RURAL CULTURAL WEALTH LAB

This Lab, created through a founding partnership between NEA and RUPRI, appreciates the ongoing support of USDA, the University of Iowa, and our many other collaborators.

The Rural Cultural Wealth Lab unites the knowledge and experiences of a diverse array of scholars and practitioners to address some of the most critical issues and opportunities facing rural people and places. It fulfills this need by building innovative metrics that will strengthen policymakers' understanding of the various relationships and assets that define and reveal rural community wealth.

To achieve these outcomes, the Lab will interrogate and integrate three complementary fields of study: 1) rural arts and culture, 2) entrepreneurship and innovation, and 3) comprehensive rural wealth.

Comprehensive Rural Wealth

The Rural Wealth Framework, pioneered by RUPRI and other scholars, has arguably emerged as the most powerful, comprehensive, and dynamic approach to fully understand the assets and opportunities rural communities and regions hold, but also the challenges they must confront in achieving development and sustainability. Indeed, this approach offers a robust conceptual frame for the work of the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab.

The Rural Wealth Framework has found traction, in no small part, because of the limitations of Gross Domestic Product as a comprehensive measure of economic well-being. By contrast, the Rural Wealth Framework is based on the following eleven principles:

1. The flow of benefits from wealth can either be consumed or invested. Only the latter increases future stocks of wealth.

2. The Rural Wealth Framework (RWF) recognizes both economic (e.g., financial capital) and non-economic assets (e.g., political capital).
3. The RWF recognizes assets for which traditional markets exist (e.g., physical capital) and assets for which that is not the case (e.g., social capital).
4. The RWF recognizes that the eight capitals can be thought of individually, but they are often inter-related, sometimes complementing and sometimes substituting one another. Furthermore, the greatest impacts typically occur when the potential synergy across these capitals is recognized and catalyzed.
5. The RWF recognizes that some assets are mobile (e.g., human capital) and others are not (e.g., most types of natural capital).
6. The RWF recognizes that certain place-based or non-mobile assets may be owned by local residents, or by those outside the locality, and that property rights determine the distribution of the benefits that flow from these assets. Absentee ownership of natural capital, for example, may impact the wealth of a community very differently than would local ownership.
7. The RWF includes both public and private assets, and recognizes that some assets may be primarily owned and controlled by individuals (e.g., private land), while others may be primarily publicly controlled (e.g., highways or airports).
8. The RWF recognizes that certain non-mobile assets (e.g. recreational areas or national parks) have value to both those who live nearby and those who live far away.
9. The RWF recognizes and makes explicit that collective action and governance play a major role in wealth creation and retention. For example, the public sector is a major generator of human capital through its investments in public education. Likewise, the public sector generates intellectual capital by creating and enforcing patent and copyright laws.
10. The RWF recognizes that the distribution of assets is very important. For example, the distribution of assets across households can have an enormous impact on inter-generational social and economic mobility. Or, as another example, political capital that

is not widely shared, but is concentrated in the hands of a few, may not benefit the entire community, state, or region.

11. The RWF recognizes that individuals' wealth depends not only on their own assets, and how they use them, but also on how the assets of their neighbors are used. For example, when individuals invest in cultural diversity, the wealth of other residents is enhanced.

All eight types of capital have a role to play in the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab. For the most part, however, the Lab will focus on how **cultural capital** is created, maintained, distributed, activated, or mobilized in the context of other capitals, in rural communities.

Rural Arts and Culture

Culture is a notoriously difficult term to define. In 1952, American anthropologists compiled a list of 164 different definitions, which varied in light of different usages of the word. Within the context of the Lab, we will refer to the UNESCO definition of culture adopted in the internationally recognized 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which states:

> *Culture should be regarded as the set of distinct spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or social group, and that it encompasses in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.*

The most common use of the term "culture" is to describe the aggregate behaviors of any group operating at any scale, expressed through a combination of rituals and activities.

