

Interactive Learning is Key to Student Success in Online Delivery of Annie's Project 101 Course

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Introduction

New Jersey (NJ) is the most densely populated state in the United States of America. While the state continues to lose agricultural acreage to development, the number of farmers is increasing. Alongside the rising population of new and beginning farmers, established farm businesses are diversifying, seeking to capitalize on the enormous potential of direct market sales and agritourism. Effective farm business management training is essential to the viability of these new and changing agricultural enterprises.

Annie's Project is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides guidance for delivering an effective farm business management training course focused on the five areas of risk – market, legal, financial, production, and human resource. We utilized this framework to develop an online-delivered Annie's Project 101 course to reduce farm business risk among participants by connecting them to diverse educational opportunities, resources, and each other.

Objectives

1. Increase participant knowledge of risk management strategies for farm businesses.
2. Develop an Annie's Project 101 course online delivery method that builds a sense of community among participants.
3. Inspire participants to utilize course material to take action in the development or diversification of their farm business.

Methods

An Annie's Project 101 course with a hybrid format provided 18 hours of farm business management training through six synchronous, 2-hour webinars and six hours of asynchronous learning (Table 1 & 2).

Synchronous Course Sessions (Table 1)

Each week highlighted a different area of risk, featuring faculty from Rutgers and other land-grant universities, technical service providers, and farmers as speakers. Speaker invitations encouraged preparation of a 30–40-minute lecture and a complimentary interactive component.

Ultimately, poll questions, facilitated breakout room discussions, and moderated question and answer sessions were incorporated to enhance student learning, ensure students had the opportunity to tailor the session to their specific needs, and facilitate peer-to-peer learning and networking.

Asynchronous Activities (Table 2)

We designed these activities, along with speakers, to aid student preparation for upcoming sessions, promote student reflection of synchronous course material, allow students to practice essential skills, and introduce topics not covered synchronously.

Course Evaluation

After each session, a post-survey asked students to rate pre- and post-knowledge of the subject(s) covered, list two takeaways, explain how they would apply the knowledge, and provide any additional feedback.

Table 1. Schedule of synchronous sessions of Annie's Project 101 course.

Date	Topic	Agenda
1/7/26	Legal Risk	(6:00-6:30 pm) Welcome, Introductions, Course Orientation Kate Brown, Claudia Gil Arroyo, and Claudia Urdanivia – County Agents III, Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE)
		(6:30-8:00 pm) Land Access and Leasing Brendon Pearsall, Sr. Coordinator, NextGen Farmer Program, NJ Dept of Agriculture
1/14/26	Financial Risk	(6:00-7:00 pm) Pricing Strategies for Agritourism Sarah Cornelisse, Senior Extension Program Specialist, Penn State University
		(7:00-8:00 pm) Simple Profitability Analysis Sophie Lee, Extension Specialist in Farm Viability, Rutgers University
1/21/26	Week Off	Consider attending the Northeast Agricultural Expo in Atlantic City, NJ
1/28/26	Market Risk	(6:00-7:00 pm) Marketing Plans Claudia Gil Arroyo, County Agent III, RCE of Cape May County
		(7:00-8:00 pm) Finding Your Niche Dave and Lisa Specca, Specca Farms Pick Your Own Tomia Macqueen, Wildflower Farm
2/4/26	Human Resource Risk	(6:00-7:00 pm) Farm Crew Recruitment, Management, and Retention Jess Niederer, Chickadee Creek Farm
		(7:00-8:00 pm) An Introduction to the Eight Dimensions of Wellness Chris Zellers, County Agent III, RCE of Cape May County
2/11/26	Production Risk	(6:00-7:00 pm) On-Farm Food Safety Meredith Melendez, County Agent II, RCE of Mercer County
		(7:00-8:00 pm) Equipment Selection for Small-Scale Agriculture David Hlubik, County Agent III, RCE of Burlington County
2/18/26	Legal and Financial Risk	(6:00-7:00 pm) Farm Insurance: Covering Your Assets Robert Moore, Attorney and Research Specialist, The Ohio State University
		(7:00-8:00 pm) Business Planning Jim Oehmke, Professor and Chair, Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics; Faculty Director, Office of Economic Development, SEBS Rutgers University

Table 2. Schedule of asynchronous activities of Annie's Project 101 course.

