

farm to plate

NETWORK

DEEP-DIVE SESSIONS

6. Charting a Path: Developing Food System Careers

Vermont is seen as a national leader in the local food movement and yet F2P research found that food system employers cannot find enough qualified employees to meet the needs of their businesses. How did successful farmers and food entrepreneurs get to where they are today? These panelists will tell their story and offer reflections on the twists and turns along their career paths. What classes did they take in school? What important life experiences or trainings helped them along their path? How do we ensure that Vermont's education system provides opportunities for careers in Vermont's food system? What additional programs or opportunities would help more young people find their way into farming and food system careers faster and easier?

Facilitator: Dan Smith, [Vermont State Colleges](#)

Presenters:

David Conner, [University of Vermont](#)

Conner Gorham, [Vermont Food Venture Center](#)

LeAnna Compagna, [Scholten Family Farm](#) and
[Weybridge Cheese](#)

Whitney Lamy, [Castleton Crackers](#)

Calley Hastings, [Fat Toad Farm](#)

This session should be of interest to the [Education & Workforce Development Working Group](#) **and** [Research Cross-Cutting Team](#).

Research Presentation

David Conner: Why, How, and What We Should be Teaching to Prepare the Next Generation of Agri-Food Entrepreneurs in Vermont.

Entrepreneurial skills are important to teach to all students because the ability to confidently run with an idea, to adapt, and take a project from start to finish is an important skillset regardless of whether or not you are going to start a business. Also, sustainability requires market and product innovation.

Three types of knowledge:

- 👉 Explicit (Written codified facts)
 - Explicit good for simple problems.
 - Explicit has low/no strategic value.
 - Explicit knowledge is the building block—prepares to work for someone else.

- 👉 Tacit (gained through experience, by doing, knowing how)
 - More complex requires tacit.
 - Entrepreneurs discover, evaluate, exploit and opportunity.
 - No logical, rational heuristics, brief time window, by feel—need to learn what it feels like to take action.
- 👉 Co-created (answers do not exist yet, context specific—not broadly applicable, gained by collaboration and experimentation).
 - Co-created for wicked problems.
 - Co-created knowledge has high strategic value.
 - Opportunity is created in part by entrepreneur; need for collaboration to solve problems and achieve sustainability.

How to teach: Service Learning

- 👉 Phase 1 - Exposure;
 - First year - More book less community
- 👉 Phase 2 - Capacity building;
 - Phase in more and more the community to put the tools to work
- 👉 Phase 3 - Responsibility. Reciprocal value;
 - Some matriculate up and cycle back, become community partners

Assessment of UVM classes revealed that we were doing better job at high level teaching; critical thinking; but not providing basic skills.

Some steps that can be taken:

- 👉 More business classes available to non-business/economic majors. Important for other majors to gain business skills through classes.
- 👉 More flexibility in faculty advisor understanding course offerings outside their departments.
- 👉 Agri-food Entrepreneurship Symposium and Workshop. June 22 2014.

Panel Presentations

Whitney Lamy - Castleton Crackers:

Formal Education in art. UMASS Amherst—BFA in education. Have had a varied career.

- 👉 Taught art in public schools, college level;
- 👉 Worked in non-profits;
- 👉 Worked in food and catering.

In early 90s came across a homemade cracker recipe which intrigued me. Had been making these for 10-15 years. People would say you should sell them. Was paying attention to the craft cheese emergence. Started doing some market research—is anyone doing artisan crackers. Around 2006-07—no one was. Oyster crackers but not artisan crackers. Replaced refined sugar with pure maple syrup. In between jobs in 2008, Rutland farmers' market had opened, sold out in 2 hours. **Hit a niche.**

Fast forward, lots of challenges with the recession—risk adverse at that time to invest. Encouraged to look into a co-packer—someone to make the crackers.

- 👉 Person said would you rather make the crackers or do the sales and marketing—art background influenced decisions, marketing was where the creativity was.
- 👉 Was doing sales and marketing. Was looking for support system that had staff capacity, Vermont Farmstead Cheese offered that.
- 👉 The goal is to still run the operation with the support—co creation opportunity.

Feels like there is a prevalence of the mind-set that you have to be one thing; part of her feels that's not what fits. In hindsight that's what brought her to be an entrepreneur. **Would like the mentality to be more about trying more things.**

Conner Gorham - Vermont Food Venture Center:

Interest sparked in English class; realized he wasn't enjoying it. Had a restaurant within school, was thinking about cooking there and realized that's what he enjoyed. Took restaurant vocational classes then went to NECI with the hope of becoming a chef in a big city. The vocational helped understand food safety, management. **You not only know how to cook, but run the kitchen so that the business stays intact.** Began to shift interest a little—realized that internal satisfaction was more about going into the store and seeing aisles of products brought there by entrepreneurs rather than in the kitchen. Got out of school in 2009 and jumped into food manufacturing.

- 👉 Knew that the FVC was coming.
- 👉 Started with Vermont Soy—learning about the manufacturing process—about the process of changing recipes, creating consistency.
- 👉 Now does quality control management, offers a variety of services for entrepreneurs. Helps guide them through the process, troubleshoot, avoid mistakes.

