

Rooted in Student Involvement

The beginnings of the Student Organic Farm

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Where did the student farm idea come from?

In the spring of 2004 the University of Minnesota had a successful graduate minor program in sustainable agriculture. It featured a weekly seminar series, "What's Up in Sustainable Agriculture" that was coordinated by a student group of the same name made up primarily of graduate students in the minor program. The undergraduate minor in sustainable agriculture existed on paper but lacked participants and a community of students interested in sustainable agriculture was hard to find outside of a few courses.

During the spring semester of 2004 two students enrolled in a basic soil science class combined efforts to try



David Campbell and Jared Ashling, the two students who collaborated to start the University of Minnesota Student Organic Farm during Spring 2004.

to create "a place for undergraduate students to try and grow things organically on campus".

At that time no such land existed on campus. One graduate program had small plots for their students to conduct summer research. In the summer of 2004 we collaborated with a graduate student who was sympathetic to our cause who signed up for 2 plots (one for him, one for us) so that the undergrads and other graduate students outside the program could have a place to experiment.

On the first day about a dozen students and few faculty members showed up for the soil preparation and planting day. Since we were on research ground the students decided to experiment and did four different

Students preparing a double dug bed and a raised bed for the 2004 season. Contrary to popular belief, double digging involves shifting soil not turning soil over.





(above) Students discussing pest management at one of the biweekly summer sessions.

(center) A purple variety of broccoli growing in the plot.



(below) Students staking and trellising plants in the garden.



types of garden bed preparation. Including double digging; a raised bed; cultivated and aerated; and tilled with a rototiller. Students brought seeds and transplants and the small 20' X 30' plot quickly filled up. The concept was simple, come help tend the garden and reap the harvest.

Throughout the summer students met biweekly in the garden to discuss what was happening the garden, do a little work, and share knowledge on topics such as organic pest and disease management; creating vertical spaces for plants to grow; using weeds and spent crops as mulch, and harvesting techniques. That summer the garden plot provided students with the opportunity for experiential learning and growing crops.

At the same time one of the two original students applied for and received funding to look into how four student farms on other campus got started and worked. The student interviewed and visited student farms at University of California at Davis, University of British Columbia, Iowa State University at Ames and Michigan State University. This work proved to be a valuable reference after we got started.

The following fall, students continued to meet to explore the idea of creating a more permanent space on campus to grow organically. In late September of 2004 the students in conjunction with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture put in a request for 1 acre of land on the St. Paul campus for an organic student farm. The request was approved after several meeting with various University officials the plot on the corner of

Cleveland and Larpentuer avenues was chosen. This site was ideal for a number of reasons. First, drift issues would be minimal given the north-west wind pattern and our neighbors to the North and West. Secondly, the location is right on the corner of campus on a busy intersection which would give our project a fair amount of visual exposure for passers by.

Once the location was chosen a cover crop of winter rye was planted that was appropriate for transitioning to organic certification. Discussion began in earnest about how we would proceed. The student intern who had looked into student farms on other campuses suggested we have a student farm planning class, which would be a way to distinguish our farm beginning from others. Faculty members Bud Markhart from the Department of Horticulture and Paul Porter from the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics were approached to teach the course, with the idea the farm would have a broader base with support from both departments. A Beautiful U Day grant was also applied for but failed to receive funding.

The final step was right before winter break. A seminar was given at the What's Up in Sustainable Agriculture seminar series on the student farm, in which stakeholders-students, faculty, staff and invited community members were introduced to the student farm idea. During the seminar potential guiding principles for the mission, goals, objectives (for the 1st year), potential partner organizations and other courses, and names for the plot were all



(left) The sign on the corner of Cleveland and Larpentuer Avenues, which the student farm is directly behind. (below) A view of the student farm, planted in winter rye November 2004.



(right) Winter rye seedlings in the student farm plot.

