

Survey of State PDP Coordinators

Re: Core Curriculum in Sustainable Agriculture for CE and other professionals

Conducted via email Spring 2003 by Kim Kroll, National SARE Program

(n = ???)

Questions

1. What should extension educators know about sustainable agriculture? What specific resources and/or topics should they be aware of? What skills should they have? What attitudes should educators have about sustainable agriculture?

2. What should an educator who know about sustainable agriculture do when working with producers and others? How should their knowledge about sustainable agriculture affect their practices and decisions as educators? How might it affect their interactions with producers and others?

Answers

1a. What should extension educators know about sustainable agriculture?

- the "true" definition of sustainable agriculture
- potential profitability
- potential to positively impact water quality
- a strong definition that is understandable by producers
- wealth of information about sustainable agriculture lies within farmers
 - sustainable agriculture is so diverse and at times the word "sustainable" is used rather loosely that one needs to experience a sustainable farm in order to get a good handle on sus ag
 - find the farmers in their region whose practices are closest to "sustainable" (good luck with that definition), and learn how and why they have chosen to farm as they do
 - help these farmers share their stories and skills with other farmers
- understanding of how farmers can steadily transition to sustainable ag systems
- business planning to processes dealing with their specific product
- understanding soils and plant science, integrated management
- they should know some of the basic definitions of sustainable agriculture, why some people believe that conventional agriculture might not be sustainable, some examples of practices that are believed to be more sustainable, and some of the controversy surrounding sustainable agriculture (why not everyone is excited about supporting sustainable agriculture)
- general concepts of sustainable agriculture and how those concepts fit into practical applications-- concepts could include:
 - a general overview of sustainable agriculture with a definition of terms
 - an introduction to the goals and objectives of sustainable agriculture
 - a discussion of the "umbrella concept" and the characteristics or identifiers of a sustainable system
 - there might also be included a discussion of some of the measurement tools to help evaluate systems
- sustainable agriculture is about working for and toward the best interests of farmers and agriculture; it is about prosperous agricultural enterprises that conserve and enhance resources for long-term continuing success and the benefit of the whole ecosystem on which agriculture and the larger community depend; sustainable agriculture is agriculture that is supportive of the larger

community and supported by the larger community (how are we defining sustainable agriculture-- is it production or is it the whole food system, or something in between?)

- it's not just for small farmers, that it is science-based, and that farm profitability is a prime concern
- they should know something about the ecological aspects of crop/livestock production, along the lines of Michigan's Field Crop Pest Ecology publication; more specifically, they should:
 - know that soil quality and conservation are important and know some of the keys in those topics, including the importance of organic matter, reduced tillage, and controlling soil erosion
 - learn the fundamentals of IPM, or even better biologically intensive IPM
 - know about the problems in agriculture that are the incentive to become more sustainable
 - have an idea about how the whole food system is important when addressing sustainability

1b. What specific resources and/or topics should they be aware of?

- good business planning and marketing, environmental quality... soil biology, water quality, nutrient management
- pest management...IPM
- SARE, ATTRA, Growing For Market, NGO's in their state
- economic analysis formula for evaluating enterprises
- New Farm, the Center for Holistic Management
- cover crops, crop rotation, less tillage, whole farm approach, marketing
- ask the farmers who are getting closer to "sustainable" what has worked for them
- business plans, feasibilities, coop structures, entering new markets
- easy access to SARE on-farm(farmer) research
- SARE/SAN and their state coordinator
- Topics: soil quality including organic matter, agro-ecology or at least crop ecology, alternative livestock production systems including pasture-based systems and hoopouses, direct marketing and other marketing alternatives such as certified organic production, on-farm research methods.

1c. What skills should they have?

