing glasses while sorting prescriptions.

Interestingly, the type of communication the student preferred was not as technologically driven as anticipated. When TAE asked students, “How would you like to be contacted” and gave them

the option to indicate all the answers that applied, the distribution between phone calls, text and email was relatively even. Forty-nine percent of students indicated they wanted to be contacted by phone, 47% indicated they wanted to be contacted by text and 50 % indicated they wanted to be contacted by email.

In the past two years, TAE has found that regular and reliable communication, regardless of the methodology, from adults can increase rural minority student participation in career preparation activities. Participation in career planning activities helps students develop a health career plan allowing them control of their future.

Lester R. Bittel, academician and author, wrote, “Good plans shape good decisions. That’s why good planning helps to make elusive dreams come true.” The rural minority student with a plan has a jump start on their future increasing the likelihood for success.

An Intern Experience—Giddings

Laruen Cooke, 2012 SHSU Texas Rural Intern

This summer, I had the great fortune of participating in the Texas Rural Internship Program, where I spent a month in the small town of Giddings, Texas. Giddings is located halfway in between Houston and Austin, where Highways 77 and 290 intersect. It is a great little town of around five thousand, with a strong historic background, and many interesting stories to hear.



Joyce Bise, Giddings EDC Director; Lauren Cooke, Intern; Kelita Alberts and Denise Harlan; Giddings Area Chamber of Commerce.

“The opportunities I received and the experiences I’ve had over the last month are a true blessing that I will remember and cherish for the rest of my life.”

When I first received the news that I had gotten the internship, I was anxious. I did not know what to expect. The work I would be focused on was nothing I had ever done before. However, I made contact with my soon-to-be supervisor, Mrs. Joyce Bise, and made arrangements to meet her before I was to start working. Upon meeting each other, Joyce settled all of my uneasy nerves and sparked an excitement that made me rush through the days until I began my adventure with her.

Giddings is a town that I have driven through countless times on my way back to my hometown. But I never realized just how much Giddings was, how much they did, and really just how large it was not in size, but in heart. I know that sounds corny, but just driving through you never see the “real” Giddings. All you see is a small town, “don’t blink because you’ll miss it”, kind of thing. Never before did I stop and think twice about all the hard work and energy that goes into preserving the history while still encouraging growth and future.

These are the types of activities I got to take part in. Giddings EDC was the name, economic development the game. And, I tell you what, from the outside looking in, you definitely do not see how much goes into this specific kind of work. There are laws to worry about, all sorts of rules and regulations, and of course the community. What will the people like? What do they want? It’s overwhelming, but I think I got gist of it!

Joyce was great to work for. She is *very* knowledgeable. To be honest, I

don’t know how she keeps so much stored in her head! The way she explained different things to me made it very easy to understand, and she made it fun. Joyce had me take part in many different activities ranging from EDC board meetings, Chamber of Commerce meetings, and Lions Club Meetings, to helping out at the Bluebonnet Electric Coop Trade and Technical Scholarship golf tournament, to handing out hot dogs for the Rotary Club. Also, during my internship, I completed a research assignment Joyce thought up, that I hope will become of use to many people in the future.

I met so many great individuals during my internship, many that I plan to keep in close contact with forever. I learned great lessons and skills that will not only help me in a future career, but that will help me throughout life in general. The opportunities I received and the experiences I’ve had over the last month are a true blessing that I will remember and cherish for the rest of my life.

“I learned great lessons and skills that will not only help me in a future career, but that will help me throughout life in general.”

Ogallala Commons

Youth Engagement on the High Plains—

When it comes to rural youth engagement, Ogallala Commons (a 501 c 3 non-profit operating in the High Plains Region) focuses on two main aims and the belief that our youth are not bystanders; in fact, rural communities need them in order to thrive.



