

**Exploring the Small Farm Dream
Network Gathering/Best Practices Meeting Report
Penn State University Great Valley Conference Center
November 19, 2010**

BACKGROUND

With the support of a Professional Development Grant from Northeast SARE, the New England Small Farm Institute spent the past two years expanding access to its *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* curriculum for aspiring farm business owners. This was accomplished by providing orientation/train the trainer sessions to potential *Explorer* course sponsors and instructors throughout the Northeast. To wrap up the grant project, NESFI invited new and established sponsors and instructors to a gathering in Malvern, PA to share best practices and to determine the level of interest in maintaining a network of *Explorer* providers. At present organizations in eight eastern states and three Canadian provinces offer *Exploring the Small Farm Dream* courses. Sixteen individuals, representing twelve organizations in seven states and two Canadian provinces, attended the meeting on November 19, 2010 (see attached list). Nine others signed up for the event but were unable to attend.

MEETING AGENDA

The day was divided into two major topics: best practices and challenges for organizing and delivering *Explorer* courses (morning) and ideas for continuing an *Explorer* network (afternoon).

Morning Session

Participants began the morning by introducing themselves and stating what they would like to share with the group and what they would like to learn. A number of issues were discussed. The best practices exchange was concluded with a slide show of John Berry's (Penn State Extension) urban *Explorer*, a large class held in Philadelphia where everyone walks or takes public transport to the course. We also looked at Beth Claypoole's (Cornell Extension) *Explorer* website with its links to resources as well as Ali English's on-line course registration form for FarmStart participants. Following is a summary of some of the practices exchanged:

Applicant Screening - Several people emphasized the importance of screening to ensure that the class is right for the participant and so they understand that the class is not a technical farming course nor does it result in a formal business plan. The importance of personal phone calls in this process was discussed as well as who does the screening, which differs among course sponsors. Also discussed was how this class is a useful screening tool in itself for other services course sponsors may offer.



Optimal Number of Students for a Class – It was generally agreed that 10 people is the minimum number to achieve synergy in class and to make a course feasible financially. How to accommodate farm partners (more than one person from a potential farm) was also discussed. Many organizations offer discounts for a second person, as they believe it is important and want to encourage their participation. There was general agreement that since personal decision-making is a key purpose of the course, all partners should complete the workbook on their own.

On-line Option? - There was some discussion about whether *Explorer* could work as an on-line course. Would we be able to reach more rural students? Could a combination of on-line/in-person work? Some strongly disagreed with having an online option, maintaining that a key benefit of the class is the networking and group dynamic, and the conversations that happen before class and at breaks. There was also some discussion of the value of offering farmer guest speakers as on-line audio to participants. In general, the group agreed that *Explorer* is best offered face-to-face.

Length of class/ momentum/ assignments/ final presentations – Most people favored the four-session format, although a few sponsors offer the course in three sessions (e.g., Airlie) and some extend the course through farm visits (e.g., NOFA-NJ) or farmer panel sessions (e.g., MDAR). There was some discussion about how to maintain momentum in the class; one instructor has had people form groups that stay in touch over breaks. Another finds farmers for participants to interview. Presentations in the last session were mentioned as a challenge for some. Suggestions included using a question and answer format and not making the presentation optional. Offering a certificate and having guests on presentation day were offered as ways to encourage participation.

Setting Course Fees - The question of setting a standardized fee for the course was raised, in terms of placing a common value on the class. Participants had varying views on this. While some organizations subsidize the class, others do not. Instructor pay varies greatly depending upon whether or not instructors are employees of the sponsoring organization. There was also discussion about regional differences in what potential course participants can afford or expect to pay. It was suggested that when the cost of holding a course is subsidized that participants be told that they are receiving a price break.

Improving Teaching Skills- How to help course instructors improve their own teaching skills was discussed, and whether or not this was a role that the network should have. For some instructors teaching is already part of their job (e.g., Extension educators). In another instance (FarmStart) the sponsoring organization has taken on the job of offering skills building workshops; in yet others there is ongoing mentoring of new instructors. Team teaching and bringing in guest speakers are other strategies for filling in “gaps” in expertise. A few people wanted to specifically learn about group dynamics, and strategies to avoid overwhelming students with information.



