

NORTHEAST NEW FARMER REPORTS

LISTENING TO NEW FARMERS FINDINGS FROM NEW FARMER FOCUS GROUPS

THE NORTHEAST NEW FARMER NETWORK

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Findings from New Farmer Focus Groups

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I. Introduction

A. Overview

Farms, farmland and farmers are disappearing in the Northeast. Fewer and fewer farmers are producing food, further and further from Northeast consumers. Nationally, farmers are retiring at twice the rate that new farmers enter farming. At risk are the Northeast's productive land base, local economies, rural landscapes, and the future of northeast agriculture and local food systems. Our food system depends on a continuous stream of new farmers who in turn depend on the conservation and transfer of farmland and farm enterprises, the transfer of farming expertise, and viable farm communities and economies.

Many individuals are interested in becoming farmers in our region. Organizations such as Pennsylvania Farm Link and the New England Small Farm Institute report increasing contacts with people who want to farm, and hundreds of applicants are looking for farms through NE land linking programs. Although there are many prospective farmers, programs and services to assist new farmers begin successful new farm businesses are scarce.

Good programming must consider both the starting point *and* the goals or “destination” of each new farmer to provide appropriate guidance and services. Understanding the different needs of new farmers with differing backgrounds and objectives is critical. Good programming will also accommodate *how* new farmers want to learn and acquire skills, as well as offering *what* skills and information they need to acquire. Programs need to help new farmers refine a farming vision to a realistic goal, and then provide learning experiences, resources, services and programs so each farmer can realize his or her farming vision.

B. The Northeast New Farmer Network

1. The Project

The Northeast New Farmer Network (NENFN) was a 2½ year project stimulating regional thinking and programming to improve the number and success of new farmers in our region. In 2001, the NENFN evolved into the Growing New Farmers (GNF) Consortium. Cornell University's NY FarmNet, Pennsylvania Farm Link, Rutgers University, and the New England Small Farm Institute began NENFN to create a regional infrastructure to meet the needs of Northeast new farmers. To address these objectives, project collaborators developed innovative pilot projects, convened focus groups and met with an Advisory Group of farmers, agency and organization service providers from around the Northeast. The NENFN's objectives were to:

- identify the full range of new farmer constituencies in the NE
- understand the learning and assistance needs of various types of new farmers
- identify new farmer programs and services, and service gaps
- propose a framework for understanding new farmer programming needs

2. The Focus Groups

One NENFN objective was to comprehensively describe Northeast new farmers and their needs. A variety of “new” farmer constituents in Massachusetts, New York, and

Pennsylvania participated in focus groups during 1999 and 2000. Focus group participants were asked to describe their backgrounds, their farming goals and visions, and discuss what they needed in terms of training, services and resources to become successful farmers. New farmers were also asked how they wanted to acquire farming expertise and resources. Farmers with a range of backgrounds and objectives participated in the focus groups. The participants were at different stages of their farming experience (from exploring to establishing their farms). Each focus group had from 6 to 20 participants and involved either:

- Land grant (4-year) university students
- Vocational high school agricultural students (rural and urban)
- Non-traditional “adult” learners (groups with farm background, without farm background, farm interns, immigrants, and “career changers”).

We learned that new farmers’ understanding of their needs changes as they gain experience. Also, we realized that *perceived* needs may not fully reflect the actual skills, information and resources necessary for a successful farming venture. The focus groups confirmed that new farmer programs must provide an introduction to the complexity of skills, knowledge and information needed to enter farming, along with the resources and social networks to become successful farmers.

3. This Report

This report is for those working to create and improve programs and services for new farmers in the NE. Understanding new farmers is the foundation of effective program design and collaborations to assist new farmers. This report presents the findings of nine new farmer focus groups held during 1999 and 2000. Individual reports of each focus group are attached to this report.

The focus groups led us to propose a typology of new farmers and a new way of thinking about programming for a full range of new farmer “types”. We have developed a set of three-dimensional matrices to interpret and manage the information we have gathered. These are provided to help visualize the ideas expressed in the text and help you categorize the new farmers you encounter and programs you offer. Each matrix corresponds to a section in the text.

If you are a service provider, consider your own farmer clientele as you read through this report. Think about where your programs and organization and the “type” of new farmers you work with “fit” into this framework.

Where do your new farmers fit in each matrix? Which type of new farmers do your programs service?

II. A Typology of New Farmers

A. Terminology

Even among project collaborators, different new farmer labels and terms have different implications. By *farming* we refer to a commercially oriented agricultural production activity. The USDA broadly defines a *beginning farmer* as anyone who has been operating a farm for 10 years or less. The term *new farmer* encompasses the “universe” of people who are considering becoming farmers and those “beginning farmers” who have actually been farming for 10 years or less. Based on our NENFN findings, we have defined two broad, and six particular, “types” of new farmers. These six NENFN farmer types are distinguished by their current engagement with, and commitment to, farming. The diagram below shows the relationship of these categories to other “new farmer” terminology in circulation by various programs¹ in the Northeast.

>>>>>>> *engagement with farming* >>>>>>

New Farmers						
USDA				Beginning		
NESFI	Prospective			Beginning		
				Entering		
DACUM	Explorers-Aspiring			New Entries		
		Inexperienced	Experienced	Year 0-3		
NX-Level		Pre-entry and Pre-ventures		Year 0	Year 1-3	Year 4-10
NENFN	Recruits	Explorers	Planners	Start-ups		Restrategizing Y4-7
				Year 0-3		Establishing
				Year 4-10		

B. New Farmer Descriptions

1. Prospective Farmers

- **Recruits:** People whose interests and aptitudes might allow them to have satisfying farm careers, but who have not considered farming as a career option- for instance students in the natural sciences or those with farm backgrounds who are uncertain about the future of the farm and are undecided about their career. They need an introduction to the possibilities farming offers.
- **Explorers:** People actively exploring/investigating farming as a career option. They are interested in and aware of farming, but are undecided on a farming career. This group includes students with farm backgrounds who are uncertain about their future in farming. Explorers need a comprehensive orientation to contemporary farming opportunities, and a realistic introduction to the challenges of farming as a career and lifestyle.

1. USDA - United States Department of Agriculture
 NESFI - New England Small Farm Institute
 DACUM - Develop a Curriculum
 NX Level - Tilling the Soil of Opportunity: USDA Ag Business Training Series

- **Planners:** People who are actively committed to becoming farmers, but are not yet farming commercially. They are in the process of developing skills and seeking resources to start and manage their own farms. They may be actively planning a farm

business. Having made a decision to become farm operators, they need guidance for acquiring experience, knowledge, specific skills and resources in order to become farmers.

2. Beginning Farmers

- **Start-ups:** Farmers in their first, second or third year of operating a farm commercially. They need all kinds of practical information and networks.
- **Re-strategists:** Farmers in an adjustment phase, a 're-strategizing' following start-up. Often, after a few years experience, new farmers find it necessary to significantly modify their operation, marketing, location or farming vision in order to farm successfully. New farmers going through a critical phase of restructuring and adjustment need reliable information and encouragement to make decisions that will allow them to continue farming.
- **Establishing:** Those beginning farmers who are well on their way to stabilizing their farming operation and markets, farming as a livelihood, and becoming established farmers.

The NENFN focus groups distinguished prospective and beginning farmers on the basis of their different needs for services and resources. **Prospective farmers**, with or without farming backgrounds, need programs that help them evaluate farming as a possible career and livelihood. In comparison, **beginning farmers** are already managing farming operations. They need timely, exact information about production inputs, techniques, and markets. They need networks with other farmers. Of course, there are "shared needs"; for example, new farm **planners** and new farm **restrategizers** may derive similar benefits from a Monday evening market research seminar. But **start-ups** in their first years are still discovering what they need, and require different services than those **establishing** their farm after 6 or 7 years. Effective programming must be designed and targeted for particular new farmer audiences.

Does this typology reflect the different new farmers you encounter? Does your programming recognize the needs of different new farmer groups?

III. Characterizing New Farmers: Conceptual Frameworks

Each new farmer comes to a service provider with some combination of attributes and ideas about farming. Within each of the six new farmer types, personal characteristics and circumstances (for instance attitude towards risk, and personal wealth) greatly influence each individual's programming needs. High school and college students and early and mid-life adults each have particular opportunity sets and constraints, and different program *delivery* options. However, our focus group results suggest that programming for new farmers should consider factors *other* than age and education.

The focus groups helped us understand those characteristics of new farmers that are most important for designing and prioritizing programming and services. If service providers understand each new farmer's current "situation" and farming "vision" they can provide targeted, effective programming. Based on the focus groups, we've developed four complementary frameworks (2 sets of 2 matrices) for thinking about new farmer "customers". These frameworks juxtapose the characteristics of each type of new farmer in terms of their current situations and ambitions. The frameworks are outlined below:

New Farmer's Current Situation

1. Background and Expertise

- *farming skills and knowledge*
- *farm management expertise*
- *farming background*

2. Assets and Resources

- *"stage" of commitment to farming*
- *family and community (social) support and farming networks*
- *resources (land, capital, infrastructure, markets)*

New Farmer's Long Term Vision

1. Livelihood Goals

- *time allocated for farming (percentage of time spent farming)*
- *desired standard of living (household income level)*
- *desired decision-making and risk role on the farm*

2. Farm Operation and Enterprise Goals

- *type of production system (and production philosophy)*
- *percentage of household income from farming*
- *marketing strategy (outlets)*

These characteristics should guide the design of services and programs for new farmers. These frameworks is described and presented graphically in the following pages.

As you think about the prospective and beginning farmers you work with, what are their different personal situations in terms of skills and knowledge, social support systems and resources? What are their livelihood and farming goals? How does your programming reflect these differences?

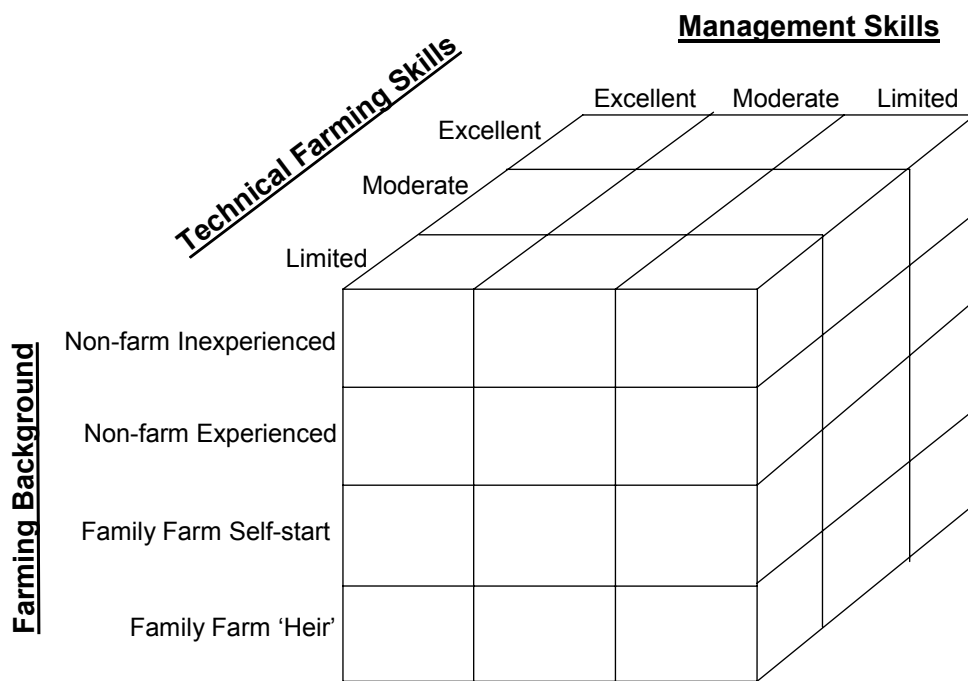
A. New Farmer's Current Situation ("who new farmers are")

First to consider is a new farmer's current situation *at the time they are interacting with a program or service*. This includes considering the new farmer's background and skills, and the resources and assets each has available.

1. Background and Expertise

- a. *farming skills and knowledge*
- b. *farm management expertise*
- c. *farming background*

Current Situation: Background and Expertise



Farmers require two general sets of skills: practical hands-on farming skills (production) and farm management (business, financial and marketing) skills. Both as natural resource managers and entrepreneurs, farmers need to be able to integrate their business plan and the practical, day-to-day farming tasks and decisions to achieve their long-term farming vision. We found that a new farmer's program needs are shaped by *the composite* of skills and knowledge that s/he possesses. Programming is necessary to bolster competency in both of these skill areas for successful farming operations. Young farmers whose skill base is limited both in terms of management and hands-on farming need program approaches that differ from those who need to develop competence in a particular skill area.