32 Ogallala Commons Community Interns gathered for orientation in Amarillo, Texas in May of 2012

The first aim of our youth engagement programs is to inspire youth to become active, enthusiastic, and influential participants in the lives and missions of our communities. The second aim is to invite youth, when they are ready, to come back to their rural hometowns to live, work and raise their families.

With these aims in mind, Ogallala Commons has developed four youth engagement programs. For more information visit Ogallala Commons website at www.ogallalacommons.org.

1. Youth Engagement Days

Ogallala Commons' Youth Engagement Days provide an opportunity for students in Grades 7 - 12 to learn about entrepreneurship, businesses in the local community, and to meet successful hometown

entrepreneurs. Additionally, students learn what it takes to be an entrepreneur through exploring their community and through presentations. The event is a morning- to- lunch program held at a regional site (large gathering area or school auditorium) where high school youth from one or several schools hear the message that their communities and region want them to come back home...when they choose and when they are ready. These activities address careers and opportunities that create viable pathways to "come home." Finally, all those attending an Engagement Day are encouraged to participate in the Youth Entrepreneur Fair.

2. Playa Festivals

Ogallala Commons Playa Festivals make the realities of High Plains water come alive for students, with demonstrations and field trips that show playa basins, flora and fauna, local watersheds carved by draws and creeks, and the Ogallala Aquifer in real-life situations, not just in books. Students are introduced and given the opportunity to explore natural resources in their own backyard and to meet and talk with professionals to learn about career opportunities in natural resources.



Nazareth, TX 5th Grade Students explored a 20 acre playa and learned in Ogallala Commons Playa Classroom

3. Youth Entrepreneur Fairs

A 1/2 day event in which youth entrepreneurs from rural communities submit a business plan for a "conceptual" or a "ready-to-go" enterprise (two different categories). Individual or entrepreneur teams are awarded cash prizes by a group of judges based on these potential categories: Business Plan, Interview with Judges, Booth Presentation at the Fair, Strategy to Finance the Business or Concept Idea, Network of Resources to Support Business or Concept.

Our Youth Entrepreneur Fairs have been held for 5 consecutive years in Texas, as well as in northwest Kansas, Baca County, CO, and in Harding County, NM. Each year, our youth engagement programs reach 3,000 high school and college students. Ogallala Commons and our entrepreneur partners contribute more than \$12,000 in cash prizes to aspiring youth entrepreneurs each year.

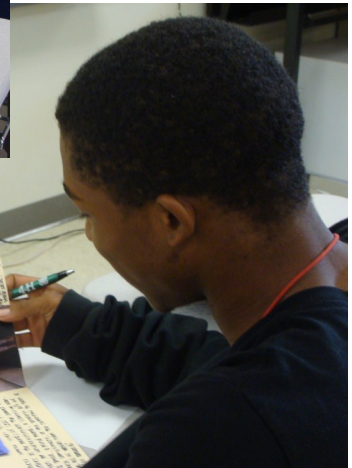
4. Community Internships

To date, over 150 students and adults have completed an Ogallala Commons Community Internship. These internships are built around three important components: work experience, skill development, and hometown career exploration--they take place in a local community, a regional institution, organization, or business. Interns work on projects that respond to community needs or build up community assets while learning and being paid a stipend. The internships provide one of the best possibilities for communities to connect with and inspire youth and adults to return home to live, work, play and raise their families. To learn more, visit the Community Intern Blogsites at <http://www.ogallalaintern.blogspot.com/>.

Anderson-Shiro

Photography and writing—

The Center for Rural Studies is supporting a new school-based initiative by partnering with local teachers in classroom activities designed to get a better understanding of rural students' viewpoints.



Ann Theodori, a doctoral student in the Department of

Language, Literacies, and Special Populations and Director of Youth Programs for the Sam Houston Writing Project, worked with Sofi Teston, an

English teacher at Anderson-Shiro High School, to design the initial project. The curriculum is based on Photovoice methodology as well as Literacy through Photography principles, and the purpose of the project is two-fold: one, to incorporate meaningful place-conscious education to engage students in literacy tasks; and two, to explore the themes in student work to better understand rural students' perceptions of education and their futures.

