RRDC
Regional Rural Development Centers

Investing in Rural Recovery

Findings from a Rapid Assessment of Stakeholder Priorities for Rural Development

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RRDC Regional Rural Development Centers

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Executive Summary

In the wake of multiple chronic challenges exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic, rural communities and small towns across the United States are beginning to build back from the associated impacts on their economies, workforces, and communities. These efforts at recovery pose critical questions of where and how to invest. To identify where stakeholders engaged in rural development see the greatest need, and the greatest opportunity, the Regional Rural Development Centers have begun to collect feedback through a Listening Sessions Initiative. The first step in this process was a survey through which key rural development implementers and other stakeholders could provide baseline feedback. This report provides findings from that rapid assessment activity.

The topics of physical infrastructure and public services; economic development; workforce development, training, and education; and health were identified as the highest priorities for rural communities to address in the next five years. Critical issues within these priorities include advancing broadband access, fostering equitable and inclusive growth, supporting entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged minority groups, and improving public health including availability and access to medical services. For these issues, and others identified within the report, investments have the greatest potential to fulfill expressed interest in expanded programming among rural development practitioner organizations. There is also a high degree of interest among these organizations in expanding programming related to rural innovation and small businesses, promoting racial understanding within communities, supporting local and regional food systems, developing new markets for agricultural products, capturing value of sustainable farm practices, planning for resilience, addressing disparities faced by minorities in program access, and enhancing youth development and engagement (including retention in rural areas). For those issues, however, relatively high capacities exist that likely can be maintained by continued investment.

Analysis of qualitative feedback provided through open-ended questions in the survey highlights deep connections between and across issues. Using the Community Capitals Framework helps explain how interventions that build foundational capacities – such as infrastructure, social networks, and scientific knowledge – among rural communities are likely to address several topical areas at once. In this report, the Regional Rural Development Center research team (RRDC) identifies preliminary themes representing these foundational capacities that emerged from stakeholder responses to questions on assets, challenges, and opportunities for each of the eight topical areas contained within the survey.

Results also highlight the kinds of activities and programming that are likely to have the greatest value in supporting rural development practitioners' work. These include providing technical assistance in identifying and pursuing funding, showcasing programs of excellence in community and economic development, and coordinating multi-state Extension teams. Formal training on community and economic development topics and targeted funding for both integrated research-Extension and multi-state collaborations were also highly valued in select regions. Investments in these activities are likely to build general organizational capacity to address priority topics.

Regional differences do exist, however, and should be taken into account when planning programmatic interventions. For example, in the Northeast addressing issues of climate change replaces health as one of the top four priorities, while in the North Central region (i.e., Midwest) promoting community vibrancy is among the most pressing topics. Capacities, interest in expansion, and valued activities all show similar regionality. These differences are best explored in future detailed regional briefings to act as supplements to the broad view taken in this report.

Introduction

The Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs) are charged with conducting research and outreach programming that builds the capacity of the Land-Grant University System to address crucial needs in our nation's rural communities. Each RRDC serves a defined geographic region and tailors its programs to address the particular needs and priorities of stakeholders within its boundaries. RRDCs are staffed by researchers, Extension professionals, and others working in support of the respective Center's goals and are housed at Land-Grant Universities within the region they serve. They also collaborate on issues that span regions, and in turn connect their regional partners to emerging Federal issues and priorities.

Established by the Rural Development Act of 1972, the RRDCs link the research and educational outreach capacity of the nation's public universities with communities, local decision-makers, entrepreneurs, farmers and ranchers, and families to help address a wide range of development issues. They respond to emerging issues, generate credible science-based information to clarify these issues, and create public-private partnerships to address them. Each RRDC is administered by a joint agreement between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and host institutions within the respective region who operate Extension Services and Agricultural Experiment Stations. Core funding is from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA) for integrated research, education, and Extension activities. As such they play a unique role in USDA's service to rural America.

As part of their collaborative effort to address emerging issues, the RRDCs have begun a national Listening Session Initiative with the goal of rapidly appraising stakeholder priorities related to the community, economic, and workforce development of rural communities in the U.S. This rapid appraisal comes at a critical juncture for rural areas and small towns, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic's height and the onset of national, regional, and local efforts to recover from its effects while sustainably addressing the challenges which existed prior to COVID-19. As this initiative starts, policymakers, community leaders, institutions, and businesses are evaluating where and how they should invest to not only rebuild our economy, but to improve it for the future.

To accomplish this rapid appraisal, the RRDCs are engaging in a two-phase approach for gathering feedback from stakeholders. The first phase is comprised of a survey instrument, sent out through the extensive networks of the RRDCs. The aim of the survey is to quickly gather baseline data about priorities, capacities, potential for expansion, and programming of high value. Following the survey, and informed by its findings, in the second phase key stakeholders will be invited to facilitated discussions (slated for spring 2022) about priorities, needs, and strategies for success in

Figure 1 Map of geographic coverage in the contiguous United States for each of the RRDCs

building rural development programming. These include facilitated discussions focused at the regional level, as well as those on topics of national importance. Through this initiative, the RRDCs are compiling findings that can guide their activities to support stakeholders and to build a body of evidence that other partners may use in identifying investments with a potential for high impact.

In this report, we summarize findings from the first phase of the Listening Sessions Initiative. We cover results of key survey elements that help us establish priority topics, understand organizational capacities to engage in programming on topics and issues, identify those topics and issues for which potential for expanded programming likely exists, and evaluate what types of programming activities provide the most value to participating stakeholders. These results are discussed primarily at the level of the national sample, but we also report early findings on regional differences. We also summarize qualitative responses that help us identify additional topics and issues of importance and understand the assets, challenges, and opportunities rural communities face in addressing key areas. Notes on the methods employed to design of the survey instrument, solicit responses, and for the treatment of data – including grouping responses by geographic region – are provided in Appendix A.

Priority Topics at the National and Regional Level

The primary goal of the survey was to identify the topics and issues where investments are most needed **within the next five years** to support the development of rural communities in the United States. To this end, respondents were first asked to provide a ranking of pre-identified topics related to rural community development and policy. Respondents were also informed at this stage that their responses to the ranking would give them additional options to build deeper understanding later in the survey. Respondents were asked, "*Which of these topical areas do you view as the most important priorities to be addressed in the next five years for rural communities?*" They were provided with a click-and-drag ranking activity where they could place each option in order from most to least important.

Description of Topic Areas

Respondents participating in the survey were presented with a total of eight (8) topical areas – broad categories of activities and domains of knowledge. Each topical area was supplemented with a list of four to five specific issues to exemplify the types of programming that might fall under each topic. Topics and issues were identified using the expertise present within the staffs of the four RRDCs and in consultation with selected stakeholders. The topics and the exemplar issues associated with them are presented in the table below. Each respondent was presented these topics in a randomized order when asked to rank them. Randomization helps alleviate bias from display ordering across the sample. The listing below is alphabetized for use in this illustration only. Topic areas are **bolded**, issues *italicized*.

In addition to the predefined topics and issues listed in Table 1, respondents were offered the opportunity to identify priorities they feel are important but which were not otherwise listed. These open-ended responses were not included in the rankings but do allow the RRDCs to identify other priorities that were seen as pressing for rural communities from survey respondents. Preliminary analysis of these topics is included in a section that follows.

A total of 641 valid responses were provided by participants to the ranking question. Of these, 32% were assigned by the research team to the Southern Region, 28% to the North Central, 18% to the West, 13% to the Northeast, 8% to a solely national scope, and less than 1% had no defined region. We do not report values for the final group, with no defined region, separately in this document, but they are included in figures for the total set of observed responses.

Table 1 Listing of topic areas (bold) and their constituent issues (italicized)

Agriculture and food systems
Local and regional food systems development
Sustainable on-farm practices and value capture
New market development for agricultural and forestry products
Land access, heirs' property, and farm transition
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather
Disaster preparation, mitigation, and management
Natural and environmental resources management
Community and economic resiliency planning
Mitigation and adaptation strategies
Community vibrancy
Youth development, engagement, and rural retention
Community governance, leadership, and resident engagement/participation
Placemaking, culture, and arts
Aging and inter-generational engagement
Population change and demographics
Diversity, equity, and inclusion
Equitable and inclusive economic growth
Entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities
Community racial understanding
Addressing disparities in access to programming
Economic development
Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention
Tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality
Exports and international trade
Sustainable growth (including "closed-loop" and "circular" economies)
Health
Nutritional security, food access, and food affordability
Behavioral and mental health services
Substance abuse issues, including opioids
Public health, including availability and access to medical facilities and services
Physical infrastructure and public services
Energy, including renewable production and reliable access
Broadband/high-speed internet access, affordability, and reliability
Housing access and affordability
Transportation infrastructure renewal
Workforce development, training, and education
Certificates and other professional training
Apprenticeships and internships
Skills gaps and strategic planning for workforce development
Educational programs in high schools, colleges, and universities for jobs of the future
Retraining and transition assistance

Ranking of Topics from Greatest to Least Priority

Across the entire sample, the topical areas identified as the four most important for rural community economic and workforce development over the next five years were (1) physical infrastructure and public services; (2) economic development activities; (3) workforce development activities including training and education programs; and (4) health programming and policy. The first three of these – infrastructure and economic and workforce development – were consistently ranked in the top three within responses assigned to each of the four regions. Health remained in the top four priorities for those assigned to the South, the West, and those with a solely national scope of operations.

Three notable differences in priorities between regions were found. For those operating in the North Central region, community vibrancy replaced health in the top four priorities, although the difference in the average ranking between the two was relatively small. For those with operations only of national scope, community vibrancy also entered the top four priorities, and workforce development ranked sixth, after diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This was also the group with the highest average ranking for the DEI topical area. Finally, in the Northeast, climate change, variability, and extreme weather entered the top four priorities – the only region for which this topic was among the top four rankings.

Table 2 Priority rankings of topic areas for entire sample (Total) and groupings

Topic Area	Priority Ranks					
	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Physical infrastructure and public services	3rd	1st	2nd	1st	2nd	**1st**
Economic development	1st	2nd	4th	2nd	3rd	**2nd**
Workforce development, training, and education	2nd	3rd	1st	4th	6th	**3rd**
Health	5th	5th	3rd	3rd	1st	**4th**
Community vibrancy	4th	7th	6th	5th	4th	**5th**
Agriculture and food systems	6th	6th	5th	7th	8th	**6th**
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	8th	4th	8th	6th	7th	**7th**
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	7th	8th	7th	8th	5th	**8th**
Legend			*Rank 1*	*Rank 2*	*Rank 3*	*Rank 4*

Other Topics and Issues Identified by Respondents

Following the rankings of the eight pre-determined topic areas, respondents were asked, "*Are there topics or issues not listed above that you see as important to community and economic development for rural communities in the U.S. over the next 5 years?*" A total of 122 respondents indicated "yes" and were provided with the opportunity to write-in up to three additional priority issues. To analyze these responses, word clouds have been generated which visually represent the frequency of common phrases. Figure 2 presents the graphic for single-word phrases within the additional priorities text submitted by respondents. Appendix B contains a similar graphic for two-word phrases.

Figure 2 Word cloud of single-word phrases for other Topics and Issues identified by respondents

This common analytical tool for qualitative responses reveals that issues identified often related to notions of *community*, *place*, *area*, *local*, or *neighborhood.* The likely implication is that additional issues and topics respondents feel are priorities which must be addressed in the next five years relate to local contexts. Issues identified also often involved some notion of *access. Education*, *housing*, *health*, and *infrastructure* – all contained within the pre-determined topic areas and issues to some degree – featured heavily. This indicates that respondents were either identifying specific issues not covered or reiterating the importance of specific items that fell within pre-defined topical areas they otherwise ranked lower in the priority list. Issues related to civic life were also noteworthy, evidenced by the relative size of concepts such as *leadership*, *government*, *public*, and *political*. Finally, specific issues of particular note deal with *immigration*, *broadband*, *the environment* (*water* and *environmental*), *food*, and *childcare.*

Current Capacity, Interest in Expansion, and Gaps for Topics and Issues

Identifying priority topics is only the first step in understanding how rural development-related programming can be targeted to address the needs of these communities and the practitioners supporting them. The RRDCs also wanted to understand the capacities of organizations engaged with the communities have to address specific issues within the most pressing priorities, as well as their interest in expanding their programming on these issues if they had the appropriate resources. This allowed the RRDC team to identify gaps between current capacity and the desire to expand. Thus, survey respondents

were provided a list of the issues and asked to rate their organization's current capacity to work on these issues and to indicate for each issue if their organization "likely has interest in expanding" existing programming beyond current activities. The 12 to 15 issues presented to the respondents for this section were those associated with the topic areas they ranked as first, second, and third priority. Table 2 provides the complete listing of possible issues by topic area. Findings on respondents' evaluation of their organization's current capacity and interest in expanding are summarized below, primarily for the entire sample, but also briefly for the regional groupings. These findings were then used to identify gaps where investment in targeted resources might build capacity and have a meaningful impact on expanding programs.

