

2009 Iowa SAEA Conference Evaluation Report

**Presented to the
Sustainable Agriculture Education Association**

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Third National Conference

Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture Education



Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

July 15-17, 2009

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Executive Summary

The third national conference on educational issues related to sustainable agriculture programs in higher education was held 15-17 July 2009, in Ames, Iowa. Members of the Conference Coordinating Committee and additional students and staff from Iowa State University (ISU) and Michigan State University (MSU) designed and implemented the program evaluation, with attention to organizational context (e.g., SAEA was a new organization), prior conference² goals and evaluations, and locally-driven objectives for outcomes of the 2009 conference. One hundred individuals registered for the conference. Proportion of students (all levels) was estimated at 55 percent, a gain from previous years. A service project associated with the conference collected 25 pairs of new work gloves that were donated to a sustainable agriculture program at the Marshalltown Community College.

Findings

- Regional rotation of the conference alternative years appeared successful.
- Provision of context-sensitive performance arts was highly valued.
- Social networking was a major benefit of field trips and Open Space events.
- Explanations at some field trip sites were unclear.
- Diversity challenges were two-fold: low participation by community college programs and low participation by US racial and ethnic minorities.
- Attendees appreciated being together and in solidarity with people and programs featuring sustainability.

Recommendations for Future Events

- Provide a variety of different approaches to teaching and learning sustainable agriculture, including examples of curriculum, instruction, assignments, teaching resources, and field trips through organizational events.
- Bolster communications regarding the need for a focus on “teaching and learning” issues in addition to addressing content.
- Continue to support diverse student and educator conference planning teams that deliberately apply principles of critically reflective teaching.
- Provide opportunities for participants to visit diverse areas of the country and be exposed to a variety of educational and agricultural methods and programs.
- Ensure farmers and presenters on field trips have a clear understanding of the needs of this educator group

² Monterey, CA in 2005; and Ithaca, NY in 2007.

- Include appropriate arts events to enhance message and provide alternative learning outlets.
- Make the conference more accessible, in terms of publicity and funding in order to reach community organizers and non-formal educators.

Recommendations for the SAEA

- Because diversity issues are challenging organizationally, it was recommended by a participant that SAEA and/or conference planners form a Diversity Committee.
- Continue to provide as many networking opportunities as possible through diverse mediums.

Early in the organization of the conference, the planning committee determined the most important goals and outcomes for the 2009 conference. Those goals were termed “non-negotiable” by the program planning committee.

Key Goals

1. Focus on teaching and curriculum, and also model good educational practice. Take risks pedagogically in order to engage people.
2. For maximum learning, attract attendees from a diversity of types of programs and institutions.
3. Provide a welcoming structure for students and teaching faculty and staff, who are engaged in exploring agricultural sustainability. Provide funds for students, and provide outlets for scholarship to all participants, as part of the supportive structure.
4. Support the emerging organization, the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association (SAEA).

Planners also honored other goals, such as the provision of local, sustainably-produced foods, incurring no debt and possibility generating a surplus for seed money for the next conference, student recruitment opportunities for attending institutions, and providing technical information about sustainable and organic food production and marketing.

Evaluation Methods

Four types of data informed the evaluation: (1) a 23-item, anonymous, post-conference, mixed quantitative and qualitative internet survey employing SurveyMonkey™³; (2) a confidential end-of-session critical incidents questionnaire completed by attendees of field trips; (3) open-ended, anonymous Feedback Sheets – “suggestion box” style – provided by attendees as-needed; and (d) observations and informal reports from the 30-plus conference planners, presenters, and conveners.

Conference Schedule Summary

Day 1:

Registration

Welcome and Meal

Farmscape (Student-written play regarding the changing agricultural climate in Iowa)

Day 2:

Discussion by Fred Kirschenmann and Terry Gompert on Resiliency in Agriculture

Workshop Session 1

Open Space Session 1

Farm Education Tours

Music Event at Local Coffee Shop

Day 3:

Panel: Student Experiences in Sustainable Agriculture Programs

SAEA Organizational Presentations

Materials Exchange and Networking

Open Space Session 2

Workshop Session 2

Iowa Picnic and Barn Dance

Also included were meals consisting of locally grown foods, educator awards to recognize excellence in sustainable agriculture education, area to display program and class materials, and open areas in which to network throughout the conference.

