Experiential educational engagement with working groups and communities of practice

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Experiential educational engagement with working groups and communities of practice

Abstract
An ISU graduate class in sustainable agriculture was used to foment student interest in community-based projects related to the heightened interest in Iowa food, fiber and energy enterprises.

Keywords
Sociology, Community-based food systems

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | International and Community Nutrition | Rural Sociology

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Can the elements of success in an intensive experiential field course beginning before the start of the fall semester be replicated in a community-based project-focused class taking place during the confines of a traditional semester?

Yes, rather than focusing on many enterprises across multiple communities as in the field course, this class focused on more in-depth engagement in community-based projects by teams of students with expectations adapted to the confines of the semester calendar.

**Background**

The overall purpose of this project was to demonstrate a model of educational delivery that meshed more closely the PI’s teaching and outreach/extension responsibilities at Iowa State University, while also cooperating with a variety of internal and external partners, in particular the networks organized under the auspices of the Leopold Center’s Marketing and Food Systems Initiative.

Objectives were to:
1. Further develop the ISU course Sustainable Agriculture 546 – Organizational Strategies for Diversified Food Systems, a project-based class, and
2. Energize the course by reaching out to new partners and coordinating with ongoing efforts.

**Approach and methods**

This effort dealt with a project-focused, credit-bearing ISU course (SusAg546 Organizational Strategies for Diversified Food and Farming Systems) offered spring term 2010 as part of ISU’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture (GPSA). This report focuses on the second iteration of this experiment, whose first run was in 2009. Additional funding allowed the incorporation of experience- and evaluation-based adjustments from 2009 into the 2010 course.

**Results and discussion**

Objective 1 (course development) Adjustments based on learning from 2009 class:

- Expanded the scope of student projects beyond an exclusive focus on the Regional Food System Working Groups to other working groups in the Value Chain Partnerships (Small Meat Processors, Fruit and Vegetable, Grass-Based Livestock, and Food Access and Health); and to a broader array of project partners including...
Healthy Urban Food and Farming (HUFF), Des Moines; the Iowa Food Systems Council; Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI); Women, Food and Agriculture Network (WFAN); Urban Dreams-Ames and Mustard Seed Farm, rural Ames.

- Implemented suggestions for making project expectations realistic in terms of what can be achieved within the confines of a typical semester.

- Focused more on context – understanding and separating what is common and what is unique about the challenges of the chosen community partner. Some students struggled with contextualization, perhaps due to inexperience in real world settings or, in some cases, cultural differences. In addition to working with a partner organization, participating in venues such as the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) conferences provided insights into the contextual dimensions of regional food systems work.

- Adopted a framework and incorporated assessment rubric on reflective learning from a Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) workshop and incorporated the idea of open-ended case studies, a pedagogical approach borrowed from Chuck Francis at the University of Nebraska. The latter proved critical in fitting projects into the time limits imposed by a semester calendar.

**Objective 2 (scaling up and out)**

- Explore alternatives for course delivery. SusAg 509 works with two open weeks at the beginning of August; a comparable stretch of open time is elusive. Students were not enthusiastic about working over spring break. So, for now, expectations have been adjusted to fit the semester calendar.

- Institutionalize at ISU. SusAg 546 is in the permanent catalog. It has the potential to work in tandem and be dual-listed or cross-listed with other courses.

- Move beyond ISU. A USDA grant application collaboration with University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Rural Development through Local Food Production and Marketing in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metroplex Region, an AFRI-integrated Rural Development proposal) proposed to extend this model across state lines and build on some relationships developed in the Iowa counties of Cass, Pottawattamie and Harrison as part of this project. The project was not funded, but the PIs plan to continue to seek funding in future rounds and from other sources.

**Conclusions**

The project was largely successful, based on:

- achieving the two major project objectives;
- meeting learning outcomes for the class and successful completion of projects;
- obtaining additional funding;
- disseminating student project work in a variety of venues;
- sustaining the course and relationships with community partners; and
- filling a need for a community engagement course in the GPSA curriculum.
The project also meets broader societal needs reflected in calls for more engaged universities. It links with priorities outlined in the Times Demand New Scholarship (2007) conference report by representatives of research universities and Campus Compact to renew the civic mission of higher education. For many students, the transition to graduate study lacks the public and community service that was a vital part of their undergraduate years – just at the time they have the academic and professional sophistication to provide more in-depth and more sustained engagement.

The report also recommends engaging graduate students as teaching assistants (TAs) of service-learning courses to increase their chances of utilizing this pedagogy throughout their careers. It encourages them to become agents for changing the culture of research institutions toward civic engagement and sustaining that change. The current project has supported these pedagogical outcomes by engaging two graduate students as teaching assistants, as well as the broader recommendations of the report for research universities to take the lead in building service opportunities, service-learning, and community-based research into graduate degree programs.

**Impact of results**

The course provided an immediate “window on the world” vantage point not readily accessible in the typical campus-based course. It helped students understand the real-world challenges faced by people and communities cultivating a more sustainable agriculture and food system. Community leaders came to appreciate what students can contribute. Over time, a more resilient agriculture can emerge from such strengthened connections and recognition of this interdependence.

The project illustrated the continued need for place-based education in the portfolio of a land-grant university. Placing ISU graduate students in community projects adds value to the traditional ISU classroom experience while advancing local priorities. Students provide a tangible and visible connection to ISU. The project demonstrates the synergy that can be achieved by binding more closely the teaching and outreach functions of ISU. The growing push toward the cost savings of distance education (education delivered online), while not without merit, may limit group interaction, public engagement and contextual learning. The investigator has used this project to build service opportunities, service-learning and community-based research into a graduate degree program

**Education and outreach**


A number of presentations were made in connection with the class and project findings, including two at the April 2010 Leopold Center Marketing and Food Systems meeting. In addition, teams of students presented posters each March (2009, 2010 and 2011) at the GPSA research symposium.
Other public presentations included:

- Leigh Ann Long, Fresh Connections Coop annual stakeholders meeting, Algona, and at Lifelong Learners Group, North Iowa Community College, Mason City
- Diego Thompson and Claudia M. Prado-Meza. Empowerment of Latino Immigrants through Farming: A Community Capitals Approach. Breakout Session on Change and Integration Panel on Social Capital and Empowerment. Latinos in the Heartland Conference, Cambio de Colores, University of Missouri-St. Louis

**Leveraged funds**

This project leveraged nearly $10,000 in additional funds from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development 2010 Small Grants Program.

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