Effective programming requires understanding each new farmer's farming background. What expertise a person brings to his or her farming career depends on his/her background. Some programming for new farmers will be tailored to respond to customers who have both practical "hands-on" farming skills and good business skills, while other

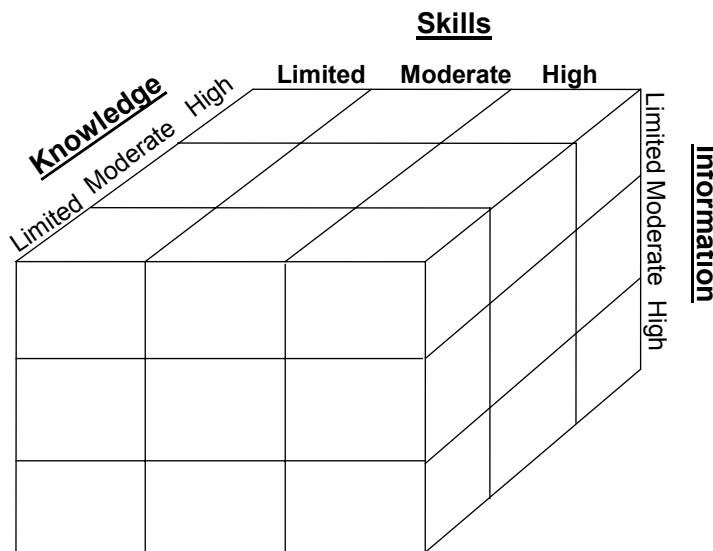
programming will be designed for customers with good business, but no practical farming skills. For example, a career changer from a professional background may have marketing savvy, but be unable to operate a tractor; in contrast to a farm heir who may have managed a dairy herd for 15 years, but lacks farm financial management experience. Let's examine each of these dimensions in greater detail.

a. Farming Skills and Knowledge

In terms of hands-on technical skills, most service providers are familiar with the breadth of competency among their new farmer clientele. Practical farm production skills encompass physical day-to-day farm work and include equipment and facilities operation, maintenance and repair, animal husbandry, planting and harvesting a crop, and pest and soil management. Many new farmers without farm backgrounds prioritize acquisition of these skills. Effective programming must enable each new farmer to efficiently acquire whatever technical skills are necessary for successful farm management of their farm operation.

Focus group participants distinguished among skills, knowledge, and information needs, and the programming required to serve those needs. A classic example is “knowing how to grow corn (a skill), how corn grows (knowledge), and when and where to buy a particular variety of corn seed at the best price (information)”.

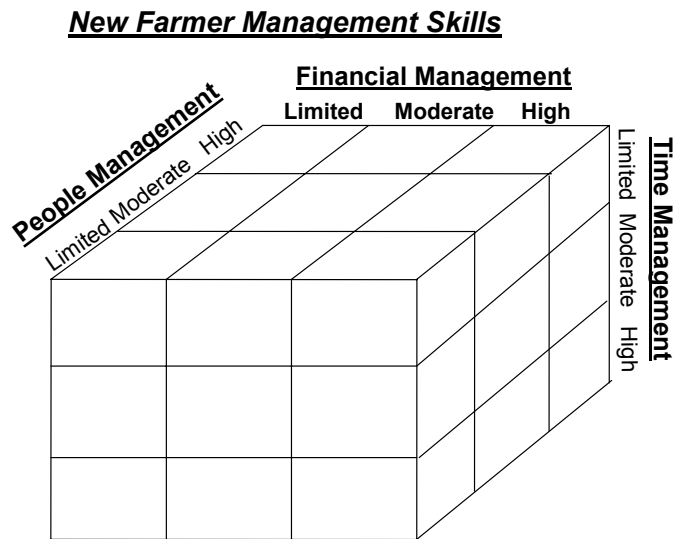
New Farmer Farming Skills



b. Farm Management Expertise

New farmers differ enormously in the managerial skills they bring to farming. The skills used to manage people, time, and finances are a function of life and work experience. “Non-physical”, day-to-day and long-range planning and management tasks integrate and coordinate the production, marketing, growth, family, financial, and quality-of-life aspects of the farm. Many new farmers in the Northeast, both with and without farm backgrounds, are seeking business and marketing skills, often after they have been farming for several years.

These skills include the myriad activities involved in any business operation: budgeting, marketing, publicity, promotion, and sales. Dealing with legal issues and regulations for labor and land use are also included in this category. Many discover they must grapple with time management, human resource management and community relations. Effective programming must enable each new farmer to efficiently acquire all the management skills necessary for a successful farm enterprise.



c. Farming Background

While being raised on a farm or coming from a farming family does not guarantee success, a farm background and experience does shape a new farmer's interests, opportunities and odds. Service Providers must develop programming that meets the needs of new farmers with and without farm backgrounds. Based on the focus groups, NENFN distinguished four categories describing the background status of new farmers. Individuals in each of these categories vary in the life experience they bring to farming, as well as in their training, resource and networking needs. These categories are:

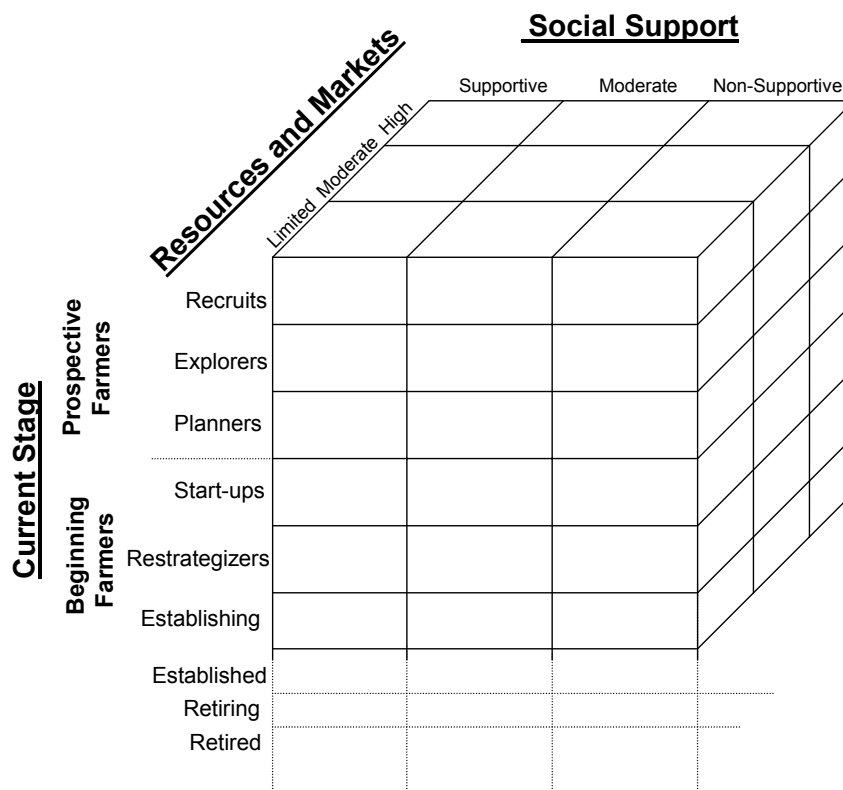
- i. **Farm "heirs":** New farmers returning to a "home" farm. These farmers often have to purchase the home farm, and rarely inherit an intact operation. They often must negotiate a range of family relationships.
- ii. **Family farm self-starts:** New farmers who come from or grew up on a farm, but, for any number of reasons, are starting an operation independent of the family farm.
- iii. **Non-farm background, but experienced:** New farmers who do not come from a farm, but have acquired significant farming experience, generally through farm employment or apprenticeships. This group may include those scaling up and commercializing a farming "hobby".
- iv. **Non-farm background, and inexperienced:** New farmers who do not come from a farm and have minimal "hands-on" farming experience, although they may have farm internship experience or obtained an agricultural degree at a university. This category includes those with no farming experience.

Which type of background represents your area's new farmers? Which of your programs serves new farmers with differing backgrounds?

2. Assets and Resources

- a. "stage" of commitment to farming (as outlined above)
- b. family and community (social) support and personal (farming) networks
- c. resources (land, capital, infrastructure, markets)

Current Situation: Assets and Resources



Each new farmer type comes to a service provider with some level of commitment and awareness, social support, and resources. The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems at the University of Wisconsin (Stevenson, personal communication, 2000) uses the term 'endowment' for these characteristics in its work with beginning dairy farmers. Resources encompass the availability of capital or credit, markets, and land. These factors fundamentally influence farming success. Social support refers to the enthusiasm of the community, family, and spouse for the farming venture, and the encouragement of a network of farming peers. Stage of commitment to farming was addressed above.

As you think about the prospective and beginning farmers with whom you work, how do their assets and resources differ? What is their system of social support?

a. Current Stage or Level of Awareness and Commitment

Farmers ordinarily progress through several stages during their farming careers. These stages reflect both commitment and risk associated with engagement in farming. As noted earlier, new farmers can be 'typed' as recruits, explorers, planners, start-ups, restrategizers or establishing new farmers. *At a given point in time*, a farmer's experiential base, a composite of farming background and expertise, intersects with his stage or level of commitment to farming. This intersection of expertise, background, and “commitment” emerged as a key factor in determining new farmer program needs.

New Farmer Continuum of Commitment

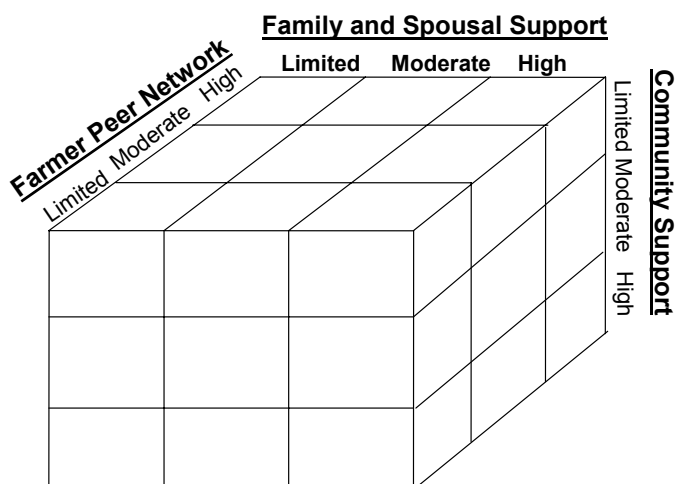


A steady progression of farmers moving through each of these stages is necessary to sustain the agricultural production sector in the Northeast. Each stage has definitive (though not necessarily exclusive) service and program needs. Programming to recruit new farmers is nearly non-existent in the region (NENFN Programs and Services Directory; NENFN Program and Service Gap Analysis, 2001). “Explorers” need specific self-assessment and values clarification tools, and a more complete picture of farming as a profession in order to make wise farming decisions. Regionally, the pool of farmers in each stage has significant implications for programming and policy. For example, while USDA “beginning farmer” loan programs target those with ten years or less farming experience, those in the start-up stage – with under three years farm management experience - are much less likely to qualify for USDA loan programs.

b. Family and Community Support

In every focus group, the issue of “social support” surfaced early in the discussion. Whatever a new farmer’s background, family and spousal support is critical, as is a farmer-peer network for obtaining information and sharing resources, experience, and solving common problems. Social support encompasses overall community understanding and encouragement of farming, and access to farming expertise, including farming mentors. A sense of “isolation” is an issue for many new farmers, even if they are in a farming community, more so if they are in a suburbanizing area. Many new farmers mentioned the importance of social acceptability and tolerance of farming. Social recognition and respect affects resource access, including availability of expertise, land and credit. Lenders (including parents) may not provide credit if they perceive farming to be an unacceptable investment, enterprise or livelihood.

New Farmer Social Support



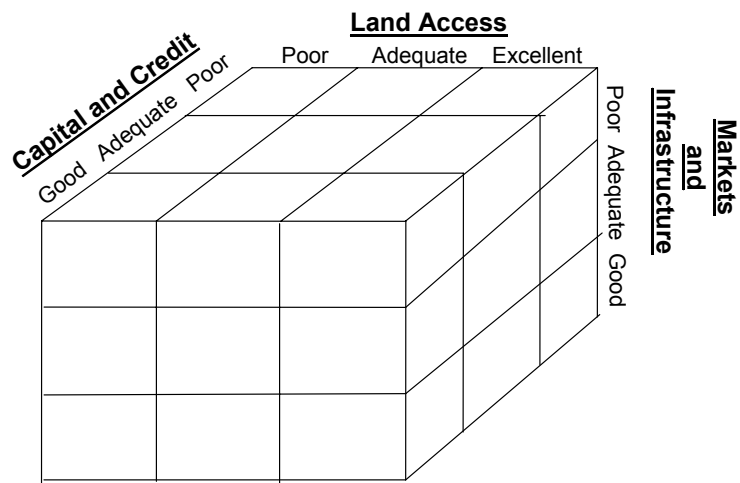
c. Resources including Markets

In our focus groups, access to resources, particularly land, capital and markets, was an issue for many new farmers. Clearly, resource access and consequently resource needs, differ for different new farmer types; young farmers may need affordable land rental or special lease arrangements; career changers often have equity for land purchase, but a limited sense of the market for farm products; while farm heirs often have access to land, but lack operating capital.

Markets (both market demand and actual outlets) should be recognized as another form of resource. Clearly, farmers in more remote areas have different market options or “resources” than farmers near population centers. Although market discovery and development is essential for the success of farming in our region, new farm start-ups are generally not prepared to create input markets or market or processing outlets from scratch.

Resources also include the existence (*and accessibility to new farmers*) of farming institutions and infrastructure such as consultants, input suppliers, repair and market facilities, even credit institutions.

New Farmer Resource Access and Availability



B. Farming Goals and Vision “where new farmers are going and what they want”

Farming goals offer a complementary perspective for designing new farmer programs. Most new farmers have some idea of the farming operation and lifestyle they ultimately envision. “Farming goals” encompass income expectations, time commitments, land tenure (ownership) aspirations, what the farmer plans to produce, and how s/he plans to sell it.

