

Building a Diverse Food Web: Professional Development Training in Sustainable Community Food Systems with a focus on Appropriate Technologies for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Small Scale producers in Rural and Urban Communities

Final Report for ENC05-087

Project Type: Professional Development Program

Funds awarded in 2005: \$75,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2005

Region: North Central

State: Wisconsin

Project Coordinator:

[Will Allen](#)

Growing Power, Inc.

Project Information

Abstract:

Growing Power received SARE funding during 2006 and 2007 to conduct specialized professional development training sessions at its Milwaukee Community Food Center for State Coordinators in the 12-state SARE North Central Region (NCR-SARE) and their local associates and partners. The broad outcome of the project was to improve the delivery of SARE programs to those of diverse cultures and limited economic resources. Growing Power was an appropriate vehicle to implement the project due to its extensive knowledge of sustainable agriculture techniques appropriate to disadvantaged communities and producers of color, its well-developed use of its Milwaukee facilities for professional/non-professional trainings, and its national reputation and connections to groups and organizations with similar objectives as SARE. Growing Power did not create a separate training structure for the NCR-SARE project, instead choosing to merge the SARE project execution into its core training structure of two-day weekend workshops. Actual participation in the Growing Power trainings among state SARE coordinators and educators was low, due to a number of factors. These included not enough lead time for coordinators to plan on attending, hesitancy over attending a Growing Power training during busy Spring periods, and a lack of clarity among coordinators on how their professional training was separate from the open trainings for all that were conducted simultaneously.

Project Objectives:

Project inputs

Facilities

A primary input that Growing Power supplied to the Building a Diverse Food Web project – and to all of its training programs – is its two-acre facility on the north side of Milwaukee. This combination of restored greenhouses, new hoopouses, livestock pens, beehives and compost piles has evolved over the years, in tandem with the philosophy and methodologies that direct Growing Power’s trainings and workshops in sustainable agriculture. Essentially, understanding the techniques and philosophies being demonstrated on-site at Growing Power is a key to successful attendance at any of its trainings and workshops.

The Growing Power facilities are, and have always been considered, a work in progress, suggesting to workshop participants that sustainable agriculture thinking must never be rigid, but open to change as new approaches are tested and developed. This idea that Growing Power’s Milwaukee facility is a testing ground for new techniques on sustainable food production made it an appropriate venue to welcome NCR-SARE coordinators and any associates they recruited to attend, and echoes their role as local educators open to conveying new ideas.

Milwaukee’s central location within the 12-state SARE North Central region made Growing Power, in theory, accessible to representatives from across the region. In practice, however, the size of the North Central region may have made the thought of traveling hundreds of miles something of a deterrent, especially if the value of the Growing Power/SARE training were seen as limited by those coordinators who had attended a Growing Power training in the past.

Because of the project’s emphasis on giving NCR-SARE coordinators and associates a deeper understanding of social justice and the role that racism plays within local food systems, Growing Power took advantage of America’s Black Holocaust Museum , located several miles from Growing Power, north of downtown Milwaukee. In recent years, Growing Power has leveraged its experience as a successful minority-founded and minority-led food systems organization to become a national leader in promoting the dismantling of racist thought and practice within the systems through which Americans produce and access food. To this end, Growing Power has added the promotion of inclusiveness and anti-racism to many of its training programs. The Black Holocaust Museum, and its affecting portrayal of the Black experience in the US, has been incorporated into this effort, and was utilized in the NCR-SARE trainings.

Staff

In addition to its facilities, the other key input is the quality of Growing Power’s staff. Growing Power lacks a separate educational staff to conduct its trainings and workshops. Instead, veteran employees (including Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Will Allen) are expected to, and willingly conduct workshop segments, in addition to their daily responsibilities of building and maintaining the on-site growing systems and livestock and the facilities in general. For the NCR-SARE project, Growing Power staff welcomed project participants as part of the regular monthly workshop training structure (see below). Erika Allen, Growing Power’s Chicago Projects Manager, conducted separate training sessions on dismantling racism, sometimes in collaboration with representatives of DR Works, a national organization that designs and conducts anti-racism activities for groups and organizations.

Introduction:

Project background and assumptions

The basic idea behind the SARE Building a Diverse Food Web grant to Growing Power was sound. As an experienced minority-led sustainable

agriculture/community food systems organization, Growing Power was well-positioned to provide North Central SARE state coordinators with culturally-appropriate training to improve their service delivery to socially-disadvantaged small farmers, inner-city urban farmers, new immigrants, and other marginalized producers – women, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans. The project thus targeted a specific, and growing, class of producers in the SARE region, while maintaining consistency with NCR-SARE’s mission “to create and manage a system designed to encourage the involvement of farm and non-farm citizens in the process of discovery and learning that leads to achieving a more sustainable, environmentally benign agriculture.”

