

**Report on the  
Rural Research Symposium  
held on  
October 21, 1998  
at the  
Memorial Union  
North Dakota State University, Fargo**

**prepared by**

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## **Report on the Rural Research Symposium** by Gary Goreham and Curt Stofferahn

A Rural Research Symposium was held on October 21, 1998 at the Memorial Union, NDSU. The purpose of the symposium was to list the types of applied multidisciplinary, multiuniversity research that was needed for the rural Northern Plains, establish network linkages among researchers and research end-users, explore potential research funding sources, and determine the feasibility of a Center for Rural Studies. The symposium was sponsored by the Center for Rural Studies, North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies. Funding for the symposium was provided by the North Dakota Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (ND EPSCoR), NDSU College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, and the NDSU Office of the Vice President of Academic Affairs.

Over 39 people attended the symposium. These included the two organizers (Gary Goreham and Curt Stofferahn), the two introducers (Larry Isaak and Tom Riley), the two funding source panelists (Cornelia Flora and Bob Koopman), six research end-users, and 27 attendees. In addition, several people who had not registered stopped by the meeting for short periods of time. Ten people preregistered for the event but were unable to attend; each was sent a copy of the materials distributed at the symposium (see attached).

The symposium began with a welcome by Larry Isaak, Chancellor of the ND University System and Tom Riley, Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science. Gary Goreham provided a brief description of the proposed Center for Rural Studies and its potential role in conducting multidisciplinary, multiuniversity research with input from the end-users of that research. An exercise was conducted among the participants to list important issues facing the rural Northern Plains. The participants used a weighted vote to select the most important issues among those listed. Appendix Table 1 lists these issues and their weighted importance. A panel of end-users of research was facilitated by Curt Stofferahn that included representatives from the North Dakota Department of Health, Department of Human Services, Department of Economic Development and Finance, Job Service North Dakota, Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society, and Lutheran Social Services. The panel described the kinds of research they find most applicable and ways they could help researchers determine research needs. A second panel was facilitated by Stofferahn made up of representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development. They discussed how research on rural issues traditionally has been approached and what lessons have been learned. They described funding sources that are available to conduct multidisciplinary, multiuniversity research on rural issues. A demonstration of the capabilities of the Group Decision Center was held on site whereby the participants listed and evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of multidisciplinary research. Appendix Table 2 lists the results. Teams were formed to discuss how to approach the research issues that received the highest number of votes earlier in the symposium. At the conclusion of the symposium, participants were asked to complete an evaluation form and a Ascope of interest form.©

Eight researchers and seven research end-users or funding agents completed a symposium evaluation form. Figure 1 shows the results of those who completed the evaluation form (N=15). Two-thirds of the respondents found that the symposium was *Very useful* in stimulating multidisciplinary, multiuniversity research. Nearly half (47%) said the symposium was *Very useful* in generating new research ideas. Nearly half of them said the symposium was *Very useful* in providing opportunities to network with other researchers (47%) or with end-users of research (47%). The visit to the Group Decision Center was *Very useful* to 42% of the respondents. Forty percent found the amount of information provided *Very useful*, and 20% found the opportunity to network with funding agents to be *Very useful*.

Nearly 80% said they would be inclined to attend next year if the Center for Rural Studies sponsors a Rural Research Symposium, and 86% would recommend the symposium to others. The respondents listed several items they found most useful about the symposium including the broad range of perspectives that are brought to light by end-users and researchers in a multidisciplinary setting. They listed the need for greater input from a larger number of funding agents and case examples of multidisciplinary research as topics to be covered in future symposia.

The final activity of the day was to break into research interest groups comprised of researchers from a variety of academic disciplines and end-users of research. These groups were developed from a discussion of key issues facing the Northern Plains and an exercise whereby the participants voted on their relative importance. The four groups included: (1) leadership/vision; (2) economic viability/sustainability; (3) economic and job opportunities; and (4) building of health, legal, social service infrastructures. Four or five people established research networks in each of these four areas. We can pursue additional opportunities for funding, research, and networking in each of these four areas, and can use the people who began discussion to serve as some of the key contacts. Given the interest shown in our demonstration at the Group Decision Center, it is likely that that facility will be used extensively by research groups in the future.

The overall interest in creating a Center for Rural Studies appeared to be overwhelmingly favorable. Thus, we shall pursue its creation. Sixteen people completed a *Scope of Interest Form* on which they listed their research interests and willingness to cooperate in multidisciplinary research projects. We will maintain these forms on file for networking purposes.