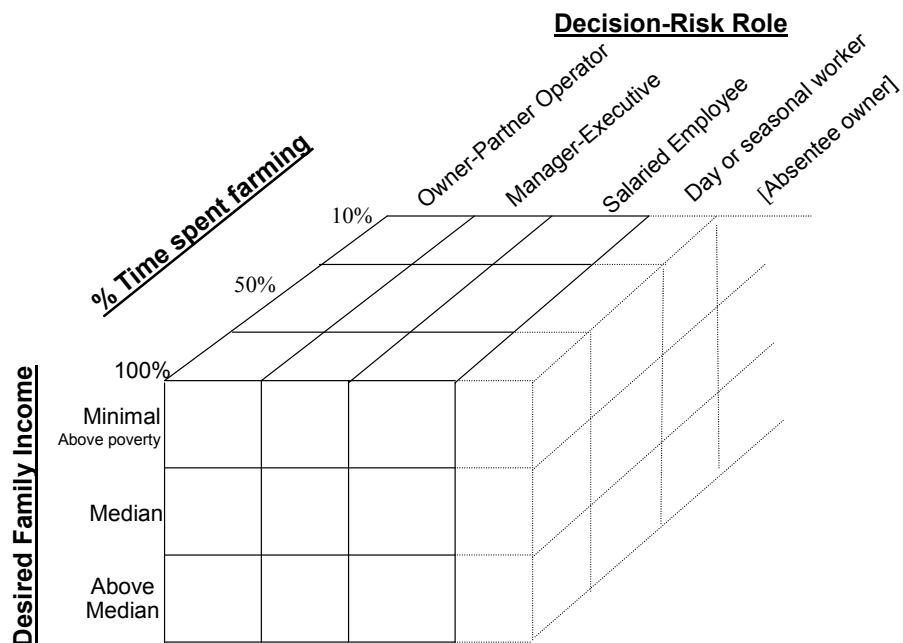
Of course goals change, but at any given moment a new farmer’s expectations are a critical reference point. Individuals may move through many farming jobs and roles, refining their ultimate farming goal as they acquire experience. Service providers need to address long-term goals as well as immediate “next steps” in order to help new farmers achieve success. Preparing someone for farm ownership is different than preparing someone for farm employment. Similarly, preparing someone for a full-time dairy farming career is dramatically different than assisting someone with a full-time non-farm career learn to run a pick-your-own blueberry operation. Explicit farm and lifestyle expectations are a logical starting point for market research, business planning, and realization of a farming ambition.

We’ve organized farming visions into “livelihood” goals that deal with broad lifestyle issues and “farm operation and enterprise” goals that address the farm enterprise and production system directly.

1. Livelihood Goals ("how they want to live")

- a. *percentage of time allocated for farming (percentage of time spent farming)*
- b. *desired standard of living (household income level)*
- c. *desired decision and risk role on the farm*

Farming Goals and Vision: Livelihood Goals



Focus group discussions indicated a range of livelihood expectations in terms of the i. **time spent farming**; ii. **family's standard of living** (specifically their desired household income

level); and iii. **farmer's decision and risk role on the farm**, particularly in terms of ownership and management responsibility and risk.

What are the ownership, time and income ambitions of the different new farm families you work with? What are the intermediate and long-term income, time and "decision role" goals of new farmers that attend your programs?

a. Percentage of Time Spent Farming

In the focus groups, new farmers had a variety of ideas about the amount and the **percentage of their time they would spend farming**. Time to be devoted to or available for farming is a key determinant of the evolution of a farm plan and enterprise. Some new farmers intend to continue another career while they farm; they plan on part-time farming and off-farm income. Other new farmers want to be fully employed on the farm; working exclusively on the farm is their long term goal. In many ways, part-time farming aspirations require different strategies and, consequently, different programs than full-time farming. Farm size and diversity, among other factors, determine the daily and seasonal workload of the new farmer. The reality is that the majority of Northeast farmers farm "part-time". In the situation of new farmer families, the intended (and actual) real time commitments and schedules of each family member need to be recognized.

An additional dimension of time management to be considered is the time a new farmer wants to personally allocate to different farm tasks, such as actual farm production (planting, weeding, animal care) or bookkeeping, personnel supervision or marketing.

b. Family's Standard of Living (desired household income level)

This is the total amount of income desired by the farm family. (The percentage to be provided from the farm is discussed later under operational goals). We've categorized household income expectations as either i. **above median (or very high)**, ii. **median- about what others in the community are earning**, or iii. **less than the median (but above poverty)**. None of our focus group participants expressed a willingness to live below the poverty line, although farmers are twice as likely to live in poverty than the general population (Farm Aid, 1998).

c. Farmer's Decision-making and Risk Role

Individuals who want to be commercial farmers tend to envision themselves in one of three "ultimate" leadership positions on the farm. Of course, this goal may change with time and experience.

i. **Owner/partner-operator:** The majority of participants in our focus groups (and new farmers contacting service providers) have farm ownership and operation as their ultimate objective. They are entrepreneurial and open to risk. Some individuals imagine themselves in a partnership, sharing expertise, overall responsibility for the farm, and risk.

ii. **Manager-executive:** A smaller percentage of new farmers are interested in a farm managerial position where their ultimate goal is to have day-to-day farm management responsibilities. They run the farm, but are answerable to an owner or a board that assumes the risk. This group includes many industrial, community and educational farm managers. Community supported agriculture (CSA) farms generally operate in this way; shareholders share the risk and sometimes own the farmland and/or farm assets.

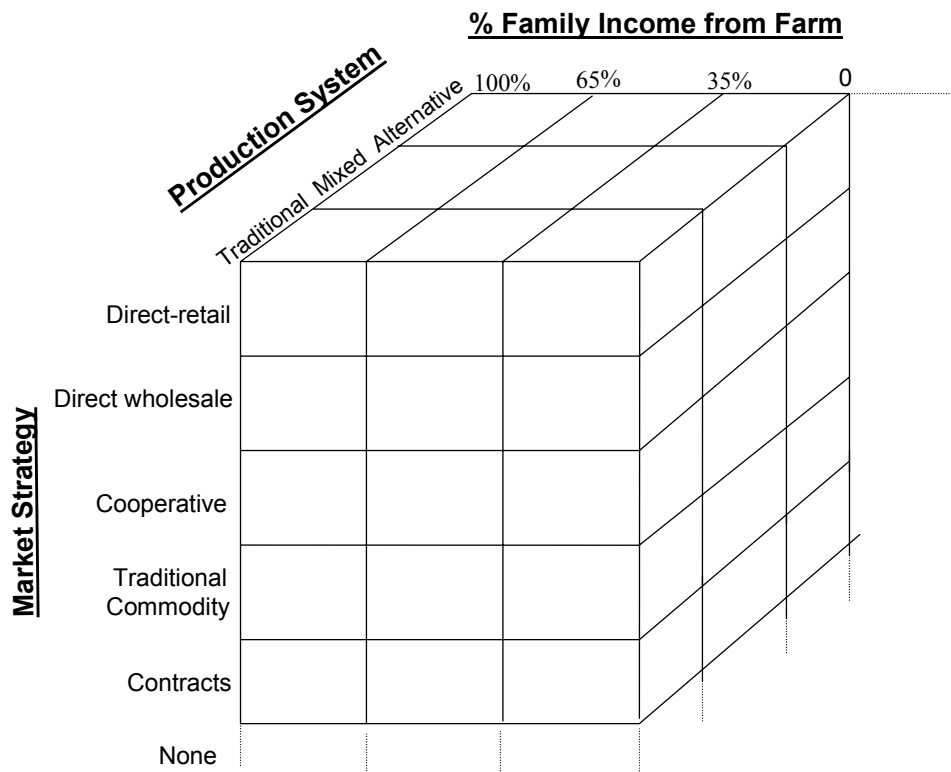
iii. **Salaried Specialist:** Some new farmers envision a career as a salaried professional technical “specialist” on the farm (for instance, as a dairy herdsman or farm mechanic). This option can provide a satisfying and productive farm livelihood, and many NE institutions seem geared to producing these “new farmer employees”.

There are also a variety of farm positions that provide good opportunities for learning and experience, for example day or seasonal workers. However, these positions were never indicated as "end goals" by the new farmers in our focus groups. And, while absentee ownership can lead to land access for new farmers, it is not a new *farmer* goal.

2. Farm Operation and Enterprise Goals (“how they want to farm”)

- a. *type of production system (production philosophy)*
- b. *percentage of household income from farming*
- c. *market strategy and outlets*

Farming Goals and Vision: Operational and Enterprise Goals



Most new farmers have ideas about the kind of farming operation they envision. By this we mean: **a type of production system** (meaning the ‘theory’ underlying their practices of production and the types of crops/livestock they want to produce); **market strategy or outlets**; and **the percentage of household income coming from the farm**.

What production philosophy do new farmers you encounter follow? What are their market interests? What percentage of the household income needs to come from the farm? How do your programs meet their needs?

a. Production System and Production Philosophy

Production “philosophy” refers to the production approach that a new farmer employs on his or her farm. This philosophy pertains to both the methods used in production and to some extent the type and scale of crop/livestock enterprise. Based on our focus group discussions, and accepting the awkwardness of distinguishing farmers based on philosophy, new farmers seem to have one of three broad production orientations. i. “**Traditional systems**” includes regionally traditional enterprises such as dairy or orchards using production methods that typically follow standard “production maximizing” practices with respect to inputs, cropping systems and animal husbandry. ii. “**Alternative systems**” refer to non-traditional production methods that stress enterprise diversity, “low-input” or organic management, often involving niche production of alternative products such as goats, herbs or exotic vegetables. Many Northeast farmers now farm a iii. “**mixed system**” – a combination of production methods and crops. For example, a dairy farmer may employ intensive rotational grazing and grow corn using prescribed pesticides and fertilizers. A diversified farm might raise “conventional” livestock, and pick-your-own organic strawberries.

Our purpose in addressing “production philosophy” is not to label farmers arbitrarily; we understand that farming approaches are personal and evolutionary and as such defy easy classification. But effective services recognize there is a relationship between “philosophy”, farming vision, farming system and consequently, programming needs.

b. Marketing Strategy and Outlets

In the focus groups, some new farmers had researched a full range of market options, while others had yet to consider marketing at all. Market options can be generally categorized as i. **direct retail**; ii. **direct wholesale**; iii; **traditional commodity**; iv **contracts**; and v. **cooperatives**. As new farmers explore market options, they realize that personal preferences (e.g. enjoying interaction with the public), cropping system (accommodating their crop rotations and soil type) and market demand (for instance providing enough variety and volume to satisfy a farm stand) as well as the bottom line, affect choice of market outlet. As more and more programs encourage farmers to explore new market opportunities, emphasis must be placed on marketing strategies - - and their risks - - for start-ups.

c. Percentage of Household Income from Farming

Focus group participants had wide-ranging expectations about the **percentage of their household income** that would be (or could be) provided from the farm. Many new farmers identify with the dream of farming full-time and providing most of their family’s income from farming, yet most feel this isn’t an achievable goal. *This is an important issue for broader policy consideration.* Off-farm income strategies, particularly for access to health and retirement benefits, were central to some focus group discussions. We know that nationally, 84% of the average farm operator’s household income comes from off the farm (USDA, 1998). Service providers need to assist new farmers in understanding that the time

spent farming may or may not parallel the **percentage of family income** desired and expected from farming.

IV. Reaching New Farmers: Effective Program and Service Delivery

Once we know what types of new farmers we are working with - - their backgrounds, farming experience and resources, and their livelihood and operational goals - - we can design appropriate program content, policy initiatives and services. The next challenge is how to effectively deliver programs and services to the different types of new farmers at different stages on the farming commitment continuum. The right program format is a function of content and “customer”. New farmers’ circumstances should influence program delivery as well as program content.

Each new farmer focus group was asked *how* they wanted to learn and acquire farming knowledge, expertise and experience, and specifically their preferred formats for programming. There was general consensus that different types of programs or learning require different forums/formats. Individuals have unique learning styles, aptitudes, and attitudes toward risk, but these are emerging as less useful for designing new farmer programs, though they influence program delivery. We asked them about scheduling (a single day event versus a series of evening workshops, or an annual 3-day conference versus full day workshops throughout the year) , locations, frequency, format, the importance of written materials versus hands-on approaches, and the role of personal interaction and computers in acquiring farming expertise and resources. Obviously, these factors are partially dependent on content. Fence building needs hands-on instruction, while budgeting may effectively use a workshop or distance learning format. Proximity and timeliness of a program offering influence attendance/participation as does content, but focus group participants indicated distance was less influential on their participation than content. They will travel a long way for the “right” program. However, this depends on commitment level (farming stage) and other obligations of the new farmer.

Training formats can indirectly affect new farmer social networks and resource access. A distance learning course creates a different network than a local hands-on workshop, than does a season-long apprenticeship. The role of learning/training systems in developing peer and expert networks needs to be considered, especially given the weakness of farmer networks indicated by many new farmers.

Different types of new farmers are able to participate in various formats. Aspiring farmers without family or job commitments can participate in full-time, year-long apprenticeships whereas as a mid-life career changing start-up farmer may benefit from a weekend program to improve tractor operation and maintenance skills. Service providers need to schedule programming appropriately for full time farmers and farmers with off-farm job commitments. Programming must recognize timeliness differs for explorers and planners relative to start-up and re-strategizing farmers. For example, start-up farmers may benefit from a full day winter workshop to evaluate markets and make planting decisions for the upcoming season, while a prospective career-changer farmer may need an evening course exploring and visiting a wide range of production systems during the growing season to guide an overall decision about farming.

Students may need some formalization, such as academic credit or certification while older career changers may find that process unnecessary, but appreciate/utilize some system of self-assessment of accomplishment and competency.

Explorer and planner focus group participants indicated a preference for local sources of information, but prospective farmers with farm backgrounds and beginning farmers recognized a need to look beyond their immediate environs for expertise.

Surprisingly, computers were generally regarded unfavorably as learning tools or information sources among focus group participants. Focus groups indicated that a centralized, comprehensive calendar (now a feature of the planned NENFN website) would make learning about farm conferences, field days and workshop opportunities more efficient, but most focus group participants indicated they used and preferred multiple sources of information.