Asynchronous Component	Due Date	Time Commitment
Pre-assignment Profitability Analysis	January 14, 2026	0.5 hr.
Post-assignment Profitability Analysis	January 28, 2026	0.5 hr.
Self-Paced Learning and Assignment Succession Planning	January 28, 2026	1 hr.
Pre-assignment Marketing Plans	January 28, 2026	0.5 hr.
Self-Paced Learning and Assignment Marketing Video	February 4, 2026	1 hr.
Pre-Assignment 8 Dimensions of Wellness	February 4, 2026	0.25 hr.
Post-Assignment 8 Dimensions of Wellness	February 11, 2026	0.75 hr.
Pre-Assignment Small-Scale Farm Equipment	February 11, 2026	0.75 hr.
Pre-Assignment Farm Insurance	February 18, 2026	0.75 hr.
Total Time Commitment		6 hr.

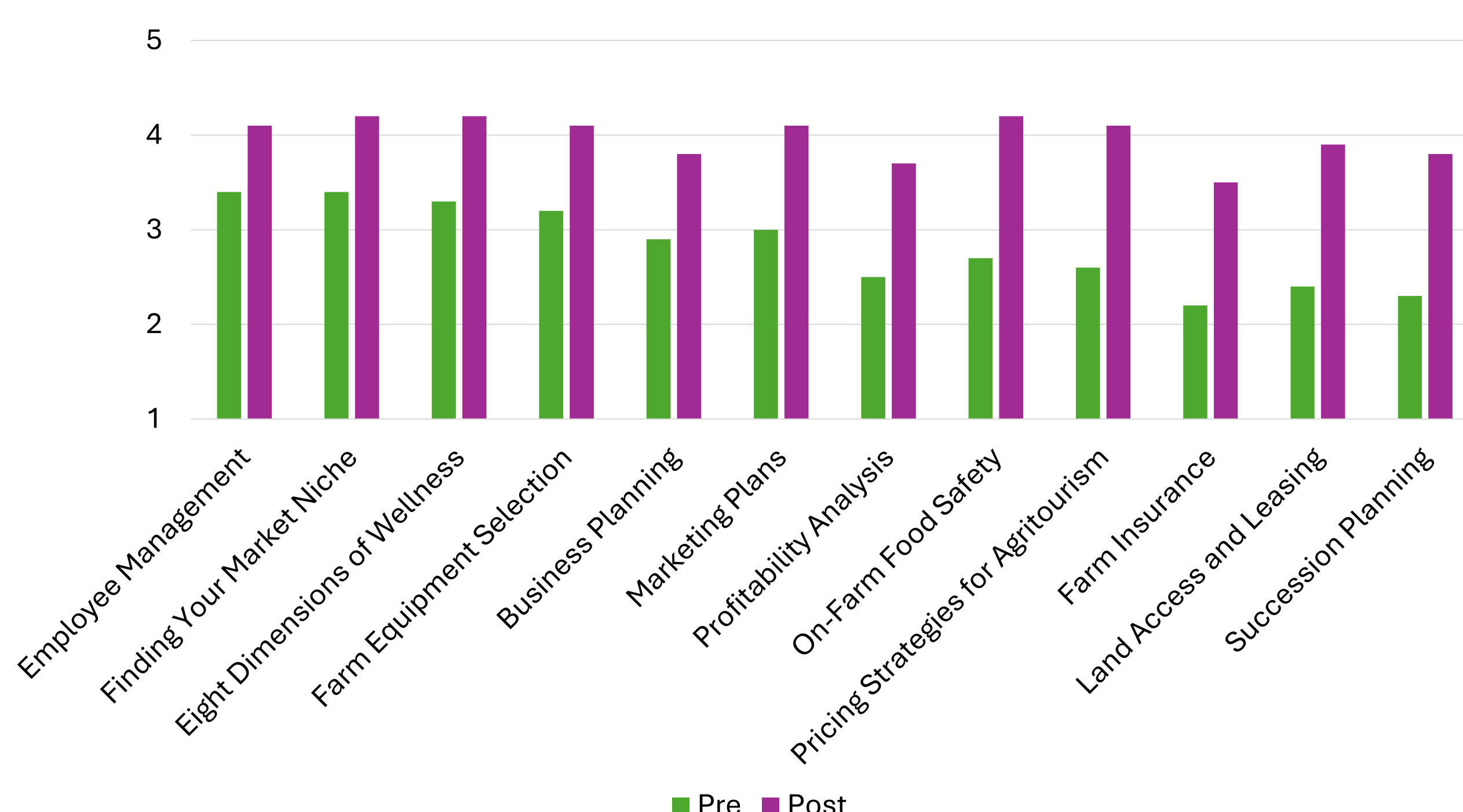


Figure 1. Self-reported pre- and post- knowledge by topic, on a scale of 1-5 (1 = very poor, 5 = excellent) for students in Annie's Project 101 course.

Results & Impact

The course had 34 students. Students self-reported their knowledge gain for each topic (Figure 1). Percent change in knowledge was greatest for Succession Planning, Land Access and Leasing, and Farm Insurance (Table 3) which were also the topics students reported the least knowledge prior to the course.

Quotes from our students best illustrate the course impact on their sense of community, their learning, and how they plan to apply the knowledge.

Sense of Community

- ☐ "I learned I am not alone. There are a lot of people in this program who are building farms while learning the business side in real time. That matters because community reduces isolation, creates accountability, and gives us access to shared knowledge and lived experience."
- ☐ "I was unaware of the NextGen Farming Program...a comfort to know of such services and resources when the time comes to actively pursue securing land."
- ☐ "The breakout sessions for the wellness session was very unique, it meant a lot to hear similarities in other wellness scores, and to be able to give and receive new ways to encourage balancing work and social wellness."

