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APPROACHING BEGINNING FARMERS AS A NEW STAKEHOLDER FOR EXTENSION

Lee Meyer, Jennifer Hunter, Ani Katchova, Sarah Lovett, Dawn Thilmany, Martha Sullins, and Adrian Card
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Across the United States, agricultural producers are responding more and more to growing market demand for local, fresh foods. While this phenomenon has created new market dynamics and momentum, it has also highlighted an information and experience gap for agricultural producers who are new to the industry or producing for a different type of market—where they are essentially beginning new businesses. These newer marketing channels require entirely new production planning and implementation that begins with changing business structure and modes of production to meet consumer demand according to the various marketing outlets that will be used.

Demographic and economic changes have signaled a need for beginning farmer programs in several states. In this article we highlight the dynamics that led to forming and designing University Extension-based programs in Kentucky and Colorado. Beyond the concerns surrounding an aging farm population, current economic conditions and a keen public interest in food system dynamics have spurred a new cohort of young, and not so young, potential farmers and ranchers who require new models of outreach and represent a growing new cohort of stakeholders for Extension professionals. This new potential clientele group could become an emerging priority for Extension systems seeking to show relevance in an ever-evolving environment.

Both United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture and Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) data confirm an aging farm population—a growing concern for a wide range of agricultural organizations, institutions and those who advocate for the U.S. farm sector. For example, 30% of farm operators were over age 65 as of the 2007 USDA Census of Agriculture, and, there were more than five times as many farmers over age 75 as under age 25. At the younger end of the spectrum, 23% were under the age of 45 in 2002 compared to 18% in 2007, so it isn't clear whether there is a large enough cohort in place to be bequeathed, leased or sold agricultural lands and enterprises. Even so, about 20% of U.S. farmers are considered to be beginning farmers according to ARMS statistics.

Programming within the Kentucky Extension system is driven by a county issues identification process, whereby feedback from clientele is shared with local county extension agents as county plans of work are developed. During this process, concerns about the aging population of agricultural operators drove the issue of farm transitions to a high priority initiative for Kentucky extension programs. The "farm transitions" concept encompasses farmer retirement, next generation ownership/management transition, and new entry into farming. But what does that mean? Observers, from community and farm organization leaders to policy makers, want to address the perceived problem. Additionally, farmers and their families have asked extension agents for help in dealing with their own personal situations. With support at all levels, Kentucky developed a targeted farm transition program which specifically highlighted barriers to entry and exit of a farming operation. Experience from this program laid the groundwork for developing a more extensive program for beginning farmers.

Similarly, Colorado Extension personnel noted a significant shift in the types of backgrounds and interests among those bringing agricultural production and business planning questions to their county offices. Their backgrounds were less likely to be tied to a farm or ranch heritage and, although often highly-educated, their knowledge of agricultural production and business practices was limited. Initially, these new clientele were grouped into programs targeted at the small acreage population that is seeking high amenity lifestyles and has historically settled in Colorado. However, it became increasingly clear that these entry-level producers had far greater aspirations about growing for direct markets, and quickly gaining the skills to run commercially viable farm enterprises. In short, some farm operators who would have been classified as lifestyle farmers in the past are now recognized as trying to gain the skills and capacity to quickly ramp up to operating small and medium farms with little or no dependency on off-farm jobs. This posed some new challenges and opportunities for Colorado State University Extension.

Cultivating Beginning Farmer Programs

As background, Kentucky has a very county-focused cooperative extension system. It has 120 counties, with at least one agriculture and natural resources extension agent in each county, and the support of more than 70 extension specialists—tenure-track faculty with a majority of their distribution of effort in extension—for the state's 83,000 farms. The existence of a local property-value based extension tax and local extension boards provides strong incentives for agents to respond to locally identified needs. Therefore, agents from this system who directly perceived the need, strongly supported state-wide efforts to address the broad farm transitions issue.

In Kentucky, the first programs related to farm transitions were targeted toward the transfer of farms from one generation to the next. With funding from USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) and the Southern Risk Management Education Center, both agent training and clientele-focused programs were implemented. These programs included financial planning, estate and legal dimensions of transitions, and intra-family communications. Based on both participant survey responses and program popularity, this topic is of great interest in the farming community. Programs focused on taking care of the retiring generation actually help create an emerging farmer gap, and new farmers are needed to fill this void. These replacements may come from the younger members of the retiring farmers' families or from new entrants to farming.

