

University of Maine System's Rural Issues Symposium: Highlighting and Connecting Issues Facing Rural Maine Communities

by Jennifer Bonnet, Catharine Biddle, and Vanessa Levesque

In January 2024, Presidents Joan Ferrini-Mundy (University of Maine) and Jacqueline Edmondson (University of Southern Maine) proposed an idea for the three coauthors of this commentary to consider: creating a symposium focused on rural issues that would highlight University of Maine System (UMS) research efforts that address Maine's capacity for resilience and revitalization and that would galvanize opportunities for collaboration across disciplines, institutions, and sectors. The presidents' vision prompted us to create a steering committee comprised of faculty and staff from across UMS to conceptualize such a gathering. The steering committee included representation from each UMS campus and from a variety of disciplines, including health, education, climate science, forestry, plant sciences, policy, and law. Our goal was to create a space where all disciplines could engage in the ways in which rurality was most relevant to their work. Members of the steering committee were encouraged to think and talk across disciplines to find the most meaningful intersections to use as themes for the convening.

The resulting Rural Issues Symposium¹ aimed to enhance the long-term sustainability of Maine's rural communities through the event's theme, Resilience and Revitalization with/in Maine Communities. The steering committee created working groups to implement a meaningful, daylong event that would provide a forum for researchers, community partners, leaders, and statewide

organizations to showcase how their work was advancing intersecting issues facing Maine.

The hybrid event drew 250 participants (120 in person, 130 online via Zoom) from across UMS, as well as from Bowdoin College, various government agencies (e.g., Maine Arts Commission, Maine Rural Development State Office, Maine Centers for Disease Control), and community and non-profit organizations (e.g., Island Institute, Outdoor Sport Institute, Mount Desert Island Biological Laboratory, Rural Futures Fund). A pair of engaged, online facilitators strengthened the hybrid part of the event, making it interactive for Zoom participants.

Fifty poster presentations (in person and online) were accepted from UMS undergraduate and graduate students, faculty members, and community partners on wide-ranging topics including rural educator workforce development and retention, culvert rehabilitation technology aimed at strengthening Maine infrastructure resilience, youth leadership development interventions, university-hospital partnerships to address nursing workforce shortages, and a case study of the integration of environmental humanities and the arts through a living laboratory on a small Maine farm. All symposium posters remain freely accessible online.²

Two plenary sessions focused on (1) innovations in rural workforce development and (2) climate resilience in rural Maine. Plenary speakers represented UMS, including Cooperative

Extension, and local government. Two journalists with the *Maine Monitor*, who have a dedicated focus on rural issues in the state, served as moderators.

Breakout discussion groups provided a forum for engagement with topics attendees had requested prior to the event, with a focus on actions that could sustain momentum and commitments beyond the day's event: climate, health and workforce, and rural community engagement. Each group was assigned a facilitator, and participants were asked to consider three interrelated concepts: challenges their issue is facing in Maine, potential solutions, and possible next steps or actions they could take together, or with others they encountered at the event, to do this work. Ideas were captured on Padlet (an online tool for collaboration) to document and share conversations with others at the symposium, and to provide a space for continued discussion.³

From the post-symposium online evaluation we shared with attendees and anecdotal comments from informal conversations with attendees, we learned that the symposium facilitated new connections among participants, both in person and in the online Zoom environment. Overall feedback suggested that the event provided valuable networking opportunities, effective breakout discussions, and a good balance of activities. Anecdotal feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with a group of scholars from one UMS institution sharing that they planned to start

a working group based on the connections they made at the symposium and carry forward collaborative research ideas that emerged from their conversations throughout the event.

There were several networking opportunities, including an open time before and after the symposium, informal time together during lunch, and breakout discussions around shared topics of interest, which participants felt were valuable aspects of the day. Respondents expressed interest in more structured networking time in a future iteration of the symposium as well as more opportunities for informal conversation.

Anonymous feedback provided through the post-event evaluation included the following comments:

Really excellent panels! They helped orient me to the issues faced in rural Maine communities while also helping me think about connections across issues. I had a small but mighty breakout group that was super interesting. We were all from different study areas but it was fascinating to see how we converged on topics to discuss different facets of the problem/solutions.

It was a very nice networking opportunity. This type of shared interest among participants was unique and made for a positive cross-campus experience.

This was a great first go at a rural conference, and I really hope we can do this again.

