

Worldwide Rural Research
& Education Network (WRREN)
A Stakeholder Model for
Digital Project Development

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OVERVIEW

Pennsylvania State University (PSU) Libraries is a partner in developing a unique online information community to advance communications, research and education in the field of rural sociology. The Worldwide Rural Research & Education Network (WRREN), a not-for-profit enterprise, is being developed collaboratively by Penn State (including University Libraries, Penn State Press, and PSU Computing Services) and the Rural Sociological Society (RSS).

Our vision is that WRREN will become a significant force in the advancement of rural interests and concerns by increasing access to scholarly and professional communication in rural sociology and related issues. WRREN will become a dynamic information community for scholars, students, policy experts, practitioners, and citizens concerned with rural issues -- a global universe of more than 100,000 potential online users -- many of whose informational needs are crucial but presently unmet.

Although unique in our field, WRREN will follow in the path of several successful initiatives in other disciplines, including Columbia International Affairs Online (CIAO) (www.ciaonet.org), Project Muse (www.nelinet.net/cpp/eroffers/pro_muse.htm) and ChemWeb.com (www.chemweb.com). WRREN is distinctive not only for its subject scope but also for its partnership of stakeholders.

STAKEHOLDERS

WRREN is being developed through the joint cooperation of representatives of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS), Penn State Press, Pennsylvania State University Libraries and PSU Computing Services. Each of these stakeholders brings valuable expertise to the initiative.

The Rural Sociological Society (RSS) publishes *Rural Sociology*, the premiere journal in rural sociology. The professional society offers insights into scholarly uses of online portals, suggesting how WRREN could benefit its members. RSS has committed to WRREN being the sole online provider of *Rural Sociology*, providing current and back content of the journal. The Penn State Press publishes the *Rural Studies Series* and other important monographs dealing with rural issues. They will make these titles available through WRREN. Collectively, these two stakeholders offer valuable publishing expertise on monographs and serials in the field of rural sociology.

University Libraries offers expertise through our knowledge of information access issues and searching patterns of users. Through our familiarity with other online portals and databases, we are able to offer insights into models of online delivery that are successful for patrons, so we can build in structures from the beginning that facilitate ease of use and maximum information access. PSU Computing Services brings expertise in technical project development and support to the project. The representatives have worked with University Libraries in the past with digital product development, and so are aware of the unique technical needs of information projects.

By having information, technology and publishing professionals, as well as a professional society at the table during development, we are able to create a digital product that reflects multiple interests and expertise.

There are a number of pitfalls that can characterize online information projects that this unique partnership allows WRREN to avoid. Portals may lack for content, dependent upon a variety of publishers, corporate, academic and scholarly, with many, often conflicting, demands. Agreements can be limited by publishers' prior contracts with other online providers. Such limitations hinder the value of online portals that are in other ways well-designed and valuable. Alternatively, librarians routinely encounter databases with a wealth of online texts but terrible interfaces. WRREN avoids these problems by having a development team with information and technical expertise, as well as depth of content.

ROLES OF STAKEHOLDERS

WRREN's founding partners are committed to making significant investments of time, resources, and the subsidization of start-up costs. The RSS/PSU collaboration represents a joining of two eminent organizations, each with a unique position and set of capabilities that can be combined to best advantage in creating and operating WRREN.

The parties have agreed that each as co-founders will perform or share in the performance of and responsibility for all activities and functions required for the development and operation of WRREN, including financing; development of business plan; design, content and quality assurance; acquisition, assembly, digital conversion, and aggregation of content (their own and that of other organizations); editorial management and control for the site; acquisition and/or development of operations and applications software; production, technology, and resource operation and maintenance; establishment and implementation of standards of various types; pricing, marketing, sales, and distribution; customer and user support; creation of licenses and other forms of contracts or agreements for customers, users, and other parties; on-line hosting of Internet access; authorized user access and user support; archiving, preservation, and migration of digital content; and administrative, personnel, accounting (including calculation, reserves for and periodic disbursement of royalties to which certain parties may be entitled), and related functions required to operate WRREN in accordance with best practices. Within this context, we have outlined principal roles for each.

Principal Role of Penn State

Penn State (incorporating the University's Library, Press, and Computing Services) will perform generally and overall as aggregator and operator of the WRREN portal, and as its design, content, and quality manager, central production and technology facility maintenance, aggregator, seller, and distributor, on-line host, and archive of digital content, some aspects of which may be performed by third parties. Penn State will perform all administrative, personnel, accounting, and related functions required to operate WRREN as a distinct entity within the University's system.

