

More About Explorer: Program History & Overview

Quite simply, the purpose of *Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting and Agricultural Business Right for You?* is to help aspiring farmers answer that question. The aim is to help those thinking about small-scale commercial farming (farming as a business with intent to make a profit, rather than as a hobby or pastime), learn what it will take to start and manage a farm business, and decide whether that is something they really want to pursue. Recognizing that many participants will choose not to farm commercially, *Explorer* also looks at other possibilities that can satisfy their interest in agriculture.

Explorer is not designed to help participants develop a full business plan. Many who are drawn to the idea are not really ready to take that step. Some, in the very earliest stages of thinking about an agricultural business, are not even certain where they might be farming—a critical factor in determining what enterprise (s) they could engage in. Others, even if they do have access to land, are not yet clear about their motivations for starting a farm business. *Explorer* provides pre-venture aspiring farmers with an opportunity to address the wide range of critical issues they must consider if they are to establish clear personal and business goals for a farm, and to map out practical next steps.

Background

In 1998, the New England Small Farm Institute (NESFI) first offered a business planning course for small farm start-ups. Aspiring farmers from southern New England and eastern New York eagerly enrolled in the ten-session course. Using the nationally acclaimed NxLevel™ Guide for Business Start-up, participants attended weekly evening classes and completed sizeable homework assignments. Their commitment was exemplary; many traveled long distances to attend the course. All participants received a firm grounding in the “business side” of being an agricultural entrepreneur. Yet, at the end of the course, few participants had been able to complete a full business plan.

As course sponsor, NESFI program staff surmised that a curriculum focused more explicitly on agricultural issues might address this problem. Funded by the National Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NSARE) program, it joined with other service providers from across the US to develop and pilot a new NxLevel™ curriculum, “Tilling the Soil of Opportunity.” NESFI instructors took care to shape course material to meet the needs of business start-ups and to reflect Northeast farming opportunities, and offered the new business planning course in 1999. As before, aspiring farmers enrolled from across the region and completed coursework with dedication. But, once again, few participants were able to complete full business plans. By agreement, many preferred to submit a written “business concept” or idea. Review of participants’ thoughtful business ideas and course evaluations, and notes from close-out interviews, suggested that many who had been drawn to the course were really at the “pre-venture” state of business development. A course in which the goal was a completely developed business plan did not really meet their needs. It was determined that a NxLevel™ “prequel”—a decision-making workbook and short course—was appropriate.

With support from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NESARE) Program and The Claneil Foundation, NESFI joined with the Pioneer Valley Enterprise Program, a project of the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, to create this prequel. *Exploring the Small Farm Dream: Is Starting an Agricultural Business Right for You?* was first offered as a pilot in the fall of 2000. It was fully subscribed with a waiting list, and was offered again in the early winter/spring and the fall of 2001. Further development has been funded by Growing New Farmers Project, with additional support from The Claneil Foundation and The Country Bank for Savings, a small community bank located in west-central MA that has a history of new farmer support.

There is clearly a market for *Explorer*. Participant evaluations demonstrate that the course meets a real need. In the late winter/spring of 2002, NESFI program staff was called upon to deliver the course at a distant site. While it was received enthusiastically, and participant evaluations were overwhelmingly positive, long distance travel was a challenge for NESFI's small program staff. It became clear that *Explorer* needed program delivery innovation that could make it available region-wide. The *Explorer* Program is designed to meet that need.

The Explorer Program

The goal of the *Explorer* Program is to provide aspiring small-scale farmers, throughout the Northeast, with access to the *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* short courses and workbook. The Program consists of the following elements:

- ***Program Coordination***

NESFI's Small Farm Development Center coordinates the *Explorer* Program. It developed and publishes the *Explorer* workbook and Course Delivery Guide, offers regularly scheduled *Explorer* courses at its Belchertown, MA site and other locations, provides guidance to *Explorer* self-study readers, and manages the *Explorer* Bookshelf and website. It offers a supportive first point of contact for *Explorer* graduates that are ready to take next steps toward farming, providing guidance and direct services to help focus planning, learning and resource acquisition, and offering information about local or regional events and useful contacts, to help graduates develop effective personal support networks. To support region-wide access to the *Explorer* curriculum, NESFI offers collaborative support to GNF Consortium members and other service providers who wish to sponsor an *Explorer* course. It has developed and publishes an *Exploring the Small Farm Dream Course Delivery Guide for Program Sponsors, Managers & Instructors*, and offers Program orientation workshops for interested course sponsors and their staff. It also will work directly with service providers that are interested in sponsoring an *Explorer* course.

- ***Explorer Course Sponsors***

Course sponsors administer, manage and provide promotional support for the *Explorer* courses they offer. They employ qualified instructors, may offer ongoing support to course participants, and are asked to share course-related information and evaluation summaries with NESFI's Small Farm Development Center. NESFI's program staff is available to present orientation workshops for organizations interested in *Explorer* course sponsorship. These workshops are structured around practical information provided in the *Explorer* Course Delivery Guide.

- ***Explorer Course Managers***

Course managers are responsible for marketing the course, managing registration and communicating with participants, and coordinating all aspects of course delivery (arranging for classroom space and equipment, making arrangements with guest speakers, etc.) in collaboration with the course instructor. This is an important role in assuring a well-attended, well-run course. Further guidance is provided in the *Explorer* Course Delivery Guide.

- ***Explorer Course Instructors***

Qualified instructors—those with experience in both adult education and business ownership/management, and local knowledge of small-scale farming and the local farming community—lead *Explorer* courses. These qualifications may be embodied in a single instructor or in a teaching team. Instructors lead the four-session course and may offer the option of a one-on-one review of each participant's final course products (a business idea and an action plan). With few exceptions, at least one member of each teaching team should attend an *Explorer* orientation workshop. Information on the role of *Explorer* course instructor, along with session-by-session sample agendas and suggestions for tailoring the course to meet local needs and interests, is provided in the *Explorer* Course Delivery Guide.

- ***The Explorer Website***

While there is a wealth of information on the web and in print for aspiring farmers, it is scattered and often difficult to find. NESFI staff continuously reviews what is available (both old and new), and offers bibliographies and online updates of the most useful resources. Both course participants and instructors are well-supported by the material offered online through the *Explorer* website <www.smallfarm.org/explorer>. It is keyed to *Explorer* course sessions, workbook sections and worksheets, and includes regular updates to the *Explorer* workbook's extensive Resource List.

- ***The Explorer Bookshelf***

A resource collection that includes those materials (books, videos, etc.) most highly valued by participants in five pilot *Explorer* courses. It is housed with a growing number of service providers throughout the region and is available from NESFI for purchase or for rent. More information is available on-line at <www.smallfarm.org/explorer/bookshelf.htm>.

- ***Explorer Follow-up***

Many *Explorer* graduates will need further support if they are to succeed at small farm start-up. Course sponsors that have the expertise and capacity to do so are encouraged to provide follow-up support. Graduates may benefit from additional feedback on their business ideas, access to additional learning opportunities, and referrals and other help from experienced advisors on decisions, plans and actions that will foster successful transition from exploration to start-up; and access to direct knowledge about the local farming community. Referrals to farmers, bankers, suppliers, growers' associations and events are invaluable as graduates begin to establish their own local support networks. While many helpful contacts may offer services or advice at no cost, *Explorer* graduates should be encouraged to provide fair compensation to others, including experienced farmers, either in cash or in-kind (such as labor on a farm). There is no substitute for the assistance a supportive local network can provide.