The total number of responses for ratings varied across issue items in the full list, due to both non-response by participants and the relative incidence for certain topics to be in the top three priorities. The minimum number of observations for any given item was 159, while the maximum was 318. On average any given item had 233 responses. The number of observations across regional groupings also varies, but no item had fewer than 13 valid observations for ratings. More detailed data on observations by item and grouping are provided in Appendix B. At the lowest value of the ratings scale, respondents were presented a combined rating category of "not applicable or not engaged." Thus, these were treated functionally as "no capacity," since they are equal indicators that programming on an issue is not being done by the respondent's organization.

Current Capacity

Ratings of current capacity were given using a scale from 1 (no capacity) to 4 (high capacity). Those respondents who offered additional key topics or issues in a previous question were also asked to rate their organization's capacity for these additional items. Ratings for respondent-identified topics are not reported here. The ratings for all valid responses within an issue are averaged to determine that issue's current capacity score. Averages are calculated for the entire sample and for each regional partition of the observations. Topic areas also receive capacity scores, these by averaging the current capacity scores for the issues within a given topic area. Actual scores are considered, but so too are the relative positions of these scores. This latter relative approach allows the RRDC team to account for (a) differences in how respondents perceived the scale and (b) differences in sample sizes between regional groupings. Because respondents only rated selected issues related to the highest ranked priority topics, results presented here must be interpreted as being *only among those respondents who see the topic as a top priority.*

Within the entire sample, the capacity of respondents' organizations to engage in programming was rated highest for the topics of agriculture and food systems; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and climate change. The topic areas ranked as the most important were also those with the lowest average ratings for organizational capacity. The lowest capacity score for a topic area within the whole sample was for physical infrastructure and public services, at 2.18. Economic development, health, and workforce development rounded out the bottom half, with average capacity scores between 2.4 and 2.58 on the four-point scale.

Table 3 Current Capacity Scores by Topic Area for entire sample (Total) and groupings

	Current Capacity Score					
	Mean Rating for Constituent Issues Scale: 1 = No Capacity to 4 = High Capacity					
Topic Area	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Agriculture and food systems	2.84	2.85	3.02	2.63	3.06	**2.90**
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	2.59	2.69	2.88	2.61	2.92	**2.74**
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	2.77	2.60	2.90	2.65	2.58	**2.73**
Community vibrancy	2.68	2.40	2.78	2.74	2.61	**2.69**
Workforce development, training, and education	2.52	2.45	2.64	2.68	2.69	**2.58**
Health	2.57	2.38	2.45	2.46	2.71	**2.49**
Economic development	2.41	2.38	2.47	2.30	2.43	**2.40**
Physical infrastructure and public	2.29	2.05	2.14	2.06	2.36	**2.18**
Legend		*Position 1 (Highest)*	*Position 2*	*Position 3*	*Position 4*	

Specific issues within these areas that showed the lowest capacities are listed below. Parentheses in the list indicate the topical area of which the issue is a part and its average rating on the four-point scale.

- Exports and international trade (Economic development; 1.82)
- Transportation infrastructure renewal (Physical infrastructure; 2.0)
- Energy, including renewable production and reliable access (Physical infrastructure; 2.14)
- Housing access and affordability (Physical infrastructure; 2.22)
- Retraining and transition assistance (Workforce development; 2.24)
- Substance abuse issues, including opioids (Health; 2.29)
- Broadband internet access, affordability, and reliability (Physical infrastructure; 2.35)
- Behavioral and mental health services (Health; 2.39)
- Sustainable growth, including closed-loop and circular economies (Economic development; 2.39)
- Public health, including availability and access to medical services (Health; 2.39)

One can compare these to the issues with the highest capacity scores such as sustainable on-farm practices and value capture and local and regional food systems development (3.13 each) and youth development, engagement, and rural retention (3.05).

Regional differences are present within organizational capacity scores. Highlights are provided here. First, while respondents from the South (score: 2.88; position: 3), Northeast (score: 2.69; position: 2), and national scope (score: 2.92; position: 2) groupings had relatively high capacity scores for diversity, equity, and inclusion, those for the North Central (score: 2.59; position: 4) and West (score: 2.61; position: 5) were lower in both absolute and relative terms. Community vibrancy capacity was rated higher, in relative terms, for organizations in the West (score: 2.74; position: 1) compared to its position in other regions (positions between 3 and 5), while western organizations' capacities in agriculture and food systems (score: 2.63; position: 4) were lower compared to how they ranked in other regions (all other positions were 1). Finally, organizations with only a national scope had higher capacity in the topic of health (score: 2.71; position: 3) compared to the capacities in the North Central (position: 5), Northeast and West (both, position: 6), and South (position: 7). Regional breakdowns on capacity scores and positions for specific issues will be explored in later briefings and data products issued subsequent to this report.

Interest in Expansion

Along with the capacity rating scale, for each issue respondents were asked to indicate whether their organization likely has interest in expanding beyond its current activities. This was presented in the form of a simple check box. Thus, expansion potential is measured as a percentage of valid respondents who indicated their organization likely had interest. This expected interest in expanding programming qualifies the capacity ratings discussed in the previous section; issues for which there is low expansion potential may be of lesser priority for resource allocation, even given low relative capacity.

Despite the topics of physical infrastructure, workforce development, and economic development being identified consistently as high priority and low capacity, these three topics also have the lowest relative positions for expansion potential, measured in terms of likely interest perceived by organizational members participating in the survey. On average, issues under the physical infrastructure topic were indicated 22.7% of the time as likely for expansion, those for workforce development 25.9% of the time, and economic development 26.7% of the time. Compare this with DEI issues – the topic with the highest expansion potential for the entire sample, at an average across its issues of 42.5%.

In terms of the expansion potential for specific issues, equitable and inclusive growth rose to the top; of those who rated DEI in the top three priorities, 47.6% said their organizations likely have an interest in expanding programming that addresses this issue. This was followed by rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention (economic development; 45.5%), local and regional food systems development (agriculture and food systems; 42.5%), community racial understanding (DEI; 42.2%), and new market development for agricultural products (agriculture and food systems; 40.9%) to round out the top five issues nationally in terms of expansion potential. Table 5 reports the issue with the highest expansion potential for each of the topical areas.

Table 4 Expansion Potential of Topic Areas for entire sample (Total) and groupings

			Expansion Potential			
		Mean Percent of Respondents over Constituent Issues Indicating Organization is Likely to Expand Activities				
Topic Area	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	43.1%	42.6%	44.7%	42.5%	35.0%	**42.5%**
Agriculture and food systems	35.0%	43.8%	40.2%	29.8%	42.9%	**38.4%**
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	25.0%	36.5%	32.4%	34.0%	38.3%	**32.1%**
Health	29.6%	17.9%	34.6%	28.9%	26.0%	**29.5%**
Community vibrancy	31.2%	34.0%	24.4%	31.7%	21.9%	**28.5%**
Economic development	27.6%	35.7%	27.1%	23.8%	13.5%	**26.7%**
Workforce development, training, and education	24.2%	30.3%	25.0%	27.8%	30.0%	**25.9%**
Physical infrastructure and public	26.7%	23.9%	18.3%	24.6%	20.5%	**22.7%**
Legend			*Position 1 (Highest)*	*Position 2*	*Position 3*	*Position 4*

Table 5 Issues for each Topic Area with highest Expansion Potential

Topic Area	**Issue with Highest Expansion Potential in Topic**	**Expansion Potential**
Agriculture and food systems	Local and regional food systems development	42.5%
Climate change	Community and economic resiliency planning	38.3%
Community vibrancy	Youth development, engagement, and rural retention	36.0%
Diversity, equity and inclusion	Equitable and inclusive economic growth	47.6%
Economic development	Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention	45.5%
Health	Nutritional security, food access, and food affordability	32.8%
Physical infrastructure and public services	Broadband/high-speed internet access, affordability, and reliability	31.5%
Workforce development	Skills gaps and strategic planning for workforce development	30.6%

While the list in Table 5 identifies the issue with the highest potential for expansion within each topic, it is important to note that additional issues were identified within the data as likely candidates for new programming. Thus, the top 10 issues overall, regardless of topic area, are presented below in order from highest to lowest proportion of respondents indicating likely interest within their organizations to expand beyond current efforts.

- Equitable and inclusive economic growth (diversity, equity, and inclusion; 47.6%)
- Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention (economic development; 45.5%)
- Local and regional food systems development (agriculture and food systems; 42.5%)
- Community racial understanding (diversity, equity, and inclusion; 42.2%)
- New market development for agricultural products (agriculture and food systems; 40.9%)
- Addressing disparities in access to programming (diversity, equity, and inclusion; 40.4%)
- Sustainable on-farm practices and value capture (agriculture and food systems; 40.3%)
- Entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities (diversity, equity, and inclusion; 39.8%)
- Community and economic resiliency planning (climate change; 38.3%)
- Youth development, engagement, and rural retention (community vibrancy; 36.0%)

Stark regional differences are shown within the data on expansion potential. Health presents the largest disparity in relative position across regions, with respondents in the Northeast indicating it as the lowest likelihood for expansion (score: 17.9%; position: 8) compared to interest in the national scope (score: 26.0%; position: 5), West (score: 28.9%; position 5), North Central (score: 29.6%; position: 4), and South (score: 34.6%; position: 3). Meanwhile, in the South community vibrancy had relatively low expansion potential (score: 24.4%; position: 7) compared to the North Central and West, where likely interest in building new programing on this topic is much higher (scores: 31.2% and 31.7%, respectively; position:3, for both). A similar pattern exists with climate change where one region – the North Central (score: 25.0%; position: 7) – breaks from the other respondent groupings where it is in position 2 (national scope and West; scores: 38.3% and 34.0%, respectively), position 3 (Northeast; score: 36.5%), or position 4 (South; score: 32.4%). Organizations with a national scope showed the greatest potential for expanding efforts in workforce development, with a relative position for this topic of 4 (score: 30.0%) compared to the Northeast, West, and South (scores: 30.3%, 27.8%, and 25%, respectively; position: 6, for all three) and North Central (position: 8).

Gaps Identified within Survey Results

Topics and issues which show high likelihood for expansion but for which capacity is low offer fertile ground for investment. Interventions in such areas that build capacity have the greatest ability to fulfill unmet desire for programmatic growth. Thus, the gap between expansion potential and capacity is one indicator of where both expanded and more focused resources may be most beneficial. We examine these gaps in two ways in this report. First, in absolute terms by visualizing the capacity and expansion potential scores on a standardized scale. Second, in relative terms, as described later in this section.

