

Best Practices for Mentoring, Internship and Apprenticeship Programs for Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

This is a summary of the discussion of breakout groups at the BFRDP Project Director's meetings at Fort Collins, Colorado. This topic of mentoring encompasses many different approaches to help beginning farmers learn through one-to-one exchanges and in hands-on learning experiences. These approaches include mentoring, apprenticeships, internships, farmer networks, on-farm skill building and technical assistance. There is a need to come up with some common definitions for the use of these terms so we can better share best practices. The group defined the purpose of mentoring as strategies that draw on life experiences to answer practical questions. It was discussed that there are many ways to achieve this purpose, informally, formally, farmer-to-farmer, small groups, on-going, short-term and more. Given the complexity of strategies employed by organizations and programs serving beginning farmers a typology would be a useful tool to help everyone understand what other programs are doing and to learn what might be transferrable to other programs.

Challenges for carrying out mentoring strategies:

1. Making a match between mentors and mentees result in a productive exchange.
2. Geographic distance between mentors and mentees limits in-person time and can impact the ability to start or continue relationships, however when producers are not competing in the same market the mentor may be more likely to share more proprietary information.
3. Mentor farmers need support and to have a manageable number of engagements and level of commitments in order to make it sustainable for them, their family and their farms.Be
4. Mentor farmers have on-going needs for peer-to-peer learning.
5. Beginning farmers that are a few years into farming need to be connected with technical assistance that can help them address issues specific to their farm, markets and families.

Best Practices:

1. Small groups of farmers forming mentoring pools
2. Asking established farmers to identify other farmers they think would be good mentors
3. Clarifying for others about mentoring strategies that your program uses
4. Farmers have a unique ability to share from their genuine experiences and this is important in building a relationship with beginning farmers
5. Create an identity for farmer networks
6. Mentors should be prepared to share their numbers with beginning farmers
7. Networking is a key element for a beginning farmer program
8. Package mentoring with beginning farmer educational pathways (like farm planning training)
9. Develop diverse pools of mentors including food entrepreneurs.
10. Paying mentors for their time.
11. Put responsibility for initiating mentoring relationship on mentee (require them to call mentor every week and hold them accountable).
12. Tours of mentor and mentee farms for those participating each year.
13. Mentee applications are reviewed by potential mentors and includes a professional development plan. Mentors decide which mentor can best meet the mentees PD goals