

NU launches Rural Futures Initiative

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Partnering with rural communities to help them meet their economic and social challenges is a natural mission for land-grant universities in the 21st century, the president of the University of Nebraska said Thursday.

James B. Milliken made his comments in Columbus as the university formally launched the Rural Futures Institute, an NU-wide institute that will tap faculty expertise across all four NU campuses for research, education and engagement involving partner organizations and rural communities across the Great Plains.

Milliken said it wasn't by accident that the announcement was made during the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's week-long celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which created land-grant universities.

The land-grant tradition of establishing research and extension in agriculture is "what gives us our grounding today," Milliken said.

"What does it mean to be a land-grant university in the 21st century?," Milliken asked. In Nebraska, he said, it will be a focus "on a range of issues in the rural economy and the rural life."

What separates the Rural Futures Institute from previous university-based rural-development efforts will be a commitment from the university's uppermost leadership, inclusion of all four of NU's campuses and collaborations with communities across the state, he added.

Nebraska's efforts already have gained national, even international, attention, Milliken said. A Rural Futures Conference in Lincoln in May drew participants from around the world.

Ronnie Green, NU vice president and Harlan vice chancellor of the university's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said he, Milliken and other university administrators knew it was time to "elevate the effort."

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Green said the institute will begin with a \$1.75 million budget its first year, growing to \$3.5 million in a couple of years. Green added that \$750,000 has been set aside for a first round of research-engagement and teaching-engagement grants to be awarded early in 2013.

Doug O'Brien, U.S. Department of Agriculture undersecretary for rural development, said, "We are in a time that presents more opportunities for rural communities and for people who live in them than we've seen in generations."

But the challenges are significant, too, he said. Partnerships and innovative ways of doing business will be more important than ever at a time when federal, state and local governments have less money to spend on development.

Representatives of all the NU campuses – UNL, University of Nebraska at Omaha, University of Nebraska Kearney and the University of Nebraska Medical Center – discussed their institutions' roles in the RFI, each pointing to programs already under way that can be incorporated into the new initiative and strengthened as they work together with others in the system.

Chuck Hassebrook, NU regent and executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs, said, "This has the potential, if we do it right, to be the premier program in the nation ... I'm excited about this; it's a big deal."

In an interview this summer, Green said Nebraska is the perfect place to lead such an effort.

"No one else is doing this ... I think we're better positioned than anyone else" to lead it, Green said. "We have the best living laboratory for it in the country."

The Rural Futures Institute will go before the NU Board of Regents for formal approval this fall.