

**Northeast SARE Core Curriculum
Planning Group -- Albany Airport Hilton
January 6, 2004**

**SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS ON CONTENT, EFFECTIVE FORMATS AND INCENTIVES
TO ENSURE ATTENDANCE**

Background.

The purpose of the Northeast SARE Core Curriculum Planning Group meeting was to review the input obtained in two focus groups of cooperative extension educators and NRCS service providers held in Lancaster, PA (July 2003) and New Hampton, MA (September 2003). A second purpose was to identify the key elements of a proposal for the development of a “core” professional development curriculum for discussion at the PDP Coordinators’ meeting in Feb 2004 and presentation to the Northeast SARE Administrative Council at its February meeting.

The following pages provide a summary of the subject matter/knowledge and skills that experienced and newly employed educators and agency staff need to know about sustainable agriculture. Strengths and gaps are listed, with an asterisk on those gaps viewed as highest priority for core curriculum development.

The last two pages provide a listing of suggested learning formats that are effective and the suggested incentives for educators and service providers to attend.

Newly Employed Staff: Subject Matter/Knowledge

⇒ **Strengths.**

- Have heard the term “sustainable agriculture” and/or “agricultural sustainability
- Training in science/technology (production practices) or business management
 - Narrow area of depth and specialization for CE, but NRCS staff may not be specialized.
 - Strong on theory; many less experienced with practical on-farm implementation
- Grounded in “best practices approach.” Text-book answers. You have a problem; I have a research-based solution. “If it is not research-based we cannot talk about it.”
- Variable depending on training and experiences.

⇒ **Gaps.** (Variable depending on training and experiences. A cookie cutter/one size fits all approach is not appropriate. Curriculum should be flexible and accommodate somewhat individualized study.)

- ***What is “sustainable agriculture” or “agricultural sustainability.” Their definitions vary depending on with whom they have worked/studied. (Proposed to be part of the National Core curriculum.)
 - Particularly the social component of ag sustainability.
 - The integration/system to address production/profit, environment and social aspects simultaneously.
- ***Basic knowledge in areas outside their specialty and/or experience (example include: organic production, soil health, marketing, business planning, the economics of production practices and technologies, farm land preservation, agroforestry and agritourism etc)
 - **These topics may be the ones that are most effective in drawing staff to participate in the core curriculum.**
 - **May be best to integrate other high priority topics in experiences that address these topics.**

- ***Background on systems approaches; whole-farm systems and whole-farm management. (Alternative terminology may be managing holistically.)
- ***Principles of effective adult learning.
- How entrepreneurs think and their decision-making processes.
- Managing a farm business to achieve family, personal and business (profit) goals simultaneously. The decision-making process to achieve balance and personal success.
- Policies affecting agriculture. Big picture. Food policy issues and impacts on agriculture in the NE.

***Highest priority for a core curriculum.

Newly Employed Staff: Skills

⇒ **Attributes and abilities.**

- Thirst for new knowledge.
- Open to learning, advice and direction to ensure success.
- University research methodology; lab and field techniques.
- Interpretation of research results.
- Class room lecture style teaching
- Learning using the internet
- Computer skills in general
- Consulting approach—you have a question/problem; here is the answer/solution.

⇒ **Gaps**

- ***How to talk with farmers; developing trust with farmers and confidence in oneself.
 - Many have no practical farm/farming experience.
 - Gaining trust, credibility and confidence.
 - Observation skills—what do you see and balance that with what you are being told
 - Questioning skills—questions to ask and how to ask them.
 - Listening skills—often the real challenges are not on the surface. What is really being said?
 - Listen, observe and question before offering an opinion.
- ***Appreciation of education vis a vis the “expert approach.”
- ***Effective adult education skills and techniques
 - Why do people change and how to influence the process.
 - Serving as a facilitator/information provider not the expert with the answer/solution.
 - Farmer to farmer learning—dealing with knowledge that is not “university research based”
 - Group dynamics and leadership development for farmer discussion groups.
- ***Dealing with farms/families in change (included crisis)
 - Recognizing that family conflicts are often the most important barriers to change in the farm business.
 - Recognizing and dealing with conflict among family members or confidence in making referrals to others more skilled in providing assistance.
- ***On-farm research

- Particularly, farmer directed research.
- May be only exposure for new staff; not building a high level of competency.
- ***Systems thinking/systems approaches.
 - Farms as systems, and
 - Farms operating within a larger food/food policy system.
 - Critical thinking.
 - Monitoring and evaluation. Identifying outcomes indicating success and milestones measuring progress toward outcomes that are sought.
- Comfort and confidence in moving from a specialist to a generalist in areas outside specialty.
 - Team approach; working effectively as teams bringing multiple skills and areas of expertise to bear on a problem
- Dealing with ambiguity and the unknown---there's not a research based answer/solution to everything. Research-based solutions are not successful in every situation.
 - There is no single, right answer/approach.
 - Research based knowledge vs. farmer experience and knowledge.
 - Success is 80% attitude/solid thought processes and 20% technology

*****Highest priority for core curriculum.**

Experienced staff: Subject matter knowledge

⇒ Strengths.

