New Policies for New Governance—Discussion

Moderator: Mark Drabenstott

Mark Drabenstott: We now are going to take time for some questions.

Let me offer the first question to the two of you. You talked about the federal grant that was a critical source of funding for this new partnership. Let me ask two questions. Were there partnership strings attached to the federal funding? Did the federal funds require that you partner in new ways? More generally, do you see this as a new and emerging role for federal funding, whether it is for higher education or for other types of regional collaborations? Do you see the federal government playing a role of putting monetary incentives on the table that say: “We'll fund this initiative, if partnerships ensue?”

Clinton Bristow: The answer to all of your questions is yes. There was a stipulation that Mississippi State and Alcorn State partner.

Mr. Drabenstott: Was that the first time that federal funds had required that?

Mr. Bristow: Yes, from that, it led to incentives for Mississippi State and Alcorn State to do joint degree programs. From the joint degree programs, we hope to continue to do a number of other collaborative efforts. Charles can talk about a number of the collaborative efforts that we currently have at the extension level.

J. Charles Lee: Our congressional delegation is about leveraging resources, and thus, there is the expectation that we will work together with other institutions within our state and across our region, or, for that matter, beyond our region. I think we will see more of that kind of thing. We were fortunate to have good support from Senator Cochran, who has spent so much of his life on Capitol Hill working on behalf of rural Mississippi. We do have a lot of other partnerships that had the same kind of basis, if not the same sorts of funding, like sharing of extension offices and other kinds of programs.

Mr. Drabenstott: Let’s turn to the audience for your questions.

Mark Okrant, Plymouth State University: We were Plymouth State College until a short time ago. Now we are in the process of trying to lead the way toward helping communities, particularly rural communities in northern New Hampshire, do some of the things you are talking about. We are not a land-grant institution, however. The administration, in a very small cadre of faculty, is committed toward this effort.

The vast majority of faculty members on campus are set in their ways. For years, they were primarily expected to be very effective teachers. Some are involved in scholarly research. What recommendations do you have to create the necessary campus culture to move this kind of issue forward?

David Sears, USDA: One of the things you spoke about was moving into a new industry in southwestern Mississippi. You talked about the fact that you had a couple of underused supercomputers. Could you tell us a little bit more about that initiative?
There are two pieces to the puzzle that I really didn’t hear you talk about. One is the human skills you will need in order to make that industry a success. In terms of your two educational institutions, is part of the plan for you to have a program or do you already have a program in place that will basically train the people who will be able to be employed in that industry? The other piece of the puzzle, it seems to me, is the entrepreneurs. I am assuming this would be a private industry, not one run by the public sector. Do you have entrepreneurs lined up who are ready to jump in and move this industry forward?

Andrew Skadberg, Texas A&M University: I am very impressed with the initiative. My question relates to your experience or the greatest challenges that you had to deal with. Maybe Mark identified one—the culture of universities, professors, and people who are really going to carry the torch of this thing. How have you been navigating communication or coordination or whatever those issues might be?

Mr. Drabenstott: Those are three great questions. First, we had a revelation that I am sure all of us found shocking that university faculty members sometimes have inertia in their programming. How do you overcome that and provide new incentives for your faculty? Second, could you provide a little more elaboration on your supercomputer initiative? Finally, what is the culture of collaboration? How do you create an environment in which these partnerships begin to happen naturally? Charles, would you like to lead off?

Mr. Lee: Let me answer the question about faculty involvement. If you are going to be committed to an outreach mission, you need at least two fundamental things. You must have a reward system that reflects the merit of good outreach activity. Secondly, you need to have a source of funds to support that outreach that does not diminish your teaching or research responsibilities. Those are two absolutely essential ingredients in your success.

We just recently have restructured our Extension Service. We have moved the Division of Continuing Education over with the Extension Service in an administrative sense to improve our economy. We also are looking at a revision of our criteria for the service or outreach role as part of our faculty promotion and tenure (P&T) process.

I will go ahead and give you the rest of my answers now. One of the greatest challenges is, first, an institutional culture. Those parts of the institution outside of agriculture and natural resources tend to be more inward looking than agriculture is. In our case, our goal is to create an outreach service that wraps around all of the institution, recognizing that issues particularly in rural America are no longer just agricultural issues.

The second part of that is, in partnering with community colleges, more than 51 percent of our graduates start at community colleges. We have a lot of built-in relationships with them. In fact, many of their faculty members come from our institutions. When it comes time for funding of the institutions, there is sometimes the potential for some competitiveness in the state House of Representatives between the community colleges and the senior colleges. I don't guess that happens in very many states, but it does in every state I have worked in. That is something you always have to get past.

Also, the issue of culture in the community colleges is a challenge. Most of the people who are now on the faculty are people who may have come from industry. But now they are at the community college to teach, not to do outreach and other things. That is where the merits of combining the strength of the extension services with the community college outreach function pay great dividends.