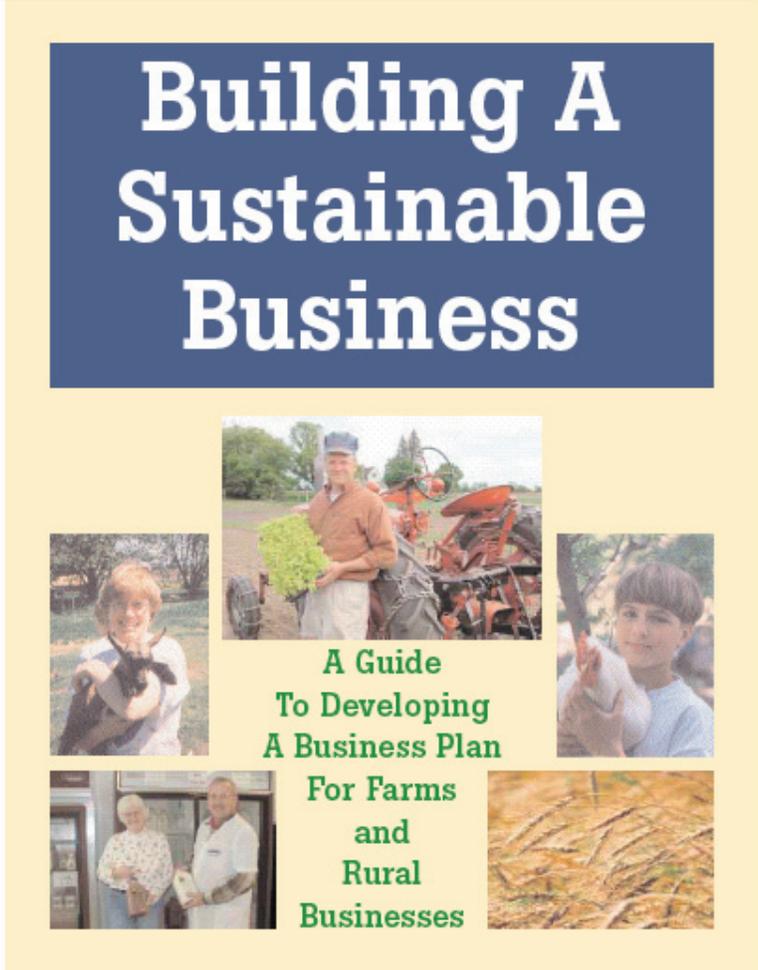


brainstormed and recorded for future use in the course.

A week or two before the class started the two faculty members, and I (the graduate program coordinator for the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture) met to discuss the course and it was suggested that in keeping with the student driven nature of the project that I, a master of agricultural education student facilitate, lead and teach the course, which I agreed to do.

In planning for the course the faculty members, few students and I came up with lists of potential topics to cover. Our main resource and guide which became the textbook and framework for how we created the master plan, was the publication, "Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to developing a Business Plan for Farms and Rural Businesses" (2004). The publication had been developed by the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and Published by the Sustainable Agriculture Network and covered the areas of operations, finances, marketing and human resources.

Other topics we intended to include were developing a mission and vision, consensus building, organic certification, and developing a master plan. Other ideas that were never used included saving seeds, harvesting, and season extension techniques, some of which were included in the syllabus for the second year of the student farm planning course.



The image shows the cover of a book titled "Building A Sustainable Business: A Guide To Developing A Business Plan For Farms and Rural Businesses". The title is prominently displayed in white text on a dark blue rectangular background at the top. Below the title, the cover features a collage of four photographs: a man in a brown shirt holding a green plant, a woman holding a black dog, a woman pointing upwards, and a man in a white shirt holding a book. The subtitle "A Guide To Developing A Business Plan For Farms and Rural Businesses" is written in green text across the center of the collage. The entire cover is set against a light yellow background and is framed by a purple border.

Building a Sustainable Business: A Guide to developing a business plan for farms and rural business, the textbook and required reading for the student farm planning class.