In Figure 3, each of the eight topical areas is situated on a radar chart. In this chart, the further from the center a topic's corresponding point lies, the higher is the value for that point. Values for capacity and expansion potential scores presented here are standardized to a single scale so they can be compared. Ideal investments would first target those topics for which expansion potential exceeds current capacity. However, data from our survey respondents indicates that, in absolute terms, there is no such topic area. Therefore, ideal investments would seek to first address topics for which there is lower *relative* capacity

and higher *relative* likelihood of expansion. Figure 2 shows that while diversity, equity, and inclusion, agriculture and food systems, climate change, and community vibrancy topics all have relatively high interest in expansion, they also have some of the higher capacity scores. This indicates that there is substantial interest in building out programming on issues for which foundational activities have already been established. The topics of health and economic development also have moderate interest in expansion but capacity scores lower than those previously mentioned, indicating these may be good candidates for initial investments among the organizational populations represented in the survey's sample.
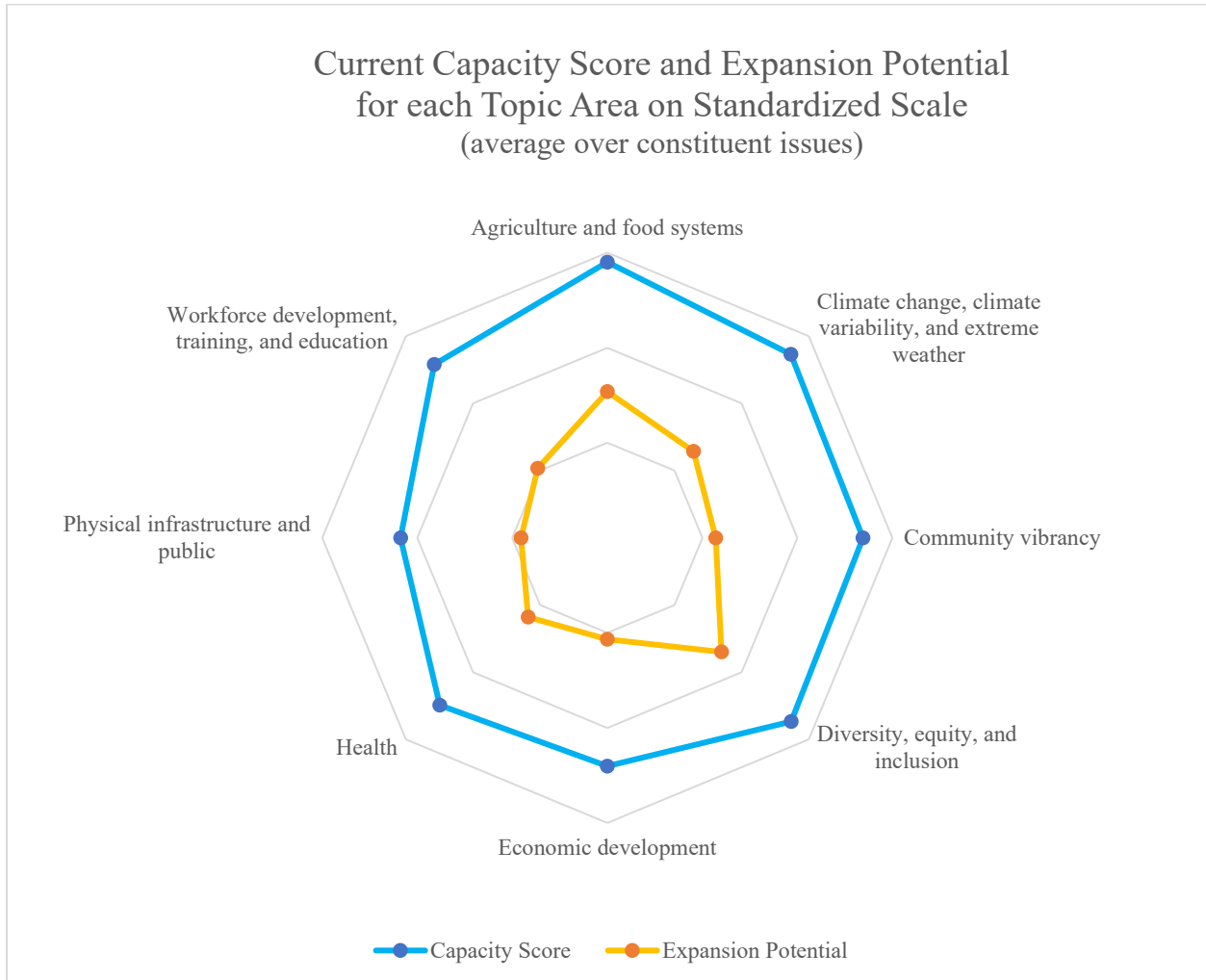

Figure 3 Radar chart comparing Current Capacity Score to Expansion Potential for Topic Areas

 For a more detailed view of gaps and to better identify key topics, we also use the relative degree of capacity and expansion potential for topic areas and their constituent issues. Relative degree is the inverse position or rank for the topic or issue's relevant score among all topics or issues. To calculate the relative degree, items are sorted from the greatest to least value for the relevant score and then assigned a number corresponding to their position among the list. For example, the topic with the largest value for the average capacity rating is assigned a relative degree of eight, because it is the greatest of eight total topics. We then compare the relative degrees for the two scores – capacity and expansion potential – to identify gaps.

Figure 4 reports the relative degree of capacity and expansion potential for each of the topical areas contained within the survey. The maximum possible relative degree for topic areas is eight. Three topical areas show the greatest promise for immediate investment across the entire sample: health; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and economic development. Health has the largest gap, with a moderate relative degree of interest but relatively lower capacity. Diversity, equity, and inclusion has the highest relative degree of interest in expanding, but also was rated relatively high in terms of current capacity. Conversely, when issues in the economic development topic area are aggregated, the relative expansion potential and relative capacity are low, but there is at least a clear indication of unmet interest in expanding.

Analysis of relative degrees information also contextualizes the priority rankings discussed in an earlier section of this report. For example, while physical infrastructure and public services was seen as the top priority by survey participants, when averaging over its constituent issues its relative degree of capacity and expansion potential appears small. While many respondents felt diversity, equity, and inclusion programming was of lower priority for developing rural communities, among those who felt it was a high priority their organizations were viewed has having relatively high capacity and even higher likelihood of expanding in this area. Moreover, these relative measures indicate that investments in issues under agriculture and food systems, community vibrancy, and workforce development are more likely to maintain current capacities, instead of expanding programming in new areas with unmet potential growth.
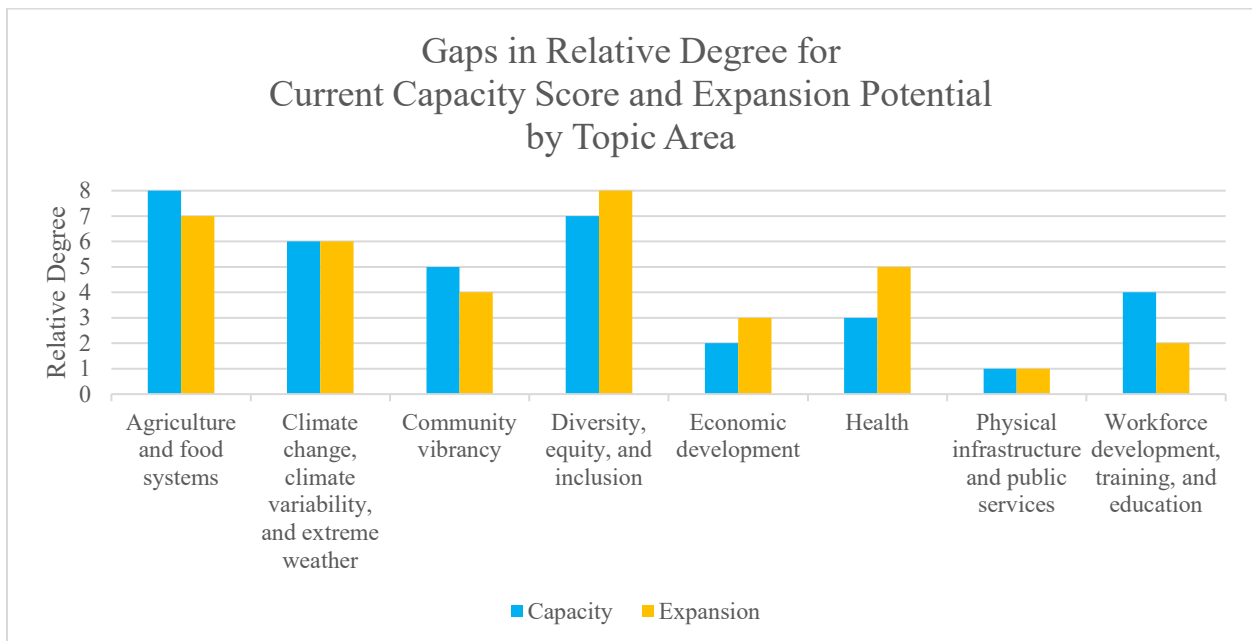

Figure 4 Bar chart comparing the Relative Degree of Current Capacity Scores and Expansion Potential for Topic Areas

Both absolute and relative measures were calculated for the 34 individual issues which constitute the eight topic areas. A radar graphic representing the absolute measures is provided in Appendix B. Our analysis here focuses on the relative measure for issues. Figure 5 reports the 16 issues for which the relative degree of expansion potential exceeds that for current capacity. The maximum possible relative degree is 34. The issues in Figure 5 are presented in order from largest gap to smallest gap. Among these are: each of the four issues for the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion; three issues each from health and physical infrastructure and public services topic areas; two issues each from agriculture and food systems and economic development; and one issue each from climate change and community vibrancy

areas. The issue with the greatest potential for investment impacts among the organizations represented in the survey is access, affordability, and reliability of broadband internet. A number of the issues in this list also share common threads, such as the ties that exist between equitable and inclusive growth, socially disadvantaged entrepreneurship, and general innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business programming for rural areas.
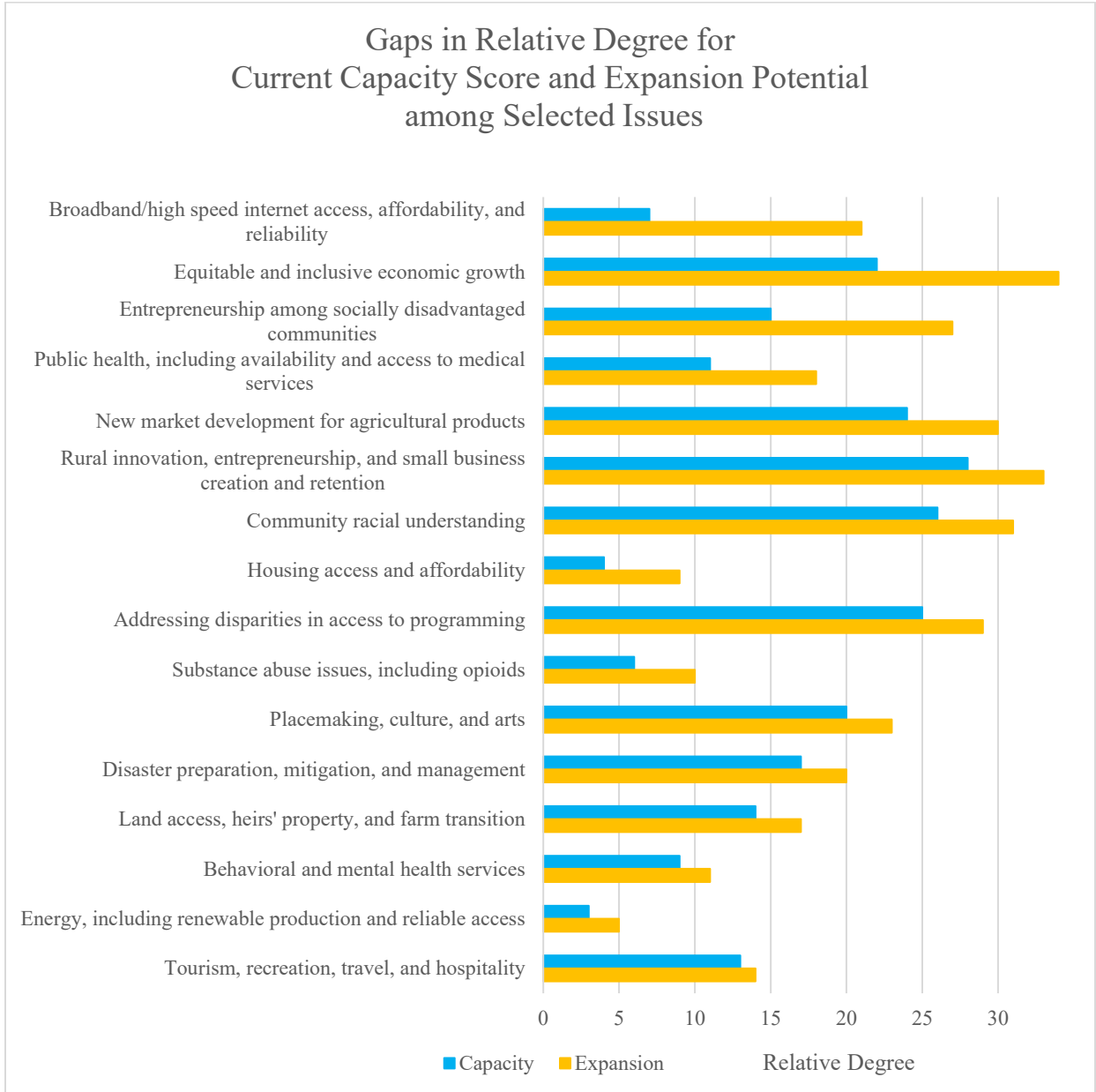

Figure 5 Bar chart comparing the Relative Degree of Current Capacity Score and Expansion Potential for Selected Issues

At the regional level there are broad topic areas showing notable gaps between capacity and expansion potential. Detailed regional analysis will be provided in later supplements to this report to be issued by the project team via a dashboard and via the individual Regional Rural Development Centers. However, summary remarks are as follows. Diversity, equity, and inclusion shows the greatest potential gains in the North Central and West. In the South, the topic with the greatest potential gains is health, while in the

Northeast it is economic development. And, for organizations working solely with a national scope, climate change issues show the most potential. These are not the only topics within the regions that have gaps to be bridged and there is even wider variation at the level of specific issues. Such results highlight that while investments at the national level and via inter-regional cooperation in key, broad-reaching programmatic areas with high potential can be impactful, and there will also be a critical role for regional leadership and investment in other issues and topics.

