

# A Conference on Informal STEM Learning in Rural Settings

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## Overview

The 60 million people who live in rural settings are often overlooked as a significantly under-represented STEM audience. In Sept 2018, a small invited conference brought together innovators and experts in rural STEM learning outside of school, to share lessons learned and plan next steps.



## What Makes a Community “Rural”?

Participants’ descriptors of their rural places often included:

- Low population density
- Deep sense of connectedness to others and to the land
- Sustained community organizations (libraries, schools, sports teams)
- Long distances to learning opportunities
- Apparent lack of STEM business and industry
- Inadequate communications technologies



## What are Some Best Practices for ISE in Rural Settings?

Participants suggested:

- Prepare for extra time needed to build trusting relationships
- Consider schools as key community centers, even in informal learning
- Devote more attention to distance learning
- Include a range of rural voices, given the great diversity of rural settings
- Embrace “intersectionality” of identity (e.g., gender, race, membership in a tribal group, or disability status)
- Include qualitative / narrative components in research & evaluation studies, to avoid the biases of statistics in small-population communities



## Conference Participants

The 30 invited participants represented various ISE sectors: library programs, adult and community education, family outreach, citizen science, and educational programs offered by field stations, universities, research institutes, and science centers. Experts on rural sociology and demographics provided research-based context about the features of rural areas.



## Challenges of Studying STEM Learning in Rural Settings

Challenges include:

- Methodological problems with sampling in small communities
- Participants’ reluctance to be surveyed
- Lack of consistent communication medium
- Community distrust of researchers “from away”

## Ways You Can Help Us:

We are currently grappling with:

- How can we creatively disseminate the conference findings? Can others help us spread the word?
- how can we encourage rural ISE providers to see the value of PD from outside the immediate community?
- Please sign up to receive the final report by email.