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The Evolution of Institutional Organic Farming Education in Washington State

Reintroducing Farm and Food Literacy to Liberal Arts Schools

Stephen Bramwell

We must understand that the introduction of agriculture into schools is not a concession to farming or to farmers. It is a school subject by right.

- Liberty Hyde Baily, 1911

Organic farming, as many know, requires a lot of knowledge. It requires a complex *set of knowledge* of soils, plant biology, livestock husbandry, chemistry, accounting, marketing, record-keeping, math, and more. It is a deep pool.

Interim Evergreen farm manager Jacob Wilson scores organic wheat for rust resistance.
Photo credit: Stephen Bramwell

And if we consider developing a sustainable and just food system, this requires knowledge of community development, power in society, domestic and global trade systems, the history of land tenure, ownership and use, and several centuries of agricultural policymaking, to pick out a few significant topic areas. Where does all this knowledge come from? Who teaches it? How does a farmer end up with this kind of knowledge? How do members of society come to possess even some of this knowledge? Why does this knowledge matter?

Knowledge of food, farming, and the ecological and social costs of our sustenance is critical to a moral existence. It is critical to any existence at all. Despite this, mainstream modern society largely dismissed topics of food and farming over the last century. While admittedly a simplification, during this time farming and food knowledge largely disappeared from mainstream American culture. This paralleled, of course, the loss of farmers to the point where now less that two percent of Americans farm.

Historically, agricultural topics have rarely been included in a liberal arts education. These institutions of higher education focused on theoretical studies, the pure sciences, philosophy and the arts. On the other hand Land Grant institutions were established to "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts." Yet for much of the twentieth century, relatively few Americans took advantage of specifically food- and farm-related curriculum. As a result,

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agricultural topics became the domain of researchers, fewer and large-scale farmers, agribusiness and grocery retailers.

The establishment and evolution of college and university organic farms in Washington State (as elsewhere) is then a curious development. It is a departure from long-term trends in American education. It is a challenge to norms about how, where and why agricultural curriculum is taught. Inter-disciplinary, organic on-farm curriculum is a novelty in a society that has been on the cusp of forgetting that sustenance is an issue worth considering. The stories of establishing organic farms at three Washington schools reflect these developments. They are stories of rediscovering something basic and almost forgotten; of challenging academic bias against vocational sciences; of students gaining strength in mind and body from hands-on experience; of education gaining effectiveness by stimulating not just the mind, but the hands and the heart.

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And perhaps most importantly, they are stories of the ability of food (of raising living things that feed us), to capture the imagination—to more than simply teach us *things*, but to *make us want to learn*.

Program development

The Evergreen State College established its teaching farm, organic but not certified at the time, in 1972. "It was considered a hippie flop pad, which it was," recounts Pat Labine, faculty at Evergreen from 1981 to 2001. Many in the faculty and administration during the 1970s did not consider study at the farm as "real science." To them it was just a bunch of kids fooling around with cows, she says. Students at the Evergreen farm persisted, however, with the help of Academic Dean John Perkins and many others.

"The students flocked to that little stump farm," she says, "and John was very forward thinking. He had a degree in environmental history, and he convinced the faculty that agriculture could be a very important part of an environmental studies curriculum."

Despite impressive results, varying degrees of bias and skepticism has trailed the Evergreen farm program over the years. Should a liberal arts school be training farmers? Says Labine, the model for teaching EcoAg (a program that uses the organic farm) is a "flypaper model." You draw them in with the farm, they open up, and then they learn all sorts of things.

"Yes, we want to be a model sustainable farm," says Labine, "but it would peel like an onion. In order to be a decent farmer, you have to know soil science, and the topics just peel from there. You talk to farmers on field trips about economics, and politics," she says. "These are liberal studies goals. It's nice that we are turning out farmers at the farmers market. The real goal is engagement. Let them see the interconnected layers of all the issues around farming."

Experiences from organic farm programs at UW and WSU reflect a similar role for organic farms at these schools. The programs may train, but also go beyond training farmers. John Reganold is the Regents Professor of Soil Science and Agroecology at WSU, which established the first (and still only) organic agriculture major in the country in 2006. "The number of students involved in agriculture is declining," says Reganold. "I knew this was a popular area, and it would provide students with knowledge of the food system."

"Students need hands-on," says Reganold, of the organic farm. "But students won't necessarily work on farms, I have to be careful. Students may go into marketing, the social side, they may not use that experience," he says. "They still need it, it's important, but we try to give them experience with other aspects."

