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The Future of Agriculture in Our Community: A Pilot Program to Increase Community Dialogue About Agricultural Sustainability

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The Future of Agriculture in Our Community: A Pilot Program to Increase Community Dialogue About Agricultural Sustainability

Abstract

The Future of Agriculture in Our Community is a program developed to allow Pennsylvania communities to assess and address the needs of local agriculture. This article describes the program in detail and provides results from an evaluation conducted of the pilot program. Findings (n=55) suggest that the program was received very well among participants and seemed to increase community organization skills, knowledge of local agriculture, interest in agriculture and in community life, and intentions to participate in future volunteer efforts. Based on these results, recommendations are offered for those interested in pursuing similar programs.

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Introduction

Along with increasing interest in direct marketing and value-added production of agricultural products is an increased awareness of the role that communities play in creating a supportive environment for such businesses to grow. Recent literature suggests that community characteristics and the engagement of the citizenry can be crucial factors in the development of a vibrant, strong agricultural system (Lyson & Guptill, 2004). However, communities interested in improving the sustainability of agricultural production at the local level often have few resources and lack formal mechanisms for identifying the future directions of agriculture, developing a vision

of what an enhanced agricultural system could be, and gathering the appropriate mix of people and local agencies to achieve that vision. For example, very few communities have economic development plans that identify agriculture as a viable economic sector in which the community should invest to sustain and enhance its growth.

This article describes a program that provides such a process for communities interested in creating a supportive climate for agriculture. The program is described in greater detail, providing results from an initial evaluation of the program and offering suggestions for Extension educators interested in creating a similar program.

Future of Agriculture in Our Community

The Future of Agriculture in Our Community (FOA) is a structured process developed by Penn State Cooperative Extension for communities to assess and improve the local agricultural business climate. A community-wide coalition (farmers and non-farmers) identifies the barriers and opportunities for the sustainability of agriculture and develops specific projects to address those barriers and develop existing opportunities. More important, however, the process demonstrates to farmers that non-farmers care about the success and long-term viability of agriculture.

In addition to developing the economic climate for agriculture, the program has a number of more subtle goals. These goals include increasing the knowledge of agriculture among community residents; increasing interaction among farmers and non-farmers; creating a network of volunteers within the community; increasing awareness of community resources and the local political structure; developing individual problem-solving, communication, and organizational skills; and increasing activism and civic engagement regarding agriculture and other community issues. These are the goals for which we provide evaluation data below.

The program develops in four phases.

- *Coalition building*: local Extension educators and community leaders inform potential participants about the process and benefits, and assess interest. This core group recruits participants and develops the Leadership Team (8-10 people who guide the program) and the Task Force (a community-wide group of 35-45 people).
- *Information gathering*: the Task Force conducts two activities to gather information from farmers: Let's Talk sessions (open discussions with farmers about farming in the community) and a survey of area farmers. The discussions from the Let's Talk sessions are used to customize the survey questions. Both sets of information inform the strategic planning process.
- *Strategic planning*: the Task Force identifies concerns and opportunities, prioritizes these issues, and develops a set of goals, objectives, and projects.
- *Implementation*: Action Teams are developed to work on specific projects, drawing on Task Force members and other community members as needed.

Pilot Program

The initial program was developed in Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, in the winter of 2002-2003. Cumberland County is in south-central Pennsylvania, near the capitol city of Harrisburg. This county contains 1,116 farms (USDA-NASS 2002), with dairy (22%), hay (19%), beef (16%), and grain (13%) the most common commodities. The farms tend to be larger than the state average: 25% sell \$100,000 or more annually (compared to 14% statewide), while 41% have less than \$5,000 in annual sales (compared to 52% statewide). The majority of operators in the county (60%) list farming as their primary occupation.

The future of farming in the county is in question because of low profits, development pressures, and related loss of farmland. An informal group of farmers, political officials, and Extension educators had been meeting for several years to discuss the future of farming in the county. In the fall of 2002, this group enlisted the help of an economic and community development educator and a state specialist to conduct a survey of farmers, the results of which would guide the development of strategies to help farming survive. The program that resulted was adapted from two existing programs: the economic development program, Business Retention and Expansion (Blaine, Hudkins, & Taylor, 1999; Haugaard & Levins, 2002; Morse & Loveridge, 1997), and the community visioning program, Charting the Future of Your Community (Shuffstall, Whitmer, O'Neill, Kowalski, & Kelsey, 2002).