Students from Anderson-Shiro High School take time to view their classmates' identity portfolios.

connection between literary lenses and writing more real for them. They literally 'saw' aspects of themselves through photography that they then wanted to elaborate with words."

"I love how putting a camera in my students' hands made the connection between literary lenses and writing more real for them. They literally 'saw' aspects of themselves through photography that they then wanted to elaborate with words."

The project will continue in Fall 2012 as students are given the opportunity to use photography and writing to explore their sense of place, sense of belonging, and post-secondary aspirations.



A mural painted on the Anderson-Shiro Gymnasium wall.

In a pilot program this spring, 11th-grade students at Anderson-Shiro High School in Anderson, Texas, completed a photography and writing unit to investigate themes of rural identity in their English Language arts class.



One student's self-portrait.

In May, 11th grade students in Mrs. Testson's classes were asked to take photographs and complete writing assignments to create a "self-portrait" collage. According to Theodori and Teston, the initial project generated much energy and excitement among the students. "I asked students, 'show us your world, show us what's important to you,'" commented Theodori. Student collages featured photos of rodeo life, athletics, fishing and hunting, outdoor work, friends, family, and—of course—many images of school. "I want people to know we have a nice school," wrote one student. "In a small school, we are like a family," wrote another. "We might have our differences but we stick together no matter what."

Teston expressed, "I love how putting a camera in my students' hands made the

An Intern Experience—Nocona

*Erica Alexander, 2012,
SHSU Texas Rural Intern*



Nocona, Texas, is a small rural community of approximately 3,000 residents. It is a part of Montague County, which also contains the towns of Saint Jo, Bowie, Montague, Forestburg, Spanish Fort, and Ringgold. There are

approximately 20,000 residents in Montague County. Nocona is located within 6 miles south of the Red River, which is the border for Texas and Oklahoma state lines. Nocona was established as the last stop in Texas for cowboys running cattle in the Chisholm Trail before crossing the Red River into Oklahoma.

According to the Nocona Economic Development Center (EDC) director

James Yohe, for whom I worked during my internship, "One main focus of the two NEDC Boards is to help Nocona remain a place where people feel at home. Somewhere where we know our neighbors, visit with friends and share with family. There is no desire to outgrow our sense of community. No headlong rush to become another Frisco, Austin, or Dallas/Fort Worth. NEDC is looking not at size, but at

**SHSU Texas Rural
Internship Program
Intern: Erica Alexander**

important community aspects like quality of life, jobs, education, and others". Mr. Yohe wanted me to not only become familiar with the town but the county as well. I met people from all over; at first it was difficult to remember everyone's name.

I was able to work half of my internship collecting material to organize a business plan to develop the future Montague County Vineyard and Heritage Museum. The business plan is intended to describe how the Vineyard and Winery will use profits to help support the Heritage Museum. The Vineyard has vines that are still

producing and that have been on this site since the late 30s as a research station for Texas A & M. The Vineyard and Heritage Museum will tell the history of the T.V. Munson operation and how it can be used as a research/experiment station for other local vineyards and wineries, and it will also tell the story of the early settlers who came to this region of Texas.

For the second half of my internship, I worked on creating a model for a potential Montague County Boot Co. & Nocona Baseball Glove Tour. This project is to show the town's niche in today's leather industry and how their products are hand-made. A proposal was developed to inform the project directors how to make this an efficient, memorable, self-guided tour for both factories. A small 3D model was constructed out of foam board and

pictures to demonstrate the tour features.



Overall, I believe this internship opened up many doors for me. I miss living in a small town, and this small gem was just what I needed. Nocona, Texas, reminded me of how neighborly everyone can be, and how a small community can treat someone like family. I am proud to say I have gained a new family and many friends in Nocona.