- where to access this information
- basic understanding of sustainable and organic practices in their areas of expertise
- economic analysis, social counseling, strategic planning, empathy
- listening, networking, openness, understanding of the need to perennialize and diversify for the many social, environmental, and economically based reasons
- ability to communicate, rapport with farmers
- active listening, interpersonal communication, intelligence, patience, social intuition, courage, ethical fortitude
- access to someone with, or knowledge of, sound on-farm research, grazing systems, organics, business planning, entering new markets, community-based food systems
- farm/business planning, areas mentioned above (soils, plants) plus maybe some general animal sciences
- they should be good at solving problems, finding info on the web, and knowing how to set up and analyze results from on-farm research
- ability to listen to the needs and concerns of farmers and their customers and community

- to look at both short and long-term consequences and the 'big picture' of decisions
- to think across disciplines, and to draw on or collaborate with partners who bring different skills, interests, and areas of expertise
- the ability to think about the implications of practices in terms of the social, economic, and environmental impacts; ability to think about systems; ability to conduct on-farm research

1d. What attitudes should educators have about sustainable agriculture?

- sustainable ag is more than organic... it's a systems approach to staying in business and taking care of the land for the future
- should be open to it so long as it is "research-based"
- a mindset of resource (all types) enhancement for stability
- open, engaging
- a willingness to learn and investigate, wisdom to know the difference of what may indeed work for one farm, but lacks potential for widespread use
- a humble attitude; this is a big project; a skeptical attitude; some success stories are less than skin deep; a wryly humorous attitude
- sustainable agriculture means "keeping farmers in business", not "organic farming", and that "bigger is not always better"
- they should be prepared for the fact that many sustainable farmers are suspicious or even hostile to extension and they'll need to be able to get beyond that and persist in their attempts to be helpful; they should also recognize that they might not get much support from some of their colleagues or from some administrators or specialists on campus
- sustainable ag is good for farmers, farm families, people who work in agriculture, people who live near farms, who eat or use farm products, for the natural and cultural landscape, and the environment
- perhaps a discussion about subjectivity in extension, along the lines of an article in the Journal of Extension (on-line) entitled "Value-free Extension Education."

Answers

2a. *What should an educator who knows about sustainable agriculture do when working with producers and others?*

- present it as another viable method of production; share that particular knowledge base
- listen, learn, get to know client prior to offering materials and suggestions
- use the learning circle as a means of tapping in to the wealth of knowledge in a group
- find info for questions that are raised
- be an active listener; ask questions; keep your eyes open; sit at their kitchen tables; encourage, empower, instill hope; share stories; challenge uncritical thinking; celebrate successes
- fostering a truly collaborative culture among extension would be very beneficial; working away from 'technical transfer' into a culture of facilitation
- the real problem is in tailoring these concepts so that they address specific regional applications--this has been a challenge for me for American Samoa
- incorporate sustainable "techniques, methods or attitudes" into how they help the farmer be more profitable/successful

- they should listen carefully to a description of the problem and needs before offering potential solutions; they should be willing to go to unconventional sources for more information and ideas
- working with the best farmers always pays off. It is also good to be associated with any sustainable agriculture organizations in your state/region, whether inside or outside the university

2b. How should their knowledge about sustainable agriculture affect their practices and decisions as educators?

- they should not be afraid to point out the issues mentioned in the first question
- should heavily support those willing to implement sustainable practices while still attempting to educate those resource managers who have not bought in
- be known as a person who "practices what they preach"
- I would hope they would focus their work on localized, community-based educational approaches
- they will probably begin using more resources outside of their land-grant university, they will begin attending different kinds of workshops and field days, and they will begin reading different kinds of magazines and newsletters
- on-farm research is a must, as there are too many questions out there to be answered by traditional researchers
- they should be able to attract grant money for innovative projects
- they should not tell people that they are not sustainable or that they need to become sustainable, but rather present specifics that will improve their sustainability; stressing the profitability part while including the social and environmental aspects also works well

2c. How might it affect their interactions with producers and others?

- consistent support for those implementing practices are often seen as placing an emphasis on a "chosen few"; this must be offset by other educational efforts
- they will be respected and sought after if indeed they can help farmers with stimulating their thinking in regards to the ag practices they use and answer their questions they might have
- they should feel an ethical imperative to share what they've learned with others and encourage them to adopt practices that move us all toward a sustainable future
- farmers/producers will realize that the educators really care if farms stay in business and are profitable and will respond with greater interest to the educator
- they will probably start interacting with new groups of people that they haven't interacted with before; they will probably recognize that they can learn as much from others (especially farmers) as others can learn from them; some of their more conventional colleagues might be critical of their work