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Society of the Quarter: Sustainable Agriculture Education Association

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COLLEGE FARMS TAKING ROOT

Many of us are fortunate to benefit from the bounty of farmer's markets springing up in our towns and cities. The wide variety of fresh, local food grown by neighborhood farmers is a welcome addition to our communities. These days I can even take advantage of a farmer's market at the university where I work. I simply walk over to the student union to buy produce grown and sold by our own students. The students' pursuits in the classroom and the fields bring real food to my family's table and I am indeed lucky.

By way of definition, "sustainable agriculture" involves the integration of three main goals: environmental health, economic profitability, and social and economic equity. These goals are based on the priorities of stewardship of natural and human resources, a systems perspective and interdisciplinary efforts in research and education (Agricultural Sustainability Institute, 2012 par. 5). A 2011 study conducted by Damian Parr and Cary Trexler explored students' perspectives about sustainable agriculture and food systems education and their motivations for participation in student farms. One key finding revealed that, "Students were motivated by the empowerment they experienced when practical learning directly aligned with, and in some instances was an extension of, their values, ideals, and deeper sense of purpose" (Parr & Trexler, 2011).

Student farms also benefit economically from a client base of college town consumers who tend to be attracted to sustainable-minded operations. A New York Times article reports that, "Discerning shoppers crowd Cal Poly Pomona's 2,500-square-foot Farm Store on Saturday mornings for hydroponically grown bok choi, kai choi, variegated lemons and fresh juices made from student-grown Valencia oranges." Another example of a successful student farm-based business is the Red Devil hot sauce, produced by Dickinson College's 50-acre organic farm which "has done so well that they are increasing hot pepper production this spring by 300 2012, par. percent." Dickinson students are also awaiting USDA approval of their pasta sauce (Spencer, 2012, par. 10).

Rodale Institute's "Farming For Credit Directory" lists close to 100 institutions of higher education that offer hands-on and classroom-based sustainable agriculture education opportunities across the U.S. and Canada (Rodale, 2011). The proliferation of such farming courses and programs indicates the drive students have to learn, engage and thrive in these experiential settings. College students and recent graduates in search of on-the-job learning opportunities in sustainable agriculture can find listings such as the one maintained by ATTRA, The National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA, 2012). However, it is the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association (SAEA) which provides access to a combination of these types of resources -- and much more – through their unique and valuable gateway into agriculture education, for educators and learners alike.

SAEA BEGINNINGS

It all began in 2002, when the W.K. Kellogg Foundation agreed to fund a new California Food and Fiber Futures project. The purpose of the $30K Kellogg grant was to encourage partnerships between higher education institutions and community based projects that addressed critical food systems issues (Online Archive of California, 2009). This new project, named the College Farms Sustainable Agriculture Educators Working Group, launched a series of workshops at the annual Ecological Farming Conferences in California. The combination of experiential sustainable agriculture education and college farms clearly struck a chord with people. After years of consistent success, the workshops expanded into a multi-day national event held at Cornell University in 2007. Attendance at the national conference topped 140 participants, including students, faculty, staff and administrators from over 50 colleges and universities, and 15 statewide and national sustainable agriculture organizations. In a telephone conversation with Allison Jack, one of the 2007 conference organizers, she described a sharing table they set up for participants to leave syllabi, lab exercises, books and other materials to peruse in an effort to not "reinvent the wheel for curriculum development." The surprisingly abundant offering of resources led the organizers to consider how they might facilitate sharing the material on a longer term basis (A. Jack, personal communication, November 21, 2012). The enthusiasm and questions stirred up by the conference led to a collective desire for a professional association to bring together the multiplicity of such participants and their varying needs. As a result, the Sustainable Agriculture Education Association (SAEA) was born.

The mission of SAEA is to promote and support the development, application, research, and exchange of best teaching and learning practices in sustainable agriculture education and curricula through communication, training, development, and collaborative activities for teachers and learners (SAEA, year?). The Steering Council is comprised of an impressive array of faculty

of Agroecology, Soil Science, Extension Education, Rural Sociology, Crop Science and Biology with many ties to food systems advocacy, projects and programs. There are also three students on the Council who presumably offer input about their direct experiences as learners.

GETTING CONNECTED

Six years and five conferences later, the SAEA website effuses a welcoming tone within ample opportunities for visitors across disciplines to participate. Subscribers to the SAEA Google Group gain access to a vibrant network of individuals and organizations to support both teachers and learners of sustainable agriculture. Discussions cover topics such as program and curriculum development; outreach and community development; approaches to experiential learning; student farm labor issues; and internship and job opportunities. A call for volunteers includes opportunities to contribute to the SAEA newsletter, database management, bookkeeping, development/fundraising, Web site content development and interactive Web applications. Membership in SAEA is open to anyone who completes a simple application and submits dues: Individual**,** $50; Student, $25; International Individual, $40; International Student; $20; Life Member, $500. Those serving on the Steering Council are considered Honorary Members and do not pay dues.