Assets, Challenges, and Opportunities for Key Topics

Participants in the survey were also asked a series of open-ended questions to provide qualitative reflections on the topic areas they ranked as first, second, and third priorities for rural communities. Respondents were posed with the following prompts for each of their top-ranked priorities individually:
- What **assets and resources** do you believe rural communities currently have?
- What **challenges** do you see rural communities facing?
- What **initiatives and research** do you believe should be supported to help rural communities address challenges?

Each of the questions for each of the top-ranked topics was posed as a separate text entry field, which allows the RRDC team to evaluate the qualitative responses distinctly for each dimension (assets and resources; challenges; and initiatives and research). The latter dimension we consider here as "opportunities." For analysis in this report, one or more RRDC researchers took responsibility for summarizing the qualitative responses for a given topic area. Within each are a few representative quotes from respondents. Additional research with this data will be completed following this report, providing even more granularity to the content. The response rate to the qualitative questions was high, providing rich information that will take substantial time to analyze in greater detail. However, the initial findings reported here are illuminating. These are discussed below in order from highest- to lowest-ranked priority across the entire sample. Analysis here and in future adopts as a common framework the Seven Community Capitals model[1]. This model is highly recognized as a framework for community development. Within it are seven key assets a viable community must have. These are briefly described below:
- Financial: Financial resources and supporting entities that can be invested in local initiatives; efforts to build wealth for individuals or groups.
- Political: The ability to influence policies and rules through access to those with decision-making power or through participatory avenues (such as forums).
- Social: Connections among people and organizations that help things happen in communities and that build trust and cooperation.
- Built: Facilities and infrastructure that were built to support a community.
- Human: Skills and abilities that individuals have in communities that help them earn a living and contribute to the community in meaningful ways. This includes the organizations that support the capital such as formal and informal education entities.
- Natural: Those resources that exist in nature and the environment in a community such as water and land.
- Cultural: Values, norms, and traditions that are woven into families, groups, and communities. This also includes arts and historical contexts that shape a community.

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[1] For a brief overview of this model, visit: http://srdc.msstate.edu/community-prosperity/state-summit-files/SevenCommunityCapitals-NEW.pdf . To read a more detailed overview with expanded descriptions, visit: https://pcrd.purdue.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Community-Capitals-Framework-Writeup-Oct-2014.pdf.

Physical Infrastructure and Public Services

Interpreted through the Community Capitals Framework, within the topic of physical infrastructure and public services, respondents often identified as assets natural capital (such as land), built capital (existing infrastructure), and social capital (relationships, commitment, existing organizations). Specific areas of need were identified as suffering from inadequate resources, notably broadband, housing, and transportation. Beyond these inadequacies, general challenges can be classified as most common in the realms of financial capital (limited investment in rural infrastructure and services) and political capital (inadequate attention to infrastructure among leaders). Respondents addressed opportunities that combined financial investment in physical infrastructure and public services – like broadband, housing, renewable energy, and transportation – as having the potential to benefit other realms of community life.

Assets

Access to land and space for infrastructure development was the most often cited asset, and in a similar theme some respondents noted specific natural resource endowments. Considering the challenges mentioned below, it is interesting to note that several respondents discussed as assets existing broadband, electricity, and transportation infrastructures that could be built on, especially with new funding programs. Emphasis was also given to the quality of community life and social relationships, highlighting how infrastructure integrates with human capital development. Emphasis is placed on these being positive community attributes that could be leveraged to move infrastructure and services projects forward. Illustrative quotations from survey responses include:

> *"Land and capacity to produce renewable fuels, wind and solar energy; natural amenities for recreational and agricultural tourism; natural resources in many locations available for development…"*

> *"The people's knowledge of their communities."*

> *"Strong desire to rebuild/reinvest in local vibrancy."*

It is also noteworthy that some respondents did not identify assets but rather a lack thereof, while others noted some assets while pointing to their limited quantity in rural and small-town America. This quote gets to the combination of assets and challenges.

> *"Rural communities have access to land and natural resources. This is important with respect to food production, forest products, energy production (wind and solar), and so on. Our rural communities typically do not have high quality infrastructure (including broadband) or housing resources as compared to more densely populated parts of our region."*

Challenges

Limited broadband (and to a lesser degree, wireless phone service) was by far the most often mentioned challenge. This included concerns with the physical infrastructure, availability and quality of service, and affordability. Housing was an often-cited concern, with issues including availability, adequacy, cost, and upkeep. Transportation challenges included maintenance of roads and bridges as well as too few public transportation options. Leadership, or lack thereof, was mentioned as a challenge in need of attention in order to address infrastructure concerns. Relatedly, limited technical knowledge and skills and cultural constraints, such as apathy, elitism, and limited acceptance of diversity among some, were seen as impediments.

> *"Broadband access is probably the most crucial, and lacking, infrastructure resource for rural communities. Especially given how demand for high-speed internet has increased with COVID impacts (e.g., home schooling, remote work, 'nomad' employees), access to such determines rural communities' ability to compete in the broader economy and retain populations sufficient to attract businesses and provide a sustainable tax base."*

> *"Although housing is often times more affordable in rural communities compared to more urban areas, there is often times not enough affordable housing in rural communities to meet the needs of the low-income citizens in these communities. Furthermore, many affordable options are in need of major repairs to ensure that housing is safe and comfortable for residents."*

> *"Transportation is always an issue between communities, especially for healthcare, which is 30+ miles away."*

> *"Lack of imagination as to options because of entrenchment of local elites which are particularly influential in smaller communities."*

Limited funding for infrastructure upkeep, improvements, and expansion was a commonly mentioned concern. This included mention of limited and dwindling tax base in rural communities, too few government funds, and insufficient investment.

> *"Inadequate development of capital planning approaches that fit the capacity of small governments. Inadequate link between prioritizing investment and community vision and goals - whether articulated or not."*

Opportunities

Asked about opportunities for further developing infrastructure, broadband was mentioned the most frequently. This was also followed by housing, transportation, and energy. On the latter, some respondents mentioned traditional energy sources, while more commonly attention was on renewable alternatives such as wind and solar power. Across the specific substantive topic of focus, issues of research, addressing the particular needs of rural areas and small towns, and funding were identified as needing attention. The latter was seen as paramount.

> *"Initiatives to provide funding to address the affordable housing deficits, upgrade broadband capacity, transportation investments, and renewable energy. More studies and strategic planning are less important than access to funding."*

Economic Development

Using the Community Capitals Framework, there were three threads that emerged from the qualitative results on the topic of economic development. Human capital, particularly that tied to social and financial capital, was important to economic development. These three were commonly discussed as assets, challenges, and opportunities. Resources and support for small businesses and entrepreneurs along with workforce development and job creation were clearly essential to respondents that prioritized economic development. The two other threads that emerged were the use of natural capital as assets and built capital as a challenge and opportunity. Respondents mentioned rural tourism, broadband access, and amenities associated with a favorable quality of life as crucial components of economic development.

Assets

Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention were the most noted assets to economic development in rural communities. Another commonly cited asset was natural and outdoor spaces, including tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality. Social and community reciprocity in rural communities was noted as an additional asset. In other words, the cohesive and collaborative support that is often found in rural communities can tie people to place, ultimately enhancing the economy of that rural community. Rounding out the top five more commonly noted assets were access to labor, human capital, and work ethic along with access to land.

> *"A strong spirit of entrepreneurship, a connection to shopping and supporting local businesses, amazing outdoor assets including trails, rivers, and cultural sites."*

> *"Rural communities often have some of the most creative and innovative businesses and entrepreneurs and makers. They have space and resources which makes them popular for tourism, recreation and hospitality."*

> *"Access to data and expertise on economic stimulation practices for small business. Natural resources that draw tourism, recreation, travel and hospitality."*

Challenges

For others, a lack of resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs was the most cited challenge for rural communities. Another challenge commonly mentioned by respondents was lack of amenities such as affordable housing, healthcare, financial services, and shopping/retail. Lack of local leadership or political organization was cited as another leading challenge for rural communities. Other challenges for economic development in rural communities included lack of broadband or technology resources along with lack of a trained or motivated workforce. Representative quotes regarding challenges are listed below.

> *"Entrepreneurial ecosystems are under-developed, which affects small businesses in all sectors. Small entrepreneurs, who would otherwise wish to reside in many of our resort areas, cannot make that leap because of the lack of broadband infrastructure."*

> *"Rural communities must have broadband connectivity and capacity to address tele-medicine, education, some workforce training AND entrepreneurship. The communities, which have often been short on resources MUST have competent administrators to understand, utilize, administer and report the use of funding."*

> *"Difficulty finding good employees. Difficulty competing globally, locally and online all at the same time. Inadequate local buildings and other infrastructure for businesses."*

Opportunities

Similar to assets and challenges, the most cited opportunity for economic development was related to small businesses and entrepreneurs as well. Specifically, startup funds, incubation efforts, and training for business owners and innovators. Workforce development was often cited as an opportunity for rural communities. Broadband access, digital assistance and tools, and remote work capabilities were also identified. Educational expansion or upgrades to the existing educational systems along with grant opportunities and other financial assistance were mentioned as well.

"Shift attitudes away from outdated business development, increase focus on entrepreneurship support, create shared business spaces that can host more than one business in an existing building, support policy and initiatives that increase affordable reliable broadband access."

"Each rural community is unique. Research on how to best utilize the assets in place and how to develop the talent so rural communities can join the connected age. Education initiatives that train for the Jobs of the future. Access to capital for under-resourced would-be entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs so they can start their businesses and scale their businesses. Incentives for small businesses to grow."

Workforce Development

Existing workforce development assets can be linked to human capital (community colleges), social capital (networking and partnership), and financial capital (access to funding workforce development programs). The most common challenges identified by respondents included built capital (limited access to broadband, roads, and highways) and human capital (workforce leaving). Finally, respondents highlighted opportunities in human capital (education and training), financial capital (additional funding in physical infrastructure), and research as having potential benefits for rural workforce development.

Assets

Access to rural community colleges was the most often cited asset for workforce development. Many community colleges offer programs for certificates, professional training, apprenticeships, and internships. In addition, respondents frequently highlighted secondary and post-secondary vocational or technology schools in their community, creating unique educational programs to meet the workforce needs of local employers. Networking and partnership with the community, local and non-local organizations, local businesses, and potential employers emerged as the third most important asset contributing to the community workforce development. Respondents also emphasized workforce availability, work ethic, broadband, workforce development initiatives and programs, access to financial and natural resources, and partnership with different schools.

"Many rural areas have community or technical colleges doing excellent jobs education local young people to enter the workforce locally."

"There are a lot of training resources, recruitment programs, and school to work programs. Some are quite successful."

"A workforce seeking opportunities. Strong, established partnerships between local groups/organizations."

Some respondents identified challenges rather than assets in their responses to this question, or mentioned the limited quantity of assets in their rural communities.

"Schools are poorly funded, without opportunities for students to learn or be exposed to educational, professional and apprentice options and exposures."

Challenges

Lack of higher education and training facilities and programs were identified as the major workforce development challenges. These were followed by limited access to financial resources, including a lack of funding to support workforce programs and continue education or training. Limited access to

transportation was also often cited as a challenge, with issues including little access to good roads and highways, limited public transportation, high transport expenditures, and distance from community colleges. Other concerns revealed by the survey involve limited broadband and internet access, lack of local quality workforce development initiatives and programs, lack of skilled/trained workforce, and low workforce retention rate mainly due to outmigration of rural youth.

> *"lack of broadband, lack of access to skills building programs, lack of funding to pay for such programs."*

> *"In order to have workforce programs in the communities you have to have a way to get to the programs depending on the geography of the community. There may not be a ride share/public transportation to get to workforce programs."*

Opportunities

More training and education programs represent the paramount opportunity cited by the survey respondents. This includes preparing youth for industry jobs, state training grants, certificate training, internships, and apprenticeships. Research was also frequently mentioned and focused on work ethic skillsets, community asset assessment, rural model of entrepreneurship, the benefits of school district consolidation, barriers to participation in workforce programs and engagement in the workforce, the role of work-based learning, and factors attracting skilled workers and businesses to move to rural communities. Access to broadband and internet, additional funding for educational programs and training opportunities, and local job opportunities were also identified as important opportunities.