The Colorado State University (CSU) Building Farmers program (http://www.extension.colostate.edu/boulder/ag/smallfarms.shtml), launched in Boulder County in 2007, is the only program in Colorado that provides a proven route for succeeding in market farm production, management and sales. For example, evaluations show that three years after completing the Building Farmers course, 83% of participants reported that they had increased the range of products they grew and had made investments in infrastructure and equipment, with 73% reporting an increased customer base, and 67% reporting that they had a greater number of farm enterprises. In each of the four regions where this program has been offered, experienced CSU Extension field agents identified segments of the agricultural producer population where more focused and intensive education was needed to meet growing local demand for high-value, direct-marketed products.

The Beginning Farmer programs in Kentucky and Colorado were not created simply because new federal programming resources were available. Instead, it is the increasing demand and engagement of the new and transitioning farm clientele with county, regional and state Extension personnel that led to more targeted programming for this target audience. In Colorado, there was some lack of clarity on how this programming would connect with or be unique from longstanding small acreage programs, and it is an ongoing challenge to determine at what point landowners are transitioning to more commercial and profit-oriented enterprises.

What We Have Learned

The USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher program was a catalyst and opportunity to respond to this clearly identified need. Kentucky had a very recent history of providing farm transitions programs—because of technical assistance provided to tobacco farmers—and an extension program model that could be adapted to the beginning farmer program needs. Although Colorado had fewer past experiences to emulate, there were national programs—such as California's Agriculture and Land Based Training Association (ALBA)—that offered clear examples of how to provide long-term education and support to new farmers.

Balancing the Roles of County Educators, State Specialists and Producer Educators

The most visible models from which to draw lessons about past successes in Kentucky were the "Master Cattleman" program and "Annie's Project", a management program for farm women. Both of these programs have similar characteristics. They use a multi-session curriculum, 10 and six sessions respectively; are organized by groups of county agents and taught primarily by state specialists, but with agents also actively participating in the instruction; charge a modest fee which is kept at the local/county level to provide support for educational materials, meals, and other materials; and are supported by state level, grant-funded extension associates under the direction of the project director who is a state extension specialist.

Kentucky's BFRDP—originally called "A Common Field" but now known as KyFarmStart—was developed with the direct involvement of extension agents. This was possible because of their familiarity with the model used, their own clientele-driven interest in the program area and their enthusiasm for implementing the program. KyFarmStart was created using weekly conference calls during the program development phase, and initiated with a face-to-face agent "training" which required a program redesign session and launch. The "redesign" was actually a means to ensure that the program, as implemented, fit the expectations of the agents who would be managing it at the county level.

KyFarmStart is inherently multidisciplinary due to the beginning farmers' diverse needs and the multi-county (local), agent-managed model. Sessions are needs-focused, rather than disciplinary in nature. Each group has a 12-session curriculum, beginning with whole farm planning and enterprise selection sessions, a session on soils and nutrient management, and another on marketing. The remaining six to eight sessions address production topics, and are a combination of classroom and field day experiences. Local stakeholders are extensively involved in these field days, which often serve multiple functions in the local extension programming.

Marketing, for example, is considered as a needed skill, not a discipline, where producers learn how to develop a marketing plan and a network of market resources. Establishing farm mission and goals is often taught by a dairy specialist. Production focused field days are designed to incorporate lessons learned in the soils session with the pragmatic skills of managing a pasture-based cow-calf enterprise. Agents and skilled, experienced farmers are often the most effective teachers, because they have the knowledge base and have integrated the skills, often unknowingly, needed for success in their chosen enterprises. About two-thirds of the KyFarmStart participants indicated an increase in their knowledge of specific skills as a result of participating in the beginning farmer program—similar to the program-wide results discussed in the introduction to this theme. As one participant said, "The (KyFarmStart) program showed me great resources and allowed me to network with other farmers with similar interest."

Networking Producers and Engaging Experienced Farmers as Educators

Two key elements ensure that the CSU Building Farmers program provides a foundation on which new farm enterprises can thrive in each of the regional programs: networking among course participants and mentoring of beginning farmers provided by more experienced farmers.