Sarah Reichard is the Chair of Urban Horticulture at UW and the Director of the UW Botanic Gardens. "UW was always been a little hesitant to stick its big toe into waters that WSU occupies," she says. "They are the Ag school and they do a good job. It took us a while to realize that we could contribute on a small-scale, urban farm level."

"Some students will be farmers, and that's great," she says. "But we want to help students to learn about food and nutrition as part of their education."

Interestingly, the UW organic farm has created unique benefits for faculty as well. Reichard notes that work on a new Food Systems minor has connected faculty who would otherwise have no opportunity to work together. "The faculty that deal with food relationships are getting to know each other. It is helping us to collaborate," she says.

The organic farm at UW is also touching foundational chords of a liberal arts education: creating well-rounded students while building confident, independent citizens.

Beth Wheat, who serves on the Tilth Producers Board, teaches in the Program on the Environment at UW. While the farm functions in an academic space, it also helps students get to know who they are, she says. "In America, people are writing about our becoming more of an urban nation, so more and more students are coming with no basic skills of how to grow food. We have ecology students who can't identify a carrot from its top, which is an issue for food production." What's more, an ecologist—who studies the interactions of species with their environment—may need to know about how humans make their single largest impact on the environment, which is through food production.

More directly, the farm helps with students' connection to their own body, and how the body can be used to perform work. Pulling her shoulders back and up proudly, Beth mimics improving postures, more confidence. "How they hold their bodies is really different once they've been on the farm," she says.

Organic farms at Washington schools follow no single set of goals, nor use exactly similar techniques. Many competing and sometimes contradictory goals are being pursued. Turning out farmers is a goal for some, and not for others. Addressing student personal growth issues also figures in heavily, yet some might say cuts into valuable classroom hours.

Farm managers, in particular, juggle a challenging set of sometimes compatible—and sometimes competing goals. If an institutional organic farm inhabits a potent curricular space between the mind and body, and between vocational and theoretical, farm managers constantly trade hats in the navigation of this dynamic teaching terrain. *Am I a farm manager? Do I grow produce to sell? Is there a budget for this program beyond my sales? Am I an educator or a "field technician"? Am I a counselor or an extension specialist for the community?*

Sarah Geurkink started managing the UW farm in 2013. "I end up taking on a mentorship role. For some, I'm their supervisor—at least the four interns we're paying. In other cases I lead work that happens on the farm, but I tend to do a lot of mentoring." Many students seem to need guidance, Geurkink explains, or at least a particular kind of support the farm gives them.

"It gives them confidence," she says. "It ends up being their main social network. I watch friendships start, develop, and strengthen." Says Geurkink, once they learn how to do something, they teach others, which is very important to the students.

Supporting institutional organic farm programs

Managing finances, for the longest-running to the newest organic farms, also remains a challenge at all three Washington schools. In Pullman, Brad Jaeckel has managed the organic farm since the summer of 2004.

Evergreen farm students Fiona Regan and Sam Frank learn the basics of butchery craft from Farmstead Meatsmith instructor Brandon Sheard. Many in the faculty and administration at Evergreen during the 1970s did not consider study at the farm as 'real science.' To them it was "just a bunch of kids fooling around with cows," says former Evergreen faculty Pat Labine. *Photo credit: Stephen Bramwell*

"Once that original funding ran out, there was no money. What I remember specifically was that there was no plan. No delivery system to keep the program going. I remember talking with faculty at the university. You want to offer this organic farming class, I said, but how are you going to pay for it? How is this organic farm going to keep going?"

Right: Evergreen farm student Evan Bombardier stakes out tomato varieties. *Photo credit: Stephen Bramwell*

Left: WSU farm manager Brad Jaeckel sets up for the Pullman Farmer's Market.

Photo credit: WSU organic farm photos

Widespread support for college and university organic farms absolutely cannot be minimized. Community donors, faculty grant-writing, and contributions from academic programs have turned out critical funding for all three organic farm programs. Nevertheless, day-to-day production costs, if not entire farm manager salaries, have rested on produce sales at all three schools. WSU's Jaeckel, who has generated a significant portion of his own salary over the years, has taken the production role perhaps the furthest.

"I offered, well, if we need to make money, we have to sell some food." Speaking of the subscription vegetable box program that makes financial contributions in all three programs, Jaeckel says, "the goal of the program was to be a mechanism to generate enough income to pay for my position, and I would teach the class and be the manager. So we pieced it together."