Mr. Bristow: Charles is absolutely correct. With regard to changing expectations of faculty, let me start with our joint degree program for preparing rural community college professors and use this one as an
example of a real situation. Charles and I went before our governing board just last month. Our governing board asked why we needed a program to train rural community college faculty members.

The response that Charles just gave gets to the heart of that. The faculties working in the rural community colleges have to understand the sense of culture and sense of place, and they have to be committed to doing those outreach activities. We had to even convince our own governing board—that should understand rural America—what is needed in order to train professionals for rural America. Fortunately, we won that argument, and they approved the degree program in this day and age of cutting degree programs.

Next, our governing board spent a lot of time—about four years—working on universities’ mission statements. Charles and I didn’t really appreciate it at first because it wasn’t going in the direction we thought it should go. Finally, something that was very important is that we were able to put in our mission statement our “communiversity” concept that says faculty members must be engaged in that outreach-type activity. The mission statement driving it down to the incentives that Charles talked about has enabled us to get faculty members very committed to reaching out.

The third piece, which is interesting as we talk about new policies and the way they are developed, is that most of our faculty lives near the university. We have housing on campus, and we are getting ready to develop a new extended housing complex on campus for faculty. So, their lives truly will be intertwined with our community. I want to commend you at Plymouth State. The answer is yes, you do not have to be a land-grant institution to do the kind of things that Plymouth State is talking about. For other universities that are not land-grant universities, thank you, Plymouth State, for stepping up.

Digital imaging was the question asked by Dave. Napoleon Moses is our dean of Agriculture who has been working on this with me. Very briefly on human skills, we have a grant from the Department of Labor to do the workforce training, Dave, to get individuals in rural America in our community ready for that industry. We do have a private entrepreneurial group that is working with us on this. Linking to new public policy, we went with our school of business to the Economic Development Authority, to the local leaders, and to others who were bemoaning the fact that we lost our only manufacturing plant. We said: “Here is an opportunity to develop a new policy position. Here is an opportunity for regional cooperation. Let’s think about an industry. Let’s put together the long-range plan for this industry, and let’s go after it.” Napoleon Moses has provided the leadership on that. Napoleon, would you like to respond?

Napoleon Moses, Alcorn State University: I just have a quick comment. First, we were looking at moving from an industry that is forest-based and replacing it with an information technology-based industry. We already have two-plus-two degree programs in place. In one case, we were depending upon the local community college to strengthen this information technology associate degree program. We have gone to our college board to seek approval for a computer network and information technology degree program. We also have a master’s of science graduate degree program in information technology to support the digital imaging initiative. We have also gone to our congressional leadership and gotten another grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to help develop an information technology digital imaging incubator for southwest Mississippi. Our notion is that we can grow our own digital imaging industries.

The Stennis Space Center that Mr. Bristow mentioned and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Waterways Experiment Station each has a major shared resource center supercomputer. We also have in the institution of higher learning community a
supercomputer located at the University of Mississippi. In each of those cases, we found there is idle capacity. That capacity is available for us to leverage to help build out the digital imaging industry in southwest Mississippi. We also are adding a center for digital imaging technology at Alcorn State University and adding faculty in that center to help provide the technical support.

Mr. Bristow: We will not build this on our campus. The other part of using our resources to help improve rural America is to build our facilities away from the university. I saw some very excellent examples, Mark, in a lot of the literature about what is happening at Purdue with its Discovery Park. What we try to do at Alcorn is just not build everything right on our campus because everybody is not going to come 30 to 35 miles. So, we try to take some of this elsewhere. For example, the digital imaging center we are building is going to be in Adams County, so we are closer to the hub of where we think we need to give impetus to the development of a new industry in rural America. We had to get out of the mindset of we want a new building with all of this equipment sitting in front of the president’s office for photo opportunities. Now, I have to get in a car and drive 35 to 40 miles for this new photo opportunity.

Mr. Bristow: The last question is from our Texas A&M colleague. I think Charles might have already effectively responded to the challenges of cultural change that were asked.

Mr. Drabenstott: We have time for a few more questions.

C. Edward Harshbarger, Farm Credit Administration: This may be premature, but you mentioned you have 150 Ph.D. students working on rural development issues with the idea that they will ultimately find job opportunities in rural areas. Can you share with us what the experience has been? Are you far enough along in the program for these people to be working in rural America?

Eric Thor, Arizona State University: We are in the process of putting together a regional plan involving what we will call the Nogales Corridor, which runs the NAFTA corridor north all the way to Canada. What we are finding is there are a number of challenges of combining the Native American population, the Hispanic population, and what we will call the old style Arizonian residents, who basically feel they still own the Wild West. I thought, maybe having come from the South, you could offer some ideas about how you overcome the challenges of what I’ll call the ethnic and other barriers that exist because of old-standing traditions.

Holly Woelber, New Mexico Rural Development Response Council: Do you have any suggestions that you can make to nonprofits that are outside of a university system on how we might broach the subject of what you all have done to encourage our university and community college systems to shift gears and to look at the opportunities they are missing to assist rural communities?

