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Producer Services
Youth Migration
Hospital Closures
Urban Misperceptions

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Editor's Notebook

From the articles in this issue, I've gained a better sense of the importance of telecommunications for rural development. Many rural areas are benefiting from telecommunications. Others could benefit by becoming better linked to national and international markets and sources of information through telecommunications. For example, Porterfield and Sizer show that producer services industries have grown rapidly in rural areas, and have kept pace with urban growth while many other rural industries have not kept up with their urban counterparts. Computer-related service industries are growing more quickly in rural than urban areas, indicating that telecommunications are playing a role in this rural job growth.

Gibbs and Cromartie show that rural areas lose more college-experienced young adults to urban areas than they gain from urban areas, widening the rural-urban gap in educational attainment. Also, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that lower shares of rural than of urban high school seniors plan to go on to obtain an undergraduate or more advanced degree. Rural areas could use telecommunications technology to address both of these education issues. To retain and attract more college-educated young adults, higher paying jobs commensurate with their skills must be available in rural areas. Computer software design, telecommunications system design and maintenance, and other jobs requiring college-educated workers can locate in rural areas that are connected to the information superhighway. Also, distance learning is being adopted by some rural schools. One of its primary uses is to provide advanced classes through video communications, preparing high school students for college. Both the availability of advanced courses and the demonstration effect of higher skilled local jobs might interest larger shares of rural students in obtaining a college education.

Hart, Pirani, and Rosenblatt investigated the relationship between hospital closures and rural towns' ability to retain physicians. They found that more remote rural towns lost a higher share of their physicians within 2 years of closure of their sole hospitals than towns closer to metro areas. Telemedicine could help some rural towns retain or even gain physicians. Consultation between rural general practitioners and specialists at large urban medical centers by means of computer or video communication is an example of telemedicine. Residents' access to computer or video communication with doctors outside their local area is another.

Urban views of rural areas verge on the bucolic, at least if urban Pennsylvanians are representative. Willits and Luloff found from surveying urban residents, business people, and State government officials/employees that they all hold very positive views of rural social, recreational, and community characteristics, but misunderstand the economic realities of the State's rural population. One of the ways that urbanites' misperceptions of rural conditions could be corrected is through interaction of rural and urban people on computer bulletin boards. If many rural residents get connected and communicate with urban residents, stereotypes may be broken down. The "Get Connected" education and awareness program recently initiated jointly by USDA and the U.S. Department of Commerce to introduce rural residents (and others) to the information superhighway may facilitate this interaction.

The telecommunications options I've outlined are overly optimistic, not considering the time and expense involved in connecting rural people, businesses, and public institutions to the information superhighway. And, access to and use of telecommunications cannot guarantee prosperity for every rural community. In the information age, however, it seems prudent for rural areas to take whatever advantage they can of telecommunications to bridge their economic, educational, and medical gaps with urban areas.

Linda M. Ghelfi

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