

History of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

The following information is excerpted from a 1997 special 25th anniversary issue of *Rural Development*, a newsletter published by NCRCRD while it was hosted by Iowa State University. Val Farmer developed a brief biography of each of Center's distinguished directors, along with their contributions to the Center.

The Creator

Earl O. Heady was director of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development at Iowa State University, and a world renowned agricultural economist. His textbooks in production economics were unprecedented, and he attracted quantitatively-oriented graduate students of high caliber who developed economic models for policy analysis.

Ear was undoubtedly wearing his CARD hat when he responded to a call for proposals by the Cooperative State Research Service to fund four regional research centers for rural economic development. Bill Stucky, at the time serving as educational director for CARD staff members, assisted in developing the proposal to locate the NCRCRD at Iowa State University. Each Center would receive \$75,000 to support rural research on a regional basis.

Earl Heady was the first director of the NCRCRD, which was established in March 1972 and housed at Iowa State University.

Earl was also part of a select group of social scientists who drafted the Rural Development Act of 1972. The RDA was an authorizing act which set an upper limit for funding and a formula for distributing the money. Initial funding consisted of \$1.8 million for extension and \$1.5 million for research. Ten percent, or \$300,000, was allocated for the four regional research centers.

The additional \$75,000 (\$37,500 for extension and \$37,500 for research) effectively doubled each Center's budget and provided the opportunity to link research with education and community outreach. Extension funds were later increased by an additional \$1 million, again divided among the four Centers. This proved to be the high mark of federal funding for the Centers in terms of real dollars.

The Rural Development Act of 1972 and its provision for four Regional Rural Development Centers was a major innovative breakthrough in the aggressive extension of scholarship to potential users. Under this format, the Agricultural Experiment Station directors and the Cooperative Extension Service directors formed relationships and integrated their efforts on a multistate basis.

This approach enabled the NCRCRD to bring together faculty in the 12-state region to conduct research on topics of mutual interest using common methodologies and analyses, and then extend this research to outreach and real world relevancy. These faculty members who worked in applied research often had more in common with each other than with colleagues in their own departments. They found support

and sustaining collaborations under this regional funding umbrella. It also provided a more direct linkage with the communities they were ultimately trying to serve.

The Rural Development Act of the 1972 that Earl Heady helped conceive was quite intentional in its vision and is as invigorating today as it was in 1974 when the new funding came on line. The vision was multidisciplinary and inclusive. A regional rural development center would “facilitate,” “integrate,” “link” and “coordinate” rural development research and bridge the gap to applied settings. It created the focal point and resources to reach out to scholars and invite synergistic collaboration.

As director of the NCRCED, Earl Heady surrounded himself with able lieutenants; sociologists Dave Rogers, newsletter editor Larry Whiting, and agricultural economists Leo Meyer. The early years were spent getting organized, forming the board of directors and two advisory boards, building an agenda, conducting needs assessments, and soliciting proposals. Early projects focused on organizing conferences and publishing the proceedings.

It soon became apparent, however, that Earl had too many responsibilities and needed to return to some of his former duties. He had provided structure in establishing the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, but did not have time to offer hands-on leadership.

Ron Powers, Director (1974-1984)

The Warrior

Ron Powers was head of the department for family environment when he was recruited to serve as director of the NCRCRD by Dean Lee Kolmer of the College of Agriculture and Dean Marvin Anderson of University Extension. He was director of the Center from 1974 to 1984. During that time Ron also had responsibility for Community Resource Development, was assistant director for University Extension, and assistant director for the Agricultural Experiment Station.

If Earl was the creator, then Ron was the consummate warrior and skilled politician. He had to fight to preserve and implement the vision of a Regional Rural Development Center. He had excellent administrative and political skills, and in general was well regarded by the Board of Directors.

The battles were what you would imagine; money, collaboration, community development vs. production agriculture. Some Agricultural Experiment Station directors and Cooperative Extension Service directors saw the Center as garnering resources in a zero sum game. Although his was new money, their focus was on their university and their program. The Regional Rural Development Center was seen as a competitor for scarce resources.

