Understanding the Drivers of Rural Development – How Can We Bridge the Gap Between Research and Policy?

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Motivation

- Despite the important research being conducted related to rural development
  - Policymaking rarely is based on the research

- How can we bridge this gap and help rural areas?
  - Especially the most distressed ones
A little bit of background about me

- My career began working in public policy
  - I worked for 5 years as a Legislative Assistant and Legislative Director for 2 U.S. Congressmen

- After getting an MBA, I eventually found my way to regional and local economic development
  - I worked on issues in rural areas in West Virginia, Wyoming, and Ohio
  - I also have experience with rural areas in California, North Carolina, and South Dakota
How this led to my current career

- In my final pre-PhD job,
  - I worked at a university-based institute at Ohio University
  - In my job, I served as an intermediary between university researchers, policymakers, and others
  - Our focus was on the rural, Appalachian Ohio region

- I have seen the needs in rural communities and the need for high-quality research and policymaking to address them
  - Thus, my PhD and my research agenda
  - And my interest in this issue
Land Grant Universities

- Play a major role in their states
  - Educating students
  - Conducting research
  - Providing extension services to their states
  - Serving as economic engines in their states and regions

- In 2015, the land grant universities and other public universities:¹
  - Enrolled 4.6 million students
  - Employed more than 645,000 faculty and over 1.8 million other staff and administrators
  - Received two-thirds of all federal research dollars, or more than $34-billion annually

¹Source: Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU)
Rural Development Research

- Researchers (especially at Land Grant Universities)
  - Have produced a wealth of high-quality research related to the economic challenges facing rural areas

- Research generally is being done by those in disciplines like:
  - Agricultural or Resource Economics
  - Economics
  - Rural Sociology
  - Geography
  - and others…
Policy-Oriented Research

- Fortunately, much of the research being produced is focused on policy issues

- With some focused on informing policy-makers

- Ex: 2018 Special issue of Applied Economics Perspectives and Policy (AEPP) organized by the Council on Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics (C-FARE)
  
  - “Agricultural and Applied Economics Priorities for Solving Societal Challenges”
  
  - Goal: to inform government, industry, and professional associations about rural economics and the policy and research needs.

- Among the articles is one focused on rural economic development (Goetz et al., 2018)
What has the research found (Goetz et al., 2018)?

- Current policies are not addressing the unique needs of rural areas
  - While many people equate agriculture with rural, the share of farm employment in rural areas declined from 15% in 1969 to 6% in 2015

- Increasing evidence that where people live affects poverty, mobility, and inequality (Chetty et al., 2014; Goetz et al., 2017)

- Reduced environmental protections will hurt resource producing regions long term if quality-of-life and natural amenities are degraded (Fan et al., 2016)

- Evidence they entrepreneurs can help support growth in rural, distressed regions (Rupasingha and Goetz, 2013; Stephens and Partridge, 2011; Stephens et al., 2013).
  - Policies to support entrepreneurship and small businesses can help communities grow from within.

- Many of the most distressed rural regions of the United States also suffer from low levels of labor force participation (LFP) (Stephens and Deskins, Forthcoming)

- Place-based policies and infrastructure can be effective.
  - For example, regional initiatives like ARC and the Delta Regional Authority (Busso et al., 2013; Sayago-Gomez et al. 2017)
  - But policy makers should make sure they have enough money!
What other research is needed (Goetz et al., 2018)?

- More research is needed to evaluate what works and to help policymakers develop potential new rural policies
  - Picking the winners and losers usually doesn’t work
  - Need to understand why some communities are resilient and others are not (Han and Goetz, 2015)

- More research is needed to understand the role that location plays, including across the rural-urban spectrum and what policies may be effective (Goetz et al., 2015; Chetty et al., 2014)

- More research is needed to understand which types of entrepreneurs are most important and how to support them

- More research is needed to help distressed rural regions increase their labor force participation rate

- Data are needed to continue to evaluate future policies
Universities and Research

- The evaluation process values:
  - Research that has high impact and is published in more prestigious journals
  - More overall research publications
  - Getting funding for research

- Funding is available for certain research – not always the research with the highest policy value
Policymakers

- Have to tackle a wide-range of issues
- Generally need information immediately
  - Meaning they usually cannot wait for new research
- It is easier to create one policy on an issue
  - However, the diversity of the U.S. and rural areas suggests one-size-fits-all policies won’t work
  - Specifically, as per Goetz et al. (2018) there are three types of rural areas today:
    1. Metro-adjacent rural areas
    2. High-amenity rural areas
    3. Remote or extractive-based areas - these are the ones that have suffered the most economically
- Are always worried about re-election
  - This may affect their willingness to create good policies
So, where is the gap?

- Research is being published in academic journals
  - Policymakers do not read these journals

- Even when outreach materials are made available
  - They may not be on the hot issue of the day and are thus not useful
  - Research may not be available on the issues they need to know more about!

- Even when policymakers know about the research
  - The results of good policies may take a long time
  - And thus not pay off in terms of reelection
Bright Spots

There are some efforts based at universities to bridge the gap

Examples include:

- The regional centers for rural development
  - Ex: NERCRD at Penn State University
- Bureaus of economic analysis – focused on research related to policymaking
  - Ex: Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER) at West Virginia University
- C. William Swank Program in Rural-Urban Policy at The Ohio State University
What else can we do?

- If one of the roles of land grant institutions is to help advance the economy of the states and the nation
  - We can make being part of the policymaking process something that is valued in our faculty evaluations

- We can work with policymakers to figure out what research is needed
  - Be proactive!

- We can help policymakers and agencies prioritize important policy research for funding

- We can use our role as educators and as extension specialists to help educate the public about the policymaking process and the need for good policies
What else can we do?

- What else do you think would help?
Final Thoughts

➢ The economic challenges in rural areas can seem overwhelming

➢ While more research is needed related to rural development
  • We already know a lot

➢ There is evidence that relatively small amounts of money and the right policies can help many communities transition to a path of longer term prosperity
Final Thoughts

- The challenge is translating this knowledge to good policymaking

- Land Grant Universities can play a leadership role in making this happen
Thank you!

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