

Entry for *Search for Excellence in Young, Beginning, or Small Farmers/Ranchers*

## **SO, YOU THINK YOU CAN FARM? ENTREPRENEURSHIP SERIES FOR BEGINNING FARMERS**

Sanchez, T., UF/IFAS Extension, Alachua County, Gainesville, FL and K. Athearn, UF/IFAS, North Florida Research and Education Center – Suwannee Valley, Live Oak, FL.

### **Introduction**

Beginning farmers face a big learning curve. Besides needing the skills to produce agricultural products in a risky environment, they need to know the business and regulatory side of farming. Beginning farmers often have questions about business registration and permitting; tax obligations; regulations; accessing farmland and financing; choosing suitable enterprises; marketing; business planning; finances and risk.

### **Educational Objectives**

We developed an Ag Entrepreneurship Series of three extension short courses for aspiring and beginning farmers. We set learning objectives for each course, Starting a Farm, Farm Business Planning, and Marketing for Your Small Farm. After completing each course; participants will be able to

1. Articulate their values, vision, and goals for a farm.
2. Assess their financial and other resources and their readiness for farming.
3. Evaluate and select suitable enterprises for their farm.
4. Identify requirements for business registration, farm-related permits, and relevant regulations.
5. Develop a comprehensive business plan with sections on marketing, management and operations, financial planning, and risk management.
6. Access financing, cost-share, and/or farmland (if needed).
7. Identify and compare various market outlets for selling farm products.
8. Develop a marketing strategy and brand identity.
9. Explore social media and online platforms for promoting and selling products.

Our objectives for the **overall** program were that

1. At least 90% of program participants would gain knowledge and increase confidence in their ability to achieve the course learning objectives; and
2. Within three years at least 20% of participants would adopt recommended practices, access financing, write a business plan, or start-up or expand their farm business.

### **Program Activities**

Starting a Farm and Farm Business Planning were offered twice each as a 7-hour face-to-face workshops in 2019 and in 2020. All three workshops were then offered twice virtually in 2020

and 2021. The virtual courses included a two-week online component via Canvas (learning management system) and a two-hour live Zoom meeting.

Educational materials developed for the series included:

- 14 video-recorded multi-media presentations
- 2 beginning farmer case study videos
- 6 worksheets as fillable PDFs
- 1 Excel workbook containing 5 worksheets on farm finances
- 12 discussion forums
- 4 quizzes

We also provided loose-leaf binders with additional resources to face-to-face participants and resource lists with links and downloadable PDFs to online participants.

Our program was enhanced through collaborations with several other individuals and institutions. Our collaborators and invited speakers for the series included Farm Credit of Florida (John Hall), Small Business Development Center (Mark Yarick), Feeding Florida (Heather Henderson), Alachua County Farm-to-School Program (Kelli Brew), the Center for Rural Enterprise Engagement (Lauri Baker and Cheryl Boyer), the UF Food and Resource Economics Department (Derek Farnsworth), and Florida A&M University (Gilbert Queeley).

### **Teaching Methods**

Our teaching methods emphasized performance-based learning, focusing on what clients need to learn how to do, not just what they need to know. Learning activities were designed for motivation, comprehension, practice, and application. We gave short content presentations, showed farmer case-study videos, facilitated structured group discussion, and allowed time for independent work on worksheet assignments.

Our teaching methods evolved as we transitioned from face-to-face to online delivery. Each course featured four online modules. Each module included one or two video presentations, an independent assignment, a group discussion assignment, and additional resources. Some modules included a farmer case study video. Short quizzes at the end of each module were used to check learning. Each virtual course ended with a live two-hour Zoom meeting. The Zoom meetings included expert presentations by invited speakers and time for discussion and Q&A.

### **Evaluation Methods & Results**

We evaluated knowledge gain, confidence at performing skills, intention to adopt recommended practices, and overall satisfaction. Evaluation surveys were prepared in Qualtrics, and the survey link was sent to course participants immediately after each course. Survey results were analyzed in MS Excel (Table 2).

Follow up data (>6 months) were collected using a combination of phone calls, emails, and Qualtrics. We plan to continue our follow up evaluation up to two years after each cycle of courses.

Table 1 shows the total number of participants attending each course and Table 2 shows evaluation data per course.

Table 1.

Course	Number of Times Offered	Total Participants
Starting a Farm	4	71
Farm Business Planning	4	63
Marketing for Your Small Farm	2	41

Table 2.

	Starting a Farm	Business Planning	Marketing
Knowledge Gain Avg increase in knowledge	57%	54%	55%
Knowledge Gain % of respondents gaining knowledge	100%	98%	100%
Skill Confidence % of respondents very/extremely confident	89%	89%	96%
Intention to Adopt % of respondents intending to adopt practice	88%	100%	100%
Overall Satisfaction % of respondents very/extremely satisfied	100%	100%	100%
Respondents Number of respondents completing evaluation	56	45	26

Participants rated their knowledge of topics before and after each course, on a scale of 1 to 5. The average increase in knowledge, as a percentage of the 1-5 scale, was above 50% for each course. 100% or nearly 100% of participants reported gaining knowledge based on their before-and-after ratings. Between 89% and 96% of respondents were very or extremely confident that they could perform a skill taught at the workshop. Between 88% and 100% of respondents reported that they intended to adopt one or more recommended practices taught at the workshop. 100% of respondents from all three courses reported being very or extremely satisfied (4 or 5 on a 1-5 scale) with the course.

### Impact Statements

It can take several years for aspiring farmers to plan, learn, and prepare to start a successful farming business. In a follow-up survey of participants who attended our first face-to-face workshops, five out of six respondents reported that they had adopted one or more recommended business practices taught in the courses. Four out of six reported starting or expanding an agricultural business since they attended the course. In fact, after completing the

first 2 courses, one of the participants successfully acquired a 10-acre property, completed her business plan, obtained all the permits required, and will start her business as a honey bee teaching farm within the next year.

Thanks to collaboration with Florida A&M University, we were able to recruit many African American and veteran beginning farmers (n=39). Participation by these underserved groups was sponsored by the USDA-NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. More than 60% of these sponsored participants successfully completed one or more of the courses in the series.

### **Conclusion**

This ag entrepreneurship series is helping beginning farmers improve their business-related knowledge and skills, adopt recommended practices, and successfully start or expand agricultural enterprises.