Principal Role of RSS

RSS will perform as an advisor to Penn State at the highest level of decision-making regarding the development, creation, and operation of WRREN. RSS will provide editorial and scholarly expertise, through an editor and editorial board, and will engage in quality assessments of various publishers and information sources, content acquisition and outreach to potential participating societies' executives and other content-owners' decision-makers. Furthermore, of course, RSS will be the lead and likely most prominent provider of proprietary content to be disseminated via WRREN.

Governance

Representatives from RSS and PSU will comprise a governing body to set policies and practices and to make decisions at the highest level. The charter and composition of this body remains to be determined. Additional parties of high stature and complementary objectives are being invited to join WRREN, where their participation will strengthen the initiative's scope, value, appeal, and visibility, and enrich its content. The Southern Rural Sociological Association is one such party among, potentially, five to ten others that will each be designated as a Charter Participant of WRREN. Each such organization will be identified prominently in all public communications issued by WRREN and on the web site. Each will be invited to designate one representative to a Participants' Council, which will communicate occasionally by telephone, by email, or in person to review and consider major strategic and substantive matters related to the development of and business planning for WRREN. (This is an advisory group, not a governing body.) Charter Participants will be encouraged to publicize and promote WRREN to their respective constituencies, and perhaps even to contribute assets (such as membership lists) to marketing and promotional efforts conducted by Penn State Press.

WRREN's core R&D and planning team is comprised of Peter Potter (project supervisor), Editor-in-Chief, Penn State Press; Ken Pigg, Chair, Social Sciences Unit, Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia, and Treasurer, RSS; and Bonnie MacEwan, Assistant Dean for Collections, Penn State University Libraries.

Rick Johnson, Enterprise Director of SPARC, provides advice and assistance on an as-needed basis. SPARC's role in helping to launch WRREN will become more central as we move further along. Some months ago, PSU engaged Howard Goldstein, a consultant who brings to our project substantial experience in start-up scholarly communications initiatives. Howard works with the core team and will be principal author of the Business Plan in close consultation with Ken, Peter, Bonnie and other concerned parties.

An academic advisory group, with representatives from the University and the Society, has recently begun to consider the many different possibilities and priorities for WRREN content and services from a scholarly viewpoint. Two other advisory groups will also be formed. A technology group will develop recommendations for a technology and technical solutions plan, and a librarians' group will advise on such issues as institutional pricing models and site licenses. The Participants' Council, mentioned above, serves as a de facto publishers' advisory group.

It is especially important to engage leaders in various constituent areas in a meaningful exchange of information, ideas, and opinions to help shape WRREN and its plans. Some time after launch, and as ongoing operations proceed, the role of these groups will likely change.

THE PRODUCT

Through their partnership, PSU and RSS will perform as a value-added consolidator and online disseminator of a comprehensive, multi-dimensional digital resource. Parts of the WRREN information community will be open for free use by all researchers; other parts will be accessible on a fee-only basis to authorized users. Research libraries at universities and colleges will be the largest paid subscriber market segment. WRREN will have added visibility and credibility in this market, particularly in North America and Europe, through an endorsement and assistance from the Scholarly Publishing & Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), a unit of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

WRREN will be an Internet host and portal to a wide variety of information resources pertinent directly, and in some cases vitally, to the large body of scholars, students, policy experts, and practitioners concerned with rural issues both in the United States and around the globe. This will meet a great need for increased awareness and more effective and economical access, across the international community including those in smaller institutions and in less-developed areas.

WRREN will be comprised of multiple components of complementary information, drawn from various publishers and sources, and chosen for their relevance to the interests of the intended audiences. Some components will be included in the inauguration of public online access, and others will be added over time. Some will be accessible free of charge, but most of the core published research will be accessible only by subscription, or through other purchase mechanisms, in order to sustain WRREN's ongoing operations and meet the incremental income requirements of participating content owners (licensees). It is, however, also our intent to provide access to WRREN to those audiences without substantial institutional or other financial support.

A content advisory group is considering the many different possibilities for WRREN products and services. Their recommendations will contribute to a refinement of our plans for building the information community.

Currently we hope to provide the following types of content and services.