Calley Hastings - Fat Toad Farm:

Career started weeding the garden for her mom, grew up in homesteading. Wasn't interested in it at all. Took a year off, working at a restaurant in Burlington. Decided she wanted to buy a restaurant. Recognized that she was a risk taker, liked seeing things come to fruition. Went to UVM for Environmental Studies, very dark period doom and gloom, and came out of it doing a on-farm project. **Actually doing rather than getting stuck on the problems.** Recognized when she got to UVM there was an education she never got exposed to. **Didn't know she liked experiential learning because never go to do it.** Realized it was exciting to learn. Was interested in teaching.

Question was, become a teacher or farm.

- 👉 Didn't really know what it meant to be on the hook as an owner.
- 👉 Started with a vegetable farm, CSA model, realized that veggies weren't going to work, then went to goats and making cheese.
- 👉 Started with cheese and goats-milk caramel. Thought, we should try this and a niche was there.

- 👉 No true farm background, had some business management background from her parents.
- 👉 Slowly built things; Professional development, workshops, learning from others.
- 👉 Got into holistic management—marketing and management are what food business is about; that's where the success is. Missing pieces are business financials, planning, and marketing. They market and distribute a product, and have prioritized that.

Interested in the idea of teaching enterprising skills. Industriousness. What's the experience with grabbing the reins. The go get it show up to work mentality.

- 👉 Best worker we have is the person with the mentality to work hard.
-Comment: And this is the mentality that the workforce is demanding as revealed by the F2P Charting a Path report.

Discussion

Matt—One thing I'm concerned with, we do need the time to be messy, but your spirit can be stifled by debt—the burden of debt by higher education is stifling entrepreneurship and the overall ability to take risks.

Bob—Something that David's presentation brought to mind is how do we get students engaged sooner and earlier?

- 👉 Narrow the target audience when we start it at the post-secondary level.
- 👉 Need to create the work ethic in the school system—something that John Dewey's educational philosophy promoted.

Whitney—Part of this the terms we use outside of the core areas of study. Art when I was in school, for example, was "special". Already set up the mentality that it was different or lesser.

John—Society is moving in directions where its creating impediments to what we are talking about. Work ethic comes so early. Hard to create entrepreneurship opportunities now at a young age—fearful of letting kids be out there to do things in an entrepreneurial way. Things have become so specialized. Need a liberal arts of agriculture so you can find your niche rather than selecting only what you've been exposed to. **We want people to specialize well before they should be specializing.**

Nicole—Important early on was advisors in the beginning of college education; public education (high school). Had an advisor who challenged all of her educational assumptions. Advisor listened and adjusted her schedule accordingly. **Early intervention and strong advisory role are very important as well.**

Jay—People change jobs often. Get students to recognize strengths and interests. Just because you're going in this one direction doesn't mean you are stuck there. Just because you are in the automotive class doesn't mean you can't become an engineer. Have to have a better understanding of what's required to do certain jobs in order to advise them effectively. Career counseling, recognizing life goals, rather than college counseling. Flexible Pathways passed in spring—all students starting in seventh grade must have learning plans. Evolutionary plan. Think it's a step in the right direction.

Dan—There's a need in some sense to deescalate the precipitous nature of each decision. It's okay to reinvent.

Whitney—Help kids not just find a career, but a passion.

David—Three things that are core to entrepreneurial success. Do something that you are passionate about. Do what you do well. Drive an economic engine.

David—Also, I hold students accountable. I work for them, they've made a huge investment in me. Make them be present.

Conner—At NECI you have allotted amount of hours to be in the kitchen and classroom. And you need to fulfill it, even if you get sick, you have to fulfill those hours to graduate. A good system that creates that sense of accountability

Calley—I think some level its good to have that difference between an entrepreneur and someone who wants to work for one. Not everyone needs to be the entrepreneur—lots of risk. Different tiers of skills to keep the engine running, and good to know and recognize what the skills are at each level.

You see creative people who want to take something and run with it, the person who is good at collaborating and being a good team member, and the person who is just passionate about doing the dirty work.

Conner—A lot of the times the people who came before them helps the entrepreneur learn what will work. The in-house networking—going by people in the kitchen—seeing experimentation and mistakes. The people who stick their head out are integral.

Matt—Dual enrollment and early college. Programs are used for retention—build confidence and an admissions strategy. As a pathway into higher ed. What if we shifted the intent? Use credits, add in higher education to get the experience of the next level, but don't need the whole experience. For example, 20 credits for entrepreneurship. Expanded life and job skills. But would I be supported by my institution?

Dan—**What can we take away? How do we create a system that takes into account different kids and learning styles?**

Julie—How could 4-H as an extracurricular model be used? How could athletics be used? Merit badge and dairy science—all examples of the intersection of education and extracurricular education. We don't normally think of these as preparing people for work, but we've already heard how people coming with, for example, an athletics background has the right workplace mentality. How do we cultivate that more explicitly?

John—Is farming cool in high school yet? I would say no. But what is cool to them? I learned what I know in the summers. What is cool is having your own money. Figure out a way to create summer jobs, early experiences to sample, in a currency they can understand—a summer job.

Policy issues that impede people form hiring young labor.

Caelan—The kitchen is cool, cooking is cool. Then it extends to going out in the field and harvesting.

Nicole—Profiles of people who haven't taken a normal path is really important. Not a certain thing to do in order to be successful.

Create this in local communities, who are the people that they can associate with in the community.

Takeaway Messages:

- 👉 **There is no one way to get involved. Many scales within a given field or organization.**
- 👉 **Experiential based education - need more opportunities prior to college.**
- 👉 **Join [Career Pathways Task Force](#) - complete illustrations of these pathways. Develop online pathways on Food System Atlas.**