Three Let's Talk sessions were held, in which farmers discussed three simple questions: (1) What's going well with Cumberland County agriculture? (2) What challenges do you face as a farmer in Cumberland County? and (3) Overall, what is the future of agriculture in Cumberland County?

The Task Force used the comments from these sessions to adapt an existing survey. As with Business Retention and Expansion programs, the survey was enumerated by pairs of trained citizen volunteers in face-to-face interviews. Each pair of "volunteer visitors" intentionally included one farmer and one non-farmer to ensure that at least one member would understand any technical terminology used by the respondents and to further educate the non-farm participants.

One hundred farms were randomly selected from the county Extension mailing list. Survey participants were first contacted by letter and then called by the volunteer visitors to arrange the interview. The volunteers successfully interviewed 73 of 99 farms they contacted. Taking into account those no longer farming, deceased, or outside the county, the effective response rate was 82% (73 completed / 89 possible).

The Task Force held a retreat in which they used the Let's Talk session comments and survey results to develop a strategic action plan. Task Force members identified and prioritized goals to improve the sustainability of agriculture in the county and developed action plans and implementation steps for achieving those goals. Four goals were identified: agricultural education for the public, farmland preservation, educating local officials about development, and marketing alternatives. A separate action team was developed to implement each goal. An official organization, Future of Cumberland County Agriculture (FOCCA), formed to pursue funding for these plans.

One other county (York) has finished the formal process. Four counties pursued the program during the winter of 2004-2005.

Evaluation and Results

To evaluate the FOA program in Cumberland County, surveys were sent to all individuals who had expressed interest in the program (146). Twenty-one indicated that they were "mailing list" members only, and did not participate. Fifty-five completed questionnaires were received, for a valid response rate of 45%. Given the distribution of respondents by program group, the respondents represent the majority of regular participants (Table 1).

Respondents were asked to evaluate the program; describe changes in their knowledge of agriculture and their community, skills working with community groups, levels of trust in community members, social interaction with varying community groups, and civic engagement in community organizations; and describe their farm and demographic backgrounds.

Several survey questions used a post- then pre-test format, in which respondents were asked to assess their knowledge, skill, or interest before the program and after its completion. This approach avoids response-shift bias found in pre- and post-test formats, in which respondents may not be able to accurately assess themselves prior to participation. Program impact can be more easily discerned using the post- then pre-test format (Rohs, 1999; Kohn & Rockwell, 1989).

This summary provides suggestions regarding volunteer recruitment and program design for Extension educators interested in developing a program. Survey results related to respondents' participation, perceptions of program quality, and evaluations of program goals are provided below.

Participation

Table 1 describes the distribution of respondents by program group. Participation in program groups is not mutually exclusive, and is additive, such that Leadership Team members are asked to serve on the Task Force; Leadership Team and Task Force members are asked to be Volunteer Visitors. Action Team members are self-selected, tend to be fewer in number, and are drawn from across the community. In Table 1, respondents are categorized by the highest commitment group in which they reported membership. For example, if a respondent selected volunteer visitor and task force, they were classified under the task force category.

Table 1.
Distribution of Survey Respondents by Program Group Membership

Program Group	Group Members Responding to Survey	Actual Total Members of Group
Leadership Team	10	6-10
Task Force	18	25-35
Volunteer Visitor Team	20	44
Action Teams	9	10-15

The main reasons for participation relate to concern for agriculture in the community. Just over half of respondents (55.6%) reported participation because of quality of life concerns; this suggests that these respondents link improving the agricultural climate with improved quality of life in the county (Table 2).

Table 2.
Reasons for Participating in Program

Reasons for Participation	Percent of Respondents (n=55)
Concern for farming and agriculture	83.3%
Concern for the preservation of agricultural land	74.1%
Commitment to improving the quality of life	55.6%
Concern for the preservation of the natural environment	44.4%
Opportunity to meet new people	7.4%

Recruitment for the program tended to be primarily through personal contact with county Extension educators. Other important means of recruitment included local newspaper coverage of the program, word of mouth, and direct mailings from Extension and other organizations affiliated with the program (Table 3). The more directed forms of communication (personal contact and mailings) seem to be particularly important means of recruiting volunteers.