To facilitate deeper interactions, Colorado's short course emphasizes community-building through shared meals, peer review of business plans and project reports and, where possible, tours of participants' operations. During the Colorado programs, these community building activities were noted as similarly impactful compared to the "capacity building" the participants' reported from the coursework in terms of knowledge gained and progress made toward operational goals. Thus, in each area where the program is implemented —local areas vary greatly in geographic size, but generally draw participants from about a 50 mile radius—it builds a strong community network of producers involved in direct marketing; local input suppliers of land, water, labor, capital, and equipment; and other resources that ultimately help the community better support small agricultural operations and strengthen the local food system. As a result, this model is being adopted throughout a new Western BFRDP, multi-state project including Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Nevada and New Mexico (see http://buildingfarmersinthewest.org/ for more information).

New Models for Mentoring

Beginning farmers greatly benefit from active engagement of an experienced farmer mentor. In the case of market farms—direct sales of food crops and animal products both on and off farm through farmers markets, CSAs, restaurants, produce stands, and u-picks—the complexity of operations is a challenge for Extension staff to fully understand and convey to those learning these production and marketing systems. As mentioned earlier, using paid mentorships, the Colorado program began by linking program participants with a producer-mentor experienced in direct market production, management and sales to provide more market-tested advice than academic class materials.

More recently, as a next step in the classroom component of the Building Farmers Program, graduates who present a well-crafted business plan are eligible to apply for an internship—for those without a substantial production enterprise or experience—or mentorship. Mentorships are designed to provide on-call technical advice to a mentee starting a market farm, while internships provide an unpaid opportunity for new farmers to work on an experienced producer's farm. The mentors and the local extension agent meet and review applications to determine the matches for the season's internships and mentorships. The mentor then acts as a consultant throughout one planning and growing season to help the mentee successfully implement his/her business plan developed during the previous fall classroom sessions. Mentors working with interns are paid $1875 for the season and mentors working with mentees are paid $625 for the season.

To amplify the learning of all mentees, they may access all of the mentors in service with mentees that season, not just their primary mentor. This allows them to tap the vast knowledge and diverse experience and production systems from the pool of mentors. The service period for mentorship is usually February through October and for internships, April through September. Both interns and mentees are required to write a professional development plan that helps to focus their learning and wisely use the time of the mentors and internship supervisors. Interns and mentees are asked to develop these, when possible, with their mentor. These plans are then shared with mentors so that there is a common understanding of the participants' educational and business development goals at the onset of the season.

Initial Outcomes

At the end of the season, all participants complete a written evaluation to determine outcomes and impacts from the mentors, interns and mentees. Evaluations from the 2010 mentorship program show that mentees felt that they gained more information about planning than they had the previous year, as well as knowledge of soil fertility, postharvest handling and merchandising for direct sales. This demonstrates that the mentorships are flexible in terms of the mentees' potential learning outcomes. Mentees indicated that the skills they gained during the mentorship period would help them develop or update their business plans and explore new markets—key goals of the beginning farmer program. From the mentor perspective, mentors felt that they gained a new perspective on their own farming operations and enjoyed sharing their knowledge of farming with their mentees. Mentors felt that the compensation for their time was appropriate and that their time was well-used by their mentees—all indications that the Colorado program management is responsive to the needs of all participants.

Kentucky also recognized mentoring as a critical component to the success of beginning farmers. However, the Kentucky program has developed a less formalized mentoring structure compared to Colorado. Traditionally mentoring in Kentucky has taken place in the context of family or community, but today many beginning farmers do not have the family or community connection as a resource when they begin farming. The Kentucky program has worked with beginning farmers to connect them with experienced farmers with a similar enterprise interest, so that they will have a mentor that understands the challenges, both production and financial, that the operation will face. This will assist producers in translating the knowledge gained in the classroom to on-farm practical experiences.

In Kentucky, the monetary incentive for the mentor-farmer to participate is marginal, based on the assumption that mentor-farmers would participate out of altruistic motives to support the future of the Kentucky agriculture industry. The Kentucky program initially outlined a simple mentoring program, but subsequently the mentoring model was expanded to encompass several different models, based on county agent and participant feedback. Instead of offering only one-on-one mentoring, the expanded options include family mentoring, group mentoring based on specific enterprises and, in some cases, institutional mentorship. Furthermore, working with Kentucky State University professional and paraprofessional staff, the group has been able to offer targeted mentor support to beginning farmers who are African-American, Mennonite, limited-resource, small in terms of gross farm sales, and female. Their outreach activities have included one-on-one education on the farmer's operations, educational outreach meetings for beginning farmers, educational workshops including monthly "Third Thursday" educational workshops on farm management, marketing, and farm enterprises, and mentorship programs coupling existing farmers with beginning farmers in the targeted counties.

