

2021 NACAA Search for Excellence in

Young, Beginning, or Small Farmers/Ranchers

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Beginning and Women Farmer Educational Programming

Program Objectives:

According to 2017 U.S. agricultural census data, there are 22,671 Wisconsin farms identifying a woman as the principal operator. This is a dramatic increase from prior census data and places Wisconsin 9th in the nation for the number of women principal operators. Census data indicates West Central Wisconsin (representing 10 counties) has 3,741 farms with a female identified as a principal operator. Research has indicated that farms operated by women are on average smaller in acres and sales when compared to farms operated by males. These farms are more likely to have limited resources and different risk management needs compared to established farmers and commodity producers.

Program objectives for women in agriculture educational programming included:

- Increased awareness of financial management resources and best practices.
- Increased awareness of communication strategies for negotiation, conflict, farm and family stress.
- Increased skill/capacity building of farm financial management concepts, tools, methods and processes.
- Increased skill/capacity building of communication and managing conflict, farm and family stress.
- Evaluate tools and strategies for farm profitability and future path of their farm.
- Prepare and/or analyze farm financial reports.
- Seek out other resources and professionals for assistance.

Program Activities:

To expand access and provide greater opportunity to this growing population, Annie's Project for Beginning and Women Farmers program was held over six weeks during 2019 with twelve participants. Annie's Project is a successful program that focuses on risk management strategies and tools for women farmers by providing useful, research-based information and resources. I coordinated a number of aspects of the six-week program, including seeking sponsorship for the series, carrying out the marketing, publicity, and registration for the program.

During May 2020, Extension educators and I virtually provided facilitation to the Heart of the Farm (HOF) Women in Agriculture Coffee Chats program, providing connectedness and coaching with four interactive sessions to assist 39 participants in addressing questions and fears farm women may have been experiencing due to COVID-19 while mitigating social isolation through connecting with other participants.

Teaching Methods:

The Annie's Project program included 24 hours of in-person instruction with interactive sessions and small group discussions. Topics ranged from communication styles, farm business financial statements and analysis, personal finances, estate planning, strategic planning and negotiation, and stress management. I coordinated scheduling of Extension educators and ag industry speakers to provide unbiased, research-based information. In addition, local women agriculture entrepreneurs spoke during the lunch hour on their farm experiences, which was the highlight of the program for all participants.

Four weekly Coffee Chat one-hour sessions were provided through Zoom meeting for women farmers in West Central Wisconsin. Timely topics included Time Management: Structuring your Day with Purpose; Communications: Exploring Perspectives to Improve Communication; Relationships: Nurturing Healthy Relationships Under Times of Stress; Bidding for Connection; and Financial: Finding Financial Well-Being.

Evaluation:

The six-part Annie's Project program was evaluated in multiple ways: a baseline online evaluation was collected to determine participant goals for attending the program and demographic information. A mid-series and an end of session written evaluation measured the knowledge and skills gained during the sessions. A one-month post online evaluation was used to measure immediate actions taken or decision made. A nine-month follow up Qualtrics survey tool was used following the series measured any actions taken or decisions made as a result of their participation in the series.

The weekly Coffee Chat sessions were evaluated during the Zoom meeting utilizing the poll feature.

Program Results and Impacts:

Pre/post session Annie's Project evaluations indicated woman-to-woman learning, hands-on activities, confidence-building, and access to resources helped participants to solidify the concepts learned as they take actions to develop and incorporate the various risk management strategies and tools into their own farm business.

As a result of participating in the workshop, all Annie's Project respondents (n=7) reported learning more about the topics that were presented (increasing their understanding by 1-3 points on a 5-point Likert scale). Respondents indicated a better understanding and feeling more confident in developing negotiation skills (increasing their understanding by 3 points on a 5-point Likert scale). An Annie's Project participant noted, *"I really enjoyed the variety of subjects presented. A lot of information was offered and I am going away from this experience with many more resources to use in my farm business & with family partners. The networking with other women connect to agriculture was empowering. Thank you!"*

In a follow up survey (one-month post), all said they were preparing or had prepared and reviewed their farm business balance sheet. In addition, 67% planned to calculate and review

their farm financial ratios. An Annie's Project respondent noted, *"There were a number of things that were important, but understanding financial statements and how they each can benefit my operation will have the most impact going forward. That being said, I also think the stress management portion was equally important for us."*

Follow up evaluative data (nine-month post) illustrated all respondents (n=3) have made decision, changes, and taken action steps based on the materials, resources, and tools that were provided. When asked the most important aspect of the program that they learned, respondents listed managing stress (100%), communication styles (100%), and financial statements (67%). These topics addressed the concerns expressed in the pre-program survey and were also the highest rated, in terms of quality and usefulness, during the program. An Annie's Project respondent noted, *"Great job! Keep offering great programs like this one!"*

Women participants are more likely to share the information they learned from Annie's Project with others, especially others in their family or farming partners. Participants shared their knowledge with over 50 beginning and women farmers. Networking has continued among the participants even after completion of the course. Half of the participants continued to network with at least one other participant. Most kept in contact through email, while some met in-person with another participant on their own.

Participants highly valued the educational and networking opportunities offered through this Annie's Project program. When asked to place a dollar value on the program, the average value reported was \$300, as compared to the actual cost paid for the six-week series of \$75 per person. An Annie's Project participant noted, *"If it had cost more than \$75, I couldn't have come to it. Ag prices were down this year, and expenses were very high. Hard to carve out funds for continuing education."*