Table 3.
Recruitment of Program Participants

Recruitment Vehicle	Percent of Respondents (n=55)
County Extension agent	34.6%
Local newspaper	17.3%
Word of mouth	13.5%
Extension/other direct mailing	11.5%
Other	9.6%
Conservation district	7.7%
Not sure	3.8%
Newsletter	1.9%
Total	100.0%

The 55 volunteers reported committing 1126 hours to the formal program. The median across all volunteers was 15 hours, although 16 volunteers (29%) reported spending 25 or more hours. These volunteers are scattered across the program groups; this suggests that the report of hours reflects personal commitment to the program regardless of formal role.

Program Quality

Most respondents gave positive evaluations of the program. Over 80% of respondents thought that the objectives had been clearly stated; nearly 90% thought the program had the right amount of support from Penn State Cooperative Extension. Some participants reported concerns about the structure of the meetings and the mix of people involved in the program.

Table 4.
Participant Evaluation of Program Elements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Program objectives were clearly stated	0.0%	2.0%	17.6%	66.7%	13.7%
Meetings were organized to help you learn	2.0%	2.0%	19.6%	64.7%	11.8%
Meetings were organized to help you conduct your projects	0.0%	6.3%	25.0%	60.4%	8.3%
The program had the right mix of people to accomplish its objectives	0.0%	9.8%	27.5%	58.8%	3.9%
The program had an appropriate amount of support from PSU Cooperative Extension	0.0%	1.9%	9.6%	67.3%	21.2%

Another measure of participants' experiences is whether they would volunteer again. Nearly 75% said that they were either somewhat or very likely to take part in another Penn State Extension program. Nearly 80% would recommend that other counties undertake a similar program.

Table 5.
Respondents' Evaluation of Extension and FOA Program

Participate in PSU Extension Program Again?		Recommend FOA to Other Counties?	
Very unlikely	1.9%	Strongly advise against	0.0%
Somewhat unlikely	13.0%	Not recommend	3.8%
Unsure	13.0%	Unsure	18.9%
Somewhat likely	40.7%	Recommend	45.3%

Very likely	31.5%	Strongly recommend	32.1%
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Respondents identified program features they particularly liked and elements that could be improved. Participants liked the team structure and the processes that encouraged expression of ideas. Respondents felt that the program brought together a diverse set of "like minded people" to solve local problems. A frequently cited benefit was that of "meeting many different, but dedicated farmers." Volunteers felt the program had created awareness of agricultural issues and built an organizational structure to oversee the development of needed projects. Overall, people felt the program gave them a chance to demonstrate the community's support for agriculture.

Suggestions for improving the program included expanding the range of people involved, particularly more farmers, elected officials, and young people. More publicity was needed to emphasize the positive work of the program. Some concerns were raised about the organization of the meetings, reflecting a desire for more advanced preparation to make meetings shorter and more productive. Finally, participants would have liked more time to study the survey results before the strategic planning process. This request indicates the complexity of discussing large quantities of data, reflecting on these findings, and identifying key issues. It also suggests that, by this point in the process, participants were heavily invested and wanted to make the best decisions they could.

Evaluation of Program Goals

To gauge the extent to which the program has made progress toward increasing community capacity around agricultural issues, we asked respondents to assess their levels of knowledge, interest, skills, activism, and trust both before and after program participation. Table 6 reports those elements in which respondents reported a statistically significant increase after program participation.

