Planting the Seed: Developing a Student-Centered Farm at Penn State University

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Program Need

- Penn State vision to embed sustainability as a fundamental value at the University
- 80% of students in Penn State's College of Ag come from a non-farm background
- Courses such as *Vegetable Crops* and *Eating Your Ecology: Current Trends in Food Writing and Environmentalism* rely on outside farms for class field trips, which are expensive and time-consuming

Students in Mary Ann Bruns' Soil Ecology class assess the organic matter of a soil core at the proposed student farm site

National Assessment

- At least 75 student-centered farms exist across the nation
- These farms are vastly diverse
  - Production: vegetables, fruit, livestock, grains
  - Marketing: dining halls, CSA, farmers' markets
  - Labor: full time staff, paid and unpaid student interns, students in academic courses, volunteers
  - Funding: internal grants, external grants, department annual budget, college annual budget, product sales, program revenue

Penn State Context

- The Russell E. Larson Agricultural Research Farms at Rock Springs
- On campus community garden plots
- Past attempts to establish a student farm fizzled out
- Sustainability Institute at Penn State is currently funding planning process
- Full time design coordinator hired to oversee a two-year planning and design process
- Essential to ground the student farm in a strong curriculum for long-term continuation

Planning Progress To-Date

- Spread word of the initiative through presentations to specific groups and open visioning sessions
- Identified interested individuals; listerv with 440 names
- Held weekly student working group meetings
- Established a steering committee and four subcommittees co-chaired by a student and faculty/staff
  1. Business & Operations
  2. Curricula & Food Systems Minor
  3. Outreach & Communications
  4. Site Analysis & Design
- Gathered input about visions of the farm and key questions
- Compiled and prioritized site design and curricula components into immediate (initiation – 2 years), medium-term (3-5 years), and long-term priorities (6+ years)
- Held various meetings with faculty, staff and administration from a variety of departments

Identifying goals and guiding principles in small groups at an open invitation potluck

Working in subcommittees to update on progress, problems and plans

Organizing components into immediate, medium-term and long-term priorities

Challenges to Consider

- A variety of parties are involved with the initiative: students, faculty, staff, administration
  - Keeping open lines of communication between these parties is challenging
  - Involvement is cross disciplinary and diverse; many viewpoints can make decision-making difficult
- Penn State is a large institution that is used to working from a top-down approach

Planning Process: Lessons Learned

- Beneficial to group stakeholders by similarity due to differences in availability
- Communication between various stakeholder groups is key
- University-wide initiative vs. college-level increases academic value, financial and operational support
- Physical Plant and Housing & Food Services have large stake in process and outcomes

A Student's Personal Perspective

- Communication is key to avoid overlap, share findings and maintain momentum
- Differences in opinion overcome by discussing broad goals rather than details
- Need to find a balance between gathering many diverse ideas and narrowing ideas down
- Working in an interdisciplinary fashion brings new perspectives and increases need to clarify
- Often gaps between desire to be involved, available time and expertise that moves planning forward
  - Students have time, faculty/administration have expertise

Mission Statement

The interdisciplinary Sustainable Food Systems Initiative will

- Link classroom knowledge through experiential learning
- Foster teamwork and leadership
- Create community
- Provide learning opportunities in sustainable agriculture and food systems

Program Goals

Enhance Education:

- Develop systems thinking
- Build skills across all facets of the food system
- Foster a cross-campus initiative that builds on the capabilities of many colleges

Create Community:

- Build meaningful relationships
- Connect to community through engaged scholarship and outreach activities

Grow Good Food Access:

- Offer locally-grown fruits and vegetables in on-campus dining venues

Moving Forward

- Survey greater student body about initiative
- Survey faculty about utilizing farm for courses
- Gain administrative support
- Clarify essential elements of farm
- Analyze benefits and drawbacks of potential sites
- Develop business plan