Links to past annual conferences demonstrate that these are highly interactive events with rich interaction and dialogue in addition to traditional presentations. These gatherings have successfully employed Open Space Technology, an approach in which participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance. The feedback forms and Power Point visuals, handily embedded in the conference

pages, attest to how the loosely structured sessions resulted in productivity, learning and participation. Educators and learners apparently went home with practical ideas and educational content to improve curricula in sustainable agriculture education at their own institutions. A 2013 conference site has not yet been identified.

A Resources tab leads to a Student Farm Directory, Academic Programs and Job Listings. There is also a page mysteriously entitled Materials Database. What I found on this page was possibly the most eye-opening and enticing of all – especially for an agriculture librarian!

SAEA DIGITAL LIBRARY: A TRUE GEM

What I discovered was the SAEA Curriculum Library, a searchable and cross-referenced database of free education resources for sustainable agriculture. Here you will find laboratory and field exercises, annotated bibliographies/reading lists, curricula, books, Web sites, service learning projects, and internship examples. This was the type of resource I had only imagined in my mind – I felt like I had hit the jackpot!

A collaboration originally between SAEA and Cornell University's Albert R. Mann Library, the SAEA Digital Library will migrate in 2013 to the National Agriculture Library (NAL). A fitting place for this subject-specific resource, NAL will catalog all the material which will then be discoverable by searching the Agricola database, another exciting aspect of this new partnership. Once the migration is complete, educators may submit their own materials online along with a permission form. Readers of this column are highly encouraged to direct those in their academic community to submit materials.

Until the migration is complete, submissions for the collection may be sent directly to Allison Jack, Agroecology Faculty and Director of Jenner Farm at Prescott College (allison.jack@prescott.edu).

The association might consider placing this vital resource “front and center” so that visitors to their site are immediately drawn to explore. Showcasing this fine resource will likely increase the rate of submissions and make it more discoverable. A separate link on the homepage might be given an alluring name such as *Free Curriculum Resources*. Keep an eye on the website for the announcement of the next version of the SAEA Curriculum Library.

The nascent literature on sustainable agriculture education and on-the-ground experiences confirm that confirm that students feel empowered by these emerging programs. I see great potential for the empowerment of educators as well through the use of the SAEA Digital Library. The rich resources encased in the spirit of sharing will likely expand their teaching capabilities and networks while increasing their dedication to sustainable agriculture education.

SAEA has a LinkedIn group, a Twitter feed, photos on Flikr, a raft of conference session videos on Allison Jack’s YouTube channel and a FaceBook page as well. Well connected, indeed. These additional forums provide space for up-to-the-minute celebrations of agriculture education successes and also point readers to grants, scholarships and other opportunities -- fine complements to the meatier web site. There are ample opportunities for involvement with SAEA and many ways to support the work they do, the educators they stimulate and the healthier, more equitable food systems they help sustain. You are invited to become part of the next phase of their growth, which promises great returns.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

Baird, J. V. (2011). Food, farming, and the liberal arts: An exploration of multi-disciplinary campus farms." *Albion College: Undergraduate research papers,* 66, 2010-11

Clark, S., Sayre L. Fields of learning: The student farm movement in North America. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Greenhorns http://www.thegreenhorns.net
Mission: To recruit, promote and support the new generation of young farmers by producing avant-garde programming, video, audio, web content, publications, events, and art projects that increase the odds for success and enhance the profile and social lives of America's young farmers.

Leis, A., Whittington, M.S., Bennet, M., Kleinhenz, M. (2011, March). Student farms at United States colleges and universities: insights gained from a survey of the farm managers. *NACTA Journal*, 55, 9-15.

Markhart, A.H. (2006). Organic educational opportunities at the University of Minnesota: the role of a student-run organic farm. *HortTechnology*, 16, 443 -445.

National Association of Agricultural Educators http://www.naae.org/
Mission: To advance agricultural education and promote the professional interests and growth of agriculture teachers as well as recruit and prepare students who have a desire to teach agriculture.

The National FFA Organization https://www.ffa.org
Mission: To make a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education.

Parr, D.M., Trexler, C.J., Khanna, N.R., Battisti, B.T. (2007). Designing sustainable agriculture education: Academics suggestions for an undergraduate curriculum at a land grant university. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 24, 523–533.

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