**Appendix Table 1. Important Issues Facing the Rural Northern Plains on which Research is Needed (weighted votes by research end-users and researchers according to academic discipline).**

Topic	Weighted votes				
	Arts and Humanities Scholars	Economic and Social Scientists	Agricultural, Biological, and Natural Scientists	End-users	Total
Long-term economic viability and sustainability	1	6	3	15	25
Loss/lack of economic and job opportunities	2	9	2	7	20
Effective leadership and partnership; cooperation		8	1	5	14
Diminished vision of what=s possible	3	1		7	11
Appropriate infrastructure for health care, legal services, etc. given our population and tax base; What do we want in the future?	2			9	11
Economic and ecological sustainability of agriculture		1	3	6	10
Lack of awareness and appropriate education about trade/global issues		5		3	8
Development of 21st century/ high-tech infrastructure				6	6
Cycle of outmigration; how outmigration is related to education, farming as an occupation, families, and quality of life			5		5
Depopulation; leaves the fragile landscape vulnerable, critical	1			3	4

population mass.					
Aging of the population				4	4
Fear of change; hopelessness; gap between hopeful and hopeless				3	3
How men's and women's roles are affected by all these issues; how knowledge is gendered	3				3
Environmental impacts			1	2	3
Loss of knowledge (culture) on how to manage the land.			2		2
Use of energy; finding other, more sustainable sources				1	1
Loss of control by farmers given low prices and biotechnology				1	1
Lack of goods/services in small communities					0
Corporate farming; concentration of food system					0
Local funding to support entrepreneurial activity					0
Encourage the poor of the world to raise their own food					0
Farming as a business vs farming as a lifestyle					0
Resources for social services					0
Violence; anger management					0
Health issues for Native American people					0
Transportation and relationship to trade					0
Trade with Canada					0
How much social service, etc. do we					0

need?					
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**Appendix Table 2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Multidisciplinary Research (as listed by attendees at the Rural Research Symposium visiting the Group Decision Center).**

Advantages	Mean (on 10-point scale)	Std. Dev.	N
Cross-fertilization; perspectives supported by other viewpoints; adds more validity than ideas narrowly constrained by one discipline.	7.79	1.81	14
Uses the strengths and insights of others.	7.71	1.83	17
Invigorating environment enriched by a range of (dissimilar) perspectives.	7.65	2.18	17
Allows for a more complete solution to complex problems.	7.53	2.45	15
Much value in multiple perspectives and skills	7.43	2.17	14
Different perspectives to complicated issues.	7.40	1.96	15
Allows opportunities for collaborative efforts.	7.00	2.58	16
Allows for different paradigms to be considered.	6.94	2.52	16
More likely to offer effective solutions because multidisciplinary research takes all factors into account.	6.93	2.40	15
More holistic.	6.93	3.13	15
Allows a comprehensive solution to the problem.	6.81	2.97	16
Wider applicability of findings.	6.75	2.14	16
Utilize multiple skills to address a common goal(s).	6.63	2.63	16
Allows for increased communication.	6.29	2.20	17
Multidisciplinary studies assist in clarifying issues for researchers.	6.13	1.92	15
Often times, it is the only possible way to address a question.	6.08	2.25	13
Leads to solutions that help more people.	5.93	2.15	15

Ease of group consensus.	5.00	2.66	14
Disadvantages	Mean (on 5-point scale)	Std. Dev.	N
Sometimes single interests tend to monopolize and exclude minority viewpoints.	3.88	0.78	17
Conflict and ownership problems.	3.82	0.88	17
Different disciplines use a different language.	3.82	0.95	17
Takes for more time to accomplish research tasks at the beginning.	3.82	1.01	17
Time and scheduling conflicts make it challenging to move forward productively.	3.65	0.86	17
Turf battles.	3.47	0.94	17
Requires better communications skills than some folks have.	3.29	0.77	17
Difficult to narrow focus and prioritize.	3.24	1.35	17
Different accounting and financial systems.	3.00	1.15	16
Need for weighed comments.	2.67	1.18	15
Freeloaders.	2.65	1.11	17
Connecting in productive ways.	2.59	1.12	17
Perhaps one discipline is not really suited to another (e.g., economics and health).	2.41	1.33	17