

## Experiential educational engagement with working groups and communities of practice

**Abstract:** Students in an ISU sustainable agriculture class worked with the Leopold Center's Regional Food Systems Working Group on cementing ties with community food groups and enterprises.

### Principal Investigator:

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**Budget:**  
\$17,456 for year one

**Q** Can we engage ISU sustainable agriculture graduate students in project-focused work that would support the Regional Food System Working Groups (RFSWGs)?

**A** The work benefitted both groups, and forged improved connections between the teaching and outreach/extension function of ISU. Such revitalization seems especially important given declining Extension resources available for rural community development.



### Background

Since 2005, the PI has taught a summer experiential field course in Agroecosystems Analysis that focused on many enterprises across multiple communities. This project attempted to replicate that model in a community-based, project-focused class that emphasized only a few community projects and engagement with local residents.

Objectives of the project were to:

1. Contribute and complement the efforts of the Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG) and increase the participation within and among them by adding students to the mix, and
2. Demonstrate the unrealized potential of creatively engaging students in outreach/extension functions of community food systems development through successful completion of projects identified by the RFSWG.

### Approach and methods

The course (SusAg546 Organizational Strategies for Diversified Food and Farming Systems) was offered spring term 2009. Projects were identified by subgroups of the Regional Food Systems Working Group, which supports education, conducts research and facilitates partnerships to increase investment and support of community-based, economically sustainable and environmentally and socially responsible regional food enterprises.. In addition to scheduled class sessions, three extracurricular venues included the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture (INCA) conference in Clear Lake in February 2009, and the Leopold Center Marketing and Food Systems Initiative workshop and the Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture (GPSA) research symposium in March.

### Results and discussion

Nine students registered for credit. Four projects were completed, three with established local groups:

- Local Narratives in SWIFFI (Southwest Iowa Food and Farm Initiative) Territory (Nikki D'Adamo and Amy Sue Alesch),



*Aerial view of research plots.*

- Aggregating Vegetables in Northeast Iowa (Nick McCann and Ben Obaa)
- Mapping COMIDA (County of Marshall Investing in Diversified Agriculture) (Joseph Malual, Diego Thompson and Claudia Prado-Meza) and
- Mapping Food System in Northern Iowa (Leigh Ann Long)

The fourth project, with an emerging group, sprang from the INCA conference, which had a mapping theme. The student received permission to pursue this project because she is from the area and plans to return there to farm upon graduation from ISU.

The project faced some challenges. Academic Practice Agreements (APAs) negotiated between student teams and the RFSWG subgroups were not reached as early as desired. Some of this difficulty derived from lack of experience in community settings.

Field work did not begin as early as desired. The issue of what realistically can be achieved within the time constraints of a typical semester is likely to remain. Another option would be to approach projects as open-ended case studies where there is no guarantee of everything being pulled together by the end of the semester.

Students could have more latitude on projects by expanding linkages beyond RFSWG to other groups in the Value Chain Partnerships, including Fruit and Vegetable, Farm Energy and Grass-Based Livestock working groups, and projects such as Farm to ISU. Students also could be offered a choice between individual and team projects. Numbers were low, mostly due to the narrow window of time between when funding became available and the class began. With more purposeful recruitment, the course will readily fill beyond this number, because there is a need for an applied course such as this in the GPSA curriculum.

## Conclusions

The project was a qualified success, based on achieving the two major project objectives and meeting all learning outcomes for the class. Student project work was disseminated in a variety of venues and all but one student project was successfully completed. Interest was expressed by RFSWG partners, especially SWIFFI, to continue working with the students, and interest in the course was expressed by a new cohort of students. Additional funding was obtained to sustain efforts in the southwest Iowa region and across the state line in Nebraska.

While not focused exclusively on farming and farmers, the RFSWGs have explicit or implicit objectives to benefit farmers. Students interviewed farmers and mapped farming enterprises as a part of their projects. In two cases, project work was influenced by a desire by students to return to a particular area to farm upon graduation (northern Iowa; in one case; Pottawattamie County, part of the Southwest Iowa Food and Farming Initiative RFSWG, in the other).



*Weed seed remover.*

## Impact of results

The course provided a “window on the world” not readily accessible in the typical campus-based course, producing enhanced student appreciation of the challenges faced by people and communities cultivating a more sustainable agriculture and food system, and appreciation by the agricultural and food systems community of what students have to offer.

The course affirmed the continued importance of place-based education.

Distance education delivered on-line saves money, but separates students from group interaction, public engagement and contextual learning. This model allowed students to engage in community projects that added value to the traditional ISU classroom experience while advancing local priorities, tapping into their underutilized potential community outreach and food systems development.

## Education and outreach

Among the presentations given about the project were:

- Leigh Ann Long: Fresh Connections Coop annual stakeholders meeting, Algona. 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. Change and Integration Panel on Social Capital and Empowerment. Latinos in the Heartland Conference, Cambio de Colores, University of Missouri-St. Louis.
- Nikki D’Adamo and Amy Alesch: Reclaiming the Narrative: Using Story to Strengthen Local Foods Systems. Ag and Human Values Conference, The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA
- Claudia Prado-Meza. Diego Thompson, Joseph Malual: Social Justice in the Food System (COMIDA). Third National Conference on Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture Education, Ames.
- Joseph Malual, Nikki D’Adamo. Diego Thompson, Claudia M. Prado-Meza, Bahia Barry, and Betty Wells: Mapping Social Diversity Workshop. Fall 2009 Community Food Security Conference, Des Moines.
- Ben Obaa and Nick McCann: Presentation incorporating two student projects. Marketing and Food Systems Initiative workshop, Ames.

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## Leveraged funds

The project received nearly \$10,000 from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development 2010 Small Grants Program as part of “Collaborative Proposal Development for Connecting Farm and Community.”