- Highly variable within and across states.
- Most keep current in their area of training/discipline.
- Some have developed a clear vision for sustainable agriculture and can teach it.
- Newest technology and “best practices.”
 - Credibility with one or more agricultural audiences.
 - Established and effective working relationships with at least some groups of farmers and some service providers.
 - Established networks with service providers and farmers.
- Established communication networks.

⇒ Gaps.

- ***Changing structure of agriculture and its implications for the NE.
 - Farm policy impact on farms and farming.
 - Food policy impacts on farms and farming
- ***Business/enterprise analysis.
- *** Understanding the human/people side of the farm business
 - Understanding gender differences and how to deal with them.
 - Balancing and integrating personal, family and business (profit) goals.
 - How entrepreneurs think. Stimulating entrepreneurial thinking among farmers.
 - Understanding decision-making processes and how to influence it.
- ***Principles of adult learning. Why people change and how to influence it.
- ***Systems thinking—farms and farm businesses as a system within a larger food system.
 - Commodity focused, narrow; need a broader perspective.

- Whole-farm management; managing the farm holistically.
- Defining desired outcomes and the monitoring and evaluating progress
- ***Social issues in ag and how to deal with them.
- New and emerging topics like pastured poultry, grass fed livestock, agritourism, soil health etc. (Especially those that land grant institutions are slow to “embrace” such as organic)
- Resources in areas outside their expertise—who are they or where are they?
- Sustaining the “industry” vs. sustaining an individual farm. Does sustaining the industry drive us to a large farm approach?

*****Highest priority for core curriculum.**

Experienced staff: Skills

⇒ **Attributes and abilities.**

- *Some, but certainly not all* have learned that it’s the people that make the difference, not technology and best practices.
 - Focus on people and the processes and info they need to make decisions.
 - Focus on decision-making—not a “recommendation”
- Confidence they don’t need to have an answer for every question.
- Consulting; providing answers in their disciplinary area of expertise
- Politically astute.
- Lecture style of teaching.
- Experience in translating theory to on-farm practice.
- Communicating with farmers—know the basic terminology etc.
- Garnering resources including grants.
- On-farm demonstrations.

⇒ **Gaps**

- ***Systems thinking and systems approaches.
 - Critical thinking-practicing it and teaching it.
 - Managing the farm holistically.
 - Farms as part of a larger food and food policy system.
- ***Gaining trust with diverse groups who think and act differently.
 - Difficulty seeing change as an opportunity. This has been successful, why is there a need to change it. Prove the need.
 - Not just farmer groups; includes food system and consumer activist groups.
- ***Diverse and innovative processes and models for adult learning and behavior change.
 - Farmer to farmer learning
 - Effective adult learning processes. Facilitation—helping people find the answers themselves.
 - Knowledge of how people change—what is the trigger? Can we create teachable moments? What blocks change?
- ***Integration of farm/family goals and decision-making.
 - Inquiry and listening skills—what is the real problem?
 - Counseling skills—social interactions, farms in crisis.
- ***On-farm (farmer driven) research

- Implementing effective team approaches.

*****Highest priority for core curriculum.**

Learning formats—What works best?

“Curricular approach.”

- ⇒ Focus on those who want to learn and change—not necessarily all staff.
- ⇒ Group learning—mixtures of experiences.
- ⇒ Regional/multi-state approach—provide diverse experiences.
- ⇒ Travel (out-of state) —broaden educators horizons.
- ⇒ Farm experiences
 - Hands on, on farm; combined with lectures and workshops.
 - Farm visits with specific focus; not general farm tours.
 - Farms as training sites; perhaps multiple days working with a specific farm example
- ⇒ Teaching staff.
 - Farmers as teachers; land grant departments never have all the answers.
 - Educators and service providers as teachers (staff-to-staff learning)
 - University and agency staff as teachers, but not limited to these “experts.”
- ⇒ Intensive multi-day (three-day/two night max) maybe sequential over a period of months on the same topic.
- ⇒ Case studies/decision cases.
- ⇒ Interactive web-based material and other self taught materials, *but only if supplementary to other experiences.*
- ⇒ Planned follow-up and reinforcement after learning experiences. Includes “work between sessions.”
- ⇒ Where appropriate consider experiences that engage both new and experienced staff; use concurrent tracts that separate new and experienced staff for some topics.

Experience-based approaches. (may or may not be coupled with a curricular approach.)

- ⇒ Mini-sabbaticals and/or part-time assignments with new responsibilities.
- ⇒ Job shadowing/mentoring.
- ⇒ Internships
 - On farms
 - With other organizations.

Incentives for educators and service providers to attend.

- ⇒ Continuing Education or other course credit mechanisms. (e.g. CCA credits, professional certification, graduate credit.)
- ⇒ Relevance; addresses a “personal need” that is recognized by the individual.
 - New, not a rehash of old topics and info.
 - Value of the experience to the participant justifies time (travel as well as the learning experience or workshop)

- ⇒ Buy-in of the employing organization
 - Supervisor requests and/or requires.
 - Permission from supervisor to “be away.”
 - Encouraged at all levels of the employing organization.
 - Required or significant advantage for promotion.
- ⇒ Credible leaders and teachers;
 - Successful track record.
 - Name recognition of facilitators and teachers.
- ⇒ Scholarships/funds to cover major expenses to attend.
- ⇒ Sufficient planning horizon so participants can avoid work and family conflicts.