Follow up with Course Participants and Connections with Other Services - Although the group recognized that many *Explorer* course participants will decide not to farm as a business, how to help those that do decide to farm was a major concern expressed in the meeting. Some questions asked: How can we integrate *Explorer* into larger programs? How can we develop partnerships so follow up is built in? What follow up mechanisms can we create? How do we keep in touch with students? There was considerable discussion – and disagreement – about how much handholding was appropriate for would-be entrepreneurs. There was agreement, however, that providing access or referrals to resources (e.g., additional training, mentorships, NESFI’s *Small Farm Planner*) was important. In some cases these are resources within a sponsor organization, in other instances it was making referrals to other programs or agencies. How or whether to use social media to keep in contact was also discussed. While there was no consensus about a strategy, how individual Network members address the issue will be an important one to continue to share.

Afternoon Session

The afternoon session was kicked off with the discussion: What do you need from the network to support your role in offering the *Explorer* course? The plan was to follow this general discussion with small groups tackling specific topics to help answer the question “where do we go from here as a network?” The group instead chose to work on everything together.

Meeting attendees expressed interest in continuing a network of providers that use the *Explorer* curriculum. There was general agreement that there is value for course sponsors and instructors to be part of a national program, and that there should be some way for sponsors to be certified or otherwise recognized for having gone through the training to become a sponsor or instructor. The group was also interested in having follow-up data on course graduates that is collected centrally. Improving NESFI’s website so that network members can learn about each other, share course innovations, sample session agendas, etc. was also rated highly as a need.

Ideas for how a network could support the organizations that offer courses and the individuals who teach/facilitate them included:

- More train the trainer sessions and/or instructor mentoring– for new instructors of established sponsors, and for potential new course sponsors
- Subject matter training (for instructors)
- “Certification” of sponsors – clear roles & expectations; certificate of participation in Train the Trainer
- Insert in workbook sold to individual purchasers to let them know where courses are being offered
- Follow-up survey (for graduates) administered centrally (probably on-line). Create so that everyone can see total stats but also extract data for own course(s).



- On-line course reports (to NESFI) created so that everyone can see total stats but also extract data for own course(s).
- More Network gatherings – maybe connected to another event
- Sharing next steps – how sponsors help course graduates
- “Regular” communication to remind everyone that Network is there; solicit updates from course sponsors; send out Newsletter twice a year

Topics the group would like to see shared via a semi-annual Newsletter or on NESFI’s website included:

- Who other courses bring in for guest speakers
- How others “tweak” the evaluation forms
- Course delivery basics by sponsor (e.g., #sessions, course fees, #instructors)
- Course outlines, etc. by course section
- Go-to links for resources
- What worked, what didn’t work in a course
- Next steps for course graduates
- Value systems inherent in the program

The group brainstormed questions to include in a follow-up survey to course participants. A suggestion was made to conduct a baseline survey, then perhaps yearly after that. It would be the responsibility of course providers to let participants know when they enroll that they will be included in future surveys.

Having identified what the group wants/needs from the Network, the discussion moved to how to support it financially. This topic was initially raised in the morning, and there was general agreement that the Network should be able to sustain itself. While no decisions were made, several ideas were put forth and debated:

- Annual membership or licensing fee to be an *Explorer* sponsor. This would be problematic for Extension and others that are part of a state agency.
- Charging for train the trainer. This could cover the costs of providing that service but would not cover other expenses.
- Increase the price of the *Explorer* workbook. This option gained the most support.



New England Small Farm Institute
Beginning Farmer Business Training & Education Project
Exploring the Small Farm Dream
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AGENDA

- I. Registration & coffee (8:30 – 9:00)
- II. Welcome & Introductions
- III. Best practices: Share successes & challenges in organizing courses and/or teaching classes

LUNCH (noon – 1:00)

- IV. Discussion: What do you need from the network to support your role in offering the Explorer course?
- V. Working groups: Where do we go from here as a network?
Topic 1: How can we best share ideas & information?
Topic 2: What data should we collect as a group and how?
Topic 3: TBD
Topic 4: TBD
- V. Wrap-up & next steps

ADJOURN (4:00)

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Exploring the Small Farm Dream Network Gathering Attendees - November 19, 2010

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