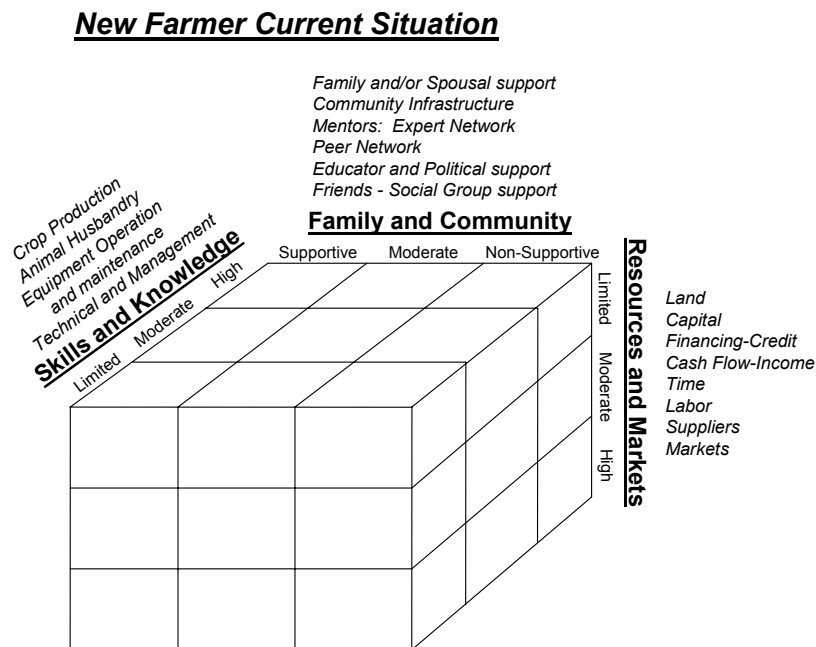
Most importantly, focus group participants indicated a desire to learn from experienced farmers and other beginning farmers. They wanted examples of successful farm start-ups. There is clearly a demand for experienced “farmer mentors”, farmer peer networks, and interactive workshops, training and individualized attention. Given the reality of service provider budgets, staffing and expertise, this is an issue that needs further consideration at the policy level, and emphasizes the need for innovative collaborations. As we’ve described in our typology, new farmers range from those who might consider a farming career to those who have operated a farm for up to ten years. In fact, new farmers are part of a full cycle of farming experience that encompasses new farmers and established, exiting and retired farmers. These established and retired farmers can and do make an enormous contribution to the success of new farmers. An effective service sector will engage all these farmer groups to create multi-generational farm communities and programming that enhance the transfer of knowledge, experience, farm businesses and farmland.

V. Summary

In this report we describe and analyze the results of focus groups held with new farmers in the Northeast. New farmers are a diverse group. We define two broad categories of new farmers: prospective (individuals who may become) farmers and beginning (individuals who are actually already farming, but have been farming for less than 10 years) farmers. We present a 6-stage typology describing new farmers based on their engagement with and commitment to farming.

Using four conceptual frameworks, we've proposed that programming for new farmers needs to be based on both their current situations and long term goals. Their current situation is a composite of their farming background, management and farming skills; and their assets, resources, and commitment to farming. Understanding livelihood and farming "goals" is necessary for service providers to develop targeted and responsive programming for this important and diverse constituency.

The diagram below is a composite of the several of the matrices presented in this paper. Critical characteristics to understand about each new farmers' current situation are their skills and knowledge, their resources, and their family and community support.



These frameworks and discussions are intended to help service providers to:

- better understand new farmer “customers” and their assistance needs.
- create targeted and effective programs and services for different new farmer “customers”.
- organize and identify program priorities for individual institutions and the region.

VI. Conclusions and Findings

In this report, we have presented findings about new farmers in the Northeast gathered from focus groups, and the NENFN Advisory Group. Based on their input, we've created a typology of new farmers – based on their current commitment to and involvement with farming. Six categories of new farmer may be placed along this continuum. New farmers include those persons considering farming and those who have been farming for 10 years or less.

New farmer programs should be designed on the basis of *who* the new farmer groups are, *what* services they want and need, and *how* they want to receive these services. Our focus groups reflected and confirmed the rich diversity of new farmer customers, and provided some initial insights about their learning preferences and needs. As a starting point in this project, we selected our focus groups according to age and education, dividing them into high school, college and adult learners. One of our significant findings is that this classification, while useful to recruit focus group participants, is not adequate to describe new farmers or to design programming for new farmers. We have provided several conceptual frameworks to characterize new farmers for programming and services, transcending age and education. We considered their background, current situation, resources and assets (“who they are”) and their livelihood and farm enterprise goals (“what they want”). These characteristics are the effective tools to assess new farmer customers and design programming. Each new farmer will fit somewhere in each of four matrices, depending on their individual characteristics, and this information should be used to guide programming.

We offer several additional observations for consideration:

- Some programs address more than one customer type; this may or may not be effective.
- Current programs are serving certain customer types more than others.
- An individual institution is unlikely to serve all new farmer customers or cover all programming needs.
- The format and approach for a particular audience needs to be balanced with the content of programming.
- Different audiences need the same content presented in different ways.
- Current programs are more likely to address operational and enterprise goals than livelihood goals.
- Programs that develop technical production skills must be complemented by programs that develop business and marketing skills.
- New farmers need access to expertise and training *and* access to resources.
- A general interest program that draws new farmers *may or may not* be effective in addressing specific new farmer needs in terms of both content and format; it is much more likely to be effective if it has considered and incorporated the new farmer customer's learning needs and preferences.
- Other farmers can benefit from programs geared to prospective and beginning farmers. In particular, “re-starts” or re-entrants, farmers who may “re-begin” farming again after leaving farming for one reason or another, need a similar array of services as do prospective and beginning farmers.

- Established farmers who are restrategizing/rethinking and transitioning their farm to another enterprise for financial viability or other objectives may benefit from programs developed for new farmers.
- Some popular educational programs (on direct marketing, agri-tourism, and cooperatives, for example), although not geared for start-ups, can benefit new farmers. However, new farmers need targeted resources and services, especially in terms of access to land and credit, and basic farming skills development.
- Policy needs to prioritize resource access for new farmers and the economics of small and part-time farms that represent the majority of new farmers.
- The social support and networking systems of a new farmer (family, other farmers, community) is crucial to his or her success.
- As new farmers eventually become established, and they continue to innovate and transform their enterprises, they should be encouraged to transfer their skills and expertise, their role in the farm, the business, and eventually the farm itself to another new farmer as they exit farming. Established and retiring farmers play a critical role in the full cycle of farming.

This report should help service providers “locate” their current programs in an overall regional context and help them to better target new farmer “customers” and design appropriate new farmer programs. These findings provide a framework for subsequent new farmer activities in the region through the Growing New Farmers Consortium. Priorities for programming, and coordination among programs, may more effectively be addressed with these understandings. We can collaborate to shape regional program and policy development and prioritization. Structuring our findings into a regional framework will help the entire *community* of service providers meet the demands of new farmers through programming and referrals.

The Northeast New Farmer Network is a two-year project funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation through the Mid-Atlantic Consortium, the USDA Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program, the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, and the Vervane Foundation.

**The Northeast New Farmer Report Series includes products from
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**Copies are available from
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Appendix 1: Focus Group Reports

Non-Traditional Adult Learners: **Beginning Farmers with Farming Backgrounds**

New England Small Farm Institute-Eric Toesnmeier

Background and Motivation

This focus group was made up of beginning farmers with who grew up on or around farms and agriculture. It was a much smaller group than the others, with only four participants. At least in Western Massachusetts, there seem to be less people in this category. There are several possible reasons for this. One, there is a narrow time window – if you grew up on a farm and will inherit it, you quickly become no longer a beginning farmer. The more important reason, however, is that the grown children of farmers all over the country are largely not going into agriculture.

Three of the four participants grew up on farms. The other grew up in a farming area and has worked on farms all of her life. Of those who grew up on farms, two of the three lost the family farm during the early 1980s. All want to do some things differently than the farms they lived on growing up. They want the benefits of the farming lifestyle, but they want to succeed. Half of the participants were women. Two have agricultural degrees.

They all listed quality of life as their primary motivation for farming, including the desire to have their children grow up on a farm. They did not enjoy having their jobs and home lives separate, instead wanting to live and work at home.

Three of the participants are currently in the start-up phase of their own enterprises. The other is not currently but would like to be. He has worked in agriculturally related jobs, like being a driver for a local milk cooperative, but has a non-farming spouse and three children who he needs to support. He would love to start an agricultural enterprise but has no concrete plans at this time. Of the others, one is currently manager of a CSA at a local college and is searching for land to start a CSA and/or mixed organic vegetable and small fruit operation. The other two are livestock farmers. One raises meat goats, lamb, and beef on tenuously rented land. The other is developing a meat add-on to an existing large CSA. Both meat producers have identified local meat processing as a need. One has started a sideline enterprise with a portable chicken processing facility, and the other is spearheading the effort to develop a regional meat processing facility.

What was most striking in this group as compared to the groups with non-farming backgrounds was its somewhat grim tone. These beginning farmers know exactly what they are getting into. They understand the amount of hard work, and the small returns that farming provides. One described her desire to farm as a “family illness”. But the three who are now farming are determined to farm anyway, using cutting edge sustainable production techniques and with a strong emphasis on direct marketing to maximize profitability. All of the participants have strong technical skills.

The participants broke down into the following categories:

Aspiring farmers who would like to begin farming again.

Current Start-Ups who are in the first 1-2 years of production in their own enterprise.

As well as:

Vegetables and Fruit Growers who have free time in winter for classes and meetings.

Livestock Producers who have farm chores and responsibilities year-round.

Learning Preferences

Method	Aspiring	Start-Up	Vegetable	Livestock
Tech. Experts	Y	Y	Y	Y
Extension	~	~	~	~
Books	~	~	~	~
Internet	~	~	~	~
Winter Events	~	~	Y	~
Conferences	Y	Y	~	Y
Courses	Y	Y	Y	Y
Workshops	Y	Y	Y	Y
Other Farmers	Y	Y	Y	Y
Work on Farms	Y	Y	Y	Y
Field Days	Y	Y	Y	Y
Magazines	Y	Y	Y	Y

Y=this group agreed this was a learning method they preferred.

~= this learning method was not preferred by the whole group, sometimes because some liked it and others didn't, at other times because the whole group felt ambivalent towards it.

N =group members did not like this learning method.

-Technical Experts/ Extension. All of the participants felt the need for technical assistance, for someone to be able to come out to the farm and tell them what disease problems they are having, etc. However, all were critical of the role of Extension. They felt that for some topics, like IPM, the University was very helpful, but that regarding organic production or rotational grazing, Extension was not of use to them. This may be particularly true in Massachusetts, where there are no longer and livestock extension specialists except those focusing on dairy biotechnology. However, “the advice of people with real skills and knowledge” was very much desired.

-Books. All of the participants think books are important resources. However, it was expressed that often there is little time to read during the growing season. Several participants read old pre-chemical farming books to research the old ways of growing sustainably.

-Internet. The participants felt that the internet was difficult to search. However, they use the web when they know where to find good information. Generally the internet does not have the kind of detailed technical information that this group is looking for.

-Conferences. All participants felt that conferences were great places to learn information and network. The vegetable grower felt that conferences should be in the winter when workload is lighter – although the livestock farmers are busy then as well.

-Courses. All the participants had taken or were willing to take courses, particularly business courses.

-Workshops. Workshops were popular, because they provide access to someone with good information. The Regional Food and Farm Project winter workshops were mentioned – these are farmer-to-farmer workshops where expert growers cover advanced topics for other growers, including such detailed aspects of growing as carrot harvesting.

-Other Farmers. One participant says she goes to auctions to listen to older farmers. All participants expressed that visiting, working for, and talking to other farmers is one of the best ways to learn. They cautioned that they have to sort the good from the bad in listening to farmers of the chemical generation. The participants would like to get together with other farmers raising similar crops or livestock to share information.

-Work on Farms. All had worked on many farms and found this an invaluable source of experience.

-Field Days. Summer field days were mentioned as a great way to learn from other people's expertise.

-Magazines. They enjoy trade magazines like Stockman Grass Farmer and Growing for Market.

Information, Skill, and Resource Needs

These beginning farmers had much technical knowledge as a result of growing up on farms. However, three of the four felt that they did not get business training growing up, and identified this as a key area

they need training in. They also need technical advice on highly specific matters like stocking densities for rotational grazing, livestock diseases, and production planning for organic vegetable production, as well as some practical courses (repairing hydraulics, baling hay, working with electric fences).

Training could take place in classes or workshops, in books, or from experts. Most business training materials assume you are growing 1,000 acres of soybeans and are not appropriate for small, diversified farms. They would also like agricultural bookkeeping services, agriculturally literate lawyers, and other business support people – either available like Extension people or at least a regional referral list. Generally they wanted field days in summer and everything else in winter.

They would also like to see a regional peer resource list who you can call to ask questions (mechanics, veterinarians...).

All participants felt that access to land was a key issue. While they felt they could secure credit for start-up costs, land is too expensive in this area. Land is less expensive in more rural areas, but these are farther from direct marketing opportunities. None of the participants are currently farming on land they own – one is not farming, one has an arrangement with another grower, one rents, and one works at a college farm.

One participant is the president of an organization of the type he would like to see more of. (One other participant is a member and another will now join). Called Living Capital, it is a peer-lending group for farmers. In addition to providing access to credit, they have monthly meetings on aspects off farm business, and small farm networking.

Non-Traditional Adult Learners: Young Farmers with Non-Farming Backgrounds

New England Small Farm Institute-Eric Toesnmeier

Background and Motivations

This group is defined as aspiring or start-up farmers of ages 35 and younger, who did not grow up on farms or with families engaged in agricultural enterprises. 10 of the 12 focus group members had grown up in the suburbs. All but one had gone to college. 11 of the 12 had spent several years interning or working on farms. They were entering agriculture for personal, environmental, and larger social reasons, but none because they thought they could make more money in agriculture than another business. Motivations included “worthwhile work”, “sense of personal accomplishment”, “a practical lifestyle”, and to “live sustainably”. Self-employment and making a positive difference to the world were also motivations. Many expressed that doing education and addressing social and environmental concerns was a part of their motivation as well. Most of the group decided to go into agriculture in college, perhaps naively, but have since had plenty of practical experience. They were realistic in their expectations of the financial realities of agriculture in the Northeast during this point in history.