Opponents within the NCRCRD Board of Directors fought the concept of regional collaboration, even though they had no quarrel with the quality of projects or the actual results.

Another battle was economic development based on production agriculture vs. main street or community development. Some AES directors defined their legitimate interests so narrowly that it became difficult to support softer issues and broader research efforts. It was corn and soybeans vs. community and people.

Ron weathered these storms. He was an influential and articulate spokesperson for rural development in the North Central region as well as in Washington, D.C. He had strong supporters and champions that helped blunt the efforts of those trying to do away with the Centers. This reached a culmination in a narrow 7 to 6 vote in Wooster, Ohio, to continue authorization for the Centers. Ron will never forget one comment that grates on his nerves to this day – “Just once we ought to stop a project while it is successful.”

During Ron’s tenure as director of the North Central Center, there were new directors of the North Central Center, there were new directors at the Northeast, Southern, and Western Centers. He became the mentor for his colleagues and was appreciated for being knowledgeable and wise. Russ Youmans, who assumed directorship of the Western Rural Development Center during that time, describes Ron as a hard-nosed sociologist, a well-regarded researcher and administrator, and adept at policy analysis. He admires Ron for the way he dealt with the many strong-minded administrators in his region.

Russ recalls that the successful strategy of the time was to keep the budgets respectfully small so that the institutional forces wouldn’t notice and be inclined to close the Centers down in order to get their hands on those funds. There was an implicit budgetary ceiling beyond which the Centers should not push.

In 1981-82, the 10 percent formula funding expired. U.S. Cooperative Extension Administrator Mary Nell Greenwood averted a funding crisis by funding Extension activities of the Regional Rural Development Centers from her budget for a couple of years. When the funding was restored and even increased, she repaid her department with the additional funding that was coming on line.

It wasn’t all politics, however. Ron takes pride in the Center’s track record of research and extension projects during the 10 years he served as director of the NCRCD. There were state-of-the-art conferences on important issues in rural development, a multiyear staff training effort in the region led by two universities, and several substantive books and reports published on high priority topics.

During Ron’s tenure, grants and contracts were developed from non-governmental sources. Projects were also developed that included all four Regional Rural Development Centers, including the major public policy effort related to uses of prime farm land in the early 1980s.

Ron moved to full time Extension administration in 1981 as associate dean and associate director of University Extension at Iowa State University. He continued to serve as director of the Rural Development Center until 1984.

Peter Korsching, Director (1984-1994)

The Facilitator

If Earl Heady was the creator and Ron Powers the warrior, then Peter Korsching was the facilitator. Peter is a professor in the department of Sociology and played a significant role as assistant director of the Center for one year prior to taking over in 1984.

Peter served as director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development for 10 years, and was a strong advocate of building relationships between the Center and faculty at the land-grant institutions. The Board was reorganized during his tenure to include non land-grant and nongovernmental representation. The combination of these two activities resulted in more support for research and a regional approach to research.

Under Peter's leadership, the Center became more active in shaping proposals and building research teams. He formalized the procedure for submitting proposals and systematized the review process.

Peter takes pride in the quality of projects that the Center facilitated. He remembers a conference in 1989 on empowering rural communities as having powerful and lasting effects. It led to several rural revitalization efforts facilitated in many cases by local extension agents. The educational materials and strategic planning materials resulted in a number of programs that have been used over the years. Locally-generated ideas mushroomed and had measurable impact.

Another project consisted of a 12-state analysis of farmers conducted during and following the farm crisis. Because of the large sample size, many states used the data to assist farmers during a highly crucial and vulnerable time in agriculture.

The research and development of multi-community collaboration took place under the leadership of Tim Borich, program specialist for the NCRCRD, and allowed communities to pool their resources and attract businesses to their region.

A major conference on community leadership was held in Chicago with several spinoff developments including additional smaller conferences, further research programs with recruitment of top researchers, educational programs, and production of videotapes and other educational materials.

