Competitive Grant Report M2009-18

Abstract: Students in an ISU sustainable agriculture class worked with the Leopold Center’s Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWGs) on cementing ties with community food groups and enterprises.

What was done and why?
Since 2005, the PI has taught a summer experiential field course in Agroecosystems Analysis that focused on many enterprises across multiple communities. This project attempted to replicate that model in a community-based, project-focused class that emphasized only a few community projects and engagement with local residents.

Objectives of the project were to:
• Contribute and complement the efforts of the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) and increase the participation within and among them by adding students to the mix, and
• Demonstrate the unrealized potential of creatively engaging students in outreach/extension functions of community food systems development through successful completion of projects identified by the RFSWG.

What did we learn?
The project was a qualified success, based on achieving the two major project objectives and meeting all learning outcomes for the class. Student project work was disseminated in a variety of venues and all but one student project was successfully completed. Interest was expressed by RFSWG partners, especially SWIFFI, to continue working with the students, and interest in the course was expressed by a new cohort of students. Additional funding was obtained to sustain efforts in the southwest Iowa region and across the state line in Nebraska.

While not focused exclusively on farming and farmers, the RFSWGs have explicit or implicit objectives to benefit farmers. Students interviewed farmers and mapped farming enterprises as a part of their projects. In two cases, project work was influenced by a desire by students to return to a particular area to farm upon graduation (northern Iowa; in one case; Pottawattamie County, part of the Southwest Iowa Food and Farming Initiative RFSWG, in the other).