The Center for Rural Engagement connects the broad resources of IU Bloomington and its region through collaborative initiatives. The goal of the center is to improve the lives of Hoosiers by working with partners to discover and deploy flexible and scalable solutions to common challenges facing rural communities. The center connects with communities to build upon their many assets, such as the natural beauty of the region; their family-friendly culture; and their many economic resources.

The idea for a rural center at IU Bloomington was conceived during the development of the Strategic Plan for Economic and Community Prosperity in Southwest Central Indiana. Since the publication of this report and Lilly Endowment Inc.’s substantial investment in the plan, IU has expanded and refined the vision for the rural center in close consultation with stakeholders from across southwest central Indiana.

Supporting and enhancing the existing work being done by IU Bloomington faculty, students, and staff on rural issues, the center uses a mix of approaches from faculty-led classes to multi-disciplinary research projects. Center staff form strong relationships with partners and use this deep knowledge of communities in the region to more effectively deploy projects that build on one another to address community issues over the long term.

The center will also support innovative initiatives with community partners, like leveraging IU’s purchasing power to buy more items from regional suppliers, and making IU’s cultural assets available to enhance the quality of life and place within rural communities. IU Corps—a network that brings together more 160 programs, 200 service-learning classes and 230 student organizations doing service work—engages with center programs and projects to benefit communities in the region.

Launching with an initial focus on health and wellness, sustainable communities, and arts and culture, the center will work in tandem with local leaders and residents to achieve community-identified goals. The center plans to address projects with a focus on educational attainment, entrepreneurship and innovation, and capacity building and leadership development as it establishes working groups in these areas.