Enhanced Learning with Interactive and Asynchronous Activities

- ☐ "The assignments for this section were very helpful in further learning to apply the material."
- ☐ "I also learned from my breakout group that there is power in paying attention to your surroundings in farmers markets or at different events, in seeing how people interact with product, what they are purchasing, and how they are perceiving different aspects of the sale."

Inspire Action

- ☐ "I learned a market niche is not everyone who buys herbs, but a clearly defined group with shared values and buying behaviors...I need to identify exactly who values what makes my farm different."
- ☐ "I am calling my insurance agent."
- ☐ "I would just like to add how much confidence this course has given me...I came into this class with no one clear path, and left with a goal, a new business, and many new connections!"

Conclusions

Foundational best practices developed by Annie's Project can be successfully applied to an online course delivery format through in-session student engagement and asynchronous activities with multi-faceted benefits to participants' overall knowledge gain and personal development.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our presenters for their time and embrace of our call to incorporate an interactive component into their presentations. We would also like to thank our students, who brought energy and authenticity to each course session.

Table 3. Percent change in student-reported knowledge of topics covered in Annie's Project 101 course.

Topic	% Change
Employee Management	+17.1
Finding Your Market Niche	+19.0
Eight Dimensions of Wellness	+21.4
Farm Equipment Selection	+22.0
Business Planning	+23.7
Marketing Plans	+26.8
Profitability Analysis	+32.4
On-Farm Food Safety	+35.7
Pricing Strategies for Agritourism	+36.6
Farm Insurance	+37.1
Land Access and Leasing	+38.5
Succession Planning	+39.5



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