

On-Farm Experience is Keystone to Capstone Course

Thursday, September 5, 2013

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Three Cooperative Extension food and agriculture specialists and a local farm teamed with a UNH professor this spring to bring to life a capstone course for the new Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems (SAFS) major.

Assistant Professor Iago Hale designed a course to get students engaged with the agricultural community beyond campus. In Farm Studio, the students served as a team of sustainability consultants to a local farm. Stout Oak Farm in Brentwood was the incubator, giving the seniors enrolled in the class a chance to bring reality into their coursework.

“We have students who have been through a full undergrad program in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems, but all their courses were more narrowly focused, like greenhouse production or pest management. What sustainability does is take a holistic view of the farm,” Hale said.

In developing the course, Hale met with Extension Field Specialist Seth Wilner, who has taught Holistic Management and Whole Farm Planning for over a decade. Together, Hale and Wilner discussed educational methodology, course content, holistic management, sustainability indicators, and more. The course was designed to include guest speakers, reading assignments, and online discussions, and to use an actual farm as a vehicle to bring the coursework and reading assignments together in a practical, applied manner.

The students worked together as a team of experts to assess a variety of sustainability metrics on the farm and provide recommendations and insights on how social, economic, and environmental sustainability might be enhanced.

No Ivory Silo Here

After hearing from Stout Oak Farm’s Kate Donald about the farm’s objectives, the students stepped into the role of professional consultants, conducting surveys and site visits, having conversations with the farm’s management team, and developing a portfolio of farm operations. They set out to devise strategies to help the farm’s management obtain its objectives.



“I wanted to expose the students to getting inside a grower’s head and all the decisions that have to be made all of the time,” Hale said. “The uncertainties and decisions were eye-opening for them.”

Dialogue, readings, targeted research, consideration of test cases, data collection, and facilitated group discussions complemented the hands-on farm work.

One student, senior Jeffrey Bregger, said the “real-life scenarios we went through and discussed...began to train us how to think as we walk on a farm property.”



Enter: Extension

For additional perspective, Hale brought in UNH Cooperative Extension experts Becky Sideman and Mike Sciabarrasi, who work with farms and growers across the state on a daily basis.

Hale said that as a graduate student, his primary connection

with agricultural research was “always through an Extension specialist” and that since his main interest is in conducting applied research and actually making a difference on the ground, connecting with UNH Extension “was a natural fit for me.”

Sciabarrasi helped the students understand farm product valuation, marketing, and farm economics, while Sideman, who connected Hale and his class with Stout Oak Farm, shared insight about agricultural Extension models, their history and theories.

During two guest lectures, Wilner discussed the social aspects of sustainability on the farm and whole-farm planning. Wilner also helped the students learn how to assess a farm operation.

“Seeing the shift of the students’ perspectives during the classes, from thinking of a farm as a biological or technical system to, fundamentally, a human system” was heartening, he said.

Hale added, “A lot of what we’ve seen in the field of Extension is the shift from thinking we can go in with technical solutions and that will somehow lead to improved agricultural systems, to a realization that these systems are in the context of cultural realities and human values. Once you have that figured out, some of the technical expertise comes in, but it has to be in the context of the human system.”

Bregger said Wilner “really got us all thinking about social sustainability, which was different and interesting, as it is usually not stressed when discussing farm sustainability.”

Another student, Geraldine Walker, agreed, saying “Social sustainability seems to have hit a chord with all of us.” Walker added that she “valued the visual of the three-legged sustainability stool and the depth in which we explored and discussed each individual leg.”

At the end of the semester, the students reported back to the farm management team directly, presenting their process and ideas and receiving feedback.

“Ultimately, they’re accountable to the grower,” Hale said.

Originally published by:

Cooperative Extension

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- **WRITTEN BY:**
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University of New Hampshire

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