

Title of the Proposal: The “Poverty” of Regional Economic Development
Mark M. Miller, Professor, College of Business & Economic Development, Department
of Economic Development, E-mail: m.m.miller@usm.edu
Awarded in 2004-2005

Objectives and Significance of Project:

The objective of this project is to analyze the changing paradigms of regional economic development (ED) research and practice in the U.S., and in particular to identify the role of poverty alleviation within these paradigms. This proposed research will address three questions:

1. To what extent has poverty alleviation been a traditional concern of regional ED? The theoretical literature suggests that poverty alleviation has played a central role since the discipline’s origins in the TVA 70+ years ago, up through the “enterprise zone” paradigm of the 1980s. To what extent was this concern reflected in research and practice in the discipline?
2. Has poverty alleviation largely disappeared from the regional ED research literature and professional practice since 1990, in the contemporary “new economy” paradigm?
3. If so, is there value in reviewing earlier paradigms for insights into how poverty concerns might be addressed as part of the discipline today?

Research and practitioner attention to poverty is a matter of critical significance today, amid growing public concerns about the impacts of globalization and economic transformation. Data suggest that economic inequalities are increasing, not declining, internationally and in the U.S. Importantly, as this gap increases, so too can a host of social problems, from civil unrest to security issues.

Relation of the Project to Your Long-term Scholarly Goals:

Returning to the role of research professor after a decade of administration, I have given careful consideration to my scholarly goals for the future. There is no issue more important today, I believe, than the “poverty” of our discipline’s reigning paradigms with regard to alleviating poverty. I am currently re-directing my research attention toward this area of concern. I will continue my research in areas such as tourism, the Caribbean region, and rural Mississippi, but I plan to maintain a focus on poverty alleviation as a strategic, cross-cutting issue that is relevant to every area of the discipline of ED.

I have been a researcher and practitioner in regional ED for the past 25 years. This breadth and longevity gives me a distinctive perspective on the major issues of the discipline, and perhaps a responsibility to communicate my concerns. This summer grant will enable me to begin this work and establish a research agenda for many years ahead.

Relation of Project to Present State of Knowledge in the Field:

Friedmann and Weaver (1979) and Bradshaw and Blakely (1999) characterize the progression of the ED discipline—like most other academic disciplines or professions—as a series of changing, competing, and often overlapping paradigms. ED practice today is dominated by Porter’s (1990) concepts of global competitive advantage and industrial clustering. This work focuses on identifying and encouraging “emerging clusters” of industries within promising environments, emphasizing advanced technologies and

skilled workers. The literature remains vague on how successfully this theory can translate to impoverished regions without such advantages or promise.

For example, cluster theory provides a justification for initiatives such as Mississippi's massive incentives to Nissan (despite Porter's own reported advice against this strategy). Nissan located in a region of our state with strong economic advantages; the benefits to poverty regions of the state such as the Delta or Southwest are far more indirect and conjectural. At present, our discipline seems to offer few prescriptions for directly addressing poverty and unemployment in such persistently lagging regions.

General Plan (outline) and/or Methods and Procedures

I propose to address my three central research questions through content analysis of key journals and websites, complemented by interviews with key opinion leaders in poverty regions. More specifically:

- June 2005: Perform a historical content analysis of three major applied journals in regional ED: *ED Review*, *ED Quarterly*, *Journal of the American Planning Association*.
- July 1-14, 2005: Perform a website content analysis of major ED authorities and professional associations.
- July 14-21, 2005: Discuss and corroborate my findings through interviews with leading area practitioners, especially those serving recognized poverty regions such as the Mississippi Delta, Southeast Mississippi, and Alabama's "Black Belt."
- July 21-August 4: Draft an academic article on my findings, to be submitted for publication.

Plans for Publication or Dissemination of Results:

My primary target is *Journal of the American Planning Association*, which has a reputation for high-quality, critical research in this discipline.