> *"Preparing youth for industry jobs in high school so that they are workforce ready if college isn't for them."*

> *"Additional funding is needed to address decline in resources, population declines, and educational and training opportunities for the local community."*

> *"Research that results in facilitations in agricultural production, marketing and market access. This should start with jobs projects, and improvements in infrastructure."*

Health

Rural community assets in the health topic area included forms of cultural and social capitals (such as sense of community, informal support, local organizations), and natural capital in terms of land and natural resources that could be used to advance health. Challenges revolved around impacts on human capital (poor nutrition, substance abuse) and limited financial capital for health-related services. Responses to the question on opportunities often emphasized the importance of understanding, working with, and investing in local efforts – thus bridging human, social, and financial capitals – to better address health problems through the services that are currently too few and far between.

Assets

Community and community life were frequently listed assets. Examples include people being personally invested in the quality of life, social relationships, neighbors helping each other, and the importance of community-based groups. Other types of organizations and services mentioned were Extension and a variety of local health-focused organizations and agencies. Additional attention was given to the importance of existing farms and food-related businesses, as well as numerous organizations and efforts focused on local food, access to fresh food and nutritious food, food security, and other food and nutrition

topics. Land and natural resources were mentioned too. Land was seen as an asset in terms of the possibility for more fresh and healthy food production and other natural resources were noted for the importance of green spaces and active recreation.

> *"People know each other and care about the community and resources."*

> *"Strong nonprofits to invest and engage communities."*

> *"Extension is an asset and resource for rural communities."*

> *"Lots of people have room to grow gardens/fresh food."*

> *"The natural resources to grow and sustain food that is accessible and affordable."*

> *"Rural communities have health assets such as outdoor spaces for recreation, connecting with nature (positive mental health benefits), and often better environmental quality (unless near a factory, processing plant, dump site etc.)."*

Challenges

Limited services was often identified by respondents as a challenge, in both the question on challenges and in the previous question on assets. Concern was expressed over gaps between what is needed for mental, behavioral, and substance abuse problems relative to what is available locally. Substance abuse issues were particularly noteworthy. Respondents also expressed concern over limited availability of local food, fresh food, nutritious food, and other labels related to healthy and affordable options.

> *"Simply not enough providers in rural areas, so obtaining health or mental health care is challenging."*

> *"There is no mental health care, which is health care. People experiencing even mild symptoms of depression are thrown on medicine (without a discussion on options) or forced to go to the ER - some even have the police called on them even though they made the appointment with their provider to just discuss getting on medicine."*

> *"Many rural communities have a significant portion of their population that rely on government or community assistance to meet the nutritional needs of their families. However, many of the available or convenient options for food in rural communities consist of un-healthy options such as fast food. Thus, limited access to affordable and convenient healthy food choices…"*

Limited funding was often mentioned as a challenge, incorporating attention to government funding for services, insurance coverage, and the financial obstacles to keeping adequate health services in rural places and small towns. When services cannot be sustained, people must travel far distances or do without. This quote presents the challenge:

> *"Communities need to have access to a nearby grocery store and medical facility. It is surprising to me how far many people have to drive to get to these services."*

Opportunities

In responding to the question of opportunities, respondents often mentioned terms like rural and small town specifically in their responses, with some emphasizing the need for better understanding and responding to the particularized needs of such places in comparison to urban/metropolitan spaces. Additionally, survey participants called for improvements in applied research for needs, assets, and planning of health services, and the development of an evidence base around what works. Additional

ideas mentioned the importance of community organizations, building partnerships, and enhancing coordination. Example entries are noted here:

> *"I have seen success in making positive impacts conducting needs assessments and asset mapping through community-developed and led projects with an eye towards uplifting marginalized voices (in ethnicity, race, gender, age, etc.)."*

> *"Providing grants to local community centers and colleges to develop centers for information awareness that can be located, managed and monitor in the rural communities these colleges and community centers serve."*

As for substantive areas of focus, calls were made for addressing an array of food and nutrition concerns (as identified in the challenges) and to give more attention to mental and behavioral health. The latter was often connected with critical concerns over substance abuse.

> *"Addiction hits every community, but often the resources for rural communities don't exist. It would be wonderful to see current nonprofits supported to have some focus here, or new resources pop up in the rural areas."*

Community Vibrancy

Central in discussion on community vibrancy was the importance of youth (human capital) to rural communities. Social connections (social capital) to and within the community garnered significant discussion, as did the importance of local leadership (human capital) and civic engagement (social capital). Assets in rural communities discussed within this topic area often focused on a sense of place and placemaking (cultural capital). However, discussion on challenges made it clear that despite a strong sense of place, without economic opportunities rural youth still are leaving these communities, posing a threat to their continued vibrancy. Difficulty making these places of inclusion (cultural, social, and human capitals) was also identified. These highlight the interrelated outcomes across topic areas.

Assets
Rural assets promoting community vibrancy that respondents frequently noted included connections people have to and within their communities. These were described in such ways as having a sense of, pride in, or a strong identity with the community. These comments, sometimes linked to words like "commitment" and "passion," indicate how this connection can be an asset in making improvements.

Youth-focused assets frequently mentioned in rural places are those organizations that provide training, support, and connections to help youth develop. Most often mentioned was the 4-H Youth Development Program available through the Land-Grant University Extension System, along with other youth-serving organizations including FFA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and formal K-12 schools. Also, aligning with the community connections, a few respondents noted how local schools were, as one respondent put it, "*often a major focal point of the community.*"

Additional assets that were noted often were cultural events, especially in connection to local arts; natural amenities which enhance both local quality of life as well as serve to draw in visitors; and a pool of leaders, both formal and informal, willing to serve.

> *"[Rural communities] typically have strong sense of community and volunteerism, rich culture and heritage, and desire to see their community thrive."*

> *"The trust that exists in many rural communities is often taken for granted, but when you know people so well that you recognize their car and can bridge philosophical differences because you know each other personally, you can get a lot more done for your community."*

> *"Placemaking, culture, and arts are the souls of rural communities."*

Challenges

Youth moving out of the area was one of the clearest challenges articulated by respondents. Many noted how youth left to pursue higher education or careers that were unavailable locally. Some also pointed to a lack of available supports (i.e. broadband, housing, social supports) as contributors to these declines. Low engagement of youth in community life was also seen as a contributor. This ties closely to another frequently noted challenge coming from long-term leaders in communities being unwilling or unskilled in expanding or sharing leadership. Also, rural communities and leaders were sometimes described as being closed-off to or unaccepting of people in the community that were considered "outsiders" or not originally from the community. This resistance to new community talent and interest may be hindering potential community vibrancy as new ideas and energy are stifled.

Also intertwined into the challenges were concerns for population declines, in general, and their impact on the tax base, which impacts the ability to provide and maintain infrastructure and other amenities that sustain community vibrancy.

> *"Urban areas are a strong draw for youth, particularly those in their college ages. Losing this cohort is difficult as more and more young people are encouraged to pursue college degrees."*
> *"These are the future generations of our rural communities that may or may not come back and provide a vision and invigoration for the success of our hometowns."*

> *"The balance of placemaking and culture and the need to grow and change these identities or adapt them to ensure they are inclusive of new populations and demographics that moving to the communities"*

> *"Diminishing economies leave significant tax base limitations in place for investments in schools, infrastructure, and other needed improvements to attract and retain businesses and workers."*

Opportunities

Opportunities to build community vibrancy spanned research as well as programming. Encouragingly, respondents linked opportunities to both assets and challenges they identified. Focusing on youth, one research suggestion was to understand the interests of youth regarding their futures and what would be needed so it could be met locally. For example, pursuing remote work might be feasible if broadband access was available. (This idea was noted for adult workers also.) Programmatically, education opportunities for youth such as providing apprenticeships, mentorships, tech/skills training, entrepreneurship training, and leadership training were seen as ways to engage and embed youth in meaningful ways into rural places.

Growing the leadership pool and civic capacity was another frequently noted pathway to more vibrant communities. In that realm, asset-based community strategic planning was tied to both research (identifying promising practices and supportive policies) and programming (training local leaders to work through this process in collaboration with community members). The emphasis on collaborative efforts was further explored as suggested research included the value of community trust and how the "*civic economy might drive the market economy.*" Programming to expand capacity to build intergroup relationships (age, race, newcomers/"locals") was also noted as a tremendous opportunity to expand the

community capacity across all realms as local talent, interests, time, and passions could be brought together around commonly identified goals. Also, woven throughout this section were notes about the importance of encouraging, celebrating, and teaching arts as these were seen as great connectors among people, ways to create a greater sense of placemaking, potential avenues for economic development, and ways to promote mental health.

> *"1. Help them realize what assets they have. Make sure that not just "leaders" are involved in identifying those assets. 2. Work with them on ways to use those assets to make the community even better. 3. Be sure that youth are involved in this and increase their bridging and bonding social capital. 4. Don't just link the community to outside assets. Help them develop their skills in recognizing and accessing them."*

> *"Program development to build capacity on themes of functional democracy; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and public dialogue and governance."*

> *"More publicized research and commentary on the value of civic engagement, placemaking, arts, etc. for overall economic development and thriving communities."*

Agriculture and Food Systems

Within the agriculture and food systems topic, often identified as assets were those in the realm of natural capital (such as land), built capital (existing infrastructure), and social capital (relationships, commitment, existing organizations). Beyond specific areas of need because of inadequacy (broadband, housing, transportation), challenges can be classified as most common in the realms of financial capital (limited investment in rural infrastructure and services) and political capital (inadequate attention to infrastructure among leaders). Respondents addressed opportunities that combined financial investment in physical infrastructure and public services – like broadband, housing, renewable energy, and transportation – as having the potential to benefit agriculture and food systems.

Assets
Respondents communicated that they considered natural resources a valuable asset to their communities, with "land" mentioned specifically, along with other natural resources identified, such as "sun" and "water." Interestingly, respondents mentioned the possibilities that could be realized when natural resources are utilized responsibly. Also conveyed was the importance the land was to their community, and the connection to following generations. Another source of pride for respondents was the mention of the expertise and knowledge in farming and ranching, once again, with the intent to pass on to the next generation. The Land-Grant System, along with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its agencies were cited numerous times, describing the value that is provided to the communities in the way of technical assistance and programs.

> *"In most cases, rural areas have pristine areas and available natural resources. In some areas, there are lots of creative individuals that are seeing success as entrepreneurs."*

> *"Land is available to produce foods for our reservation. We have youngsters interested in producing food for the community."*

> *"Young people interested in agriculture and experienced adults willing to help mentor..."*

> *"USDA, NRCS, and the Extension offices are all good resources in local communities."*

For some respondents, community food systems were described as important resources, providing income and healthy foods. Additionally, some noted food systems as providing social experiences by such activities as farmers markets and agritourism.

Challenges

Unsurprisingly, reliable broadband access was an area respondents indicated was a challenge to their communities. It is noted from the survey that there is a desire for business expansion, education, and other benefits associated with reliable digital access. As one respondent wrote:

> "Bridging the gap on communication. There are so many rural areas that do not have quality internet, if any at all. The world is at their fingertips, and yet they don't have the means to use them in a manner that is conducive to them to helping be all that they can be."

Business development challenges were also mentioned as a barrier to wealth creation, with factors such as processing logistical challenges, lack of a skilled workforce, market development, and expensive equipment cited as issues. Following along the theme of business opportunities, other challenges were economic obstacles such lack of access to financial capital and affordable land.

A declining rural population was also stated as a challenge, with several different but related reasons stated. These included an aging population, aging farmers, youth migration from rural areas, and young people disregarding agriculture careers as an option. Such dynamics are captured in this quotation:

> "Rural areas face fierce competition from opportunities in urban areas, especially among young, educated people who assume the quality of life in urban areas is always superior, mainly due to 'things to do.'"

Opportunities

Broadband was also seen by many as an opportunity for agriculture and food systems. There was also a strong desire of respondents to protect the resources that their communities currently possess, with many identifying sustainable food system development as a key opportunity. Some comments demonstrated hope for value-added foods produced locally, and a wish to expand and develop markets for their products. To achieve these goals, respondents conveyed the belief that strong community leadership, with involvement from all areas of the community, can develop strategies to help their communities. This statement illustrates the point:

> "Communities need to understand resilience: how they can survive and thrive. Then they need to explore initiatives which have worked for communities similar to theirs. Finally, many communities need an outside spark for progress to flame up. Often this is a facilitator who comes in to fan the flames of local entrepreneurship."