Table 6.
Before/After Program Effects

Goal/Indicator	Percent Reporting Increase After Program (n=55)
Increased knowledge of community	
County agriculture	45.9%
County people and businesses	42.0%
Role agriculture plays in county life	40.0%
Increased interest in community	
Interest in county agriculture	24.5%
Interest in being involved in local decision making	42.0%
Encouraged community activism	
Attending meetings	51.0%
Writing to representatives	40.9%

Testifying at public meetings	40.0%
Talking to community groups	38.0%
Serving on county committee	34.0%
Serving on state/regional committee	34.0%
Improved individual and collective problem-identification and problem-solving skills	
Identify causes and consequences of a problem	36.0%
Develop a plan to solve a local problem	32.6%
Organize a group of people to work on a local issue	34.6%
Increased trust	
Other program participants	41.7%
Local government officials	24.0%
County farmers	20.4%
Other county residents	18.3%

These results suggest that the program achieved many of its stated goals related to increasing knowledge of the community, encouraging community involvement and activism, improving problem-solving skills, and increasing trust. In particular, respondents reported increased knowledge of agriculture (45.9%), community residents and businesses (42.0%), and an understanding of how agriculture fits into community life (40.0%).

Significant numbers of respondents said that they are interested in becoming actively involved in community decision-making (42.0%) and are more likely to become active (such as by attending public meetings). Over 40% of respondents reported increased trust in other program participants, although the percentages were lower for other categories. When asked if program participants expected to increase their interaction with other county residents, positive responses for two groups stand out - farmers (45%) and elected officials and other community leaders (40%). Over 40% suggested that they are likely to become involved in farmers groups.

Table 7.
Reported Future Change in Behavior Because of FOA

Goal/Indicator	Percent Reporting Increase After Program (n=55)
Increased social interaction	
Farmers	45.0%

Elected Officials/Community Leaders	40.0%
Long-time residents	33.0%
Increased civic engagement	
Farming related groups	42.0%
Natural Resources groups	36.5%
School/education groups	28.3%
Economic development groups	19.2%

Lessons for Program Development

The following program elements led to the positive evaluations and significant community impacts. These elements would be essential for Extension educators interested in crafting a community-based agricultural economic development program based on this pilot program in Pennsylvania.

- Emphasize direct contact and interaction among program participants through structured program activities. The results here indicate that this leads to greater knowledge of each other and the community; trust in other participants; interest in learning about their community; and likelihood of participation in community decision-making.
- Involve both farmers and non-farmers. The participation of both farmers and non-farmers resulted in greater interaction and discussion of issues, greater likelihood of learning about other community members' views, and better representation of diverse perspectives. It is also essential to have a diversity of farm types represented, to create greater discussion about farming possibilities, learning opportunities, and community resources.
- Involve local officials and community leaders/decision-makers. Develop linkages with local, regional, and statewide governments and agencies through direct involvement in the program, through organizational sponsorship, and/or through regular communication. This lends legitimacy to the process, acquaints residents with their local politicians and political system, and offers faith that programs developed through the process can be implemented.
- Recognize that Extension needs to maintain a "backseat" role. Extension educators need to remain neutral about the outcomes and be willing to hand over projects to community groups. Extension should facilitate and support the program, but should not be seen as leading it. The community coalition that forms needs to have significant autonomy to tailor the program to the needs and concerns of local residents (Loveridge & Smith, 1992; Warner, 1999).
- Recognize that the Leadership Team should be the public face of the project, providing leadership, speaking for the program, and running meetings. Leadership Team members should be responsible for as much as they can handle, as early as possible, and empowered to follow through on the strategic action plan.
- Lay the groundwork early. Recruitment of volunteers needs to result in a Leadership Team and Task Force with diverse members, representing key skills (such as communication), community composition, and local networks (farm organizations, businesses, local government, schools).
- Ensure that participants see the connections among the "information gathering" phase, the strategic planning process, and the implementation of projects. Don't let early discussion of potential solutions pre-empt the strategic planning process. Good solutions and long-term engagement in agricultural issues depend on learning from and involving all different types of people in the community.
- Be flexible and allow for modifications to the initial plan. The Task Force in an on-going program requested more time to digest the survey information, so additional meetings were organized. This resulted in an improved strategic planning process and demonstrated greater buy-in of community residents.
- Recruit local publicity, which will create community awareness (a "buzz"), generate support

and discussion outside of the program, and recruit additional volunteers (particularly those who might be outside existing networks).

Although the program described above is specific to agriculture, several of the recommendations apply to building community-wide efforts in multiple program areas and the evaluation materials could be adapted to assess the effects of volunteer participation.

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