At UW, Geurkink worries some about money too. "I'm having a hard time with the sales part. A lot of my job with our two acres is to be self-sustaining, which is not possible," she says. "We can buy supplies, seeds, but I can't pay for my four interns and my salary and be an educational farm."

With the help of gifts and grants, and academic support, Geurkink may not need to make her program self-sustaining. Additionally, a degree of tension around financial support has tended to enrich these programs. At Evergreen, Melissa Barker has managed the organic farm since 2004. "Because we're not a working farm that needs to pay its way entirely, we can have a great variety of learning opportunities," says Barker. "My salary isn't tied to the farm, but the operating costs are, which keeps it a real farm even though it's educational."

Sarah Reichard, at UW, agrees. "If you want to teach students about real life, you can't present this rosy picture that everything

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that you need gets paid for like magic." UW, she says, receives only one-third of its funding from the state. So a tension between running a program, teaching, and securing financing reflects larger realities in higher education.

Other programs with somewhat high overhead and hands-on components face similar challenges, says Lynne Carpenter-Boggs, associate professor in sustainable and organic agriculture at WSU. "There are a lot of other types of education that are or should be high overhead. And there's been a tendency in schools to just cut out a lot of labs," she says. "For my graduate students who need molecular work, there's no lab class they can learn to extract DNA. That has to be done on my time."

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Says Barker at Evergreen: "It is difficult, just running a farm. There's no farmer out there running a farm on forty hours a week. You put in the hours you need to, but you don't get that time back."

Questions of adequate financing and staffing for three organic teaching farms, naturally, speak to larger issues of how well we in society support higher education. Are we investing enough energy educating students about the essential relationships between humans and the environment? If we did, could programs integrating food topics help relieve some of the pressure that agriculture is placing on environmental limits? These are questions that can be asked and addressed as these programs continue to grow and evolve.

WSU farm students put the 'community' into community supported agriculture. *Photo credit: WSU organic farm photos*

Confidence and motivation to make positive change

The education offered at institutional organic farms has a range of benefits. Some are the direct benefit to students both in lessons learned and less tangible gains in confidence or direction. Some impact communities and local ecosystems by providing healthier, fresher and more local food while using fewer chemicals and invigorating biological relations between soil, plant and person.

Whatever the benefits, a central theme of institutional organic farm education is the use of agricultural and food-related curriculum to motivate and inspire students to go on to make positive change. At WSU, Carpenter-Boggs teaches a class titled Civic Engagement and Food Systems. "We are simply encouraging their idealism and willingness to work hard."

Keys to generating this enthusiasm seem to be combining theoretical knowledge with doing things: putting ideas to practice in the field, field trips to farms and food systems players, and studying a topic that touches lives and mediates human relationships with the rest of the world.

Says Carpenter-Boggs, "we try to find that model where we can read and talk about concepts, and then go out and see the many ways it's happening in the world." After these experiences, she says, students take different professional trajectories, but they're all contributing to more sustainable systems. "That's what is really exciting to me."

Meaningful experiences on organic teaching farms have spun off in highly successful social change efforts

Martha Rosemeyer has been a faculty in the organic farm programs at Evergreen since 2001. On impacts of the farm program, she recounts the farm program graduates who established the non-profit, GRuB (Garden Raised Bounty). Among other work, the program works with disengaged students to both earn credit and contribute to their local food system.

"It turns people's lives around," says Rosemeyer. "The benefits are so incredibly enormous." What about kids who might have otherwise ended up in jail, she asks? The amount of money spent on farming and gardening programs is so small compared to what is saved in costs and suffering.

Broadly speaking, institutional organic farm programs in Washington ask and address critical questions about the role of food and farming in society. In the process, they inspire students, create opportunities for positive change and forge new connections across subject matter and academic disciplines. If the academic enthusiasm generated by campus organic farms can be any measure, farming and food systems topics may be securing a much-needed role in higher education.

Stephen Bramwell is adjunct faculty at South Puget Sound Community College and Centralia College. He teaches coursework in ecological agriculture and environmental science. Outside the classroom, he hikes, bikes and swims around Puget Sound with his family, and is slowly establishing a biodynamic farm. 206-484-7524, stephengbramwell@gmail.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: *When queried about the use of the word "institutional" the author replies: "I sympathize with how that word could be off-putting, but I like owning the word because what we're talking about is how the organic farm movement is carving out a role in the institutional ed realm—odd bedfellows to some perhaps, but only through the lens that sees farm education and higher education as two separate things. Which, of course, is what's being challenged."*