Climate Change

The following themes were identified as central to the topic of climate change: managing natural resources, advancing physical, economic, and social infrastructure, and developing localized mitigation tools and strategies. Using the community capitals framework, rural community assets included strong social bonds (social capital), land, and renewable energy sources like solar and wind (natural capital). Challenges predominantly included lack of capacity, knowledge, or skillsets (human capital), and divided viewpoints on climate change (political capital). Respondents also expressed physical and social isolation of rural communities from larger networks and infrastructure (built, financial, and social capitals) as

additional barriers. Meanwhile in response to opportunities, respondents advocated for expanding education, research, and comprehensive mitigation strategies (human capital), as well as increasing access to funding and technology (financial and built capital) in rural communities.

Assets

Respondents identified natural resources, sense of community, and local knowledge as principal assets in rural communities. These unifying capitals form the foundation for social networks and initiatives, creating an opportunity for coordinated and informed efforts around shared goals and values.

> *"We know our land, our weather patterns, and climate risks. Small groups of people are able to make change appropriate to local culture. Smaller planning and implementation teams can act more quickly, with reduced bureaucracy"*

> *"Rural communities have a strong sense of community and interest in supporting each other"*

Existing resources such as organizational networks and community plans were also mentioned, as well as several respondents acknowledging uncertainty or a lack of assets.

> *"Very few, if any[assets]. Resources might include local extension offices, USDA local offices/staff and regional universities/community colleges. Some non-profits focus on natural resource management but are low on funds and staff beyond local volunteers."*

Challenges

Frequent challenges identified by rural community respondents included a lack of training, capacity, and funding. The absence of any one of those resources making it difficult for communities to respond in the face of an extreme weather event, but the absence of all three making it all but impossible for communities to redirect resources to climate mitigation strategies. As one respondent put it, *"people are so busy surviving they don't have time or energy to plan for change."* Therefore, technical training, leadership and capital investment were identified as critical infrastructure that need to be addressed in order to develop comprehensive community plans as they relate to climate mitigation.

> *"Education, training, and physical resources to prepare communities for both disasters and climate change."*

> *"Lack of financial resources, lack of technical expertise, sometimes lack of political will, [and] competing local interests."*

> *"lagging access to new technologies and infrastructures and services transforming rest of economy."*

An additional and reoccurring challenge was climate skepticism. Climate change has become heavily politicized and divisive in recent years, making it difficult for productive conversations to be held. This is particularly true of rural communities where sustainable practices are often at odds with extractive industries like coal mining. Many rural communities tie their identity to these extractive histories rather than consider an opportunity for economic diversification. Frequent elections suggest local politicians agree with or accommodate prevailing views to maintain elected office. Otherwise, initiatives change with election cycles.

> *"Local economic histories of resource extraction from environments promote short-term-gain mindsets."*

> *"Political and institutional inertia that defers planning and action. Failure to define or frame problems as relating to climate change…"*

> *"No coordinated strategies for adapting to climate change. Both planning and funding are uncoordinated - we're relying on "project by project" solutions instead of offering comprehensive strategies."*

Opportunities

In a similar way to challenges, opportunities included developing skillsets, comprehensive plans, and capital investment. Respondents frequently mentioned place-based research, as a first step to increase community engagement and support by meeting individuals where they live. As one respondent wrote, an opportunity lies in *"programs that include people in decision-making and priority-setting."* Consequently, community involvement would help inform relevant and specific mitigation plans which was also mentioned.

> *"We need credible expertise that is respected and heeded at the local level, and an available pool of Extension or outreach folks who are able to work with communities on a long-term basis."*

> *"Focused research and funding for communities to incorporate climate change projections into planning."*

> *"Provide examples of communities that have implemented or have begun to implement mitigation and adaptation efforts."*

Lastly, respondents frequently cited the need for financial and organizational structures to advance new and existing projects such as renewable energy production and sustainable agriculture. Social infrastructure was also mentioned as a means for building collaborative resource-sharing networks within and across rural communities.

> *"Expanded, forward looking work on how rural places are not left behind in the face of technology innovations, especially with respect to infrastructure."*

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues are directly related to social and cultural capital yet play out across all the other capitals. Given this, DEI has some unique nuances compared to the other potential priority topics considered in this scan. Even within the survey design team, a great amount of discussion went in to how this important topic should be explored. In the final decision, DEI was listed among other priorities as noted above. In the overall ranking, DEI was listed last, which sounds as if it is not considered important. However, many of the respondents that gave clarity to this section noted how DEI was a thread within each of the other priorities, thus, separating it from those was a challenging mental exercise. This challenge may make it difficult to raise this as its own priority. As one respondent put it, "Prioritizing projects that address equity when there are other competing priorities - how do we raise this one to the top?" And as will be discussed further below, many of the comments in this section referenced areas where DEI disparities exist, which overlap many of the other priority areas of this scan. So, as one respondent stated, "Organizations should … find ways to integrate DEI initiatives into day-to-day activity." Also, important to note, most comments in this section pointed back to racial/ethnic DEI challenges. Yet a few highlighted the need to advance DEI in other realms such as gender, gender identity, ability, as examples.

Assets

One of the most frequently noted rural asset related to DEI was a sense of connection to community and to each other (social capital). Often respondents noted a general tendency for people in rural places to know each and to work together for common good. Likewise, rural organizations were seen as connectors and supporters in this work, with those most frequently mentioned being non-profits/grassroots, faith-based, education, and Extension. Specifically, several noted dialogue efforts being facilitated by Extension as being helpful. Quite a few respondents also pointed out that existing diversity in rural places provides a base for growing connections, while others observed that rural diversity is lacking. This may reflect the fact that rural demographic characteristics across the four regions differ. In some places, racial diversity was seen as growing as new populations were sometimes more diverse that the previous generations. This was noted as a potential asset as these new arrivals could help provide much-needed workforce talent (human capital) that rural population declines threaten. A few others reported seeing a growing understanding for why DEI is needed, and some leadership emerging as ready to help address challenges. Youth may also be more accepting of others as their interactions with other groups increases.

> *"There is often a strong sense of community from rural neighbors knowing each other and assisting each other."*

> *"Some communities see that being more inclusive will help them grow or stop declining"*

> *"[There is a] growing understanding of need for work in this area by core community institutions."*

Challenges

The challenges related to DEI fell into two broad categories. One of these related to interpersonal and cultural relationships and included issues around historical-based fear and mistrust between differing racial and ethnic groups. Power systems were also tagged as challenges as leaders were sometimes seen as either unwilling to share leadership with those that have previously been excluded, or lacking vision, skills, or understanding on how to bridge the divide. Limited communication avenues between differing groups were noted as exacerbating the challenge.

The second category of challenges identified focused on realms in which DEI disparities exist within rural communities. Most noted were challenges in economic opportunities where DEI sensitive strategies were lacking, support for minority owned businesses and farms, and a lack of funding focused on rural economic development in general. DEI issues around access to education, internet, healthy foods, healthcare, housing, and transportation were all specifically noted as rural concerns. Overarching these were several notes around challenges of persistent poverty which plague many rural places, especially at the intersection of black and brown populations.

> *"'RELATIONSHIP' will fix a lot of things. We don't understand other people well enough to reach out. We don't have confidence about "How not to offend" so we just don't reach out."*

> *"Racial mistrust, system mistrust that leads to minimal access to existing services and supports, program qualification criteria may be more favorable to those with more established assets (i.e., white citizens)."*

> *"There is not a real understanding among decision makers that this should be a priority AND what the side-effects of not addressing these problems are. It is not about raising one group at the expense of others. It is about raising the bar and livelihoods for all."*

Opportunities

Mirroring the challenges above, respondents focused on two main areas: (1) helping people to understand, connect, and work together; and (2) implementing strategies to address specific DEI disparities. Beginning with the first of these two categories, a prominently noted opportunity was to provide training to help individuals understand issues around DEI as well as training on how to support meaningful connections across differing groups. The latter included both facilitating dialogues designed specifically to foster conversations as well as organizing community events to celebrate and honor various cultures existing within communities. Also, offering training to support collaborative community planning was noted often. Likewise, identifying and supporting efforts that seem to be working was lifted up as a priority. In support of these comments were specific notes about work being facilitated by the Extension Service and Regional Rural Development Centers such as *Coming Together for Racial Understanding* and *Juntos*. Together, these differing opportunities all point to the importance of developing social capital, or connections among and within differing community groups.

Like the challenges, respondents also noted opportunities to address specific DEI disparities, such as small business development, education, healthcare, economic development, workforce development, and internet access. Several saw the need for both research and funding to address these concerns. Research focused on policy implications and best practices was recommended. Funding specifically supporting minority-serving institutions, communities, and organizations was deemed important.

> *"The importance of relationship building and empathy. Many of these soft skills could be labeled as workforce development skills."*

> *"When people work together with respect for each other to achieve a goal that benefits the entire community, it lays the foundation for advancing larger projects. Leadership development, sharing and exploring each other's cultures and values through the creative process, and appreciative inquiry can dissolve barriers and strengthen the community's vision."*

Programming Activities of Value

Survey participants were also asked to rate the value they perceive for ten different types of programming activities that support the capacity of community and economic development organizations. For each they indicated this value on a four-point scale, from no value to high value. The number of responses per item ranged from 456 to 459. Average scores were calculated across the entire sample and within regional groupings of responses for each item.

Three programming efforts were consistently among the four most valued across all regions (presented here in order from most valued to least for the entire sample):
- Give technical assistance that helps identify and apply for funding;
- Showcase promising practices or programs within community and economic development;
- Coordinate Extension and outreach teams across states/institutions around key issues.

At the regional level other items showed notable value to respondents: providing formal training on community and economic development topics in the North Central, West, and South; support for integrated research-Extension on cross-cutting topics in the South and for those working in national scope organizations; and funding targeted specifically for multi-state teams on high-priority issues in the Northeast and among national scope organization employees.

Table 6 Mean rating of value from different programming activities for entire sample (Total) and groupings

	Valued Programming					
	Mean Rating Scale: 1 = No Value to 4 = High Value					
Activity	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Give technical assistance that helps identify and apply for funding	3.57	3.58	3.58	3.59	3.74	**3.59**
Showcase promising practices or programs within community and economic development	3.58	3.44	3.40	3.47	3.33	**3.46**
Coordinate Extension and outreach teams across states/institutions around key issues	3.41	3.47	3.43	3.32	3.46	**3.41**
Provide formal training on community and economic development topics	3.43	3.28	3.35	3.33	3.13	**3.34**
Support integrated (i.e. research plus Extension) projects on cross-cutting topics	3.21	3.26	3.40	3.29	3.41	**3.31**
Organize research teams across states/institutions around key issues	3.24	3.31	3.24	3.03	3.18	**3.20**
Have funding targeted specifically for multi-state teams on high-priority issues	3.20	3.36	3.21	3.01	3.33	**3.19**
Provide technical assistance for evaluation and impact measurement	3.11	3.24	3.21	3.09	3.10	**3.16**
Offer informal workshops and webinars on key community and economic development topics	3.20	3.00	3.25	3.09	2.97	**3.15**
Facilitate multi-institutional approaches to technology transfer	2.94	3.09	3.06	2.89	2.97	**2.98**
Legend		*Position 1 (Highest)*	*Position 2*	*Position 3*	*Position 4*	

Summary of Participants

Those participating in the survey were asked, but not required, to provide details about themselves in order to have a general understanding of the perspectives represented in the feedback gathered during this phase of the Listening Sessions Initiative. This included soliciting information on the sector in which they work, the kind of organization by which they are employed, their general role within their professional life, the state in which they reside, and core demographic characteristics.

The vast majority of respondents provided at least some information on their professional background; 672 respondents told us about the sector in which they work, 670 about the type of organization that employs them, and 662 about the general role they have within their organizations. Overall, 61.9% of respondents came from the higher education sector, followed by 23.5% from non-governmental, non-profit, or for-profit organizations, 13.4% in various levels of government, and 1.2% from K-12 education. The top kinds of organizations represented included 1862 Land-Grant Universities (45.2%), organizations related to law, education, or economic development (11.5%), 1890 Land-Grant Universities (7.8%), local or municipal governments (7.5%), and public universities without land- or sea-grants (4.8%). A large number of respondents were Cooperative Extension professionals in field offices (16.9%) and faculty with Extension appointments (11.9%). There were also a number of regional specialists or program leaders from Extension (10.1%), university administrators (8.0%), and faculty with teaching and research duties only (6.6%). Civil servants (6.9%), general professional staff (6.8%), and executive leadership of private organizations (7.1%) – such as CEOs, CFOs, or Unit Directors – were also well-represented.