To supplement the University of Kentucky and Kentucky State University's formal mentoring and one-on-one training programs, the KyFarmStart program has partnered with two nongovernmental organizations, the Kentucky Beef Network and Kentucky Women in Agriculture to identify mentors and host mentoring events.

Beginning Farmers Bring Diversity

One unforeseen benefit from beginning farmer programs is that they draw in a diverse, and often new, audience whose composition varies by region. This represents new opportunities for Extension Agents and Specialists to develop outreach strategies that help them to more directly target the needs of this emerging client group and be more successful. For example, each year the Colorado programs accept participants who are launching a second career in agriculture, either from a completely different background or from a different type of agricultural production system. These participants may come from corporate backgrounds such as marketing or technology, but want to transition into a new, more rural lifestyle that creates value-based linkages in their community, or they may want to transition into a new business model such as direct marketing food and food products to consumers.

Kentucky reports similar experiences, where its beginning farmer program not only attracts new clientele groups, such as second-career farmers, but also generates interest among younger clientele who will hopefully be the future extension leadership. Initially, anecdotal data suggested that a majority of program clientele would not be the stereotypical young farmers, under age 30, and that has proven true. Initial KyFarmStart participant analysis shows that 9% were under 30 years old, 18% were in the 30 to 45 age group, 40% were 46 to 60 years old, and 33% were age 60 or older. The backgrounds of the participants were equally diverse, with beef cattle, vegetables, sheep/goat production and forage production representing the most common industries. Twelve percent of the participants were limited resource farmers with gross farm sales not exceeding $150,000 and a household income of less than $25,000. This diversity obviously created a challenge in curriculum design.

The Colorado Building Farmers Program serves as a springboard for younger individuals involved in 4-H and FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) to advance their connections to agriculture in ways that were unavailable five years ago. With experience and an interest in agriculture, these youth-based programs are a natural new client base for beginning farmer programs, primarily as participants who want to start their own specialty production agriculture businesses and explore new market opportunities. These young farmers and ranchers bring innovative marketing ideas and energy, as well as a link to the generation that still retains most of agriculture's productive land and water resources. By demonstrating the viability of managing smaller-scale, direct market operations, these younger individuals may also help to retain land and water in agriculture, for future generations.

Expanding the Resource Base for Agriculture

The beginning farmer classroom component gives these new farmers a chance to test their interest in and commitment to agriculture as a profitable, commercial business rather than a recreational or hobby pursuit. The process of developing the foundation for a complete business plan allows participants to identify their goals and capabilities for a production agriculture business. As they advance through the course, they also have the opportunity to interact with experienced producers who can identify key production and business management practices for direct market enterprises, such as keeping accurate records that trace the product from preseason planning to marketing, or useful equipment for different scales of specialty crop production.

For those participants who are transitioning from a different agricultural production and/or marketing system such as larger scale crop or livestock enterprises, the beginning farmer program provides community resources not always applicable to commodity production and marketing systems, and links them to the market farm community of producers and potential market outlets. Without these connections and resources—such as information on locating land, labor, seeds, transplants and other inputs—it would be more difficult to help commodity producers transition into specialized crop or livestock production.

Closing Comments

The information and experience gap for young, beginning and transitioning agricultural producers includes production and business skills. While some producers are transitioning to new production and marketing practices, other producers are entering agriculture for the first time and want to respond to emerging markets. But previously, there were few technical assistance offerings for smaller-scale, direct-market oriented operations. So, new planning for agricultural Extension programs may include activities that could help new operators grow sales, plan for better efficiency, target appropriate customers and marketing channels, and ultimately, improve the likelihood of profitability in the long run.

The key indicator of program success is the long term financial viability of the beginning farmer clientele, and there is limited evidence that these programs are helping to move participants in the right direction. Indeed, a three-year assessment of Boulder County, Colo. program participants showed that, by the third year, farmers had significantly increased their average sales as a medium term outcome toward commercial sustainability, while making modest capital investments. Based on outcomes from Colorado pilot programs, and the steep learning curves perceived, project coordinators expect to keep seeing improved knowledge among all participants, and documented business plans developed by at least half of the project's beginning farmers.