Growing Power’s initial proposal to NCR-SARE was built upon the following assumptions:

1. Educators are aware and seek more information and materials to integrate sustainable agriculture with community food security.
2. Educators/Professionals require additional tools and support to establish community food systems that promote self-reliance and cooperation.
3. Educators/Professionals need overall sustainable food systems education in relation to diverse communities (rural/urban/ethnicity/gender/culture).
4. Educators/Professionals need hands-on training in sustainable food systems and would like to return to work place/audience with applicable skills.

These operating assumptions for the Building a Diverse Food Web work are consistent with the objectives that Growing Power aims for in its other sustainable agriculture and food system trainings that are aimed at a wide range of participants – diverse in social and cultural background, age, race, gender, and farming experience. Thus Growing Power’s goals and methodologies for executing the SARE grant were not substantively different from its overall organizational objectives.

Another relevant point regarding Growing Power’s appropriateness for implementing the SARE grant is the fact that its experience in working with socially-disadvantaged farmers had not been achieved independently. It had been gained through organizational relationships with national organizations such as USDA Risk Management Agency, Heifer International, and the National Immigrant Farming Initiative (NIFI) – and with a host of local urban, rural and tribal organizations viewing food sovereignty as a key mechanism in creating community and economic development.

Cooperators

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Education & Outreach Initiatives

Objective:

Description:

Structured Technical Training

Growing Power did not create a separate training structure for the NCR-SARE project. It instead chose to mesh the SARE project execution into its core training structure, a yearly series of two-day weekend workshops, titled Growing Together: From the Ground Up. These workshops are scheduled monthly from January through May (a total of 5). As they serve as Growing Power's primary training vehicle, the Growing Together workshops bring together participants representing various separately-funded projects, such as NCR-SARE, or individuals using their own resources to attend. Thus it is possible for an experienced SARE state coordinator to be attending a training on, for example, vermiculture, with a representative from USDA Risk Management Agency, a young person from an inner-city Chicago neighborhood, a college student from Kansas, a teacher from a Milwaukee grade school, or a recent Wisconsin retiree looking for a new activity to learn.

The basic Growing Together training line-up includes workshops on these topics;

- Vermiculture
- Aquaculture/Aquaponics
- Food Production Living Systems
- Community Food System Project Planning

In addition, a typical weekend will add other workshop offerings on Product Marketing, Livestock Keeping, Beekeeping, and Hoophouse Construction. Following a general introductory tour of the entire Growing Power facility on Saturday morning, each workshop usually lasts 3-4 hours, requiring participants to choose two to attend; one each on Saturday and Sunday. (A desire to learn more than can be gained in a single weekend results in a number of participants returning for later trainings; meaning that the Growing Together trainings have a built-in incentive for repeat visits.) Thus several workshops are occurring simultaneously across the site. Combined with the frequent presence of Growing Power volunteers working on other tasks, this results in a vibrant learning environment.

Friday Dismantling Racism Training

In the last two years, Growing Power has seen the need to expand the monthly workshop weekends from two to three days, adding Fridays as a training day for specific groups. The NCR-SARE project intended to use Fridays as the day for focused training on social justice and diversity training for SARE state coordinators and associates. The plan then called for attendance at the regular Saturday/Sunday workshops.

The day of dismantling racism training for NCR-SARE participants began with a morning visit to America's Black Holocaust Museum (see above). The afternoon saw a return to Growing Power, and a structured, facilitated session that reviewed the concept of racism, covered different types of racist practice within organizations, and asked participants to explore and share their personal attitudes about the subject. Structured anti-racism training run by trained facilitators can be as short as one-half day or as long as 2-3 days. With the context provided by the visit to the Black Holocaust Museum, the NCR-SARE trainings at Growing Power lasted 3-4 hours. This represents enough time to properly introduce the issue, and for participants to start identifying the presence of discrimination and racism in their work. Yet, it did not grant an adequate amount of time to go in depth on an issue that requires individuals to think through, discuss and share personal attitudes, and the creation of professional approaches that incorporate the insights gained.

Informal Interactions

The third activity is not structured: the several informal opportunities to informally meet with fellow participants to trade information and network among those with similar interests. These are incorporated into the schedule as meals and periods before and after meals. The rather tight confines of the Growing Power greenhouses tend to force people outside on nice days, and that is where much of these informal interactions occur.