³ Retrieved August 26, 2009. Location: http://www.surveymonkey.com/Home_CompanyInfo.aspx

Findings

Overall Program

Fifty-four percent said the conference overall was “great” with 36 percent indicating that the program was nearly so, totaling 90 percent. Planners are happy to report these data, which illustrate success in the broadest sense. A participant commented that the program delivered more than anticipated: “I wasn't actually expecting too much, but came away with more ideas and more excited about sustainable ag than I thought!” Data across types of evaluations showed a similar positive assessment of the conference.

1. Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning issues – pedagogy – were a focus of all three conferences. The conference planners worked hard to ensure that a range of ways of sharing and thinking about pedagogy were present throughout the event. At the same time, planners knew that accurate technical and content knowledge regarding sustainable agriculture had to be present as well or “education sessions” would be received as too abstract. Evaluation results tell us several things about the way attendees experienced this key thread. Question 8 asked about balance and sufficiency of pedagogical strands in comparison to other elements. Thirty four percent indicated that “nearly all” sessions were pedagogy oriented. Success in this vein is likely indicated by the combined 70 percent that showed that pedagogy dominated their experience, thus:

“There were some workshops where some presenters handed out teaching materials and then reviewed them with us. I found this extremely useful.”

And also, “GIVE ME MORE.”

Comments however show the variability of the way the apparent dominance of pedagogical issues was received. First, some attendees did not appear to encounter educational issues, thus:

“I was looking for [pedagogy] sessions, but much of the discussion was on sustainable agriculture in general.”

“I was also looking for more specifics on course development, appropriate pedagogy, classroom structure vs. independent learning, etc.”

Moreover, some participants did not appear to value the educational focus in the same way as program planners, thus,

“As a graduate student I felt that too many of the sessions focused on teaching. I’m not minoring in education, and might not take a faculty position when I graduate. Thus, for me, much of the information was irrelevant.”

Modeling good practices. The planners designed the conference to “show” as well as “tell” about good educational practices. Toward this end, the conference was structured to provide different types of instruction, including arts-based and experiential, that were informed by social learning, experiential learning, and critical theorist educational research. Here is how the following elements were received by participants:

Arts-based sessions. Choosing to feature arts-based activities as part of the conference was a risk taken by the planners, in line with beliefs about learning, e.g., some people will learn best through music and art. Scott Peters, based at Cornell, had visited ISU in fall 2009 and several of the students had read his work on land-grant ethics, reminding us that rural and farming people have always created and benefited from esthetic elements. Q10 asked about art and theatre as both educational and networking venues. Thirty eight percent indicated that these events “contributed nicely.” However, such events appeared to be less well attended. Twenty three percent indicated “not applicable.” We wonder if arts-based events are considered less important to learning than workshops and keynote presentations, or whether time of day affected attendance (two out of three events were at the beginning and end of the conference, or at night). We were relieved to note that only one person felt that the events “detracted.” Consequently, this endeavor was considered a success.

“FarmScape was truly remarkable.”

“The theatre was really good and touched on the sometimes-forgotten sides of sustainable agriculture.”

“I was so sorry to not attend this event because I was ill those nights, but I heard they were great.”

The FarmScape readers’ theatre event was so successful that within three months, the show, directed by co-creator Dr. Mary Swanson, the Poet Laureate of Iowa, was asked

to “book” several more shows locally, regionally, and in Canada. The authors now plan to publish the play.

The planners would like to offer a word of caution about art events, however. Despite success at this event, the committee found arts-based arrangements challenging because music and theatre can be expensive, and sustainable agriculture-oriented art had to be sought out. A solution was found in local, student-driven, and inexpensive events that also were open to the public for a fee, alleviating some of the financial pressure.

Field trips. The three concurrent bus trips to farms with programs were designed to be experiential learning events, conveying both pedagogical ideas and showcasing content knowledge. Field trip events were part of offerings of the second conference (Cornell) and, based on positive evaluations of field trip experiences, they were enhanced for this (Iowa) conference. The quantitative survey indicated that the field trips served the goals variably. Twenty seven percent responded (Q12, that field trips) “stimulated ideas for programming or pedagogy” by playing a key role, and 29 percent indicated that the trips were satisfactory.

“The field trip was a real success as we attempt to illustrate the process of a one-week class in a short four hours.”

“For me being in heartland of USA farm region was very cool”

“Great job.”