Survey participants were also asked about the state in which they reside and the type of community in which they live. Respondents are assigned to a geographic region based on where they live, in addition to regional assignments made based on where a respondent's organization has active operations. The latter is used in the previous sections of this report. A total of 667 participants provided information on their residency state; 34.2% live in the South, 29.1% of are from the North Central Region covering the Midwest, 19.6% are from the West, and 16.9% are from the Northeastern U.S. Individual states with the largest number of respondents in the sample are Oregon (7.6%), Iowa (5.7%), Tennessee (5.5%), Missouri (4.3%), and Maine (3.7%). The total number of observations for community type is lower, down to 463 valid responses. Of these, 38.9% indicated they live in a small city or town and 38.2% indicated they reside in rural areas. Only 12.9% of the sample resides in a large metro area.

Core demographic information was also requested. Of the 462 respondents who provided information on their age, 35.1% were 41 to 55 years old, followed by 26% between 56 and 65 years of age. Thus, the vast majority of respondents are likely mid- to late career professionals. Equal numbers of respondents were aged 18 to 40 and 65 and older (19.5% for each). Overall, 453 participants provided responses covering gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Of those, 53.2% indicated they identify as women and 46.1% as men. Further, 2.4% self-identified as being a part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT+) community. Questions soliciting the respondent's race (454 valid responses) and ethnicity (448 valid response) were also presented. We report aggregated numbers using USDA's definition of *socially disadvantaged*, combining racial and ethnic minority groups for an effective number of 438 valid responses. Of those, 14.4% identified themselves as belonging to one or more racial or ethnic minority groups. The largest representation was for those identifying as Black or African American, but there was representation across all other identities including Hispanic/Latino; American Indian or Native Alaskan, Hawai'ian, or Pacific Islander; and Asian. Combing race/ethnicity and gender, 30.2% of the valid respondents were identified as women who were only white, 8.2% identified as men of color, 0.6% identified as women of color, and 25.1% had no identification with a minority group.

Concluding Remarks

These findings indicate that across regions key stakeholders consistently view issues associated with physical infrastructure and public services and economic development as the most pressing priorities for rural development in the next five years. Qualitative feedback indicates that these two topics are deeply intertwined, and that investments that address their constituent issues also play a pivotal role in efforts to address other topics covered in our survey. Among the organizations represented by survey participants – predominately those in higher education and non-governmental organizations – the greatest potential for impact by investment in these areas is likely that which builds capacity on the issues of broadband internet, housing, energy, rural innovation and entrepreneurship, and tourism and recreation. Also notable are potential investments in issues related to economic development but focused on diversity, such as entrepreneurship promotion among socially disadvantaged groups and promoting equitable and inclusive economic growth.

Topics of workforce development, including training and education, and health also were widely identified as key priorities for rural community success, and within select regions community vibrancy and climate change received relative prioritization. National efforts in these topics, particularly among higher education institutions and non-governmental organizations, may do well to place emphasis on capacity building in the issues of behavioral and mental health, public health (including availability and access to medical services), substance abuse (including opioids), placemaking and culture, and disaster preparedness, mitigation, and management. Interestingly, none of these issues relate to the workforce development topic, despite its relative importance in priority rankings.

In part this is likely due to relatively high estimates of current capacity in four out the topic's five constituent issues. (Retraining and transition assistance being the exception, with a relatively low capacity score among relevant respondents.) However, this finding is also similarly present for other topic areas, where they are identified as high priorities but with low average scores for capacity and expansion potential. Such a pattern is likely driven, in part, by survey respondents identifying topics as priorities for rural communities in which their own organizations have little or no capacity to engage, in absolute terms. In other words, our findings may be highlighting a gap between what rural development professionals see as needed and what their actual roles within rural development practice are. Consider the topic of physical infrastructure. Many of the stakeholders in our survey are community and economic development practitioners. Had this been a survey targeting civil engineering firms, these capacity and expansion potential results would likely be much different, and the relative degrees for the topic altered.

Such an observation indicates in its own right that investments that enable and empower these organizations to better engage in key priority areas through partnership and technical assistance may be well placed. Consider, for example, the most highly valued programming activities in the survey results: (1) providing technical assistance on accessing funding; (2) showcasing promising practices or programs; and (3) coordinating multi-state Extension teams around key issues. Investments that build the capacity of these programming activities can simultaneously seek to fortify the ability of respondents' organizations to engage with priority topics for which they currently lack engagement. Other investments can target specific issues or topics to either maintain current capacity or empower organizations to fulfill unmet desire to expand programming. The results provided here are a first crucial step in informing paths forward. Additional analysis in this and the second phase of the RRDCs' Listening Sessions Initiative will continue to map potential avenues for continued investment in America's small towns and rural spaces.

APPENDIX A: Notes on Methods

Survey Instrument Design

Researchers and staff members from within the four RRDCs developed the data collection tool based on previous work conducted by the Southern Rural Development Center to guide a regional priority scan. It was updated to include expanded issues that meet contemporary challenges perceived by the research team and key stakeholders consulted during the instrument's development. Elements were also added to make the digital survey applicable to a broader set of stakeholders than those engaged with the baseline tool. The survey instrument was reviewed in multiple rounds by researchers across the four RRDCs with experience in survey design and social science research and by key external stakeholders. It was reviewed by the Institutional Review Boards of Mississippi State University and The Pennsylvania State University as part of the Exempt Research Protocol oversight procedures at those institutions.

Response Solicitation and Sampling Method

Data collection occurred between September 20 and October 6, 2021. During these 17 days, staff from the four RRDCs sent open calls via targeted communications channels to individual stakeholders and stakeholder organizations and networks. These open calls included invitations to participate in the survey and requests to share this invitation with others in the professional networks of the recipient who represented the target audience. The target audience was those working for a broad range of organizations engaged in programming and policy-making related to workforce, community, and economic development in rural spaces. This included researchers, educators, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers at local, state, regional, and national levels. Thus, the methodology was a modified form of "snowball" or chain-referral sampling, which is a non-probability technique. RRDC researchers did not solicit the names and contact information for other prospective participants, instead requesting simply that the anonymous link and invitation document be passed directly on to pertinent networks. Initial contacts (i.e., those invitations made directly via RRDC staffers) targeted a diverse set of primary contacts centrally connected to networks, including Land-Grant System administrators and national and community-based organization leaders.

Data Treatment

During the 17 days in which data were collected, a total of 934 surveys were initiated. Of those, 680 met the completion threshold set by the research team and are included in the data analyzed. The majority of those discarded failed to advance beyond the initial questions, indicating the respondents simply elected not to participate in the feedback process. These initial questions asked about general professional role and geographic scope. Respondents were informed before entering the survey that all questions were optional and any item could be skipped.

In this report, information is provided for the entire valid sample (labeled "Total") and for partitions into five groupings. Four of these groupings represent the geographic Cooperative Extension Regions established by the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities' (APLU) Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP)[2]. These are the regional boundaries used to denote the service areas of the four RRDCs. Figure 1 reports the U.S. states within each region; territories and protectorates are not

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[2] See: https://www.aplu.org/members/commissions/food-environment-and-renewable-resources/board-on-agriculture-assembly/cooperative-extension-section/ecop-members/regions.html

shown on this map[3]. Responses are assigned to a grouping based on the geographic region using information provided by respondents about the states in which their organization operates. For example, if a respondent indicated that their organization operates in three states belonging to the Northeastern Region and two states in the Southern Region the response is assigned to the Northeast grouping. Those respondents who indicated their organization operates only at a national scope are assigned to the fifth grouping. Additionally, a small number who did not indicate a geographic scope for their organization are classified as undefined. Those with an undefined group are included in results for the total sample but are not reported on separately.

Data presented in this report is for all valid original responses for a given item within a given grouping. This means that the total number of underlying responses varies by item. Where feasible this number is reported here. Otherwise, it is available upon request from the research team, unless doing so may present a disclosure issue.

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[3] Assignments of territories and protectorates to regional groupings are as follows: Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to the Southern Region; American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, and the Northern Mariana Islands to the Western Region.

APPENDIX B: Data Supplements

Word cloud of two-word phrases for other issues and topics identified by respondents

…

Rating of current capacity for issues within topics – Part 1

Current Capacity Rating

Scale: 1 - Not applicable or not engaged to 4 - High Capacity

Topic	Issue	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Agriculture and food systems	Sustainable on-farm practices and value capture	2.95	3.13	3.31	2.76	3.46	**3.13**
	Local and regional food systems development	3.16	3.06	3.14	3.08	3.29	**3.13**
	New market development for agricultural products	2.74	2.67	2.97	2.40	3.21	**2.81**
	Land access, heirs' property, and farm transition	2.53	2.55	2.65	2.28	2.29	**2.53**
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	Natural and environmental resources management	3.11	2.81	3.11	2.75	2.67	**2.94**
	Community and economic resiliency planning	2.95	2.74	2.87	2.86	2.80	**2.85**
	Mitigation and adaptation strategies	2.55	2.47	2.73	2.50	2.47	**2.57**
	Disaster preparation, mitigation, and management	2.47	2.38	2.88	2.50	2.40	**2.56**
Community vibrancy	Youth development, engagement, and rural retention	2.93	2.80	3.22	3.11	3.21	**3.05**
	Community governance, leadership, and resident engagement/participation	2.99	2.45	3.09	3.06	2.84	**2.97**
	Placemaking, culture, and arts	2.67	2.40	2.80	2.58	2.50	**2.65**
	Aging and inter-generational engagement	2.29	2.25	2.43	2.58	2.44	**2.40**
	Population change and demographics	2.53	2.11	2.35	2.36	2.06	**2.38**
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	Community racial understanding	2.70	2.53	2.96	2.97	2.90	**2.84**
	Addressing disparities in access to programming	2.63	2.76	3.02	2.68	3.00	**2.82**
	Equitable and inclusive economic growth	2.60	2.76	2.90	2.53	2.95	**2.74**
	Entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities	2.43	2.71	2.65	2.27	2.85	**2.54**

Rating of current capacity for issues within topics – Part 2

Topic	Issue	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Economic development	Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention	3.00	2.83	3.01	2.71	2.87	**2.91**
	Tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality	2.49	2.69	2.41	2.57	2.26	**2.49**
	Sustainable growth (including "closed-loop" and "circular" economies)	2.21	2.40	2.55	2.35	2.61	**2.39**
	Exports and international trade	1.94	1.57	1.93	1.59	2.00	**1.82**
Health	Nutritional security, food access, and food affordability	2.98	2.77	3.01	2.69	3.04	**2.91**
	Public health, including availability and access to medical services	2.43	2.26	2.34	2.40	2.63	**2.39**
	Behavioral and mental health services	2.48	2.19	2.22	2.54	2.67	**2.38**
	Substance abuse issues, including opioids	2.37	2.30	2.23	2.20	2.50	**2.29**
Physical infrastructure and public services	Broadband/high speed internet access, affordability, and reliability	2.62	2.14	2.37	2.10	2.36	**2.35**
	Housing access and affordability	2.35	1.88	2.11	2.29	2.39	**2.22**
	Energy, including renewable production and reliable access	2.12	2.21	2.21	1.83	2.43	**2.14**
	Transportation infrastructure renewal	2.07	1.95	1.87	2.03	2.25	**2.00**
Workforce development, training, and education	Educational programs in high schools, colleges, and universities for jobs of the future	2.68	2.67	2.89	2.70	2.85	**2.76**
	Certificates and other professional training	2.67	2.57	2.79	2.69	2.77	**2.70**
	Skills gaps and strategic planning for workforce development	2.60	2.42	2.70	2.72	2.85	**2.63**
	Apprenticeships and internships	2.41	2.53	2.57	2.87	2.62	**2.55**
	Retraining and transition assistance	2.23	2.06	2.26	2.40	2.38	**2.24**

