

Rural communities use new technology

By **Melanie Brandert**
Staff Reporter

Residents in rural communities are trying to keep up with their urban counterparts by using the latest in telecommunications technology, a recent study shows.

John Allen, an assistant professor of rural sociology, directed the 11-year joint study with North Dakota State University. The study, which was completed this summer, determined how often rural residents use telecommunications technology and whether the technology will create or eliminate jobs in rural communities. Allen said he and other scientists conducted interviews with members of 20 communities in six states, including Nebraska, Iowa, North Dakota, Kansas, South Dakota and Minnesota.

Nebraska towns included in the survey were Aurora, Blair, Broken Bow, Gordon, Red Cloud and Sidney.

Communities ranged in population from 718 to 6,500, and were selected because of their geographic locations and diverse economic bases and cultural backgrounds.

Scientists also used surveys and newspaper clippings to collect data, Allen said.

Allen, who received a small grant to conduct the study, said the results indicated rural residents used telecommunications technology as much or more than urban residents.

According to the study, 69 percent of respondents regularly use fax machines. More than 75 percent of respondents said they believed telecommunications were important for delivering educational and medical services.

The study showed that 64 percent of respondents saw telecommunications as important or

very important for future economic growth in their communities, he said.

Allen said the study also showed that members of rural communities would like to have universal access to telecommunications technology, including the information superhighway.

Some of the residents' main concerns include the cost of obtaining that technology and how it will be maintained, Allen said. To keep costs down, he said, communities must find enough people who are willing to use the latest technology, such as the Internet.

"If we can't figure out how to aggregate demand for it, no one will be able to figure it out," he said.

Allen said he learned that rural residents believe they need educational and training programs to learn how to use the technology. They also want incentive programs, he said, to create community "bulletin boards" that will link residents who use telecommunications services and other isolated communities.

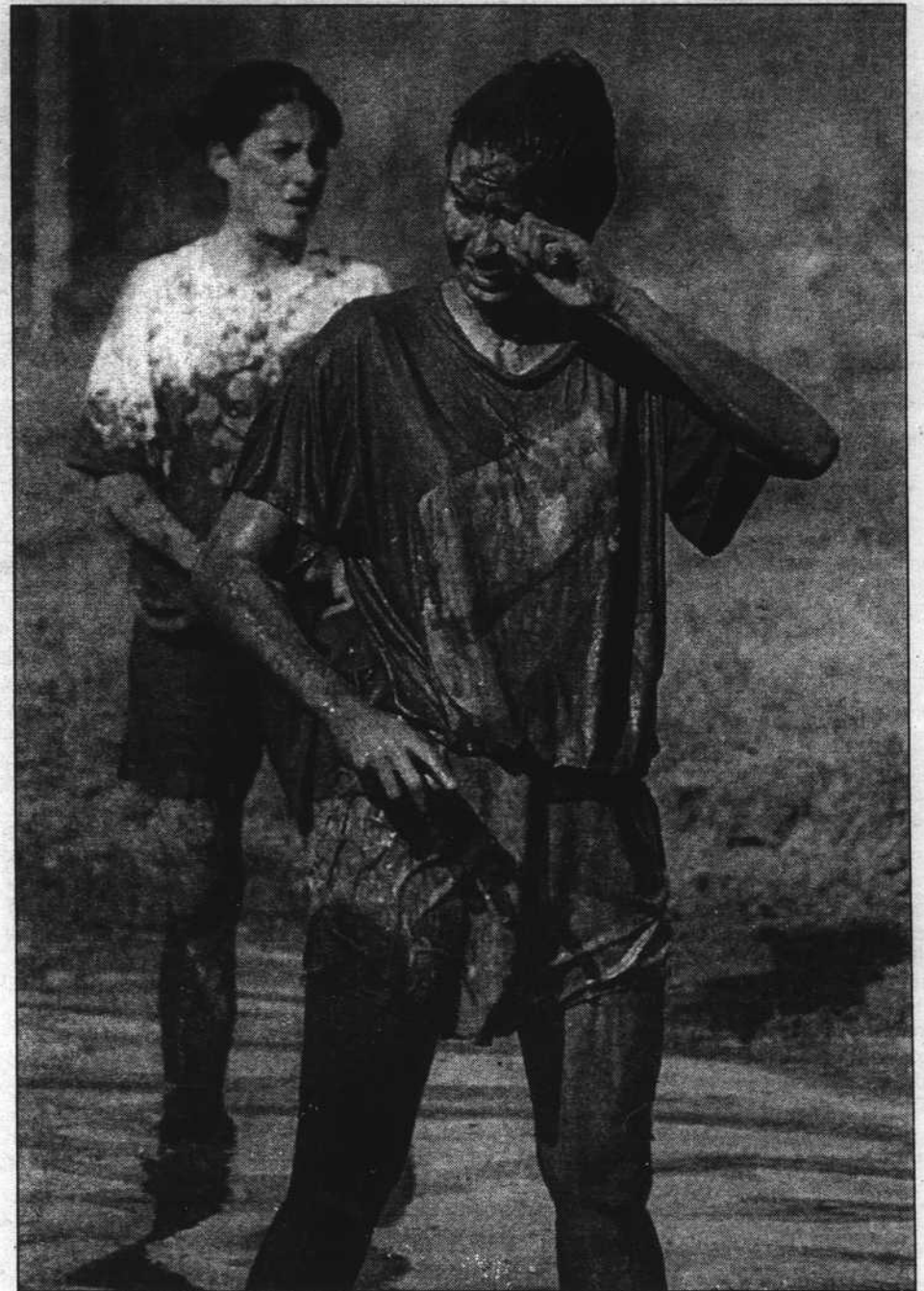
"This technology allows anyone to live anywhere," he said. "(It) provides one way of keeping populations spread out and could help slow urbanization."

One study result that Allen said surprised him was that small business owners said they wanted the government to take the lead in making universal access to the information superhighway available to rural communities.

Usually, he said, private business owners do not want the government to intervene in their matters.


Allen said he also was amazed that technology did not eliminate jobs in rural communities.

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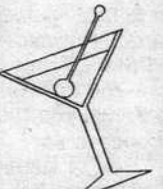
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