

Educational Opportunities for Farmers

Introduction

Traditionally, there have been four main avenues of educational options for farmers and aspirational farmers to consider. Traditional four-year bachelor's degree programs, technical college programs, UW-Madison's Farm and Industry Short Course and mentorships/apprenticeship programs.

Each of these educational track opportunities provide different levels and focuses of learning depending on the best fit for an individual's future career track. Providing diversity in options for future or existing farmers or supporting agricultural sectors allows for options for all learners to engage in continuing education to continue building a robust agricultural industry now and for the future.

Background

Four-Year Colleges

Historically in Wisconsin, the main four-year campuses within the UW system that provide agricultural focused majors for future careers in agriculture include UW-Madison CALS College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, UW-Platteville School of Agriculture and UW-River Falls CAFES College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. These universities have seen consolidation within academic degree offerings, professional staff changes and program prioritizations, program restructuring, targeted infrastructure investments and significant enrollment changes.

As agriculture becomes more specialized, university programs have continuously refocused degree program offerings in order to evaluate duplication of programs across campuses and still provide educational opportunities for students enrolling in agricultural programs within the UW System. With declining enrollments at UW-Platteville and UW-River Falls during the last 10 years, there has been a slight uptick in enrollments withing the colleges of agriculture.

UW-Madison has seen an increase in enrollment campus-wide but a decline in enrollment within CALS. There is also a significant trend within agricultural colleges with increases in the percentage of women enrolling. At UW-Madison CALS, the current enrollment of female undergraduates is 67% and males at 33%.

Technical Colleges

Technical colleges have seen an increase in enrollment, program and certification offerings. Opportunities for individual course enrollment, non-traditional student participation, proximity to local population centers with appropriate, flexible timing for course offerings, enhanced opportunities through virtual learning and a focus on locally demanded program offerings have all contributed to the increase in technical college courses, certification programs, associate degrees and other accreditations.

Many of these programs provide technical skill learning and assistance to current farmers, farm employees, beginning/future farmers and agricultural support industries. The current Wisconsin Technical College System offers 78 current agriculture, food and natural resources focused programs.

Tuition costs for technical colleges are consistent across the Wisconsin Technical College System and range from 40 to 60% lower per year than most UW four-year colleges.

UW Farm and Industry Short Course

The UW Farm and Industry Short Course has been a unique and nationally renowned program. It provides hands-on and classroom educational learning opportunities for students who overwhelmingly return to the farm. These important skill sets are put to work to enhance their farm as well as improve the Wisconsin, and nation's agricultural sectors. The FISC program has gone through several changes during the last decade. These include changes to the start and end timing of the program, adjustments to course length and duration to two 8-week sessions, transition to a for-credit program, relocation of student housing off of the agricultural campus and adjustments to course offerings including instructional faculty, staff and other guest instructors. All of these changes including higher tuition costs and a shift to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in a steep decline in enrollment during the past 10 years.

Changes in faculty contracts at CALS no longer include requirements to provide instructional teaching hours for FISC courses. Current timing of FISC course offerings often overlaps with the traditional UW Madison first and second semester courses. This creates conflicts for faculty who are teaching undergraduate courses.

Most recently, UW-Madison announced significant changes to the FISC program for the 2022-2023 academic year. Farm Bureau and other stakeholder groups have engaged in discussions regarding the future viability, structure, prospective students and needs of Wisconsin agriculture education within the parameters of this program.

FISC is a revenue-generating program, so tuition and fees collected from students pays for the instructional and programmatic costs. As enrollment declines, course offerings follow a similar trend due to lack of funds for instructor compensation. The future structure of the FISC program is unknown and in development.

Mentorship and Apprenticeship Programs

Mentorship and apprenticeship program offerings for agricultural focus areas are generally topic specific. These hands-on, on the job trainings provide participants with a specific focus area and in-depth training, often to use the knowledge and skills within an individual's farming operation.

Mentorships and hands-on training in specialized industries such as organic agricultural production, intensive grazing and agroforestry provide networks of mentors as resources as well

as one on one guidance from experienced mentor farmers. Mentorship and apprenticeship programs are a combination of local, state and national resources for participants.

Discussion Questions

- Four-Year Campuses
 - Should there be a streamlining of degree offerings designated to particular campuses in order to maximize resources?
 - Should instructor/researcher positions have more of a cross campus functionality to serve a greater student body as well as broaden faculty interactions?
 - Is there a need to reassess the University of Wisconsin System funding formula to take into consideration the smaller numbers yet the significant economic impact agricultural students provide?
- Technical College System
 - Is the growth in agriculture focused program offerings enhancing the opportunities for farmers to engage in local and convenient continual learning?
 - What role should the technical college system play in farmer training and education?
- FISC
 - Is the current format of the program working for prospective attendees?
 - Should learning take place in person/virtual/hybrid?
 - Should there be a prioritization or focus of courses/program offerings?
 - Should there be a change in how the program is funded? If so, how?
 - How can agricultural organizations, such as WFBF, participate in the continual evaluation and guidance of a program such as FISC?
- Mentorship/Apprenticeship Programs
 - Is there a need to enhance the offerings of mentorships and apprenticeships across Wisconsin agriculture? If so, what areas of focus are needed?
 - What is WFBF's role in these programs?
- Should there be a state-wide task force charged with evaluating advanced educational offerings within Wisconsin's agricultural sectors and making recommendations for the future?

Resources

- [UW Extension Beginning Farmer Training Education Programs](#)
- [Wisconsin Technical College Offerings](#)
- [UW Four-year campus enrollment – 10-year trend](#)
- [UW System Spring 2022 Enrollment Data](#)
- [UW Madison CALS enrollment](#)
- [UW River Falls CAFES enrollment](#)
- [UW River Falls enrollment](#)