

Beginning Farmer Learning Network Meeting

March 8, 2013

Voorheesville, NY

ROUNDTABLE SESSION: FULL-SERVICE APPROACHES TO NEW FARMER TRAINING

Panelists: Beth Holtzman (VT New Farmer Network) and Sara Runkel (The Seed Farm)

Beth Holtzman – VT New Farmer Network
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1. Overview

→ Goal to connect beginning farmers to right resources via:

- Education
- Technical assistance
- Coaching
- Mentoring

Don't perceive themselves as a "training" organization, but more as offering education.

GOALS:

1. Accelerate beginning farmer progress
From start-up to being profitable and sustainable
2. Help scale-up to earn at least 51% of household income from farming
3. Increase effectiveness of the network

→ VT Farm-to-Plate Program: possible collaboration to help scaling-up

2. Structure/Approach

- Multi-organization collaboration around beginning farmers (long history)
- Builds on 10 years of inter-organization collaboration
- Statewide and serving adjacent counties of NY and NH
- Whole-farm orientation – holistic planning and management
- Multiple delivery methods (see overview)

7 ORGANIZATION PARTNERS

1. Association of Africans Living in VT (to help connect with refugees, provide translation)
2. Intervale Center
3. NOFA-NY
4. Rutland Area Farm and Food Link
5. Student Conservation Association
6. Vital Communities
7. UVM (6 faculty, 3 staff, and 2 individual contractors)

→ Whole-farm orientation has several components – i.e. goals and decision making, production, marketing, business management, and access to land

3. Audiences

Include apprentices, farmers, farm workers, homesteaders, chosen 1st career, career changers, retiring to farming, and supplementing income

→ No model for what a farm/farmer is – individual people decide

→ Audience tends to be younger and more female

4. Delivery Methods

- Education (in a group setting)
- Technical assistance (1-on-1, 1-on-2)
- Coaching (relatively new)
- Mentoring (match new and experienced farmers)

→ Use both in-person and distance technology/online tools

→ Field vs. classroom:

FIELD: Workshops (soils, tractor safety), apprenticeship programs (through partners) – more production-oriented

CLASSROOM: Business planning, marketing planning, access to capital – try to be very hands-on and to give 1-on-1 help

→ Even classroom education often takes place on farms (not traditional classroom settings) – the space makes a difference

→ Use a “New Farmer Business Assessment” tool – used by coaches and a tool to help them remember to ask about the full spectrum of needs/whole-farm planning, includes following components of farm business:

- Access to markets (market assessment, regulations, confirmed markets)
- Goals and decision making (guiding values, SMART goals, decision making skills)
- Access to capital (savings, credit history, business plan, record keeping skills)
- Access to land (secure land tenure, adequate soils, infrastructure, access to markets and services)
- Production skills (field experience, management experience, mentors, networks)

A subjective, relative tool

Helps hone in on things to work on

Adapted from a “quality of life” evaluation

→ Virtual coach (online tool) – opened February 13th

5. Metrics: How to Measure Progress

- Number of beginning farmers to obtain coaching
- Number of beginning farmers to write business plans
- Number of beginning farmers to obtain land access/lending/technical assistance
- Number of beginning farmers to obtain referrals and education
- Number of beginning farmers to increase knowledge and skills
- Number of beginning farmers to plan a change
- Number of beginning farmers to complete at least 6 hours of education
- Etc.

Questions and Answers

Q: Lately, been getting requests for “formal mentors” from farmers who don’t want to bother another informal mentor farmer – willing to pay

A: Collaborate with NOFA-NY for mentors – have trained and paid mentors