In Kentucky, the level of involvement in the farm business increased dramatically for participants. The program met expectations for 97% of the participants, and over half intend to participate in a subsequent mentoring program. As a result of participation in the KyFarmStart Program, 65% of participants indicated an increase in knowledge by at least one category on a Likert scale—where participants specified a level of agreement with a statement about their own learning. A majority of Kentucky participants also agreed that they were in a better position to network and use government resources after completing the program, but only about one-quarter had developed a farm business plan.

Stronger networks and awareness of resources was an intended outcome, and feedback from community resource partners in Colorado suggests these outcomes are being realized. Colorado participants note that at least 10% of program "graduates" will have made such significant progress on their business plans that they will be able to acquire additional capital, land, or financing; establish new markets such as farmers markets, CSAs, or chef accounts; or complete the requirements to participate in government programs such as NRCS, FSA, or value-added loans within 18 months of completing the course.

Community linkages are also important in recruiting some participants. As a unique aspect of the Kentucky program, project leaders partnered with two community social services organizations, Catholic Charities and Americana Community Services, to serve the refugee community. This is an urban/community garden-focused group, comprising 50-60 participants from nine ethnic communities. Most of the participants have some farming experience and are learning how to adapt their skills to an Upper South, urban ecology. Although, the initial program may not have targeted this specific audience, it clearly demonstrates the need for flexible programming and responding to the needs of clientele.

An interesting question emerged during the delivery of the KyFarmStart program: how do we account for and understand the reasons for participant attrition? In general, the Kentucky program was designed to help beginning farmers develop a farm business plan and evaluate the actual viability of their specific plan. Therefore, if producers "drop" from the program because they realize that embarking on a new agricultural venture is not as easy or financially possibly as they initially perceived, then this should be viewed as a success of the program, potentially preventing a future farm failure. Kentucky's hope is to address this specific question in the post-program evaluation: why do participants drop out of KyFarmStart? The goal of program leadership is to know how much attrition occurs because clientele learn enough about farming to decide that it is not the life for them and/or perhaps that farming does not justify the investment they would have to make, financially or otherwise.

This became a question of interest because the attrition rate was higher in one specific group, which had the largest numbers of "explorers" or those individuals currently considering a possible career in farming. Colorado has seen less attrition—typically less than 15% according to follow-up surveys—which may be due to an application process which compels participants to explain their goals and why program participation is important for their business development and sustainability.

On the other hand, Colorado Extension agents are more concerned with developing Building Farmer programs in regions of the state that are less connected to high value, consumer markets in urban areas. This entails cultivating demand through consumer market development and/or increasing supply by developing concentrations of market farm producers in more rural areas—an evolution which is slowly occurring as farmers' markets emerge in rural counties and larger scale buyers have to seek more distant suppliers.

Comments similar to these by Colorado Building Farmers program graduates provide positive feedback: "This is a fabulous course with lots of great experienced farmers supporting the system... I found it extremely valuable and felt that I made connections within my community that are irreplaceable!" By carefully adapting the Colorado Building Farmers and KyFarmStart programs to each locale, the programs create a foundation for success that lies not only in the business management skills that participants gain, but also in the farm community networks that will support those new businesses in the future.

For More Information

Colorado Building Farmers website: http://extension.colostate.edu/boulder/ag/smallfarms.shtml#cbf.

Kentucky FarmStart website: http://www.ca.uky.edu/kyfarmstart/.

Dawn Thilmany (dawn.thilmany@colostate.edu) is Professor, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. Martha Sullins (martha.sullins@colostate.edu) is Extension Specialist, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. Adrian Card (adrian.card@colostate.edu) is Extension Agent in Agriculture and Natural Resources, Colorado State University, Boulder County, Colorado. Lee Meyer (lee.meyer@uky.edu) is Extension Professor, Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky; Lexington, Kentucky. Jennifer Hunter (jhunter@uky.edu) is Assistant Extension Professor, Family Studies, University of Kentucky, *Lexington, Kentucky. Ani Katchova (akatchova@uky.edu) is Assistant Professor, Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky. Sarah Lovett (sarah.lovett@uky.edu) is Extension Associate, Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.*