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Rural Myths, Realities and Opportunities Briefing Session

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Presenter: Dee Davis, Founder and President, Center for Rural Strategies
See the [presenter's bio](#) under Friday Morning Briefings.

Summary

When Dee Davis entered the field, the major principles guiding rural arts administration were excellence and inclusion. States were laboratories of innovation in the arts. The context for this work was that many rural communities felt isolated and behind but didn't know why. Arts administrators wanted to create a new narrative about rural communities and help them feel connected to each other.

One myth about rural areas is that **everyone is a farmer**. In fact, fewer than 2% of people in rural America make their living as farmers. More people are farmers in the cultural sense. A second myth is that **rural people are bigots**. Rural people carry this same false perception about urban people. Rural and urban areas face similar challenges around poverty and yet are politically opposed and there's little dialogue. Policy follows perception, so these perceptions matter.

There are a number of opportunities for rural communities. One is **our changing economy**. Our economy historically has been organized around shortages of energy. Now, because of natural gas and renewable energy, we have an abundance that no one was aware of. This is going to open up opportunities primarily for rural communities. Another opportunity is **broadband connectivity**. If your community is connected it doesn't guarantee you'll be successful; but if you're not connected it means that you likely will not be. You won't be able to compete, participate in democracy or educate your children. Connectivity can determine the health of rural communities. And finally, we have the opportunity to **find what makes each rural community unique** and bring it to a larger discourse. This is the opportunity of the arts.

Questions

What are the strengths and weaknesses of federal level data and definitions of rural?

The U.S. Census Bureau has defined rural as anything that is not metropolitan. This is somewhat arbitrary and has to do with the relative stability of rural populations

compared to the growth of metropolitan populations. Some congressional leaders try to make exemptions so other places can receive program funds. It's not an easily resolved issue. His best advice is to complain if the definition is harmful to you, because you may get exemption.

One of the stories we hear is that downtown commerce becomes unsustainable without enough population. What do you think?

What we know about rural communities is that the best indicator of success is whether people want to live there. High-amenity rural communities, broadband, good schools, good health care and the arts are indicators in towns that work. People don't come to them for industrial employment like they once did.

Sometimes communities compete with one another. What do you see in terms of communities working together?

There's a lack of trust between communities and this is a widespread issue. It's always hard to build trust. What's important—and here's where the arts have a role—is to talk about what can happen together. The challenge is to articulate a future that people want to participate in. In some ways there are more opportunities to do this around cultural activity than economic activity.

Do you have any examples of where the balance of power between rural and urban is being addressed successfully?

A 2008 Brookings Institution study called [MetroPolicy for a MetroNation](#) made the case that the way you create wealth is to invest in metro areas. It also claimed that investing in rural areas is wasteful because there's no return. It was a convincing story until the economy melted down, and yet many people still hold to this model. Because more and more models of delivery systems come through metro areas it makes it harder for rural communities. It's important for us to advocate for rural communities to be connected to the solutions.

Do you see models of where rural communities tap into connectivity other than putting something up on a website?

There are new technologies that could make a difference. For example, white spaces are the unused spectrum spaces in broadcast antennas. The FCC has decided to let more of this spectrum be used by rural, which could mean the availability of lower-cost technology in some communities.

Have you been analyzing trends around immigration populations coming into rural communities?

We've polled rural voters in battleground states. What you see is a general, surprising tolerance for immigrants. There's also a demographic shift in metro areas that we're getting ready to see in rural: We expect that the majority of rural counties will be majority people of color in the next 20 to 25 years. No one votes their pocketbook—they vote their culture. This is an opportunity for cultural workers to create the kind of conversation that avoids fear and brings people in. The longer trend is that immigrants coming into communities for low-wage jobs are going to stay.

Do immigrant families expect their children to go to metro areas or stay in rural areas?

There is not adequate data on this that Davis is aware of. People are generally worried about where their kids will go. There are many people who live in metro areas but who culturally identify as rural. Those people are the hardest fighters for rural communities and you'll find more and more of these people. People no longer live in just one place.