

The Execution of the Organic Farming Certificate Program – Pedagogy Details and Development, Corie Pierce, Department of Horticulture, Michigan State University

Background:

The Student Organic Farm is an educational farm at Michigan State University that was formed in 1999 by students and faculty. A student group, MSAN, was formed and worked with faculty to secure a 10-acre parcel at the Horticulture Teaching and Research Farm. Horticulture Faculty member, John Biernbaum, was beginning organic crop research in passive solar greenhouses and the site was ideal for the students to be the Student Organic Farm. Eventually in 2003, a year round CSA was launched because of the winter crop production in the hoopouses. Over these first 4-5 years, undergraduates interacted with the farm as volunteers and interns. Many expressed the desire to have deeper opportunities to learn about organic farming and the concept for the Organic Farming Certificate Program was developed. In 2005, USDA Organic Transitions Grant funded a position to help develop the courses and overall program coordination. In 2007, the first cohort of students in the OFCP came to the farm.

Program Development and a 3 Year Plan:

First the program curriculum was developed. The curriculum content of the OFCP focused on vegetable production, organic farming principles and practices, specialty crop production, direct and wholesale marketing, and organic certification and farm plans. The backbone of the program was the on-farm Practicum, where students engaged in the management and decision making on the Student Organic Farm. The practical management was a key element to the training of new farmers.

A 3 year plan was created to establish enrollment goals and an interactive evaluation process for the program. This process was designed to insure that students who completed the program were asked for feedback about how to make it stronger in the future. Programmatic learning outcomes were refined and each course was to be “workshopped” annually to assure that course goals were aligned with the programmatic goals. Annual feedback sessions for instructors teaching in the program would also allow for more improvements and changes.

Additionally, considerations for new ways to package the curriculum into off-site formats were planned for and development would begin in year 3 of the program, after completing 2 years of the on-site program.

Pedagogy: General Overview and Program Structure:

Throughout the development of the program, there has been a strong commitment to the philosophy of the program as learner-centered, place-based, and hands-on. The backbone to the program is the Practicum. In the Practicum, students are trained to operate the farm and given management responsibilities and opportunities. All skills are practiced and reinforced in the context of the management of the Student Organic Farm. The on-campus courses are designed to allow students to go deeper into key farming concepts.

In the first 2 years, the development of 5 Key Themes to guide the students learning were created. The 5 Themes are:

- 1) **Farming**
 - Seasonal Farm Skills (efficiency and effectiveness)
 - Management and Decision Making Skills
- 2) **Personal Learning Plan**
 - One on one meetings throughout the year
 - Creation of PLP with specific goals for students to accomplish
 - Individualized goals created, personalized program to suit their needs
- 3) **Learning Community**
 - Peer to peer accountability and learning, create opportunity for sharing and learning from peers
- 4) **Sense of Place**
 - Students begin to understand where they have come from and their place on the Earth
- 5) **The Larger Food System**
 - Development of a greater understanding of the broader food system

Additionally, there are overall programmatic learning outcomes that support the 5 key themes. These overall learning outcomes are then further filled out by each student in their Personal Learning Plan depending on their own individual goals.

The Programmatic Learning Outcomes are:

- 1) A. Graduates will be competent in seasonal, organic **farm skills**.
 B. Graduates will be practiced to “**think like a farmer**”
- 2) Graduates will be practiced in the development and execution of a **personal learning plan**.
- 3) Graduates will be practiced in how to develop an understanding of place and **ecological identity**.
- 4) Graduates will be practiced in the thoughtful engagement of a **learning community**.
- 5) Graduates will be practiced in critical analysis of the **food system** and understanding their relationship to the system.

The Personal Learning Plan provides the roadmap for students and is designed to engage them and build ownership in their learning. At the beginning of the year, students work with instructors to develop their PLP, specifically to create clear goals for their time in the program and beyond. As the instructors meet with students for the rest of the year, they are able to help keep students accountable to their goals based on the content in the PLP. As the year progresses, students check off completed goals and add to the plan and by the end of the year the PLP includes goals for their internship and beyond. For students who are ready to develop a business plan, it helps them to set up the foundation to begin the development of their farm business plan.

Pedagogy: Learning How to Farm In A Year:

To achieve the goal of students learning how to “think like a farmer,” each student engages in several activities while at the farm to help facilitate their learning and specifically learning to make management decisions. 1) Weekly Farm Walks, 2) Management of a ½ acre Field or Garden for the entire year, and 3) Rotations in 4 different areas (CSA Management, Farm Stand Management, Edible Forest Garden Management, and Propagation Management) allow students to deeply engage in the critical areas of the farm and gives them opportunity to learn each area.

It is essential to give students opportunities that create ownership and encourage “thinking like a farmer”. It is essential to balance the theoretical learning (classroom) practical learning experience. Additionally, students need to practice the various farm tasks repeatedly and be critiqued in their performance. Efficiency and effectiveness together are crucial. Since students are responsible for a field or garden, it is up to them to complete the work in their area, so they have an incentive to learn the most efficient way to get tasks complete.

Next 5 Years:

Now into the 3rd cohort on-site, the development of new offsite packaging of the curriculum has begun. The goal is to make the curriculum available to more people around Michigan and beyond. New formats include workshops, short courses, and online classes. All of these together will be packaged in ways that will allow students in various regions of Michigan to have access to this curriculum in both for-credit and non-credit formats. Overall, the goal is to make this content accessible and affordable for more people and to help train more small scale and organic farmers to help rebuild the local food economy in Michigan and the US.