Almost all of the participants were interested in organic vegetable production, with one who is a partner in an IPM orchard business. Many desired diversified farms, with livestock integrated into the farm system. Many were interested in CSA.

The primary division was between those currently apprenticing and those in the start up phase.

Interns. These focus group members were in their second, third or greater year of apprenticing on farms in exchange for small stipends, education, and practical experience. All of these interns were planning to become farmers themselves. All worked on CSA farms, and most aspired to start a CSA of their own – after a few years of farmers markets and selling to restaurants. Of the four apprentices present, only one was not planning to start her own farm in the next year or two. She felt that spending five years or so as manager of someone else’s farm might be the best next step for her.

Start-Ups. Eight of the twelve focus group participants were in this category. All were in their first or second year of operation. All but one had organic vegetable production as an important element of their operation. These farmers sold primarily through direct markets including a cooperative farm stand, farmers markets, and other venues. Other elements of their enterprises included hand-made brooms, fleeces and handspun wool, a bakery, lamb, and other livestock. The exception was a 20 year old who has become a partner in an orchard business that direct markets, wholesales, and also provides custom pruning and orchard management services.

All of these young start-up farmers were operating on leased land, including the orchard enterprise. Five leased land at NESFI, two together at another site. None were currently capable of purchasing farms in this area at this time. All but one had taken a NxLevel Agricultural Business Training Course, either at NESFI or another similar program in another town. There were two married couples – in both the woman worked at an off-farm job and did part-time work on the farm as well, while the husband worked full time on the farm.

Learning Preferences

The most clear result of the focus group was that young beginning farmers with non-farming backgrounds prefer to learn by talking to, visiting, and working for established farmers. There were a number of ways in which they preferred to do so.

<u>Learning Style</u>	<u>Current Interns</u>	<u>Start-Ups</u>
Working on Farms	Y	Y
Farm Internships	~	~

Farmer Mentors	Y	Y
Farm Visits	Y	T
Conferences	Y	Y
Classes & “Aftercare”	Y	Y
Networking	Y	Y
Extension & Universities	~	~
Internet	~	~
Books	Y	Y
NESFI Library	Y	Y
Learning by Doing	~	Y

Y=this group agreed this was a learning method they preferred.

~= this learning method was not preferred by the whole group, sometimes because some liked it and others didn't, at other times because the whole group felt ambivalent towards it.

N =group members did not like this learning method.

-Working on Farms & Farm Internships. All of the group members felt that working on a farm was the most efficient way to learn about farming. However, they were divided on whether or not internships (as opposed to being a general hired farm employee) was the best way to learn. Some members pointed out that some internships are very negative experiences for the interns – often working long hours for little pay and little educational benefit. Interns often finish their time feeling bitter and worked to the bone, which this group did not think was conducive to learning. They recommended a list of things a prospective intern should look for – and recommendations on setting up formal educational goals as well. Other members said that their positive experiences as interns were the most important things that had happened to them on their route to becoming farmers. The group wanted to see an article for a publication like *Growing for Market* or what interns want out of their time on farms. They also thought a good idea would be a collection of farmer references by former interns. Some current interns had found it interesting to do farm swaps with interns on other farms.

-Farmer Mentors. One focus group member has an experienced orchardist as his farm partner. His partner is teaching him about the tree fruit industry, and has taken him on as formal business partner. Other group members have less formal arrangements with experienced farmers, who provide education on various technical issues as well. One farmer in particular plays such a role with a number of these young farmers, teaching about equipment use and repair, and renting the use of his extensive equipment collection as well. All group members agreed that farmer mentors are a great idea. One group members suggested a directory of regional farmers who would make themselves available for calls on specific topics.

-Farm Visits. The group also said that farm visits were a very good way to learn. Many had traveled a visited a number of farms. One said that what he found most effective was to call ahead and ask what was a good time, and to volunteer to work while they talked.

-Conferences. Conferences (when affordable) were felt to be a great place to take workshops and network, hearing from a wide range of experiences. All agreed classes and workshops should take place during the winter.

-Classes & “Aftercare”. There was general agreement that courses are an important method of learning – although one-on-one time with experts was preferred. A number of the group members had taken the NxLevel business training course for farmers – both at NESFI and at another site. They said that one of the most important things about the class was that it required them to walk through the business planning process and do the work of planning their own farms. This made them think things through more thoroughly. However, one year later, all of those who had taken the course felt a need for “aftercare” – some sort of follow up, with an opportunity to review and revise their plans, with a structure to make them sit down and work, the company of their fellow farmers doing the same work, and preferably the presence of a farm business expert who they could ask questions. Classes that were mentioned in particular included the NxLevel courses, workshops at NOFA conferences, and NESFI’s Small Farm Association workshops. One current intern felt that classes were often more useful after having some

experience. In response a start-up farmer said they preferred to begin by taking a class to get a general overview. All agreed classes and workshops should take place during the winter.

-Networking. Group members felt that any opportunity to make contact with experienced farmers (and other beginning farmers) was desirable. This was expressed over and above the specific networking opportunities like conferences, farm visits, mentoring, and apprenticeships.

-Extension and Universities. Group members had mixed feelings about Extension. They felt that the idea of someone who they could call was excellent, but that the focus of most Extension programs were not useful to them as (predominantly) small scale organic growers. Certain Extension and University staff and professors were mentioned as excellent resources. It was mentioned that MOFGA (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Assn.) has its own Extension agent. Group members felt that a slight refocus of extension could make it more useful to them – but felt that with the corporations funding university research, this was not likely. Some group members spoke of the need for alternative research facilities. Some group members had taken agriculture classes at Universities and found them useful. One found that after his farm work experiences he was really able to use the classes on soils and plant pathology. Another had worked as a student farm manager on a University farm that had since closed – an experience he had found very good for his learning. It was also mentioned that some Universities let farmers sit in one classes for free.

-Internet. Generally group members were not interested in doing a lot of searching on the internet. Some felt that if they knew of a good website (like ATTRA), they found it useful. Several group members did not own computers and did not plan to. It was also expressed that internet resources would be more useful if they were regionally appropriate.

-Books. All of the group members found books useful – although none felt that they were a replacement for direct experience on someone else's farm. Books were considered important by most, particularly when planning and for looking up specifics.

-NESFI Library. Some of the group members are NESFI site users. They expressed the usefulness of NESFI's collection of materials on farm planning, agricultural business planning, and technical materials.

-Learning by Doing. Some of the start-ups felt that they learned best by just getting out and trying. They were in the process of starting their own enterprises and learning quite a bit along the way.

Information, Skill, and Resource Needs

There was not a lot of time to cover this subject. One current start-up said that what they most needed was a regional directory of suppliers – fencing, seed, etc. The other start-ups agreed. The interns all felt that business training was something they needed – and the start-ups agreed that that had been important for them. Of course, access to land is a crucial issue for these beginning farmers – all of those currently operating were doing so on leased land. Credit for building their business and acquiring land was also mentioned (one participant had received a loan from FSA for young farmers under 21). Others are in peer lending groups that make small loans. Equipment was also listed – either opportunities to rent or affordable 'access' to purchase it.

Non-Traditional Adult Learners: Immigrant Farmers
New England Small Farm Institute- Eric Toesnmeier

This was not in fact a focus group, but rather a series of one-on-one interviews, with two farmers and two service providers. The focus group was originally conceived as “immigrant, minority, and urban beginning farmers”, but it became apparent that at least in western New England the group was in fact made up primarily of immigrants. More farmer interviews were planned but had to be postponed due to health problems of the Khmer translator.

Background and Motivations

This is a very diverse group of beginning farmers. We became aware of Puerto Rican, Cambodian and other Southeast Asian, Jamaican, and Kosovar refugee populations of start-up or aspiring farmers. We also spoke to an aspiring farm family with African-American and Guyanese immigrant members. All shared a strong desire to farm, and a knowledge of niche markets for ethnic specialty crops. While there are immigrant and minority farmers entering into conventional commodity production in other parts of the country, this was not the case here.

The Cambodian farmers were the farthest along. This is largely due to the efforts of Worcester County FSA, who have developed a program to give assistance to the city’s Cambodian beginning farmers. There are over 30,000 Cambodians in Lowell, Massachusetts – and 90% were farmers in Cambodia. Farming and a strong connection to the land are deeply rooted in their culture. In Lowell, they are mostly working in low-level industrial jobs. FSA, working with community leaders, has assisted 12 growers by providing land on farms outside of town, with a farmer mentor and use of equipment. These beginning farmers are raising Southeast Asian vegetables and marketing them to local Asian food markets, restaurants, and at the farmers market. One grower is raising hydroponic water spinach (a popular vegetable), and others are involved in a new tilapia aquaculture program. They are currently growing on 1.5 to 4 acre plots. Most would like more land. All have full time jobs in addition to their farm operations. Most would like farming to be a primary source of their income. After one or two years of growing, some are ready to take that step next year. Others (20%) have decided not to farm at this time after giving it a try. Some growers would like to move into chicken and quail production. These farmers use intensive, non-organic practices. Most speak little or no English. All could be characterized as limited resource.

Nuestras Raices is a community garden organization in Holyoke, Massachusetts, which works primarily with Puerto Rican community members. Several of the gardeners are interested in moving into commercial farming. Again, many grew up on farms in Puerto Rico, or worked extensively on farms in Puerto Rico or in the U.S. Some are already selling cilantro from their garden plots. They collectively market surplus produce at the farmers market. None are currently farming, partly due to lack of access to land. English ability varies widely, but this group includes many who speak little or no English. Crop interests are in Puerto Rican crops as well as tomatoes, lettuce, and common vegetables. Livestock interests include poultry and pork production. This is also a limited resource constituency. One Puerto Rican aspiring farmer, who had owned a coffee farm in Puerto Rico, is interested in farming organically but does not now, and needs technical information on how to grow long-season tropical crops without chemical fertilizers.

The Jamaican growers are located in Hartford, Connecticut. They are utilizing public land to grow Jamaican specialty vegetables like “calaloo” (Amaranth greens). The Kosovar refugee population includes many farmers, who would be interested in farming in this area if they end up staying here, according to Catholic Charities, their host organization.

The last interview was with a couple including an African-American man, a Guyanese woman, and their children, living near Boston, Massachusetts. The family is Muslim and is interested in goat production (with Halal slaughter), for marketing to the Boston Muslim population. In all other respects they more

closely resemble the Career Changers group – they have middle class jobs in the city and would like to move to the country and get away from “the city life”. They do not have farming backgrounds and have not worked on farms. They are looking to buy land and have the capital to do so. Language is not a barrier for them.

These beginning farmers are strongly committed and have been farmers in their home countries. They need special attention from service providers, for unique crops, cultures, and languages. However, experience in Lowell and elsewhere in the country has shown that this group has the determination and experience to overcome the significant barriers they face to become successful farmers. There will no doubt be different immigrant groups in different urban areas. Urban gardens are excellent places to look for this type of beginning farmer.

Learning Preferences

For those with no or limited English, language is perhaps the most important concern. Training materials, workshops, and other interfaces with service providers must be translated into the appropriate language. Cultural barriers are also a major challenge – for instance, the Cambodian growers are all survivors of the Pohl Pot state-sponsored genocide, which has left them very distrustful of government agencies, no matter how well intentioned.

More information is needed on the learning needs and preferences of these groups. FSA of Lowell is about to undertake an extensive survey of the needs and preferences of the Cambodian farmers they work with, which they would be glad to make available to NENFN when it is completed.

Service providers indicate that the best way to work with these populations is through existing community leadership and organizations. For instance, Lowell FSA is working with the Cambodian-American League of Lowell to provide short business training courses. All of their initial work was through such organizations. They have also hired a translator, their liaison to the Southeast Asian community”. It is important to earn the trust and respect of the community and listen, rather than try to impose program on the communities, which probably be ignored. These populations often require more one-on-one work, according to Daniel Ross of Nuestras Raices.

Information, Skill, and Resource Needs

The primary need of all of all identified immigrant beginning farmers is access to land. They tend to have technical skills, and familiarity with their crops. They also have strong contacts in their markets as well. Pest and nutrient management, as well as marketing, were also identified as needs. Technical needs also include season extension for tropical crops.

Business training and information regarding regulations are also needed- although this is often a population that would prefer to run their enterprises under the table.

Non-Traditional Adult Learners: Career-Changing Adults with Non-Farming Backgrounds

New England Small Farm Institute-Eric Toesnmeier

Background and Motivations

These beginning farmers have spent their adult lives to date or until recently working in non-farming careers. They did not grow up on farms. Generally they did not study agriculture in college or high school. Many in our focus group in Massachusetts work or worked in the computer industry.

Dissatisfaction with their careers or a search for a higher quality of life are motivating this group to begin farming. Some have always aspired to farm. Making a higher income through agriculture is not a motivator for this group.

Most of these beginning farmers are interested in vegetable growing, through direct marketing strategies like CSA, restaurants, and farmer's markets. Some are interested in diversified farming with some livestock, but none intend to make livestock their primary enterprise. Most prospective farmers felt their crop mix would depend on what markets were available as well as what their land was well suited for. As far as NESFI is aware, career changing beginning farmers with non-farming backgrounds in Massachusetts are generally not interested in serious livestock operations, possibly due to a perception that livestock take more experience and startup costs (not necessarily true).