Additionally, the hybrid format appeared successful, with an online attendee sharing:

Being online the mixed modalities and large break in the middle was terrific. I missed the poster link being shared ahead of the symposium so that was challenging to find but the moderator in the zoom room kept the conversation going and we were able to chat in real time with each other which made it feel

more interactive and took advantage of the medium rather than trying to recreate an in-person experience. I also appreciated the discussion and would have liked to have that time after each discussion session."

The majority of evaluation survey respondents found the poster session "somewhat helpful" to "very helpful," particularly given that it allowed for a variety of additional presentations and opportunities for engagement. Suggestions for ways to enhance the format at future events included having breakout rooms for virtual attendees to interact with online poster authors, and protected time for poster presenters to engage with each other. Breakout discussion groups were well received as an opportunity for deeper discussion and action-oriented next steps.

A groundswell of interest in the symposium made clear that rural issues in their many, layered forms are valuable drivers of engagement across institutions, communities, and sectors. Although the original vision of the symposium was to bring together UMS researchers and their community partners throughout the state to foster future collaborations in service to the state, evaluations revealed a common desire for future events like this one to include broader representation from rural partners and organizations who are leading resilience efforts in their communities, as well as additional representation across sectors, such as business and industry partners who are drivers of workforce and leadership development opportunities.

Several participants requested greater engagement in shared problem solving and actionable takeaways in future events. There was a desire to integrate such activities into each element of the day to provide opportunities for attendees to collaborate post-event

(e.g., working groups based on shared interests and goals).

Interest in future symposia focused on specific topical areas, such as

- transportation and infrastructure;
- climate change infrastructure and energy solutions;
- education equity;
- approaches to regional planning;
- lived experiences in rural areas (e.g., tribal partners, community partners);
- healthcare with an emphasis on aging in place;
- regional focus on different efforts in various parts of Maine; and
- what collaborations or organizational opportunities already exist; who is looking for partners and what kind of partners.

Regardless of the specific logistics and focus of a future rural issues symposium, we believe that there is value in continuing to pull together partners from across UMS institutions, as well as nongovernmental and governmental organizations that are working to advance rural well-being in Maine. This type of symposium allows for interdisciplinary conversations and problem solving around the complex issues that the state is facing. As we learned in the inaugural Rural Issues Symposium, the ways that specific situations—such as employment opportunities, educational challenges, or climate change—play out in rural areas in Maine are interrelated. By creating a space for partners who normally focus on one specific issue to think about these interactions and the ways in which potential solutions can have both positive (unexpected benefits) or negative (unexpected drawbacks) effects is essential as we work together to help rural Maine thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to acknowledge the contributions of all steering committee members to the design and implementation of the Rural Issues Symposium: Vanessa Levesque, University of Southern Maine; Catharine Biddle, University of Maine; Jennifer Bonnet, University of Maine; Jason Charland, University of Maine System; Reed Miller, University of Maine; Sarah Walton, University of Maine; Rachel Bouvier, University of Southern Maine; Tara Casimir, University of Southern Maine; Anthony Moffa, University of Maine School of Law; Bee Chim, University of Maine at Presque Isle; Jason Johnston, University of Maine at Presque Isle; Kennedy Rubert-Nason, University of Maine at Fort Kent; Nicholas MacDonald, University of Maine at Machias; Juyoung Shim, University of Maine at Augusta; Parker Gassett, Maine Climate Science Information Exchange Office; Patty Williams, University of Maine Farmington.

NOTES

- 1 A description of the symposium and the schedule of events are available on this UMS website: <https://www.maine.edu/rural-issues/>
- 2 https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/rural_issues/
- 3 All remain live and accessible: climate (<https://padlet.com/research103/ris-breakout-session-climate-wmbklvc4g8m0xdmz>), health and workforce (<https://padlet.com/research103/ris-breakout-session-health-workforce-community-w3pljsgnnqet2u4o>), rural community engagement (<https://padlet.com/research103/ris-breakout-session-rural-community-engagement-d1r5vme76jkh9df5>)-

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Catharine Biddle is an associate professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine. Her research examines how rural schools and communities respond to 21st century social and economic change. She is coeditor of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rural Education in the United States*, and her work has appeared in the *Review of Research in Education*, *Education Policy*, and the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*.

Jennifer Bonnet is a research development associate for special projects in the University of Maine's Office of Research Development, where she helps advance researcher success across the University of Maine System through proposal writing support. She works with researchers to develop their ideas, find relevant funding opportunities, identify potential collaborations and partnerships, draft various elements of grant proposals, and maximize the ways they document the impacts of their work.