Lee County

Community-Youth Development—

The Community-Youth Development Program is an initiative of the Center for Rural Studies. Research has shown rural areas often see young people leave because of the perception that better opportunities are available elsewhere. The problem is compounded by rural areas' poverty, less-diverse economies, poor civic infrastructure, and limited educational and career opportunities.

The pilot program kicked off this summer with eight Lee County students. The goal was to educate them on the way their rural communities function, as well as encourage them to think about staying in or returning to their rural homes.

Students took part in a three-day summer camp, during which they completed a community mapping exercise, toured city and county offices, and explored local businesses. They were asked to think critically about local issues and develop a community project.

Cheryl Hudec, associate director for the Center for Rural Studies, called this year "a great success" in that



Lee County students in front of the County Courthouse.

(students did four-week paid internships). Content analysis will be used to identify significant themes.



Students sign the ledger at the County Courthouse.

“Students provided valuable insights to community leaders, and the community has started the process of rethinking its investment in youth.”

students provided valuable insights to community leaders, and the community has started the process of rethinking its investment in youth.

"They've begun to realize that the youth in fact do care and do want to be involved, but are often left out," she said. "Additionally, the initial feedback from the project indicates that the youth participants have begun to become more aware of the happenings and operations of their community and the many great individuals within. It is these kind of connections to the communities that lead youth to stay in or return to rural places."

The partnerships with the Rural Capital Area Workforce Solutions and Giddings Economic Development Corporation as well as the local school districts, businesses, and organizations helped to make this year a grand success. The different partners provided financial resources, expertise, and technical assistance. The program will expand to other communities next summer, depending on available partnerships and funding.



Leaders of Lee County met initially to learn about the program .

The center plans to evaluate the program's efficacy by reviewing recorded conversations with youth about themselves, their futures, struggles, supports, and communities. Students also did photographic and written collages, and focus groups were held with their supervisors



The County Judge provided a tour of the courthouse to the students.

Rural Events

Who	What	When	Where
TORCH	Texas Association of Rural Health Clinics	Aug. 1-3	Austin
TANO	Lunch & Learn: Improving Communication Using Type	Aug. 3	Austin
AgriLIFE Extension	Ranch Estate Planning	Aug. 8-9	College Station
Texas Plains Trail Region	Texas Plains Trail Tourism Round-Up	Aug. 9-10	Big Spring
TANO	Lunch & Learn: Give Voice to your Vision	Aug. 10	Austin
TANO	Cultural Competence: Embracing Diversity and Creating Inclusion	Aug. 17	Austin
TEDC	Texas Economic Development & Energy Summit	Aug. 23-24	San Antonio
TANO	IRS Non-profit Workshop	Aug. 30	Austin
TORCH	TORCH Leadership & Management Institute (TLMI) Conference & Retreat	Sept. 5-6	Austin
TANO	Certificate in Social Media Management for Non-profit Organizations	Sept. 8	Austin
TANO	Effective Grant Writing	Sept. 11	Austin
TEDC	Basic Economic Development Course	Sept. 11-14	Austin
Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, RAISE Texas, Texas Rural Innovators	Strong Families-Strong Economies	Sept. 12	Waco
TEDC	Webinars- Data Gathering & Analysis for Small and Rural Communities	Sept. 12	Online
TEDC	Getting Your Volunteer Groups out of the Box	Sept. 13	Fort Worth
AgriLIFE Extension	AgriLIFE Extension District Training for Commissioners Courts District 1 Training	Sept. 13	Amarillo
TEDC	2012 Annual Conference	Sept. 25-27	Austin
TANO	Improving your Team Leadership Skills for Business Results	Sept. 28	Austin
AgriLIFE Extension	90th Annual County Judges & Commissioners Association of Texas State Conference	Oct. 1-3	San Marcos
TANO	Beyond Will Power- A Research- Based Approach to Changing your Behavior	Oct. 5	Austin
TEDC	ED Sales Tax Workshop	Oct. 11	Mesquite
TORCH	Rural Hospital Info. Technology Conference (HITCON/12) & Tradeshow	Oct. 17-18	San Antonio
TANO	2012 Texas CASA Conference	Oct. 25-27	Frisco
TANO	Texas Homeless Network Conference	Oct. 26-28	Houston
Texas Rural Health Association	Texas Rural Health Assoc. Annual Conference	Oct. 29-31	San Marcos
AgriLIFE Extension	AgriLIFE Extension District Training for Commissioners Courts District 2 Training	Oct. 31	Lubbock