Expansion potential for issues within topics – Part 1

Topic	Issue	**Expansion Potential** *% of relevant respondents indicating organization likely has interest in expanding programming on this issue*					
		North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	**Total**
Agriculture and food systems	Local and regional food systems development	40.0%	40.6%	45.9%	38.5%	42.9%	**42.5%**
	New market development for agricultural products	37.5%	46.9%	44.6%	26.9%	42.9%	**40.9%**
	Sustainable on-farm practices and value capture	32.5%	53.1%	41.9%	26.9%	50.0%	**40.3%**
	Land access, heirs' property, and farm transition	30.0%	34.4%	28.4%	26.9%	35.7%	**30.1%**
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	Community and economic resiliency planning	34.2%	48.6%	29.8%	38.9%	53.3%	**38.3%**
	Disaster preparation, mitigation, and management	23.7%	29.7%	34.0%	33.3%	40.0%	**30.9%**
	Mitigation and adaptation strategies	23.7%	35.1%	29.8%	30.6%	33.3%	**29.7%**
	Natural and environmental resources management	18.4%	32.4%	36.2%	33.3%	26.7%	**29.7%**
Community vibrancy	Youth development, engagement, and rural retention	33.8%	45.0%	36.4%	36.1%	38.1%	**36.0%**
	Placemaking, culture, and arts	39.0%	45.0%	25.5%	38.9%	14.3%	**33.2%**
	Community governance, leadership, and resident engagement/participation	37.7%	40.0%	29.1%	38.9%	14.3%	**33.2%**
	Aging and inter-generational engagement	22.1%	15.0%	21.8%	25.0%	23.8%	**21.8%**
	Population change and demographics	23.4%	25.0%	9.1%	19.4%	19.0%	**18.5%**
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	Equitable and inclusive economic growth	47.5%	47.1%	54.4%	40.0%	40.0%	**47.6%**
	Community racial understanding	40.0%	35.3%	43.9%	50.0%	35.0%	**42.2%**
	Addressing disparities in access to programming	45.0%	41.2%	38.6%	46.7%	30.0%	**40.4%**
	Entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities	40.0%	47.1%	42.1%	33.3%	35.0%	**39.8%**

Expansion potential for issues within topics – Part 2

Topic	Issue	North Central	Northeast	South	West	National-scope	Total
Economic development	Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, and small business creation and retention	47.4%	52.4%	47.0%	43.3%	25.0%	**45.5%**
	Tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality	33.0%	38.1%	26.5%	28.3%	12.5%	**29.5%**
	Sustainable growth (including "closed-loop" and "circular" economies)	21.6%	40.5%	19.3%	18.3%	12.5%	**22.1%**
	Exports and international trade	8.2%	11.9%	15.7%	5.0%	4.2%	**9.7%**
Health	Nutritional security, food access, and food affordability	33.8%	21.4%	39.6%	25.5%	34.6%	**32.8%**
	Public health, including availability and access to medical services	30.8%	17.9%	36.3%	29.4%	23.1%	**30.2%**
	Behavioral and mental health services	29.2%	14.3%	30.8%	33.3%	23.1%	**28.2%**
	Substance abuse issues, including opioids	24.6%	17.9%	31.9%	27.5%	23.1%	**26.7%**
Physical infrastructure and public services	Broadband/high speed internet access, affordability, and reliability	36.0%	28.9%	31.4%	32.2%	21.4%	**31.5%**
	Housing access and affordability	32.6%	26.7%	19.0%	30.5%	21.4%	**26.0%**
	Energy, including renewable production and reliable access	22.1%	24.4%	16.2%	15.3%	17.9%	**19.0%**
	Transportation infrastructure renewal	16.3%	15.6%	6.7%	20.3%	21.4%	**14.4%**
Workforce development, training, and education	Skills gaps and strategic planning for workforce development	28.6%	32.4%	32.0%	26.8%	42.9%	**30.6%**
	Educational programs in high schools, colleges, and universities for jobs of the future	27.5%	40.5%	27.2%	31.7%	28.6%	**29.5%**
	Certificates and other professional training	28.6%	24.3%	29.1%	31.7%	28.6%	**28.5%**
	Apprenticeships and internships	19.8%	29.7%	23.3%	29.3%	28.6%	**24.0%**
	Retraining and transition assistance	16.5%	24.3%	13.6%	19.5%	21.4%	**17.0%**

Graphic representation of standardized capacity scores and expansion potential for all issues
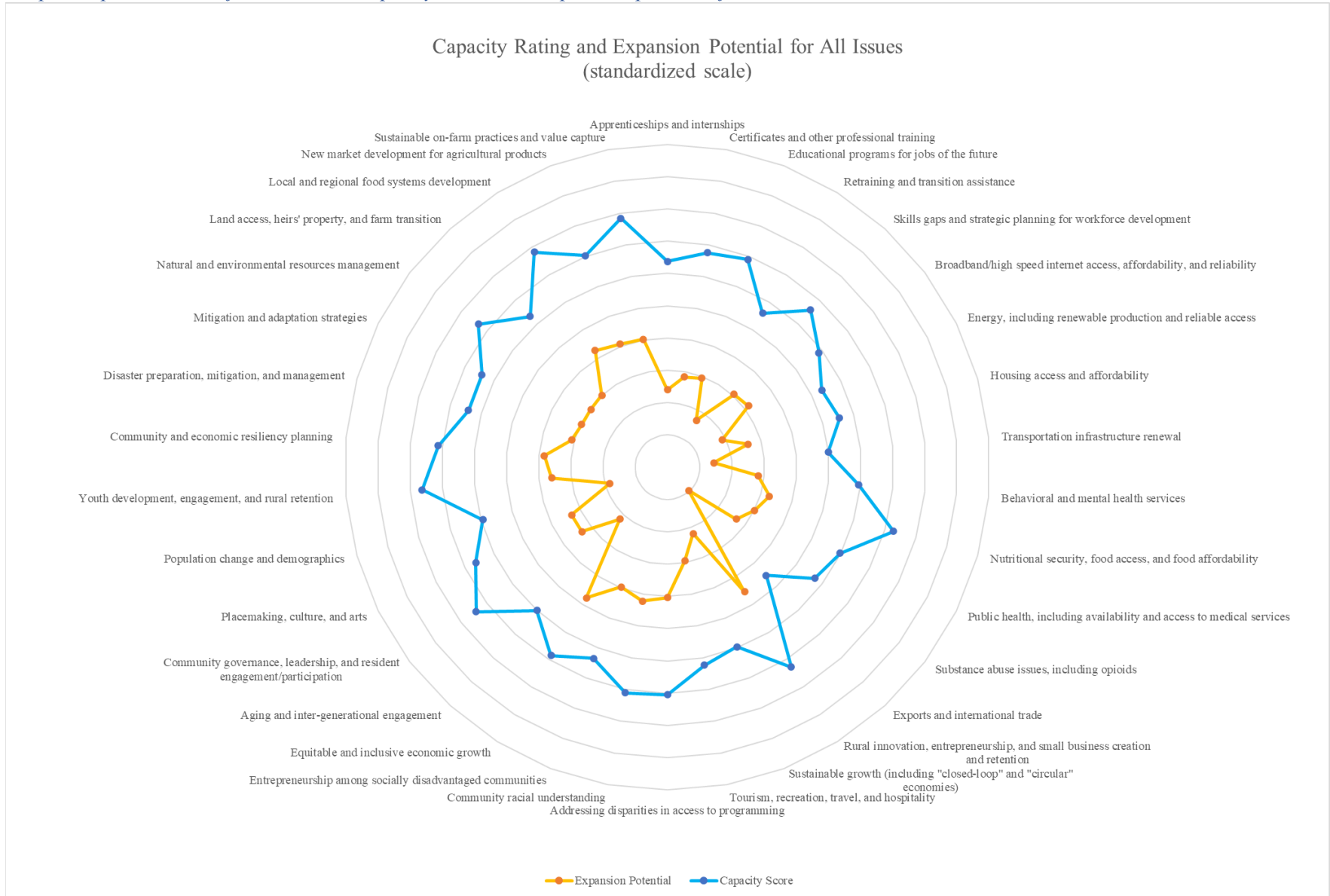
Capacity Rating and Expansion Potential for All Issues
(standardized scale)

Total observations for priority rankings

		Priority Ranks				
	Total	Central	Northeast	South	West	National
All Topics	**641**	178	86	205	113	54

Total observations for valued programming items

		Valued Programming				
	Total	Central	Northeast	South	West	National
Organize research teams across states/institutions around key issues	**459**	134	58	146	79	39
Coordinate Extension and Outreach teams across states/institutions around key issues	**459**	134	58	146	79	39
Provide formal training on community and economic development topics	**458**	133	58	146	79	39
Offer informal workshops and webinars on key community and economic development topics	**458**	133	58	146	79	39
Showcase promising practices or programs within community and economic development	**457**	133	57	146	79	39
Give technical assistance that helps identify and apply for funding	**457**	133	57	146	79	39
Have funding targeted specifically for multi-state teams on high-priority issues	**458**	133	58	146	79	39
Provide technical assistance for evaluation and impact measurement	**457**	132	58	146	79	39
Facilitate multi-institutional approaches to technology transfer	**456**	131	58	146	79	39
Support integrated (i.e. research plus Extension) projects on cross-cutting topics	**458**	133	58	146	79	39

Total observations for capacity and expansion – Part 1

		Capacity Ratings					Interest in Expanding					
		Total	C	E	S	W	NS	**Total**	C	E	S	W	NS
Agriculture and food systems	Land access, heirs' property, and farm transition	**179**	38	31	71	25	14	**186**	40	32	74	26	14
	Local and regional food systems development	**180**	38	31	72	25	14	**186**	40	32	74	26	14
	New market development for agricultural products	**180**	39	30	72	25	14	**186**	40	32	74	26	14
	Sustainable on-farm practices and value capture	**179**	38	31	72	25	13	**186**	40	32	74	26	14
Climate change, climate variability, and extreme weather	Community and economic resiliency planning	**171**	38	35	46	36	15	**175**	38	37	47	36	15
	Disaster preparation, mitigation, and management	**167**	38	34	43	36	15	**175**	38	37	47	36	15
	Mitigation and adaptation strategies	**172**	38	36	45	36	15	**175**	38	37	47	36	15
	Natural and environmental resources management	**171**	38	36	45	36	15	**175**	38	37	47	36	15
Community vibrancy	Aging and inter-generational engagement	**205**	75	20	54	36	18	**211**	77	20	55	36	21
	Community governance, leadership, and resident engagement/participation	**208**	76	20	55	36	19	**211**	77	20	55	36	21
	Placemaking, culture, and arts	**206**	76	20	54	36	18	**211**	77	20	55	36	21
	Population change and demographics	**204**	75	19	54	36	18	**211**	77	20	55	36	21
	Youth development, engagement, and rural retention	**206**	75	20	54	36	19	**211**	77	20	55	36	21
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	Addressing disparities in access to programming	**159**	40	17	53	28	20	**166**	40	17	57	30	20
	Community racial understanding	**161**	40	17	53	29	20	**166**	40	17	57	30	20
	Entrepreneurship among socially disadvantaged communities	**163**	40	17	54	30	20	**166**	40	17	57	30	20
	Equitable and inclusive economic growth	**159**	40	17	52	30	19	**166**	40	17	57	30	20

Total observations for capacity and expansion – Part 2

		Capacity Ratings						Interest in Expanding					
		Total	C	E	S	W	NS	**Total**	C	E	S	W	NS
Economic Development	Exports and international trade	**299**	93	42	82	58	23	**308**	97	42	83	60	24
	Rural innovation, entrepreneurship, & small business creation/retention	**296**	93	42	78	58	23	**308**	97	42	83	60	24
	Sustainable growth (including "closed-loop" and "circular" economies)	**294**	91	42	80	57	23	**308**	97	42	83	60	24
	Tourism, recreation, travel, and hospitality	**296**	92	42	79	58	23	**308**	97	42	83	60	24
Health	Behavioral and mental health services	**251**	62	27	87	50	24	**262**	65	28	91	51	26
	Nutritional security, food access, & affordability	**251**	63	26	88	49	24	**262**	65	28	91	51	26
	Public health, including availability and access to medical services	**252**	63	27	87	50	24	**262**	65	28	91	51	26
	Substance abuse issues, including opioids	**252**	63	27	87	50	24	**262**	65	28	91	51	26
Physical infrastructure and public services	Broadband/high speed internet access, affordability, & reliability	**318**	81	44	102	59	28	**327**	86	45	105	59	28
	Energy, including renewable production and reliable access	**315**	82	43	99	59	28	**327**	86	45	105	59	28
	Housing access and affordability	**314**	82	43	99	58	28	**327**	86	45	105	59	28
	Transportation infrastructure renewal	**317**	83	44	99	59	28	**327**	86	45	105	59	28
Workforce development, training, and education	Apprenticeships and internships	**277**	86	36	102	38	13	**288**	91	37	103	41	14
	Certificates and other professional training	**277**	88	37	101	36	13	**288**	91	37	103	41	14
	Educational programs in high schools, colleges, and universities for jobs of the future	**277**	87	36	102	37	13	**288**	91	37	103	41	14
	Retraining and transition assistance	**278**	87	36	100	40	13	**288**	91	37	103	41	14
	Skills gaps and strategic planning for workforce development	**277**	87	36	100	39	13	**288**	91	37	103	41	14

National RRDC Initiatives | rrdc.usu.edu

Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development | nercrd.psu.edu

Southern Rural Development Center | srdc.msstate.edu

North Central Regional Center for Rural Development | ncrcrd.org

Western Rural Development Center | wrdc.usu.edu

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