

SEPTEMBER 1, 2004
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Portraying “Rural” in Metropolitan Media

There are hundreds of newspaper, radio, and television stations across Minnesota. Only a handful offer papers and broadcasts outside of their hometowns, much less across the state. A study conducted by the Center for Small Towns (CST) answered the question: How are events in rural areas covered and reported by metropolitan-area media? Under the supervision of Benjamin Winchester, Coordinator of Data Analysis and Research at CST, three University of Minnesota, Morris undergraduate students – Neil Linscheid, a senior from St. Paul, Minnesota majoring in Political Science; Abby Von Arx, a senior from Caledonia, Minnesota majoring in English; and Tara Schmidt, a senior from Brainerd, Minnesota majoring in Political Science – conducted the research for the study.

To answer the research question, a years worth of stories (from 2003) in the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press were examined. Underlying themes were determined and historical understandings of "rural" were applied by the research team to provide a framework for the rural portrayals. There were four themes that were identified in the study:

- There is not a conscious pattern of stereotypical rural portrayals. A common stereotype associated with rural areas is the tradition of farming and agriculture. In Minnesota today, only a fraction of our counties are dependent upon agriculture as an economic base;
- A clear definition or understanding of rural was not evident. However, as a context was provided, such as an ethanol story, it became closely associated with a rural basis. Generally, these are relative definitions and tend to be dependent upon one's personal history and contact with rural places. Literally any city outside of Minneapolis and St. Paul was fair game for a “rural” label;
- Rural areas are portrayed as in need of help. The vocabulary used by the authors to describe the economy, education, and instances of natural disasters represented the idea was that rural places are in need of help and are unable to help themselves. This may be troubling, as self-sufficiency is a common value found in rural life; and
- In light of the negative portrayals, there is evidence of consistently idyllic imagery. Idyllic images of pastoral settings are powerful and resonate positively within the population. This may cause readers to look past the negatives (such as lack of jobs and low wages) and envision only the positives in their symbolic understanding of rural areas.

A common portrayal of rural that was evident in the articles reviewed was the general belief that small towns and rural areas are dying. While this may be true in some places, it is not a statement that one can use as a blanket to cover all of rural Minnesota. Over 85% of cities in Minnesota are under 5,000, and those with retirement and recreational activities are witnessing explosions of growth. There are diverse, vibrant small towns in our state and the measurement of rural success is typically based upon urban ideals and portrayed as lacking by metro media. People have different backgrounds and connections with rural places, which also has an impact on how they perceive rural. A realization and understanding of these perceptions will move Minnesotan's toward minimizing the limiting effects of the rural-urban differences.

This research project was commissioned by the Minnesota Initiative Foundations and the results were presented at the board retreat on June 4, 2004 in Brainerd. The final written report is posted on the Center for Small Towns' web page. The Center for Small Towns <http://www.centerforsmalltowns.org/> is a community outreach program housed at the University of Minnesota, Morris and serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, non-profit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the Center's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. The mission of the Center is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

The Minnesota Initiative Foundations were created in 1986 by The McKnight Foundation, a private foundation based in Minneapolis, in partnership with the citizens of Greater Minnesota. These independent, philanthropic organizations work outside the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to make each of their six distinct regions stronger and more prosperous. Each foundation's priorities are decided by people in its own region, with grants and loans supporting economic development; leadership development; community building; and families, youth, and older adults.

Contributed by Jessica Beyer '02, community program assistant at the Center for Small Towns