As a result of participating in the experiential learning offered by the field trips, most attendees pointed out that they felt the most engaged while they were talking with farmers and hearing about farmers’ experiences in the field. In addition, most of the participants were highly engaged in conversations with other participants – engaging and exchanging experiences and knowledge about different agricultural practices: production, education, and market, among others. The social networks established during the field trips were key elements for most of the participants. According to the evaluation results from the field trips we found that most of the (35 of 38 respondents) said that the length of the field trip was right. Also, most of the participants mentioned that the facilitators enhanced the field trips.

The evaluation, however, also showed that the lowest category of “did not contribute” or “contributed at a low level” were 14 percent and 18 percent, respectively, totaling 32 percent of participants did not appear to gain from the field trips what planners had hoped. The critical points that need to be considered:

- Many of participants didn't like to be indoors for a field trip (bus or classroom) and that was when they felt most distanced from what was happening.
- Some of the participants mentioned that it would have been nice to have more time for discussion after the visits: “Everyone has a unique perspective-this is a good learning tool.”
- Some indications and explanations made by the instructors were confusing or not clear during the site visits.
- The language used by the evaluators needed to be clearer when asking questions about this part of the conference: “The survey was too much educational-speak. I didn't understand some of the questions. Please common English.”

Recommendation would be to assist staff, farmers, and students associated with the field trip site to plan ahead of time – with the help of conferences planners – to build in active learning, reflection, and discussion to enhance the learning experience.

2. 2. Diversity

Programs and institutions. The planning committee and past conference planners desired more rather than less participation from non land-grant four year institutions. Fifty-two percent of respondents indicated that broad representation was adequate; zero indicated that such needs were ignored. From the first conference onward, there has been a presence of community college programs, but it has been low. The following comment from Q4 illustrates that low participation is still the norm. A participant echoed the desire for institutional diversity thus, “As someone from a land-grant I appreciated the presence of certificate programs, community college, etc. because it gave me a better sense of the activity all around.” Somewhat less expected were (a few) calls for greater participation of the extension service (1 comment) and industry and business (1 comment). The planners responded to this call for broader aspects of the agricultural sector by asking how such additions to the continuum might contribute educationally,

and/or how many such institutions support or desire to support formal or non formal educational programs.

Social elements of diversity. Diversity of institution goes hand in hand with other crucial forms of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, language, gender, and region of the country. Q21 asked directly about such diversity in a “check all that apply” format. The social category that was selected the most was “under-represented US minorities,” at 56 percent. Question 21 also led 35 percent of individuals to observe that there was under-representation of institutions that serve US minorities, “land-grant college 1994 tribal and 1890 historic black.” Also, from the feedback sheets completed at-will during the event: “My big suggestion is to have a diversity committee. This committee would work to make diverse cultures and ideas [come to] the conference.”

Next was “staff from non formal programs at farms or camps,” at 41 percent. These top two are not surprises. It is longstanding that agricultural programs less successfully recruit and retain US minorities. Inclusion of non-formal programs was desired. The planning committee tried, perhaps not successfully, to publicize. Planners also were told personally by small-scale NGOs, on several occasions, that cost of the conference was prohibitive. That said, there appears to be an opportunity to include greater numbers of staff and members of both large and small-scale nonprofit sustainable agricultural organizations who have a teaching or communications mission. Also, farmers, extension, and businesses whose work crosses into social justice and community development work would enrich the discussion regarding approaches to education.

Another frequently checked category (by 38 percent) was “high level administrators.” Conference planners recalled that a greater number of administrators attended prior conferences. Participation by institutional leaders is generally thought to signal their knowledge and support of the conference endeavor; hence the curriculum itself, i.e., sustainable agriculture education.

Recommendations

1. Demand is constant for access to different approaches to teaching and learning sustainable agriculture, including examples of curriculum, instruction, assignments, and teaching resources, and field trips and virtual environments. We have not yet met this need, and more events are needed.
2. Bolster communications regarding the warrant for an explicit focus on “teaching and learning” issues in addition to addressing content (e.g., subject matter). This is not a new recommendation. An under-appreciation of the role of pedagogy is part of the warrant for the new SAEA organization.
3. Continue to support student and educator conference planning teams that deliberately apply principles of critically reflective teaching. Student participation in planning was high at this event, and influenced the structure of the conference.
4. Because diversity issues are persistent across programs, and challenging organizationally, it was recommended by a participant that SAEA and/or conference planners form a Diversity Committee.
5. Make the conference more accessible, in terms of publicity and funding in order to reach community organizers and non-formal educators. This was not highly ranked, so also needs more discussion and fact-finding. Going beyond higher education for membership may or may not be fundamental to the mission of SAEA.