

Beginning Farmer Apprentice Program

Developed by:

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with funding provided by:

the Mid-Atlantic Consortium and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

and

the Natural Resource and Conservation Service, USDA

Need

Finding skilled labor is a challenge for today's farmers. Obtaining appropriate hands-on experience can also be a challenge for those who want to pursue a career in farming. To address these challenges, Pennsylvania Farm Link, a non-profit organization dedicated to the mission of "creating farming opportunities for the next generation, developed a registered apprentice program in production agriculture.

We have learned that a beginning farmer's survival is enhanced by a good education, an education that goes beyond book learning. For any beginning farmer, the real world has to be an important part of his/her education whether or not he/she is from a farm background. Students bound for a career in law or medicine get experience as law clerks or interns. But, students who didn't grow up on farms won't find a clear path to a profession in production agriculture. To establish that rung on the career ladder to farming, Pennsylvania Farm Link expanded its services in 1999-2001 to include a youth apprentice/mentoring program in production agriculture.

As part of our project we conducted focus groups among urban (W.B. Saul High School) and rural (Manheim Central High School) vocational agriculture students. Everyone agreed that hands-on experience was a very important way to develop a farm career. The students with more farm experience also wanted their educational curriculum to include more of a focus on production agriculture, and less general agriculture curriculum. They wanted their work experience to include different types of farms, to help them determine the best career fit.

Research on existing apprentice programs

Pennsylvania Farm Link reviewed the vocational agriculture programs in Pennsylvania. A review of existing programs nationally, determined that there was only one other program that targeted youth for apprenticeships in production agriculture, Wisconsin. In discussions with Cooperative Extension and Department of Agriculture personnel in Wisconsin, they indicated a willingness to share information and identified work skills with our program, specifically in the dairy industry.

Background information about a farm apprentice program in Germany was also obtained. In this program, students work under the supervision of a master farmer and can eventually become a Certified Farmer or Certified Farm Manager. Unlike apprentice programs in this country, the farmer who is in turn reimbursed by the German government, pays students.

Alberta, Canada, has an apprentice style, skill-training program called Green Certificate. Minnesota has a farm internship program, and a number of states have sustainable agriculture apprentice programs for adults. These programs do not have the same criterion as registered apprentice programs with Labor and Industry. Our goal was to

develop a certified program through Pennsylvania and U.S. Labor and Industry similar to the apprentice program plumbers and electricians complete.

Targeted schools

Pennsylvania Farm Link targeted high school vocational agriculture students in its first efforts. The largest vocational agriculture school in PA and the second largest vo-ag school in the nation, W.B. Saul High School in Philadelphia, was initially selected for this opportunity. Saul was viewed as a priority because urban youth lack opportunity to experience hands on farming skills and to encourage minority participation.

In August of 1998 the first contact was made with the principal of the Saul High School to explore the idea of developing a beginning farmer apprentice program. Other schools targeted in the first year of the project included Manheim Central High School, a rural school in Lancaster County and Kutztown High School, a rural school in Berks County. In the second year of the project these additional schools were targeted: Delaware County Career and Technology Center (Delaware County), Ephrata High School, Lampeter-Strasburg High School, Penn Manor High School, Warwick High School, Lancaster Mennonite, (all Lancaster County) and Liberty High School (Tioga County).

Two presentations were made at most of the schools with the cooperation and support of the vocational agriculture instructors. The student response was generally better from the schools where the teachers actively supported the concept of an apprentice program. Some schools indicated that there were no vocational agriculture students that were interested in entering farming.

Efforts were made to incorporate the existing co-op program that some schools have with the requirements of the registered program so that students could get credit for both. These efforts will need additional consultation and support from vocational agriculture teachers, to further the interest and participation in this effort. Part of this work includes providing students and teachers with an understanding of how completing a registered apprentice program will benefit both groups.

