

Moving the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture to a Systems Approach

Linda Berlin

Issue: The UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture started in 1994, prior to significant focus on food systems. At that time, the strongest emphasis at the Center was on “helping” the farmer. In 2010, the National Research Council produced a report on Sustainable Agriculture in the 21st Century that calls for more emphasis on systems approaches that will lead to a real transformation in the way we approach agriculture and food systems. The current incremental approach to research and outreach can result in solving one problem while worsening a related problem.

What has been done: Shifting the Center’s approach from individual program areas that emphasize farmers’ needs to a cohesive team-based approach focused on building a food system which is increasingly resilient and responsive to economic, environmental and social conditions requires many steps. We began by engaging in strategic planning where we explored how to work in a more transformative way. Because funding is a factor in the way we do things, we decided to try and secure grants which would involve a cross-section of staff. To expand the range of disciplines represented at the Center, and open up opportunities for further collaboration, we began a Fellows program. In January 2011 we invited eight people to join our first group of Fellows, including UVM faculty and other Vermont-based partners. We also decided to become more of a “learning organization” which has given us the chance to better understand one another’s programs and delve into new concepts.

Impacts/New Partnerships: The Fellows program has definitely helped us to establish and/or strengthen partnerships across the university and in the broader community. We have discussed grants to apply for collaboratively and begun the process of seeking out opportunities.

When UVM recently approved “food systems” as a major focus area across the university, I joined the newly developed food systems steering committee. This has helped to align the Center’s work with UVM’s strategic focus.

Outcome of Project (societal impact/ measure of increased quality of life)

The project of moving the Center towards more systems work has only just begun, and the significant outcomes will be revealed as time passes. However, within the Center, there are some immediate wins. Staff are more content to be working as a team, and appear to be stimulated by the interactions that come from being a “learning organization.” Integrating Fellows into the Center has been a great way to rapidly expand our perspective and reach. The Fellows provide new energy, different skills, and additional connections to others outside of UVM doing food systems work.

How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience?

The primary contribution of FSLI to this project has been related to my growing awareness of how to provide leadership for change within an organization. I feel more confident about my decisions, and comfortable with the steps to take that will lead to transformative change. Overall, I believe that FSLI experiences have helped me to gain comfort with my personal style of leadership.

Contact information:

Linda Berlin, Director, UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture
106 High Point Center, Suite 300, Colchester, VT 05446-8800 802.656.0669 (phone)
02.656.8874 (fax)