1. Journals of Scholarly Societies

WRREN has set as the highest priority the inclusion of scholarly journals in the discipline. Rural Sociology, the RSS journal, is a leading peer-reviewed journal in the discipline. Current issues and back years will be aggregated in a hyperlinked database. The RSS journal will be the centerpiece with, eventually, all of its back years dating to 1936 converted to electronic form. Other leading journals of similar relevance and quality will also be included, with their current issues and at least three years of back issues (potentially more, based on individual situations).

Other participating content-owners will include the Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA), publisher of *Southern Rural Sociology*, with whom we have an agreement in principle. Other potential partners include the National Rural Health Association, the Centre for Rural Social Research, and the Community Development Society.

Southern Rural Sociology is the official journal of the Southern Rural Sociological Association (SRSA). The SRSA is a section of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, an organization of researchers and Extension staff in 1862 and 1890 land grant colleges and universities in the South. The SRSA is not, however, limited in its membership to people who work at land grant institutions. Membership of the SRSA is drawn from a range of social science interests and disciplines, as well as from the ranks of those involved in the promoting social change. As an academic refereed journal, *Southern Rural Sociology* was established in 1983 to stimulate research on a wide range of rural issues that relate to the South. Areas of interest include rural economic restructuring, rural development, rural households in transition, the sociology of community, health, and poverty, rural labor market participation, agricultural restructuring, natural resource and environmental issues, agricultural and natural resource commodity systems, globalization of the agro-food system, race, gender, and class inequality.

The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) is a nonprofit association composed of individual and organizational members who share a common interest in rural health. NRHA's *Journal of Rural Health* is a quarterly journal offering original research encompassing evaluations of model and demonstration projects to improve rural health, statistical comparisons of rural and urban differences, and mathematical models examining the use of health care services by rural residents. Summaries of recently published rural health research discuss the objectives, geographical focus, database, and methods and outcomes of the research.

The Centre for Rural Social Research (CRSR) contributes significantly to rural Australia and is recognized as the Australian national centre for rural and regional social research. Publishing activities at the CRSR provide a vital source of information on rural social issues, particularly its unique nationally refereed journal *Rural Society*. *Rural Society* is a refereed, academic journal, which covers topics such as: the rural media; small town development; rural gender issues; agricultural restructuring; heritage and tourism; youth and ageing in rural areas and many other rural related topics.

The international Community Development Society (CDS), founded in 1969, is a professional association for community development practitioners and citizen leaders around the world. CDS members represent a variety of fields: education, health care, social services, government, utilities, economic development practitioners, citizen groups, and more. The *Journal of the Community Development Society* is devoted to improving knowledge and practice in the field of purposive community change. The Journal's purposes are to disseminate information on community development theory, research, and practice.

Our initial goal is to secure electronic publishing rights to leading journals, including those with an international focus. Some of these journals are already available online. For those journals for which WRREN is not exclusive electronic distributor, the strength of WRREN will be in the advantages of its aggregation and cross-journal functionality, rather than in exclusivity.

2. Monographs

Books of interest to the field from university presses, scholarly societies, and other publishers are a high priority, including in particular the *Rural Studies Series* published by Penn State Press and sponsored by RSS. While emphasizing current in-print editions, some older books (even out-of-print books) might be included at some point. Various technological solutions to delivery of full text are to be examined. In some cases, WRREN may make full texts available electronically for download in PDF; in others WRREN will act as an e-commerce transaction facility, processing the online user's order for drop shipment of the printed book by the publisher.

3. Working Papers

Selected publications of research institutes, government agencies and foundation-funded research projects represent a potentially integral component of the information community. Virtually all of these materials exist in digital form (although forms will vary), and many may already appear online elsewhere, but not in a centralized set. For example, we hope to include the issue papers of the National Rural Health Association, currently freely available on the Association's web site. These papers include the NRHA's position and policies on federal programs and issues impacting our nation's rural health care delivery system.

4. Policy Briefs, Issue Updates, Legislative Alerts, etc.

Selected publications may include current legislative and regulatory activity alerts from the Census Bureau, the Economic Development Administration, the Congressional Rural Caucus, the United States Department of Agriculture, and from non-governmental organizations, such as the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). Additionally, RSS can expand its role as publisher by commissioning five to ten original papers annually on important topics from eminent researchers.