They may bring some technical, business, or managerial experience from their other fields, but are generally in need of training in a wide range of aspects of farming – including some very basic information. Existing responsibilities like children and jobs make it difficult for this group to embark on a risky venture like farming, and difficult to take advantage of certain opportunities for training, particularly internships. Financial pressures like the need to send children to college may keep members of this group's agricultural activities on a part-time basis.

A crucial issue for these beginning farmers is whether they have support or resistance from their spouses, partners, and/or children. For those who don't have support, full-time farming may not be a realistic possibility. Many of these beginning farmers are making slow transitions from full time off-farm jobs to part-time farming. Those with non-farming, supportive partners often rely on their partner's income during the start-up years of the farm.

We subdivided our group of career changers into the following three categories:

Prospective farmers with spouse/family support. These career changers are thinking and planning for an agricultural venture, and have the encouragement of their spouses, partners, and/or children. Some couples agree to go into farming together, with both as full farm partners.

Prospective farmers without spouse/family support. The partners, spouses, and/or children of these aspiring farmers are not supportive – often due to financial concerns. This is a very serious issue for these beginning farmers.

Startup farmers in their first few years. These beginning farmers have undergone the career change and are getting their farm operation under way. They may be supported by an off-farm partner or still work an off-farm job themselves. Two farms (and three farmers) in this category were represented. Both had secured land with capital they had saved, in partnership with local Land Trusts. This is growing in popularity due to the high cost of land in this area.

Learning Preferences

All agreed that their #1 preferred resource was direct contact with experienced farmers. This can take place in a number of formats: conferences, intensive workshops, farm tours, and mentoring relationships were listed as desirable. Internships, as mentioned above, are generally difficult for this constituency to arrange due to their careers and family responsibilities, although those who have done so have found it very helpful. Beginning farmers in this focus group wanted to hear the painful experiences and successes, both of other beginning farmers and the start-up year stories of established, successful farmers. They

attend events to seek out and listen to farmers and others with real life, practical experiences with weeds, livestock, marketing, and other “nitty-gritty” topics. The group prefers winter as the time for classes, workshops, and conferences, while during the growing season are interested in visiting and touring working farms.

Written materials are used by this group – many are active members of NESFI’s library. Again, the emphasis is on practical, “how-to” materials, whether they be on farm buildings, business planning, or vegetable pest management. They also are active readers and subscribers of magazines – notably Growing for Market, but also other trade publications. One reason they like magazines is to find information on upcoming workshops, classes, and farm tours. Group members had mixed feelings about internet resources. While some expressed that they are active internet users, others much preferred books and magazines. All enjoy reading printed materials.

All expressed the importance of business planning, although pro-formas are only of limited usefulness. Business plans were seen as an important planning tool, even if they must be scrapped and revised only a month into the season.

Table of Preferred Learning Approaches

Learning Approach	Prospective Farmer	Currently Farming
Mentor-Farmer	Y	Y
Internships	~	N
Classes	~	~
Workshops	Y	Y
Conferences	Y	Y
Farm Tours	Y	Y
Free “Experts”	Y	Y
Paid “Experts”	N*	N*
Networking Opportunities	Y	Y
Free Print Media	Y	Y
Paid Print Media	~	~
Magazines/Newsletters	Y	Y
Growing for Market	Y	Y
Event Calendars	Y	Y
Resource Lists	Y	Y
Internet	~	~
Software	~	~
Video	~	~

Y=this group agreed this was a learning method they preferred.

~= this learning method was not preferred by the whole group, sometimes because some liked it and others didn’t, at other times because the whole group felt ambivalent towards it.

N =group members did not like this learning method.

*participants expressed that their limited budgets prevented them from using professional consultants or paid extension advice. Although none had, some expressed that they would do so if they knew the expert to be extremely good at something that would make a big difference to the farm and could not be obtained elsewhere.

It is worth noting that these results do not always line up with what NESFI has experienced. For instance, a number of career changers took NESFI’s NxLevel business training courses last winter. This was a ten-week, weekly course. Many career changers took it and reported finding it useful, including some members of the focus group.

Information, Skill, and Resource Needs

Information needs and learning preferences also differed between prospective and startup farmers (those already in the first years of operation).

Prospective farmers desired general information on how to grow things, an “Introduction to Farming 101”. They have a voracious appetite for information, and a great need for it due to their lack of experience. One specific request they voiced was listings of available land, including a more active recruiting of farmland owners for Land Link programs. Family support or lack of it, while an important factor in their lives, did not influence their preferences for learning methods. The youngest of our career changers (eight years as a computer worker) was doing an internship, which he felt would be less disruptive to his life than starting a school program somewhere. He wanted direct experience to see if farming was really for him. This intern is part of a network of farms with apprentices called CRAFT, which tour each other’s farms every other weekend. He finds this a very useful way to learn. He has a fiancée but no children. Another group member was doing an internship during a leave of absence from work. He also had no children.

Existing startup farmers had different needs. They wanted lists of suppliers, sources of reliable information on pest control, or to hear from experts on weed control in particular cut flower species. This group has less time to read, and wants condensed information easily accessible. The representatives of this group were generally not interested in paying for the services of Extension or consultants, due to very limited farm budgets. They requested and would pay for a quarterly bulletin and resource list with a calendar of events, lists of suppliers, and up-to-date bibliography and resource lists on business and technical aspects of farming, particularly including organic pest control. They were interested in technical information on small scale farming – for instance small scale irrigation. They expressed a desire to get information they could use to inform their choices about such issues as purchasing new or used equipment.

Manheim Central High School Focus Group

Manheim, Pennsylvania September 23, 1999

Marion Bowlan- Pennsylvania Farm Link

Participants-9 young men, 1 young woman

Male—16 years old, 11th grade—lives on a 300-acre beef farm with a commercial grain elevator. An FFA member for three years, he is an officer this year, and has exhibited livestock at the Manheim Farm Show. Their family has some exotic animals on their farm, including Scottish Highland cattle and llamas. He is undecided about career goals, but wants to do something in agriculture. His family encouraged him to be the sole manager of an acre of tobacco last year.

Female—16 years old, 11th grade—lives on a 30-acre horse farm. Her father boards horses and is a fulltime trainer. Her experience includes helping her father with training and working in a local greenhouse. She is the only one of the group who plans to go to college, probably Penn State, but is undecided about career plans. Expressing an interest in floriculture, she plans to have a full time job and train horses on the side.

Male—17 years old, 11th grade—His family lived on a dairy farm until he was 7 or 8. The farm was sold at auction due to an inability to remain solvent after modernization. He worked on a dairy farm for the last 3 1/2 years and is currently working on a 400-cow operation. As a member of FFA, he has shown pigs and steers at the Manheim Farm Show. He plans to participate in the coop program next year.

Male—is 16 years old, 10th grade—his father and grandfather were in partnership on a farm, but he does not currently live on a farm. An FFA member for the last two years, he currently works on a local dairy farm. He stated that he likes the mechanical side of farming more than production and thinks his career will most likely be in that area. His aspirations are to operate a part-time beef farm.

Male—is 16 years old, 10th grade—and lives on a 115-acre dairy farm. A member of FFA since 8th grade, he plans to take over his family's dairy farm. Although he has three brothers who also help work on the farm, he thinks that he will be the one that will be the sole operator in a few years.

Male—is 15 years old, 10th grade—lives on a 36-acre part-time beef farm. His father makes his living as an auctioneer. In addition to membership in the FFA since 8th grade, he has shown steers at the Manheim Farm Show. He is undecided about his future plans.

Male--is 17 years old, 12th grade—he lives on a 58-acre poultry farm. Currently he is an officer in the FFA and participates in the Co-op program on his mother's farm. He may eventually take over the poultry farm, but, also wants to do something in woodworking after high school. He is undecided about career goals.

Male--is 16 Years old, 10th grade—he live on an 85-acre dairy farm and has works for his dad during the school year. He spent the last two summers working on a cattle ranch in Montana. Currently serving as an officer, he lists two years of FFA membership. After high school, he may help his dad on the farm, but wants to eventually move west and become a cattle rancher. He isn't sure there will be any farms left in Lancaster County in 20 years.

Male—is 16 years old, 11th grade—he lives on a dairy/hog farm. They milk 160 cows and his responsibilities include the entire cow feeding. Although he is not sure what he wants to do after high school, he plans to become a crop farmer.

This group was very experienced in farm work and heavily enmeshed in the farm community. All but one of the participants grew up on a farm. Everyone had major responsibilities either on their home farm or working for another farmer. Everyone was involved in the FFA, and most participated in the local Farm Show, exhibiting livestock.

Some students had the experience raising a crop or animal entirely on their own, making all of the decisions, and providing the labor and management necessary to produce and market their crop. These job experiences led to earning, saving and investing money at an earlier stage of life than their peers, and contributed to their belief in their abilities and self-worth. Many expressed pride in their abilities and pointed out that other students their age “really don't know what things are like in the real world.” Most

understood that obtaining a farm business takes time and sacrifice. They knew they would have to work for someone else for awhile to accumulate the capitol they would need to get started.

The overwhelming sentiment was that hands-on experience was the best teacher. Only one participant wanted to attend college. Although the others were not adverse to advanced education, they wanted it in shorter sessions, in the evening or in a series of evening sessions, one-day workshops, or other time-frames that would not require a four year investment of time and money.

This is consistent with the findings of Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) in identifying the characteristics of entrepreneurs:

- ✓ Vocational graduates were much younger when they started their business than the balance of entrepreneurs.
- ✓ Most entrepreneurs came from trades and industrial education, followed by agriculture, and then business education.
- ✓ One-third of the business owners started with less than \$5,000. Only 21% started with more than \$50,000
- ✓ Two thirds of the business owners reported participating in further education or training after business start-up.

When asked about the co-op program, some students felt that most participants thought of it as work and a way to make money while getting out of school. They thought that a more valuable learning experience would include the opportunity to work on several different types of farms, rather than just one farm. They suggested establishing a rotation of farms and thought that would help them decide what kind of farming they wanted to pursue.

This particular group of students appeared to be very cohesive and had similar interests. They feel constrained by the fact that they have students in their classes that aren't interested in pursuing a career in agriculture. One student talked about a fellow student who thought a cantaloupe grew up out of the ground rather than on a vine. The whole group laughed. They suggested that the people who wanted to pursue farming should be in separate classes so that they could pursue some subjects in depth. They would like more in depth, intensive study in farming topics and less of a broad brushstroke approach to agriculture topics. They had some knowledge of agriculture resource organizations, but wanted to learn more about these organizations. Field days on active farms, job-shadowing, and more specific classes were all recommended. The potential exist to expand on this group's cohesiveness and interest.

The general attitude about farming was that is was a high-risk occupation. One student said, "Agriculture is a big gamble. In other industries, where there's a big threat of failure, there's a high return. Farming is high risk, but not high return. Its just so overwhelming that people just starting out, just don't want to put themselves in that position. Is it really worth it?" Overall, most students thought that farming wasn't as inviting as other occupations.

One student commented on the current drought and help that is available for the farmers. He said the government acts like they want to help, but then when you check into the assistance available, you have to be rejected by other lenders. He thought this was misleading and was only for those farmers who were already unstable.

However, everyone thought they might at least want to farm part-time. They expressed their love of animals, working the land, being outside, the family values, way of life, and culture of farming for the reasons they wanted to go into farming. Some thought they would need to leave the county and even the state to find affordable farmland, another student thought it was easier to farm in other states. The desire to enter farming was evident; the confidence that the obstacles could be overcome was not as evident.

Most felt that commodity prices were just too low and that something needed to happen to enable and encourage young people to get into farming. There was deep concern over the development pressure and urban-rural conflict within their communities. One student said, “I don’t think there will be any farmland left in Lancaster County in twenty years.” They were aware of farmland preservation efforts in the county.

W.B. Saul High School Focus Group

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania October 5, 1999

Marion Bowlan- Pennsylvania Farm Link

Participants-16 young women, 5 young men, 5 white, 16 minorities—all are FFA members and are enrolled in the large animal sciences at Saul

Female—is in the 11th grade and has shown livestock at the PA Farm Show. Her career aspiration is to be a veterinarian owning her own practice. Relatives in Florida own a farm with exotics.

Female--is in the 11th grade and has shown sheep at the PA Farm Show. She also wants to be a vet.

Female--is 16 and in the 11th grade and has shown sheep at the PA Farm Show. Her career goal is to be a vet technician. Her grandma was raised on a farm.

Female—is 16, in the 11th grade and has shown sheep at the PA Farm Show. Although she has not decided on career goals, she is leaning toward veterinary medicine.

Female—is 17, in the 11th grade, and has shown livestock at the PA Farm Show. She has friends who farm and her great grandmother owned a farm. Her career goal is to become a dairy farmer.

Female—is in the 11th grade and has shown sheep at the PA Farm Show. She stated that she doesn't know much about farming and is undecided about career goals.

Female—is 18 and has shown animals at the PA Farm Show. Her career goals are largely undecided but she is leaning towards being a zookeeper.

Female—is a senior and has shown pigs at the PA Farm Show. Her career goal is to be a chiropractor. Relatives in the South were in farming.

Female—is 17, in the 11th grade and has shown dairy and swine in the PA Farm Show. She is undecided about career goals.

Male—is 17, a senior, and has shown a pig at the PA Farm Show. He is interested in smaller animals and is undecided about career goals, but is leaning toward farming or veterinary medicine. He has a cousin in Saudi Arabia who is on a farm.

Male—is in the 11th grade. She would like to work in a veterinary hospital or in landscaping. Her grandfather was a horse jockey.

Male—is 16 and in the 11th grade. He doesn't want to be a farmer, but would like to work in aquaculture, perhaps at Sea World.

Female—is 16 and in the 11th grade. She worked on a friend's horse and dairy farm and is interested in operating a similar operation after school.

Male—is 17 and a senior. His father has a farm in North Carolina and raises horses and chickens. He sees farming as a low wage occupation and doesn't want to get into farming, but is undecided about career goals.