For a calendar of events visit

the Texas Rural Innovators events page at www.ruraltx.org



Texas Rural Survey

Providing representative rural data for leaders and residents—

“The findings from the Texas Rural Survey will be a valuable tool for state legislators, state agencies and organizations, and rural leadership.”

There are many state agencies, interests groups, and non-profit organizations working to improve the viability of our rural areas. One key challenge these groups face is a lack of reliable, representative, regionally and locally specific data identifying the populations that need assistance most.

These organizations often draw on government data collected in the U.S. Census

or by other state and federal agencies monitoring labor statistics, economic development, education, and health, just to name a few. These sources of secondary data lack the detail needed for decisive policy actions as they are collected with a narrow focus and rarely include input from actual rural residents.

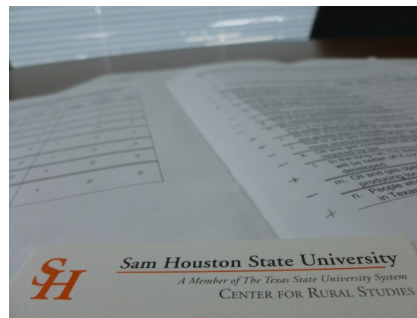
Research indicates that rural communities continue to face significant challenges including depressed economies, high

poverty rates, limited access to healthcare, and lower education levels, among many others. While some state and federal agencies provide data to policymakers at the state and county level, these secondary data sources are not designed to provide the regional and local-level information needed to accurately guide policy decisions intended to improve rural Texans’ standard of living.

In response to the limitations of state and federal data, many states with significant rural populations have instituted annual, or semiannual, surveys that address issues key to improving rural livelihoods. For example, Nebraska’s Center for Applied Rural Innovation, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, and the Center for Rural Pennsylvania regularly conduct statewide surveys. These data have proven invaluable for policy makers and local stakeholders alike.

In the next month the Center for Rural Studies at Sam Houston State University will be distributing a statewide survey of rural Texans: the Texas Rural Survey. This proposed survey is a first step in bringing this kind of sophisticated, scientifically

rigorous, and regionally focused survey to Texas.



The research involves collecting detailed, local-level data from the seven regions of Texas designated by the Texas Department of Agriculture, providing a scientifically robust account of the state of rural Texas.

The goal of the study is to advance our understanding of the state of rural Texas by identifying relevant factors pertaining to health, immigration, the availability and adequacy of

government services, access to information technology, public perceptions of natural resource use, and other issues pertinent to public policy.

The findings from the Texas Rural Survey will be a valuable tool for state legislators, state agencies and organizations, and rural leadership as they work to better utilize the human and natural resource capital residing in rural Texas.



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*The mission of the Center for Rural
Studies is to assist in the building,
strengthening, and maintaining of rural
Texas communities.*

Thank you for taking the time to explore this special issue of *Rural Conversations* on Youth Engagement in Rural Texas. Our hope is that *Rural Conversations* encourages all of us who hold a passion for rurality to work together toward the goal of allowing rural Texas to flourish.

www.shsu.edu/ruralcenter

If you would like to submit something to be published in *Rural Conversations*, please contact Cheryl L. Hudec, Associate Director of the Center for Rural Studies at ruralcenter@shsu.edu.

If you wish to be removed from the mailing list for *Rural Conversations*, please email Cheryl L. Hudec at ruralcenter@shsu.edu.

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