On final project that Peter mentioned was sponsorship of the MidAmerica Conference where local citizen leaders came together for a "show-and-tell" program. This was a low budget affair and was immensely popular. Several regional multistate conferences using this format followed, with the follow-up conferences being self-supporting.

Although the Center was experiencing great success with its rural development programming efforts, both regionally and nationally, Peter grew weary of the politics. In a sense, Peter was the anti-politician, and he found that in general, faculty also were not political enough. The impact of the Center's support was often not communicated to the Extension and Experiment Station directors in their respective states.

His chief frustration was that if tension or differences existed, his critics wouldn't tell him directly, which made it difficult to identify the differences in both in source and content. About seven or eight years into his tenure, a director or constituent took offense to his leadership and called for a national review process. The center emerged from the review process revitalized and a strategic plan was developed that sets the direction for current programs.

True to the initial vision of Earl O. Heady, the Center did not build an empire. It existed by keeping overhead to a minimum and channeling resources to faculty in the participating states. Success makes a difference. Peter states. "The Center was on solid footing before I took over. I feel I did the same thing for the new director."

Cornelia Flora, Director (1994- still director at the time this was written in 1997; she stepped down in 2009, making her the longest-serving director to date)

The System Builder

If Earl was the creator, Ron the warrior and Peter the facilitator, then Cornelia (Neal) Flora is the system builder. Neal joined the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development as director in 1994, and brought with her a vision and a network. She has focused on bringing people together and facilitating their doing wonderful things.

Besides being a noted researcher in her own right, Neal has nurtured strong ties with other researchers. Her talent is her ability to develop partnerships. Her style is epitomized by two highly potent words which she embraces and touts – social capital.

Neal readily acknowledges the fine strategic plan that was in place when she arrived at the NCRCRD, and the firm foundation that had been established. However, what was appropriate programming efforts for the 1970s and 1980s needed to evolve to fit the 1990s. Under her leadership the Center has expanded the mission to include an entrepreneurial role through higher levels of cooperation around financial, human and environmental resources.

Research is currently focused on community capacity building and empowerment zones and enterprise communities. These initiatives address holistic concerns of a vibrant labor force, including increased skills, new jobs, daycare, housing, transportation and health care.

In particular, current work in health-based community development combines research and outreach in helping communities understand the role of health and healthcare in community development. Under Center auspices, teams have been formed at the national and state level to train and help communities address issues of health planning, telemedicine and access concerns.

State health departments are one of many partners in the health-based community development program and this is one example of reaching out to develop new collaborations. Economic developers

and social service providers are sitting at the same table. There are both public partners and private partners.

Under Cornelia's leadership, the Center has strengthened its ties with traditional partners such as USDA, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Farm Foundation. In addition, working relationships have been established with non-traditional partners such as the Center for Rural Affairs, the Northwest Area Foundation, the Aspen Institute, and the National Council on Alternative Technologies. As government devolves, a linkage with the Rural Policy Research Institute examines national and state policy regarding rural issues.

Neal has ventured further into USDA as well and the Center is involved in rural development programming efforts with the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Agricultural Research Service, USDA Rural Development, the Forest Service and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

State Rural Development Council programs in the region are linked and participate in projects that address helping people rise from poverty. The NCRCD has also co-sponsored and co-facilitated key workshops and conferences on viability of rural communities, sustainable agriculture, value-added enterprises, conflict resolution between public good and private interests, citizen participation, and market driven solutions.

As you may have guessed by now, Neal champions active participation, communication and activist research. People who need to talk with each other are comparing notes and adding value to each other's thoughts and efforts – social capital. Active communication through electronic mail messages, sharing minutes, and monthly grassroots feedback make for a dynamic organization. Research and outreach are closely linked.

Neal envisions these activities as creating a virtual center – slim in physical structure but huge in terms of viable networks of teams and partnerships. The NCRCD is becoming an epicenter of this 90's style of organization and communications.

New partners and new resources now seek out and find the Center. Neal has the luxury of picking and choosing among people who seek the NCRCD as being a vehicle for working on common goals. The Center is in an enviable position and becoming a major player in the regions.