5. Web Subject Directory

WRREN will facilitate the greatest number and widest variety of Internet links reasonably possible to and from pertinent web sites and resources (such as societies, institutes, agencies, associations, development centers, universities, publishers, abstracting and indexing services.) Again, this would reinforce our community stature and add to the site's functionality and user convenience. This subject directory would be free to all online users.

6. Conference Proceedings

We hope to include the proceedings of annual meetings of RSS and other societies. Such publications are currently indexed in Sociological Abstracts and other databases but are not easily available.

7. Pedagogical Resources

Including course syllabi and other teaching materials reinforces the intended value of WRREN as a central resource for rural studies education. Individual scholars may be encouraged to share their course packs and other teaching materials with the community.

8. News and Updates

Postings of news and other current non-research information of community interest would present participating society publishers with an additional communications venue and increased visibility for their activities and programs. For RSS, this could be as simple as an electronic version of *The Rural Sociologist*, published four times a year to provide information and comment of interest to members of the Rural Sociological Society; however, we may be able to enhance this with regular updating and bulletin-board features. Access by all online users would be free.

9. Preprints

Scholars wanting quicker and potentially wider access to their papers by other researchers are more frequently posting preprints on articles or papers on the Internet, on both their own web sites and elsewhere. These papers are identified as un-refereed and may, as often is the case, precede publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Preprints, posted within a “rolling repository” (with appropriate criteria for inclusion and oversight) may be a potentially rich complementary resource for WRREN. Access by all online users would be free.

10. Maps and Country Data

We are considering including maps, country information, and statistics, and perhaps even State Department travel advisories, to expand the WRREN information community. At a minimum, we plan to provide lists or indices of such materials with links to those available on other web sites

11. Scholars’ Commons

We are considering inclusion of an interactive online discussion facility (e.g., chat room), either moderated (by volunteers) or not, where visitors can exchange information and views or post notices of interest to the community.

FUNCTIONALITY AND ONLINE USER BENEFITS

Penn State and RSS will create an electronic information resource that is not only comprehensive and highly relevant to researchers in our field, but that also provides contemporary features and functionality to best serve the members of RSS and the entire community. The very creation and operation of the online service presents great benefits. WRREN will offer a consolidated, readily accessible body of information, all within a single location. Moreover, through this web resource, researchers throughout the world have access to vital information that otherwise would remain difficult or impossible to find and retrieve. With an aggregated collection, it becomes remarkably easy to navigate from one journal article to another, even when the articles appear in

separate journals. (Also, for the authors, editors, and publishers, for whom visibility and impact are of paramount importance, WRREN presents an unparalleled venue for dissemination.)

The search page for WRREN will be designed with a two-tier level search interface. The Basic Search will allow users to do a quick keyword search across all content on the web site. The Enhanced or Advanced Search will allow users to perform more sophisticated searches, either in specific types of sources (journals, monographs, papers) or across all types. Users will also be able to limit a search to a specific title, such as *Rural Sociology*. Finally, users will be able to designate specific fields within which to search, e.g. author, title, abstract, or full-text.

The following presents the basic goals (subject to refinement) we will pursue for WRREN's core content component, the journals. We intend to offer the highest practical levels of functionality for online users, meeting the expectations of both basic and advanced searchers for precision, convenience, and efficiency.

- Search by: journal, volume, issue; document type; date range; author; keywords; abstract; full-text; title
- Browsable
- Keyword searches across any and all journals by year, title, and issue based on strings within title, author, abstract, and article full-text
- Display of a list of hits (search results) in the form of titles and authors, with the user option to view abstract, full-text HTML, and full-text PDF
- Separate online delivery of abstracts and full-text articles in HTML
- Many basic pages/templates
- Opening page with links to current journal issues, available issues (archive), information about each journal and publisher, information about WRREN
- Online help screens and FAQ
- Feedback (email) function
- Current issues page with links to current tables of contents of journal issues
- Archive "drill-down" pages indicating available volumes/issues for each journal
- Individual HTML abstract displays
- Individual full-text article displays
- Search page for simple queries as well as more complex Boolean searches
- List of hits in the form of titles and authors-linked internally to abstracts, full-text HTML, and PDF files
- External linking including to/from other online publications and content (external to WRREN), other database aggregators, A&I databases, participating societies, and other participants and/or sites of interest

A comparable level of functionality, relative to cost-benefits, will also be pursued for other content components, such as monographs, adapted to their respective types and electronic formats.