Like culture itself, the term "cultural capital" is defined in multiple ways. The Lab has adopted the following working definition of cultural capital, although examples/circumstances in from U.S. rural communities may refine this:

> *The stock of practices that reflect values and identities rooted in place, class, and/or ethnicity. Investments in cultural capital create or sustain the values, traditions, beliefs, and/or languages that become the currency to leverage other types of capital.*

The study of cultural capital—the assets and relationships unique to rural arts and culture—is understandably a key driver of the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab. Nevertheless, other capitals are also of special interest. For example, **natural capital** is expected to play a critical role in the Lab's research; such capital is abundant in rural areas and generally limited in urban areas.

Additionally, **social capital** (*the stock of trust, relationships, and networks that support civic society*) provides the "soft infrastructure" for (a) moving or accelerating curiosity, imagination, and creativity, and (b) providing a support structure for the entrepreneur.

Finally, **human capital** *(the stock of education, skills, and mental health of people)* has long been recognized as a critical element in community well-being, both in urban and rural areas. The Rural Cultural Wealth Lab will examine how cultural assets influence human capital in rural communities and thereby help to spur creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. For that matter, the Lab will build on research findings that in lagging rural regions, creativity is more important for prosperity than are human capital, patents, or high-tech industry employment.

<u>Innovation/Entrepreneurship</u>

Distinctions are helpful. Innovation can be thought of as the "ah ha moment," the creative idea or intellectual breakthrough. Entrepreneurship is the vehicle (the artisan, the business person, the entrepreneurial support system, etc.) that allows innovation to reach practical fruition and to impact a community or society.

The Rural Cultural Wealth Lab will examine the link between cultural capital and innovation/entrepreneurship. Specifically, our research will determine the pathways of greatest relevance in linking cultural capital to innovation/entrepreneurship, especially civic innovation/entrepreneurship, within a rural context. In pursuing this goal, the Lab will rely heavily on theories of comprehensive rural wealth, as noted above.

Despite the vital need for communities to understand how a portfolio of capitals can work together to build wealth through innovative activities, scant research examines these interactions or the sequencing (or simultaneity) with which the phenomenon occurs.

The U.S. cultural infrastructure and its associated knowledge base are predominantly urban in character. And yet, this Lab's existence reflects the growing momentum to recognize the distinct ways in which arts and culture benefit rural and indigenous communities. Concurrent with this growing knowledge, practitioners, policymakers, and funders have begun to more deeply engage with these concerns and constituencies.

Evidence-based practices must be reinforced, if we seek more inclusive dialogues and more responsive development strategies and public policies regarding rural arts and culture. Given our imperfect knowledge base, it is imperative a balance is struck between rigorous intellectual aspirations and practical approaches to build a solid foundation on which to generate substantive research, for years to come. This spadework must begin by recognizing the dearth of national statistics about the size, composition, capitalization, and evolution of the U.S. rural arts and culture ecology. Thus, the establishment and validation of a conceptual frame and a measurement model are absolutely essential products of the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab.

For starters, the formation of this Lab results from our belief that studying culture and cultural capital through a predominantly urban lens obscures important features of arts and culture in rural areas—a misunderstanding that can lead to imprecise and inaccurate policy prescriptions. While arts and cultural assets are equally important in both urban and rural areas, the latter type of community is often characterized by low population density, historical outmigration of youth, greater reliance on natural capital for livelihoods, and other traits that can account for differences in how arts and cultural assets and relationships are viewed in these settings.

Finally, the unique capital represented by rural arts and culture has implications for the prosperity and sustainability of urban communities, as well. After all, urban residents equally benefit from these essential rural contributions, as well as basic resources, such as food, energy and water.

Consistent with all above, the Rural Cultural Wealth Lab is designed to be a "living" lab, intentionally framing research hypotheses, questions, and metrics that will hold many diverse but related strands of knowledge, for the ultimate benefit of policy and practice.