Female—is in the 11th grade and has exhibited livestock at the PA Farm Show. She would like to own a farm, but wants to hire other people to do the work. Her great grandfather was a share-cropper.

Male—is 16 and in the 11th grade. His great grandma had a farm. His career goal is to be a vet.

Female—is 16, a senior, and the Vice President of FFA. She is allergic to hay, so she doesn't want to be a farmer, and says its too much work. He would like to be a vet or a doctor.

Female-- is 16, a senior and has worked with horses on her own family's farm. She would like to be an obstetrician and train and show horses on the side.

Female—is 16, a senior and the President of the FFA. She would like to own a farm, but would like to be a veterinarian.

Male--is 18, a graduate of Saul and is currently employed as a AI technician at Genex. He likes cows and may be interested in farming.

Female—is 16 and has shown pigs at the PA Farm Show. Her aunt owns a farm. Although she is undecided about her career goals, she is leaning towards being an animal trainer.

This group of high school students had the advantage of working on the farm at the Saul High School and had many vocational agriculture courses and training that is unavailable to rural districts. The students

were proud of their education at Saul and proud of their school. One said, “We should put posters up about Saul from here to the Wissahickon Transfer stop that say ‘Go to Saul!’ ” They marveled at the lack of knowledge their peers had about animals and were proud of their knowledge and sophistication in this area. One student said, the other kids think we go to classes with the cows walking around in the hallways.

Many of the students said they didn’t start out wanting to go to a vo-ag school, their parents pushed it on them, because Saul has a good reputation. Administration noted that is also considered a safe school.

Over half of the students had exhibited livestock at the PA Farm Show, most had attended the Farm Show, and several others were interested in exhibiting. Some were initially afraid of animals, but were able to overcome those fears, and go on to enjoy working with animals. However, very few had any other experience, other than Saul, in working with animals. Only three had worked on commercial farms, and it is of interest to note, that two of those want to be dairy farmers. The other student would like to be an obstetrician but would like to train and show horses on the side. While the desire to enter farming was not strong in the group as a whole, the desire to enter veterinary medicine was strong. Over half of the students indicated this as a career goal.

Lack of opportunity to get hands on experience through a family situation was very limited. Only one student’s family owned a farm, another student’s father worked on a farm in the South. The other students either had no close relatives involved in farming or were two to three generations removed from farming. While their education experiences at Saul appear to be excellent, their opportunity to seek out career paths in farming are very limited due largely to their surroundings and lack of access to working farms.

According to the students, co-op and intern experiences include the agriculture professions and landscaping but no working farms. Again, this is a product of the setting of the school and surrounding counties. Transportation to potential job sites on farm will be a challenge.

Most students now valued their education and felt that it changed their attitude about animals and farmers. They had a deeper understanding of the hard work and perseverance needed to farm. Farming is viewed as a high risk, low return occupation that requires good business skills and record keeping to be successful. Students also had a sense of the responsibility involved, one said, “It’s a big responsibility, as much as any other job”. Concerns included the lack of a steady paycheck and what they saw as this generation’s desire for high-powered occupations and more money.

They also understood that a farming career could not be established overnight, but needed to start out small and gradually increased over time. Some thought the hard work and sacrifice required were too great for their generation. One said, “It’s like a third world occupation”. One student said people are just too lazy to go into farming, today.

The desire to advance their careers and to obtain further education was strong. All of the students said they wanted to further their education, most in college. However, their awareness of community resources for agriculture was limited, for example they were largely unaware of resource agencies that assist beginning farmers.

Although only three indicated interest in a farming career, eleven of the twenty students indicated an interest in a youth apprentice in production agriculture. Establishing apprenticeships for this group will involve many challenges, but the potential and desire is there.

W.B. Saul High School Focus Group II

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania January 25, 2001

Marion Bowlan- Pennsylvania Farm Link

Female - age 16, 11th grade. She has participated in FFA, dairy judging competitions at Kimberton, Goshen, Wrightstown, and the PA Farm Show. Outside of Saul High School she has no farming experience.

Female - age 16, 11th grade. Has participated in showing dairy cattle at Philadelphia, Kimberton and the PA Farm Show. She is interested in working in a greenhouse.

Female - age 17, 11th grade. She has participated in the PA Farm Show the last three years and has shown beef, sheep, dairy, and hogs. She would like to attend college to become a veterinary technician for small and large animals and have her own farm some day where she would raise sheep, goats, and cows.

Female - age 16, 11th grade. She has shown cows in Philadelphia, Kimberton, and the PA Farm Show. She would like to gain farm experience in “a little bit of everything.” Her uncle has a farm in West Virginia. Her career goals include becoming a veterinarian.

Female - age 17, 12th grade. She has not shown cattle but would like to become a large animal veterinarian and/or raise beef cattle.

Female - age 17, 11th grade. Her uncle was a dairy farmer and she would like to become a sheep farmer. She has shown pigs, and sheep at the Philadelphia fair and the PA Farm Show.

Female - age 16, 11th grade. She has not shown animals at any of the fairs and has no farming experience other than at Saul. She would like to be a large and small animal vet. Her preference for an apprenticeship is with horses.

Female - age 16, 11th grade. She has worked with sheep, but doesn't really know what she would like to do.

Female - age 16, 11th grade. She has shown sheep at the Philadelphia Fair and is uncertain about career goals.

Female - age 17, 12th grade. Has participated in the apprentice program, She says that on the farm she learned that 200 animals keep you alive. You learn what it takes to keep a milking operation running and learn a great deal about the finances. Even though she feels she has learned there isn't a lot of gain in farming she would like to become a herd person on a large dairy after high school and her apprenticeship. By comparison with the school, she feels a working farm gives you valuable experience in what it's really like.

As a whole the group agreed that they learn best through hands on experience and find it more enjoyable. Most of the participants had talked to other farmers, volunteered to work with the vet at the school, or talked to their teachers about farming. Many career goals include part-time farming and veterinary medicine. There was a noticeable increase in enthusiasm for the apprentice program and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the group took applications for the program as a result of hearing about Lisa's experience. There is still some hesitation about working on farms outside familiar areas, but most were willing to at least investigate the possibilities. Some were interested in dairy, some sheep and some beef.

The group said barriers to farm entry included finding the right location, having the money, knowledge and experience needed to acquire a farm. There was new evidence that the group felt you couldn't just jump into a career in farming, it took a lot of experience, planning, and interest. Many feel just living in the city is a barrier.

There was interest in having a "Career Day" that would include farmers. In discussions with one of the teachers, he indicated this was a possibility, especially if it was held after school. Next steps could include bringing a few farmers to Saul to talk to the students about farming.

Most students had virtually no contact with agriculture outside of the school setting and related activities. Most were interested in the apprentice program and were eager to gain hands on experience. It is of interest to note that the entire group was female with three black females and seven white females. One of the most noticeable indicators was the enthusiasm (300-400 percent increase), the desire to find out more about it, and the types of questions asked. At least several of the students indicated that they could enter a career in farming if they actively pursue an apprentice placement on a farm.

Four-year agricultural college students - Cornell University

Fall 1999

New York FarmNet - Cathy Sheils

Profile:

12 students participated

6 female, 6 male in age range of 18-23

all had farm work experience

- 2 worked on farms as employees - in both cases lived in rural communities near farm, 10 were from farm families who owned farm business
- 11 New York residents, 1 California resident
- 11 undergraduate students, 1 grad student in farm management
- 11 dairy farm experience, 1 vegetable farm experience
- most from small farms (45-130 cows) only one participant was from a large dairy,
- 1 participants family recently sold their dairy farm
- 2 participants families derive income from other enterprises ie pumpkins, hay,
- college majors: 8 animal science; 1 education; 3 farm business management
- 9 were oldest child in their family

Farm entry plans and desires:

- majority do not have plan to enter farming - most have thoughts and desires at this point
- all have a desire to enter production agriculture - majority were unsure as to how they would enter - mentioned the following choices which include: 1) 10 - going back to home farm 2) 6 - working as a farm employee and move into mgt and ownership over time, 3) 5- farming part time while also having a professional career off the farm ie. feed sales or cooperative extension and 4) 8- farming part time with another income generating enterprise ie. stone wall masonry, breeding and selling cattle, bottling milk maple syrup production were mentioned.
- two participants want to have large farm enterprises - one in dairy production the other perhaps more specialized – i.e. dairy replacements
- majority of participants are not sure they could make full time living on the size farm they desire - those from farms had experiences where farm did not provide a “comfortable” living and participants mentioned wanting their farm to provide a more “comfortable” living - definition of comfort varied; i.e. more time off with family, vacations.
- all participants would farm full time if they could make a living at it
- two participants definitely plan to enter into the family farm business - one in a large 400 cow dairy farm enterprise in NAY and the other in the family 500 acre vegetable business in CA (small in that state)- both are concerned about working relationships with older generation and the farm transfer plan - in one case the entering person does see his parents transferring ownership and he will be a worker only
- one participant plans to enter dairy farming and is talking with her parents and they are considering selling present 40 cow conventional dairy farm and buying an 80 cow dairy farm in a better location
- one participant plans to teach full time and help his family on their dairy farm part time on weekends and holidays
- one participant would like to farm with his younger brother on the family operation or look for another farm to purchase
- all participants saw farming as “owning”
- four participants wanted to have a small dairy farm 60-100 cows and believed they would have to earn additional income beyond milk sales i.e. marketing registered cattle, milk component pricing, specialty food item

Personal Characteristics needed to be a successful beginner farmer:

- dedication *
- commitment *
- open-mindedness
- need to challenge older generation
- motivation *
- crazy
- willing to take a risk *
- passion *
- fighter
- experience in farming *
- ambition
- drive and creativity
- desire to work with family
- raise your family in a rural environment with high values *
- someone who knows what they want and goes after it
- love the lifestyle *
- flexibility
- know how to deal with problems
- know how to deal with people
- willingness to work long hours
- sense of running your own business
- want to do it
- have support
- communication skills
- willingness to learn

Skills needed to be successful:

- business management skills mentioned by all participants
- people management skills mentioned by nine participants
- business sense *
- mix lifestyle and business
- willingness to take risk
- adapting to new ideas
- ability to deal with change *
- experience *
- positive attitude
- development of a support system

* mentioned by majority

Goals:

- not to be rich, but make a profit - farm cover itself and provide for family living
- raise family on a farm *
- farm to be self sufficient * (definition varied but mostly meant to cover itself and not make a profit in all cases)

* mentioned by majority

Barriers to farm entry:

- lack of a support network i.e. guidance counselors
- public opinion of the career

- constantly defending practices
- negative images of the occupation
- capital needed
- family support lacking
- family farm not a viable enterprise for the future
- unsure how to get into farming without capital needed
- difference with older generation i.e. parents

Opportunities to farm entry:

- 8 participants see opportunities - mostly in working for someone and then moving into business ownership or returning to the home farm
- being young was seen as an opportunity
- lots of older farmers needing to retire

Experience growing up on farm:

Positive

- positive - all said was positive having farm work experience growing up
- provided a chance for development of skills
- experience a lot of responsibility *

Negative:

- too much responsibility as a child
- know too much about parents financial situation
- worries you have as a child i.e. weather - see parents worries
- way the family works - business and family too intertwined

Learning preferences:

- networking with friends, neighbors, college classmates *
- one-on-one - will find someone who knows *
- surround yourself with successful people *
- watch neighbors and learn from them
- personal experiences - trial and error *
- look to credible sources of information i.e. Cornell
- trying things to see if they work
- farm tours by yourself or sponsored by extension
- talk to those who have done it or are doing it *
- need to call on others - cannot operate in isolation *
- reading farm publications

* mentioned by majority

* identified by majority

MAC Project Focus Group January 22, 2001 State University of NY at Morrisville

Cathy Sheils gave introduction of project and herself
Participants were asked to give brief introduction about themselves
Twelve students and two professors attended the focus group

GIBBS-comes from Orange County, small 60 cow dairy, wants to work for Farm Credit
CORNELL-comes from 300 cow dairy family farm. Wants to teach (agricultural related)
LILLY-small, 50 cow farm in NY, maybe teaching also
CHAMBERS-family started dairy in 91, 100 cows, going on to Cornell University.
BUFFALO-large family farm, 600 Heifers, 60,000 Chickens, Honey, also roadside stand plus 550 acres produce farm
MOSHER-comes from 100 cow farm in NY and wants to run a farm
WARREN-600 acre crop farm (owned by grandfather)
BARTEL-from Oswego, wants to become an assistant herdsman
SHINELL-small, 50 cow farm, wants to get masters from Cornell and then go home
JESSICA-small farm with horses, cows, and off farm income. Wants to become a Vet
BACH-120 cow family farm, will eventually take over.

Cathy: Question: What is your definition of a beginner farmer?

BECKY: Don't know
CRYSTAL: Start from scratch
LISA: Same
BRIAN: Looking into where nothing exists
MATT: has not been involved before in farming
BOBBY: Same
JOSH: Never owned one before but has assets
ERIC: Ditto
RUSTY: Has no experience and no resources
JAY: Start from beginning
JESSICA: Someone with some experience as a way in that might take over afterward

Cathy: Question: What type of individuals do you see wanting to go into farming as a career? (Who are beginner farmers and potential beginner farmers?)

BOBBY: A Wallstreet broker type, someone who talks to people
JOSH: Adventure some, independent
ERIC: Someone raised on a farm
RUSTY: Ditto
JAY: Born into it, plus with some other background
JESSICA: Some people despise the fact that they have been born into it
LEE: Needs a background
BECKY: A person who loves animals
CRYSTAL: A person that loves agriculture
LISA: People who grew up around it
BRIAN: Needs to love the outdoors and does not want to sit behind a desk all day
MATT: A hard working person who wants to be his own boss

Cathy: Question: What characteristics does a person need to possess to be successful as a beginner farmer?