Summary: Project Activities

Growing Power maintains a consistent approach in carrying out its trainings, that of “training the trainer” – the idea that those who participate are then able (to a degree) to take the new knowledge back to their communities, and pass on to others what was learned. In reality, the technical aspects of vermicomposting, aquaponics, etc. are best learned through trial-and-error, a fact that Growing Power staff educators do not ignore. The thinking behind the NCR-SARE project objectives was that – as a professional development exercise – state coordinators and associates would integrate the insights gained at Growing Power to the specific characteristics of their work with local farmers and ranchers. The benefits would be particularly important for those working extensively with disadvantaged producers: immigrant farmers, inner-city farmers and Native American tribes.

Outcomes and impacts:

The opportunity for North Central SARE state coordinators, educators and associates to participate in the three-day Building a Diverse Food Web trainings at Growing Power was promoted by NCR-SARE and Growing Power, with NCR-SARE making some travel money available as a sanctioned professional development activity. In general, participation across the 12-state region was low during the period covered by the SARE grant. Thus, the outcomes of the entire Building a Diverse Food Web project proposed by Growing Power were compromised.

Given the low level of interest during 2006, state coordinators were contacted directly by the author of this evaluation during February and March 2007, in the expectation that a personal invitation from a Growing Power representative would be appreciated. By that point, Growing Power had decided to designate one or both of the two Spring workshops in mid-April or mid-May as the dedicated NCR-SARE training for 2007.

A total of 11 state coordinators were contacted in order to gauge interest in one of the Spring 2007 weekends; two coordinators had attended in 2006, and were not contacted. Of these eleven, the author actually spoke with nine. Three stated outright that they would not attend, while six said they would consider going. Of these, two attended the May training.

Conversations with the nine coordinators during their invitations or follow-up calls revealed a consensus that the intentions of the Building a Diverse Food Web project were somewhat appropriate to their work (several North Central state coordinators were themselves persons of color). They also revealed the following reasons why their attending would be problematic:

- The general problem of adding any multi-day events, including travel time, to an already-busy Spring schedule for farmers and ranchers.
- Not enough advance word was given in order to decide whether to attend.
- Scheduling conflicts with already-set Spring events.
- A lack of clarity among coordinators on how their professional training at Growing Power was separate and distinct from the open trainings for all being conducted

simultaneously.

- Difficulty in prioritizing attendance at a Growing Power workshop over other demands.
- Questions of why a three-day commitment at Growing Power was necessary, when the anti-racism training was just one day.
- Had already done a Growing Power training, and failed to see the need to go again.
- Already works with persons of color, and was not sure special training was needed.
- Needed further clarification of the availability of SARE professional development travel funding.
- Was soon retiring from SARE, and was not sure of how much benefit the training would be.
- Some (unspecified) tension between Growing Power and one state extension agency.

The above reasons aside, there was a general interest among several state coordinators in investigating whether any of their associates would be interested in attending, and hoped that SARE travel funds would support their travel to Milwaukee. One of these associates did attend the April training.

In summary, the biggest obstacles to attending a NCR-SARE sponsored training at Growing Power were an inability to prioritize it among other demands, the likelihood of conflict given the time of year, and the short advance notice that state coordinators received. It is also likely that the value of diversity and anti-racism training – as an optional, not mandatory, activity – was not apparent enough to make a commitment.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

Conclusions

As noted, the low attendance among those for whom the Building a Diverse Food Web project was intended compromised Growing Power's ability to produce its intended outputs (which, in addition to a total attendance of 40 SARE educators at Growing Power trainings, included a one-day symposium for sustainable agriculture professionals focused on effective outreach to socially-disadvantaged communities) and outcomes (the primary one being improved program delivery to small farms, inner-city urban agriculture producers, new immigrant farmers and socially disadvantaged minority and women producers.)

It is also true, however, that the positive experiences from those who attended a Growing Power training during 2006 and 2007, and the generally favorable opinions of the state coordinators with whom the author spoke, suggests that it still makes sense to have North Central SARE continue to use Growing Power as a vehicle to increase the effectiveness of its coordinators and educators. The reasons include:

- The progress being made in identifying the role that discrimination and racist attitudes play in the contemporary US food system.
- Growing Power's assuming an important supporting role in this progress; through its current sponsorship of the new Growing Food and Justice For All Initiative, and its ongoing partnerships with USDA Risk Management Agency and the National Immigrant Farming Initiative. This suggests a continued value in SARE's working with Growing Power to keep in step with the movement to dismantle racism in the

food system through its professional outreach activities to the region's farmers and ranchers.

With more advance planning (over one year, for example), including designing a training agenda making future trainings more specifically dedicated to NCR-SARE personnel, the objectives of the 2006-2007 Building a Diverse Food Web project could be successfully attained.

Information Products

- [Will Allen Keynote Urban and Small Farm Conference, Growing Power 2012](#)
(Multimedia)

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