Obtaining partners

Over the start-up phase of the project, at least fifteen meetings were held to gain support for the idea, to determine partners, to establish direction for the project, and to establish guidelines for apprentices. Participants included: Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Pennsylvania and United States Departments of Labor and Industry, Rural Development, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania State University's Rural Leadership Program (RULE), Saul High School, the School District of Gettysburg, the Migrant Education Program, the Milton Hershey School, Master Farmers, and other farmers. The Pennsylvania Young Farmers, FFA, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, Pennsylvania Farmers Union, and the Governor's office were also involved in the project.

Apprentice Requirements

The Labor and Industry Training Council officially approved the “Beginning Farmer Apprentice” program on September 14, 2000. The program includes 2000 hours of work experience and 144 hours of related instruction. (Work skills are attached.) Students must be at least 16 years of age. Farmer mentors must pay minimum wage and must carry workman’s compensation insurance on apprentices.

The goals for the project were to place 4 students. Participating farms and apprentices were primarily located in Southeastern Pennsylvania, but the program will be expanded statewide. At a later date we will work on an advanced effort that will include a farm manager position.

Two apprentices were placed in the summer of 2000. A female senior from Saul High School worked on a dairy farm in Lancaster County during the summer and on some weekends throughout the year. Her apprenticeship succeeded beyond our expectations, in that she felt like a member of the family. Her competent work skills included milking, cleaning up, calf care and breeding skills. She did a presentation at the Farms for the Future Conference in December in Philadelphia and attended DHIA meetings throughout the year. She helped her mentor’s children show dairy cattle at the local Farm Show and was elected to a statewide FFA office, a first for an urban FFA member.

A male apprentice was placed at an orchard/farm market in Delaware County. His placement also worked well in both the orchard and the farm market. He worked at the orchard through the school year. His interests have changed as a result of his work in the apprentice program and he now works for a local florist in the floriculture industry.

Another male student was placed in a landscape/nursery business in Berks County. He has completed over 500 hours of his apprenticeship and is actively engaged with the nursery manager. Job skill competency includes digging trees, landscaping, and planting. Skills he needs to learn include sales and marketing practices, customer interaction, operating machinery, and handling fertilizers and chemicals.

Apprentice Outreach efforts

Presentations on the apprentice program were made at the Vo-Ag Institute, Young Farmer Annual Conference, and several local young farmer groups. Teachers were given copies of the standards and some background information on the program. Response to the program was mixed with some teachers being very enthusiastic and others indicating that farming is seen as a dead-end career.

Pennsylvania Farm Link participated in the Governor’s focus on youth apprentices by participating in Youth Apprentice Day. Over 1000 students had the opportunity to learn about farm apprentice placement and other youth apprentice placement opportunities within the state.

In an effort to reach out to high school students, presentations on the apprentice program was given to one or two of the vocational education classes in each of the following schools: Kutztown High School, Manheim Central, Ephrata, Lampeter-Strasburg, Delaware County Career and Technology Center, and Penn Manor High School. Other outreach efforts included sending letters to every vo-ag instructor with a brochure on the apprentice program and an invitation to the New and Beginning Farmer workshop. At least five students and two teachers, and one farmer mentor participated in the New and Beginning Farmer workshop.

Future efforts

To further advance Beginning farmer apprentice opportunities ongoing meetings with vocational agriculture schools, young farmer groups, and farm organizations will continue. We are planning to integrate our work standards with job skills identified by the school districts on an ongoing basis. As success in several schools is achieved additional placements will be easier to secure.

Additional work is being done to refine work skills for different types of farms. Working with the industry, we added and adjusted work skills for nursery/landscaping and will continue to revise and adjust the requirement of other types of farm enterprises to meet the needs of the specific industry.

Our long range planning includes establishing job skills and educational curriculum for farm manager apprentices (journeymen). This category requires 4000 hours of on farm experience and approximately 280 hours of instruction. Nutrient management training, borrower training, business plan development and marketing will be included into the educational requirements for the journeyman position.