Mr. Drabenstott: Those are three excellent questions. What are the prospects for the new leaders that you are training? New governance implies a much more inclusive participation by all segments of the region. How do you foster collaboration across fences that may be built fairly high? Third, how do we take your model to the rest of the country?

Mr. Lee: On the first question about the Ph.D.s, we may not have made this clear, but the primary mission of that Ph.D. program is to prepare the next generation of potential leaders in the community college system. We have the oldest community college system in the country, and we have, as do many other states, an aging population of administrative leaders in these community colleges. There is a great deal of concern about that in terms of what type of people we will need to take the places of those who are going to be retiring over the next decade.
Most of the people enrolled in this program from across the southern states are associated with a community college. They are on the faculty, they are deans, or they are in some role already within that. This program is designed to help them get that additional educational experience, without necessarily having to spend a lot of time in residence on our campus or at Alcorn State. It is a program that is designed more specifically for community college positions than it is for the general workforce.

Bill, do you want to stand up? You probably all know Bill Scaggs. He is our senior consultant for our MidSouth Partnership and is very involved in the Ph.D. program and a number of other leadership development efforts.

Bill Scaggs, Rural Community College Alliance: I watched Mr. Lee “robe” at least three of these people in the Ph.D. program a week ago. All three of them worked in rural community colleges.

Mr. Lee: The second question was about overcoming barriers. I think there are two things there. You just have to work hard to build trust. It helps a lot if nonprofits, foundations, state, or federal government sources can help provide some resources. You make a lot of progress in bringing people together if you have something to grease the skids.

Finally, there was a question about the role of nonprofits. Responsive institutions are looking for guidance about how to deal with some of these issues that are out there today. I am not sure we always have the best and most sophisticated dialogue about changes in rural America and how it affects the ag dimension of land-grant universities today. We need a lot more of that. I would encourage you to get involved in that sense. Helping people to see the opportunity and finding a couple of missionaries to go with you are powerful first steps.

Mr. Bristow: The Ph.D. program is going to be really outstanding. As Charles indicated, it is focused primarily on preparing individuals for leadership positions in the community colleges. There is an opportunity to expand beyond that and begin to look at county administrators and others that will be on the front lines in policymaking positions in rural America.

Second, let me talk about the nonprofits. I want to compliment you for asking what role nonprofits can play. Often, nonprofits can step up to the plate because they provide objectivity. They provide forums for competing sides. For instance, in rural America, where lines are drawn in the sand, a not-for-profit can bring parties together and have the discussions take place, without people thinking there is some financial incentive.

In our counties about 10 years ago, the discussions were so heated that you had to take guns away from people at the door before they had metal detectors. People would come to county board meetings. They were really very serious discussions. I had to stop posting meetings. On a serious basis, the university as a neutral party was able to bring the sides together because we weren't trying to make money off of people. We weren't trying to get the highway to go this way because we had land over here that was going to be bought in the process. Not-for-profits can provide that neutrality, and we strongly encourage not-for-profits to do that, even in terms of pushing the universities. I want to compliment the Phil Hardin Foundation of Mississippi. It pushed the two universities closer to collaboration with some of the initial start-up grants it provided for the MidSouth Partnership.

Now I will answer the question of diversity. I slightly disagree with Charles on this. Sometimes, you don't need money to make things happen that ought to happen. That should be right. Again, we had a great discussion on this yesterday at the dinner table about Brown versus the Board of Education—the 50th anniversary, the history, and all this information on television. In a state like Mississippi where we have had a great racial divide
for years, the coming together now is based on the fact we see that our economic life is inextricably connected. My success is going to be contingent upon Charles’ success and vice-versa. Ole Miss has done something that is really unique, and I compliment Ole Miss in terms of doing this. It established a Racial Reconciliation Institute. Robert Kyett, the president up there, thought it was necessary to have such an institute to look at history, to have open discussions, and to move forward.

At Alcorn, just last month, we had a conference called Multiculturalism at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), so that we could get more comfortable with a diverse environment at a historically black college. Understanding that, yes, we are proud of being a historically black college and a land-grant university. But, in this day and age, we have to serve rural America and the counties I talked about. I have to serve all people that walk through the door, whether they are African-American, non-African-American, or Hispanic. We have a growing Hispanic population.

We had the conference to have the open discussion to get the comfort levels going. Sometimes, you have to do things, even though there is no money on the table. But you understand that moving forward, bringing the diversity, and bringing the different constituency groups together is going to lead to a higher quality of life and a growth capacity in your respective communities.

I refer you to the Ole Miss Racial Reconciliation Institute as a great model, if you are looking for a Web site activity. And I refer you to the Alcorn Web site, www.alcorn.edu. We actually have a multicultural initiatives icon right on the Web site. You can go there, and you can get information that talks about what we are trying to do to bridge the racial divide.

Mr. Drabenstott: Charles and Clinton, you have given us a fascinating inside view of an impressive innovation. We wish you much success with that, and thank you for taking the time to share it with us.