

Education Focus Group Notes

Feb 12, 2014

4 Attendees

After presentation on project background, there was a question about whether the trend in the increasing number of farms is continuing. We won't know until the 2012 Census of Ag is released. Our large farms can't compete at the international scale like the farms in Chile and China. Those farms dwarf ours. Our land just isn't suited for that really, really big agriculture. This will limit farm consolidation to some extent.

- In terms of education, the educational needs of the big farms is probably not what we're focusing on here? They can access their own resources, right? *We're interested in looking at both.*

4-H

- 4-H mostly meet where the kids are. Most of the work is done by volunteers. Major areas are horses and dairy. Educational events include dairy science knowledge bowls, and the animal husbandry show at the youth fair. This is all "non formal" education, it's very hands-on.
- CCE is offering a tractor youth safety certification training this spring

BOCES

- BOCES teacher focused on ag education is spread too thin. Use vet science as a recruitment tool to the BOCES plant, animal and life sciences program. Then once they're there, they get to explore other options. 95% of classes are female.
- Teaches the book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* in the program, get them to think about their daily food choices.
- The students have minimal exposure to ag. It's a problem. It NEEDS to be a component in every school. Now, 11th graders have no idea what a carrot looks like coming out of the ground.
- It's a challenge to inspire the students to consider taking the ag program in the first place. We took "ag" out of the name and attendance doubled. We rope them in with animal science. We do plant science, entomology, farm visits.
- Have to give them the passion, the inspiration.
- 2/3 end up doing something involving something in the ag industry or outdoors, not necessarily farming. Some are at BassPro.
- 1/3 goes on to college. Get nervous when they go to CCC, because there's no ag there.

Organic farmer involved in educational outreach

- We have an educational program on the farm, do spring gardening classes. Also go into school classrooms. Give spring, summer farm tours. Our operation is NOT low tech, people are surprised by that.

Regional non-profit sustainable agriculture educational organization

- Has a different experience than at BOCES. People who tend to gravitate towards Groundswell's programs are in their 20's (but it varies), and come in already interested in farming but are ignorant of it. End up wittling out most of them, but it's a lot harder than they realize. 1/100.
- **TCC has just launched a Farm-to-Bistro Program.** They're opening a bistro in downtown Ithaca and are creating a sustainable farm to provide ingredients for the bistro. Offering two AA/AAS degrees, one for the farming and one for the restaurant.
- BOCES has a good culinary school. Instructor there has offered to work with the cafeteria, but hasn't gotten very far.
- *There was discussion of farm-to-school programs and why there aren't more schools getting local foods into school meals.* One participant mentioned that sometimes things like that get stonewalled by one admin person who refuses to play along.

Ag-In-The-Classroom

- Many schools don't participate. It tends to get scheduled during BOCES's Feb break (but not this year, which is in March). Teachers are not given time to do it! Why? Had person at CCE to spread word, full time, but that position was eliminated.
- Usually gets invited to schools by teachers working on environmental subject areas, the web of life, etc. The kids love the presentation, and the teachers end up learning a lot, too. They often don't realize how relevant it is to what they're trying to teach, that it demonstrates real-life applications of the concepts they discuss on class.
- The reality is that Cornell University has very little interest in *organic* farming. Their organic farming board doesn't do much. Ag student numbers at Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences are declining, every year there is discussion about dropping ag programs. There is no push from the top to push ag education, sustainable farming, etc. *Led to discussion about the lack of support for ag education in the leadership of Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.* Cornell University leaders don't understand the importance of K-12 ag. education to Cornell's own ag programs. Some ag educators have started working with Ithaca College to ensure that there is a continued regional pathway for students other than Cornell.
- South Cayuga and Moravia both have ag educators. Must have an ag educator in order to have an FFA chapter.
- BOCES also has a heavy equipment and operation program, but mostly focuses on construction equipment such as bulldozers. Also has carpentry classes, which does provide helpful skills that can transfer to ag-related work. Also has an outdoor power equipment program, for machines such as rototillers.
- BOCES just doesn't have enough resources to get ag students on a tractor; there's only one ag educator to go around! The heavy equip. program does help with plowing the 4-5 acres of the garden, though.
- Garden would not be happening if it wasn't for community volunteers. It produces food for area food pantries. BOCES students plow and plant. Volunteers tend the garden in the summer time, then students are also involved during the fall semester. They plant about 2 acres with

vegetables, etc., the rest is buckwheat or some other cover crop. Will probably do white clover this year.

