



## Highlighting Rural Researchers

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### Dr. Wayne Kelly

Director of the Rural Development Institute

#### WHAT'S MORE

- Since Wayne became the Director of the Rural Development Institute in February 2023, he has collaborated with partners to successfully secure \$839,700 in research and project funding
- Wayne currently holds a position on the Research Manitoba Board, as well as a position with Community Futures
- Wayne's Doctoral Studies were completed through the National University of Ireland, Galway, where he worked with community to organize and facilitate digital coding programs

#### GETTING TO KNOW DR. WAYNE KELLY

Growing up between southern Manitoba's prairies, and Thompson's rugged northern landscape, Wayne has cultivated a unique perspective on rurality. To Wayne, from fields and wide-open skies, to dense forests, rocks, and lakes - so many environments encompass the rural landscape in Manitoba. Early on, he felt the pull of urban life; however, he quickly came to realize that he had a deep connection to rural life. He maintains a deep connection to nature, frequently turning to the peace of the outdoors to decompress and maintain a healthy work-life balance. For Wayne, "home" is not only about location, but the sense of belonging and community.

#### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Wayne's career path into rural development was relatively serendipitous. Initially, he completed his undergraduate studies at Brandon University, with a focus in political science and religion. These interests were fostered in his youth, where he would engage in constructive conversations on politics - in Canada and internationally. As these conversations continued, he was interested in assessing the role of religion in political systems, and began to apply a sociological lens to these reflections. These interests were vastly influential in his early life, sparking a curiosity about ideological beliefs and their societal impacts. His intrigue extended to understanding religious practices as a path to building a sense of community belonging.

Wayne's first experience in community work began as he was working as a grant writer with a research firm based out of Winnipeg. While he was collaborating with the Rural Development Institute (RDI) on community research projects, the Master of Arts in Rural Development (MARD) program was established at Brandon University. Enrolling in this program provided Wayne the opportunity to utilize his knowledge on the intersections in politics and religion, and he further explored themes in community development. After the completion of his

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*My experience growing up was focused on building community. I like systems and theory, but how do we build community?*

graduate studies, Wayne became a vital member at the Rural Development Institute - coordinating the Rural Policy Learning Commons (RPLC) while simultaneously completing his Doctoral research exploring digital technologies with communities in Manitoba. These experiences reinforced his dedication to community development, community advocacy, and the importance of community-based, actionable projects. In turn, this dedication strengthened his interests in supporting communities to thrive and build resiliency.

## ONGOING RESEARCH AND CURRENT PROJECTS

Wayne envisions a dynamic future for RDI and is focused on working collaboratively with communities to address their specific challenges. In his view, the best way to support rural spaces—whether in Manitoba, across Canada, or internationally—is by focusing on core areas that unify the complexities of rural and remote life. For example, he identifies capacity building, data management, and policy alignment as essential to many RDI initiatives. By giving shape to these pillars of research, Wayne hopes to work to empower communities to pursue meaningful approaches to ensure effective change and development for the future.

With a multitude of ongoing projects exploring contrasting topics, Wayne believes there are many opportunities for research and project work moving forward. For example, the ConnectedMB project team are currently creating a podcast exploring the digital landscapes of Manitoba. He believes this approach to community engagement is a promising opportunity - bringing together voices from diverse rural regions, and showcasing the work that has been done in communities that should be celebrated. He also finds immense value in expanding RDIs International Rural Research initiatives that may foster partnership-building and enrich the exchange of rural community knowledge. While many communities face unique challenges based on their specific community dynamics, many of these challenges are shared amongst all rural and remote regions. Whether focusing on local or global efforts, the projects RDI is collaborating on emphasize the importance of strengthening rural communities through informed, collaborative development.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wayne is motivated to continue building the research and project team at RDI, as there are countless opportunities to engage community for the sake of development and capacity building. While we are all working to give shape to the key pillars of community-based work, he deeply believes rural and remote community development is vital to Canada's future success. While rural areas make up 20% of Canada's population, they contribute around 30% of the country's economy - through agriculture, energy, recreation, and so forth. Wayne sees tremendous potential for growth in these regions, and is committed to supporting the positive change that drives sustainable development across rural Canada.

