

Lindsey Rose Arnold
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Ecological Agriculture
Eco-Farm Conference Report

My most unique experience at Eco Farm was actually the educator's Pre-conference called Facilitating Sustainable Agriculture. It was a congregation of university faculty (both land grant and non-land grant), students with an interest in curriculum or graduate school, and assorted NGO and 'sustainable' business people.

This conference took the form based on the "autonomous impulse" of the "professionals" in attendance, known as the Open Space Technique. The framework and timing of the conference were held in place by the organizers, but the agenda and content were created by participants as the conference progressed. Interspersed with Open Space agenda setting and the subsequent workshops and processing were periods of interaction called World Café, where participants casually met others at their tea table and then discussed several open ended questions put forth by the conference hosts. The World Café table seating switched several times so that with each round, more and more acquaintances were made. These sessions were great for getting the creative juices and connection potentials flowing.

At the first Open Space agenda setting, those who felt burning topical questions regarding Higher Education for Sustainable Agriculture would ask them aloud and then take responsibility for facilitating an almost immediate follow-up workshop where other participants who had chosen interest in the topic would all gather and let the conversation go free form and more in depth.

I asked the question which is a hardly tangible one but fiery in my brain nonetheless: How do we create livelihoods and paths beyond college for graduates of Sustainability? I purposely didn't narrow it to sustainable agriculture because it is becoming increasingly evident that sustainable agriculture and healthy local food systems only flourish where there is the political, economic and cultural framework which necessitates and supports organic, cooperative agriculture. This requires people in all manners of employment and creativity to also embody a skill set or at least, consciousness of, sustainability. It requires incorporation of these concepts within students' professional or adult lives.

The ten or so people who gathered at my workshop represented a wide spectrum of interests and perspectives in sustainable agriculture. They included a graduate student of molecular biology at Cornell, a longtime ag professor from a Land Grant university, a student from Colorado College with a self-created major in Agroecology, director of The Farm School in Massachusetts, graduate student farm manager, founder of No Enemy conscious clothing company, and other faculty and students. A diversity of questions and views were raised.

We asked each other about the roles of educators in helping their students create pathways to apply their knowledge after school?; what skills are needed for graduates to be sustain-able, both in farm and non-farm work?; what actual jobs are out there in the field of sustainable ag or food systems?; what kind of 'careers' are students looking to create?; what are the potentials of colleges tuning in to the needs and unfilled niches of the local, state, national and global community to help plug students in?; how can we rethink our constructs of work and employment and modern subsistence, entertaining the idea of community cooperation in work and food systems?; what and who do we really

need to subsist and sustain in these times?; and simply, how can we find valuable return for the work we do that can support our basic living needs and provide methods of expansion?

Thought provoking as the conversation was, these questions about sustainable livelihoods for college graduates brought us to the edges of discovery but not quite to any of the answers. I think, if nothing else, each attendant was strengthened in their awareness and questioning of their own potential to create a new picture which answers the demands of this changing paradigm.