- Used to do corn test plots on the same land, but it meant nothing to the students. (they aren't ready for it. They don't know what a carrot looks like, so they're not at the point of appreciating something like that)
- How does BOCES address **ag-business education**? The Ag program has a huge business planning component in the last year of the program. This part of the program isn't a draw, but students end up seeing the value of it in the end.
- **How does FFA fit into this?** All the students in the program required to participate in FFA. Initially, Julia has to force them to do it, but they quickly come around and a lot of them really get into it and become life-long fans of the organization. Julia puts them on a bus and does a 20 minute ag tour of the area, and has the students list every single ag-related business they can identify. They are amazed by how many there are.

Other Ag-biz planning opportunities?

- CCC- weren't they talking about starting some sort of ag program? Aren't they building greenhouses?
- BOCES has an internship program for the ag students, but it's been challenging finding placements. The public is saying that they really need good people, but they're not taking on interns. There's a breakdown somewhere in placing students.
- Possible solution is to find a handful of farmers that are committed to mentoring, and do a series on 1-month rotations.
- Farmers could buy into the idea of mentoring, but they also need to pay these kids if they do actual work rather than just get training. A good internship experience would solidify interest in these kids.
- One participant gets interns but they aren't local. They're from Vermont, PennState, UMass. Culinary students are also interested, but none from the BOCES culinary program, they come from Paul Smith's. Those students are really interested in the farm-to-table connection.
- Another participant doesn't have interns on their farm but have had high school employees in the past. It hasn't been so easy finding reliable workers of that age. They don't have the work ethic, the commitment that's needed.
- Groundswell plays middle man to make connections, and is also becoming more aware of people interested in becoming ag educators. People interested in ag education are starting to approach this organization.
- Some students end up finding the work fulfilling even if they don't at first – ultimately they get a sense of accomplishment and become more engaged with the work.
- Agriculture is related to science and biology. Teachers and students don't often make the connection between science and agriculture. Colleges don't accept BOCES soils/horticulture classes as science classes.
- Idea: find a handful of farms to do an internship rotation. A one-month rotation at each farm. Need to build a network of farmers interested in the future of farming. This would be CCE's job. Farms with huge resources could financially assist. Has anyone done outreach for this sort of program?
- **need to have direction from Cornell, but aren't getting it from the CCE Executive Director at Cornell University. Also, Cornell has had budget cuts.
- North Carolina Extension is excellent. One participant uses their models extensively on his farm.

- The Cornell Research Farm is losing SARE funding because Cornell doesn't support sustainable agriculture. Someone needs to go public with this!

Ag Business Planning Resources

- Groundswell does a business planning course. Has gotten a VERY good response. A lot of interest. Students already in business or in serious planning mode, it's not for those who are just toying around with the idea.
- Farm Viability Institute in Syracuse does farm business planning. Give grants. One participant got one for his farm restaurant. They paid for the wait staff at the restaurant for the first 6 months when it was just getting started.
- There is a Ag Biz education program at Cobleskill. A business plan is VERY important to lenders.
- CCC – talked about offering Cobleskill classes, but it didn't happen. This is too bad because some of the BOCES students are interested in continuing with ag education but are not ready to leave home. There's a GIANT transition problem between BOCES and post-BOCES (and also between pre-BOCES and BOCES)
- As a major funder of CCE, CCC, the County Legislature needs to decide that this is important and pass this down as a priority to the institutions that it supports.