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Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture: Dream to Farm

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

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Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture: Dream to Farm

Abstract

One of our Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture, this publication is a case study about a course created and offered at Iowa Western Community College to prepare students to produce food on small parcels of land for local markets.

Disciplines

Agriculture | Sustainability

Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture:

At Iowa Western Community College in Council Bluffs, Iowa, students learn production and marketing basics to launch and expand local, sustainable micro-farms.

The Story

The Dream to Farm course was created and offered at Iowa Western Community College to prepare students to produce food on small parcels of land for local markets. Seven graduates have already launched their farm and seven others are preparing to do so.

The Opportunity

Lack of access to healthy food is one problem facing rural residents of southwest Iowa. Matt Mancuso, director of sustainability at Iowa Western Community College (IWCC), saw an opportunity to address this issue while also filling a demand for education from aspiring farmers.

Mancuso observed this demand in IWCC's gardening classes. "The gardening classes had so many people involved that wanted to start a small farm that I saw interest was there." In addition, he recognized the economic opportunity that can be tapped in the region. "The amount of food sold through farmers markets is increasing 15 to 20 percent per year [...] To grow that market, we need to grow local farmers."

DREAM TO FARM

The Strategy

Partners

Mancuso and Bahia Nightengale, who was then the local foods coordinator at the Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development, envisioned offering a "micro-farming" course in response. According to Mancuso, micro-farming refers to intensive farming on small pieces of land, often between two and four acres, both in rural and urban settings. "We're looking at small farms that are community-based and growing local foods," says Mancuso.



Connection to the Leopold Center

To develop the course Mancuso and Nightengale sought and were awarded a small grant from the Leopold Center, worth \$16,994. The funds were used to create the Dream to Farm curriculum and offer the course twice in 2012.

Mancuso and Nightengale assembled a group of farmers and IWCC horticulture instructors to create the curriculum. "We sat down with them and identified what the main areas were that we needed to make sure people understood how to become local farmers," says Mancuso.

"We gathered with neighbors around food and celebrated the abundance of our fall harvest!"

—Ali Clark, member of the Big Muddy Urban Farm collective



Big Muddy Urban Farm holds an end-of-season community potluck.
Credit: Ali Clark

DREAM TO FARM

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Dream to Farm was offered twice in 2012 with 20 graduates. The class was taught not only by IWCC instructors, but also farmers, local food advocates and other community partners with expertise in business, accounting, permaculture, soils and more.

Making a Difference

Seven course graduates are now producing for local markets. Another seven are scaling up their production or working in other facets of the local foods movement.

Janna Feldman first heard of the course when her business, Doe's and Diva's Dairy, Inc., was going through a transition. She milks goats and sheep and produces cheeses and soaps in the Honey Creek region between Council Bluffs and Missouri Valley.

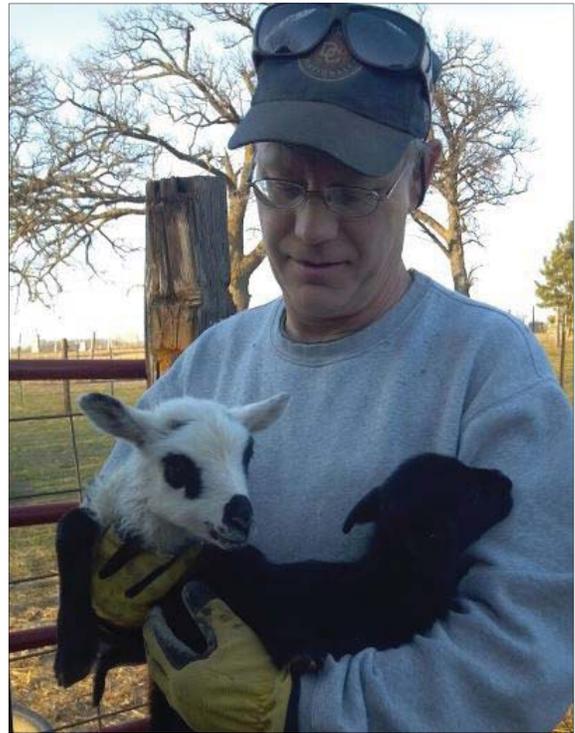
A partnership that was essential to her operation dissolved in June 2012, leaving her with goats, sheep and a milking parlor, but no place to store and process the milk. "It was devastating," she says. "Bahia said I needed a business plan and told me of a program that could help."

Feldman and her husband, Tom, took the course together and spent hours outside of class with instructors creating a business plan. With plan in hand, they sought financing to erect a milkhouse in which to store the milk, process and age the cheese, and allow for customer viewing. Several financing options didn't work out. However, one day they received a fortunate visit from a small group including former IWCC president Carl Heinrichs. After seeing the Feldman's dairy operation and business plan, Heinrichs called a local bank. As a result, the bank chose to finance the milkhouse, which will be ready in time for the 2014 milking season.

Ali Clark and six others started Big Muddy Urban Farm in 2012 in the Gifford Park neighborhood of north Omaha. The vegetable farm provides healthy food to people of all economic situations and experiments with various ways to make local food affordable for all.

Dream to Farm helped her and her team select efforts to match their goals. "It was important to think through our mission and vision statement and use that in decision-making and as a self-proclaimed structure for what types of things we choose to do and not to do." As a result, they partnered in expanding a farmers market established in the

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*Joe Feldman holds up lambs at Doe's and Diva's Dairy.
Credit: Janna Feldman*

neighborhood in 2012, and chose to continue to distribute their produce through a 25-member CSA, with some shares traded for work, land and kitchen space, and at Table Grace Café, a pay-as-you-can restaurant with which they partner.

The Golden Hills RC&D was also able to leverage an additional \$16,050 from the USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant program to offer the course three more times, once in 2013 and twice in 2014.

Contact



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Case study by Arlene Enderton, Winter 2013

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Reducing Rural and Urban Food Deserts through Job Training