JOSH: Hard working, good people skills, PR know how
ERIC: Not afraid of getting dirty
RUSTY: Not afraid of debt
JAY: Adaptable
JESSICA: Organized
LEE: Work hard and likes it
BECKY: Communicate well
CRYSTAL: Time
LISA: Self motivated, can work alone
BRIAN: Know finances, is stable and understands management
MATT: Ditto
BOBBY: Likes new things, knows how to complain (if you deal with government, etc.), will not be left behind

Cathy: Question: Have your farming experiences been positive or negative: explain?

ERIC: Positive and not
RUSTY: Positive, I like to do it
JAY: Positive because of self discipline, but also negative
JESSICA: Positive, because of family bond
LEE: Positive, because of work with people
BECKY: Positive
CRYSTAL: Positive because of responsibility and negative when things go wrong
LISA: Positive because it teaches you time management and negative because of working with other farmers
BRIAN: Mostly positive. Young adults learn things. Finances, time management and you can see the effects
MATT: Positive because of responsibility
BOBBY: Positive and negative. You can make lots of money and be your own boss or you can lose lots and go hungry
JOSH: Positive because of dedication, organizational skills, family values. Also beats city living

Cathy: Question: Do you plan to enter farming as a career? And if so, what type of farming and where?

RUSTY: Yes, dairy has the most income potential. But also some non farm income
JAY: Yes, will work at home
JESSICA: Yes, part time, plus being a vet
LEE: Dairy, want to own my own
BECKY: Work for Farm Credit
CRYSTAL: Maybe rent out, teaching
LISA: Don't know
BRIAN: Want to farm and raise Heifers
MATT: Raise vegetables and work on farm at home
BOBBY: Go into shipping and buying, produce
JOSH: Go home to dairy
ERIC: Like to raise crops, hay, corn, soy

Cathy: Question: How do you plan on entering into farming?

JAY: Slowly

JESSICA: Learning the ways slowly
LEE: Through a Partnership, slowly
BECKY: No
CRYSTAL: Gain experience slowly
LISA: No
BRIAN: Get into partnership and get experience
MATT: On my own build something slowly
BOBBY: At home, have kids and work with them
JOSH: Through Partnership
ERIC: Try something else first
RUSTY: Try something else first and then a partnership

Cathy: Question: What resources do you think either you or those who are looking to enter farming need?

JESSICA: Education, work for experience
LEE: Education
BECKY: Industry experience
CRYSTAL: Facilities experience
LISA: Have a 5 to 10 year plan and a mentor. But not family
BRIAN: Good relations such as Cornell, etc.
MATT: Education and money, experience and contacts
BOBBY: Education and friends
JOSH: Experience, offer new ideas and things, education based on other things than dairy, finances
ERIC: Ditto
RUSTY: Start late and build
JAY: Education and experience

Cathy: Question: What experience do you think either you or those who are looking to enter farming need?

LEE: If the plans are big-what goals do you have
BECKY: What criteria
CRYSTAL: Knowing what you want
LISA: Broad range of experience is needed
BRIAN: Touch base on all farming issues. Big and small
MATT: Experience with other things
BOBBY: Experience with one success and failure also
JOSH: Off farm experience
ERIC: Experience with people and what they think
RUSTY: Ditto
JAY: Hands on experience and input
JESSICA: Broad spectrum of experience. What works and what doesn't

All participants felt that internships and information about farming and agriculture should be made available to high schools. Needs for Web sites with links to farm sites, network groups, advertising groups and home page links to industry specific sites like dairy and job postings are also needed.

Cathy: Question: What education do you think either you or those who are looking to enter farming need?

BRIAN: Nutrition
MATT: Accounting, general math, management, how to be a boss
BOBBY: Arts and a view of the world
JOSH: Informal education is OK also. Either one is good. More likely to be successful through experience
ERIC: Know the basic mechanics of smaller things
RUSTY: Ditto, pick up on things, use common sense
JAY: Formal and practical
JESSICA: Formal plus labs, government, and how the process works
LEE: Agree with everything

Eight participants will continue with more education after graduating from Morrisville

Cathy: Question: How will you go about acquiring information related to farming?

RUSTY: From boss, sales people, focus groups
ERIC: Magazines
JOSH: Extension, Cornell, other farmers, nutritionists, professors
BOBBY: Weekly, cooperative extension
MATT: Internet
BRIAN: All of the above and seminars
LISA: Consultants
CRYSTAL: Same
BECKY: Consultants, ditto
LEE: Media, etc.
JESSICA: Family, friends
JAY: Neighbors

Cathy: Question: What is your preferred learning environment or type of learning?

LISA: Interactive
CRYSTAL: By doing, experimental and lecture
LEE: Hands on and lecture
JESSICA: Interactive
JAY: Hands on, groups
RUSTY: Hands on
ERIC: Hands on and one on one
JOSH: Hands on with small groups, problem solving
BOBBY: Outside
MATT: Hands on
BRIAN: Hands on with lectures

Cathy: Question: How do you want to receive support of your farming career?

BRIAN: Lots of it, financial and from sales people
MATT: Information
BOBBY: From Family
JOSH: From lenders, neighbors working together, consortiums
ERIC: Family
JAY: Family, friends and in financial matters
JESSICA: In education and finances
LEE: Family and friends

BECKY: Anyone
CRYSTAL: Education
LISA: Have the industry behind you and back you up

BARRIERS

JAY: Too much invested in family, can't leave
RUSTY: No farm to go back to. Lacking financial and family support
ERIC: In Dutchess county - urban location
JOSH: Not enough schooling available (no ag in high school) and lack of finances
BOBBY: Prices of equipment and property are too high. State rents land back under current conditions
MATT: Lack of land and hired help problems
BRIAN: Farm is in someone else's name. Hired help
LISA: Topography, father passing away, estate planning and management
CRYSTAL: Stuck there and tied down
BECKY: Competition for land
LEE: Father does not want to retire, debt load too high
JESSICA: Not sure

OPPORTUNITIES

CRYSTAL: Start off as an employee, get experience
LISA: Good experience
BRIAN: Growing industry, people need to eat. Good help needed
MATT: Be an employee and then become a partner
BOBBY: Location, family oriented, kids grow up healthy in good environment
JOSH: Retiring farmers are willing to work with the young. Niche market in the East filled with opportunities
ERIC: Can start small and grow
RUSTY: Huge return on investment, become more efficient in the future
JAY: Educate small children about agriculture and products
JESSICA: Large, growing population needs food
LEE: Niche markets, including overseas, use new technology
BECKY: Be part of it and in it by being an employee

Jessica remarked about the negative image that agriculture has in general
John mentioned risk management, lending institution alternatives and management skills
Cathy talked about produce and how to sell products with add on value

Appendix 2. Northeast New Farmer Focus Group Findings

Marion Bowlan, Cathy Sheils and Eric Toensmeier summarized by Sue Ellen Johnson

Introduction

The Northeast New Farmer Network is a collaborative initiative funded by the Mid-Atlantic Consortium and NE-SARE to improve programs and services for new farmers in the northeast states. During 1999 and 2001 nine focus groups were held with Northeast new (prospective and beginning) farmers. Between 8 and 16 individuals participated in each of the discussions/group interviews that lasted 2-3 hours. The intent of these meetings was to discover what people who wanted to become farmers needed and wanted (in terms of services and resources) to successfully enter/begin farming.

The focus groups were conducted with 3 groups of vocational agriculture high school students, groups of 2 and 4 year college students enrolled in agricultural programs, and four groups of adult, non-traditional learners.

This overview summarizes the findings and comments of the focus groups based on age and educational status. The focus group process demonstrated that “educational level” is not the only or most effective way to think about programming for individuals interested in becoming farmers. We conclude with some common themes that emerged from all the focus groups. An extensive focus group report presenting a typology of new farmers is available from NENFN.

High School Students

Focus Groups conducted by Marion Bowlan- Pennsylvania Farm Link

Three groups of high school students were interviewed at their schools (Manheim Central, a rural vocational school; and Saul, an urban vocational/college prep school) in southern Pennsylvania. Many of the urban high school students, although enrolled in vo-ag programs, did not necessarily intend to farm, and indicated they were not being encouraged to consider farming as a career. Few high school students felt farming was feasible as a full-time/full-income employment option. Those students interested in farming, mostly at the rural high school, suggested that their ag training program was not as intensive as it needed to be for students who wanted to be farmers.

Finding:

“Recruitment” of young people into farming is clearly an important issue for our region. Student advisors have great influence in encouraging or discouraging consideration of farming as a career choice. Recruitment requires unique programming initiatives. Although they had farm classes and hands-on opportunities at a school farm, students who didn’t come from farming communities were generally unaware of the resources or opportunities or “paths” that might be used to enter farming. *This finding highlights the attitudes of vo-ag students and their instructors towards farming, and the need for a project directed at the recruitment of young people into farming.*

College Students

Focus Groups conducted by Cathleen Sheils (NY FarmNet)

College students were interviewed at SUNY-Morrisville and at Cornell University in west central New York. All of the 4-year college students who participated in a focus group were enrolled in an ag program. Although interested in production agriculture few intended a career in farming. (Two out of 12 were returning to a home farm). They felt it wasn't a feasible career/livelihood option with too much economic risk. In contrast, eight of the twelve students in the two-year vocational college focus group did intend to farm. Those two-year college students who indicated a strong relationship with a "home farm" planned to work to accumulate capital in order to get started. Most anticipated farming as a part-time vocation because of the depression of the farm economy.

Finding:

Almost all the college students that came from a farm did not consider themselves "beginning" farmers.

Non-traditional Adult Learners

Focus Groups conducted by Eric Toensmeier (New England Small Farm Institute)

The four adult "non-traditional" learner focus groups were conducted in Massachusetts. All of the participants in the non-traditional learner (non-student) focus groups had intentions to farm (or were farming) commercially though at very different scales producing a wide range of commodities. Four distinct groups were interviewed: young people with a farm background, young people without farm background, "mid-life" career changers, and immigrants.

Finding:

New farmers who are immigrants face specific linguistic and cultural barriers, but also have unique market opportunities. Many have farming experience. A major barrier is land access.

The comprehensive specialized programs being developed for some immigrant groups may be useful models for other types of new farmers.

Common themes of the new farmer focus groups

Finding:

New farmers come from many backgrounds and have a variety of farming visions. Focus group participants who were interested in farming had a range of experiential levels, assets and understanding of the challenges involved in farming commercially in the northeast.

Differences in farm background, farming skills and business experience, available resources, credit access, and farm goals influence the programming needs of new farmers.

Finding:

Interest in "worthwhile work", "self-employment", "being outside" and "quality of (family) life" were generally cited motivations for farming as a career.

Enthusiasm and commitment to farming were mingled with concerns about "how to make it work". Many were considering farming part-time as the only way to have a viable farming career.

Finding:

The issue overshadowing farming as a profession is the farm economy.

Limited market opportunities, farmland prices, inability to support a family on farm income and the lack of financial security are all cited farm economic concerns. **The overall situation of the farm and food economy in the Northeast needs to be addressed if new farmers are to enter and succeed in farming.**

Finding:

New farmers are at different stages in their commitment to and dependence on farming. *New farmers may be exploring the possibility, others are planning their farm, while others are already starting or establishing their farms.*

Finding:

Differences in farming background and whether or not one is already active in a farming operation are key factors that should shape programming. New farmer programming must take factors other than educational status into consideration.

In the adult and high school focus groups those people exploring farming had very different priorities for service and information needs than people who were already farming. Beginning farmers (new farmers who were actually, already farming) expressed a need for comprehensive and condensed information sources, basically an efficient means for collecting information time being critical. They also need different kinds of information.

Finding:

Many new farmers who lack farm background need guidance to understand all the possible risks and returns of a farm enterprise.

Agriculture was described as a "big gamble" by students with a farm background, and as "high risk, but not high return". In contrast, new farmers without farm backgrounds generally recognized high land costs, skill and knowledge barriers to farm start-up, but did not mention profitability of farming operations.

Finding:

New farmers require different kinds of programs and services than established farmers. New farmers interests, knowledge – experiential base and constraints as well as the kind of information they need is different than established farmers.

New farmers in the exploring or planning phase tend to operate and look for programming on different seasonal schedules than established farmers.

Finding:

Hands-on instruction and interaction with farmers through workshops or less formal systems was considered the best way to learn by most of the focus groups participants. Appreciation for computer based learning or formal educational programs was more moderate. Many expressed a desire for one-on-one advice.

High school students in the focus groups who were interested in farming expressed minimal interest in higher education.

Finding:

Many focus group participants wanted or had had some experience on a farm as an apprentice or employee. While working on a farm is a worthwhile “keystone” experience most focus group participants indicated that a single experience is inadequate. Work-visit experience on multiple farms was indicated as advantageous by several focus groups.

Although there are numerous formal and informal apprenticeship options scattered around the northeast, quality and opportunities for farm apprenticeship/internship experiences vary greatly. Some non-traditional learners reported negative informal apprenticeship experiences.

Finding:

The desire for social and community support and the importance of a farming peer network suggests a need to develop new forms of “farm community” in many areas of the northeast. Many focus group participants, especially career changing adult learners, were concerned about family and spousal support as they began a farming operation. One high school student described farming “as a third world occupation” without respect in the greater community.

Almost every focus group expressed appreciation for the opportunity the focus group provided to meet together with other new farmers and discuss farming and their personal program needs and farming goals.

Finding:

There are many individuals who want to farm in the northeast.

Almost every focus group participant defined “farming” as farm ownership. The Jeffersonian agrarian ideal is alive, but new farmers need active support in terms of programs, services, and policy.

Appendix 3. NENFN Advisory Group

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