

Perspectives on Accomplishments and Future Challenges

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Five years ago the Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) was created by the College of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota and the Sustainers' Coalition. Its purpose was to bring community and University people together to promote sustainable agriculture. In the bylaws, MISA's founders called for a formal review after five years. It is now time to formally reflect on what MISA has accomplished, how well it is functioning, and where it might head in the future.

Summary of Findings

- MISA has been very effective in connecting farmers, community members, and University faculty interested in sustainable agriculture.
- MISA has been less effective in impacting the work of faculty not already interested in sustainable agriculture.
- MISA has fostered change within the University including the sustainable agriculture minor, the coordinated sustainable agriculture research program, and the Minnesota Extension Service's Sustainable Agriculture newsletter. These are seen as the first steps in what is needed to internalize sustainability within the University.
- People repeatedly said that any limited progress is due to the difficulty of MISA's mission, not shortcomings of MISA.
- People agreed that there is a need for additional resources for sustainable agriculture and they encourage the Dean to provide additional financial support for sustainable agriculture
- The staff is highly regarded.
- The Board continues to struggle with issues of trust and process versus outcomes.
- The greatest challenges ahead for MISA? Developing a clear message which spurs action, getting funding, and getting more people involved.
- People believe MISA should continue. Its work is not done. No other organization is doing its work. And the work continues to be important.

Background

Five years ago the Minnesota Institute of Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) was created by the College of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota and the Sustainers' Coalition. Its purpose was to bring community and University people together to promote sustainable agriculture. In the bylaws, MISA's founders called for a formal review after five years. It is now time to formally reflect on what MISA has accomplished, how well it is functioning, and where it might head in the future.

As part of the review, nine people were asked to share their perspectives on the accomplishments and future challenges of MISA. Two farmers, a student, a member of the Sustainers' Coalition, a representative of a farm organization, a director of a legislative commission, two campus-based faculty, and one branch station faculty member were interviewed. These nine people are all supporters of sustainable agriculture and have all been involved with MISA in some way: some have been intensely involved in all aspects of MISA, others have been involved in a piece of MISA's work. This report summarizes the results of these nine interviews.

Findings

Accomplishments/Effectiveness

People said it in different ways, but most agreed that MISA's greatest accomplishment has been the opening of communication channels between the University and the sustainable agriculture community. This was no small accomplishment. According to the people interviewed, it was a huge challenge to bring together people who were skeptical of one another's views and motives to talk about issues and build trust. Out of distrust, arrogance, lack of respect, and misunderstandings MISA has created a structure, an environment, and provided resources for faculty and the sustainable agriculture community to come together to work on issues of sustainable agriculture.

Interviewees were asked to talk about how effective MISA has been in addressing four major goals:

- increasing University resources devoted to sustainable agriculture
- increasing practitioners' influence on the University
- internalization of sustainable agriculture within the University, and
- working with rural communities on sustainability issues.

Increasing the Amount of University Resources Devoted to Sustainable Agriculture

People were pleased with the financial commitment the Dean of the College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences (COAFES) has made to sustainable agriculture through MISA. They were also impressed with the faculty resources being devoted to sustainable agriculture. Although pleased that resources had been designated for MISA particularly during times of tight budgets, people said more funding is needed to address sustainable agriculture issues. Some expressed concern that Dean Martin may not be as supportive of sustainable agriculture as his predecessor. Others said he seemed very supportive. People agreed that there is a need for additional resources for sustainable agriculture and they encourage the Dean to provide additional financial support for sustainable agriculture. No matter what happens within the University, people said MISA needs to do a better job of helping people find grant money from outside the University.

Increasing Practitioners' [Farmers'] Influence on the University

One farmer said "if you look back on how much influence we had when we started, then I would say MISA has been extremely effective. If you look at where we have to go, then I would say we haven't been very effective." (This contrast captures the way a number of people thought about MISA's work in general.) People within the University tend to see less impact on the University than people from outside the University.

Internalization of Sustainable Agriculture within the University in Teaching, Research, and Extension

Most people interviewed believe MISA has been somewhat effective in internalizing sustainable agriculture within the University. Some observed that MISA has provided support for COAFES faculty who were already interested in sustainable agriculture. This, undoubtedly, got more faculty engaged in sustainable agriculture. Yet, some believe MISA hasn't touched the lives of other faculty. One faculty member said s/he believes most COAFES faculty have no idea what MISA is doing and don't really care.

Among teaching, research, and extension, people believe MISA has been most effective in internalizing sustainable agriculture with the teaching program.

Teaching

People believe the sustainable agriculture minor which has been developed by MISA will continue even if MISA disappears. It is a sign that sustainable agriculture has been internalized within some courses within the College. The minor gives visibility and credibility to sustainable agriculture. Yet, some say the concept of sustainability must permeate more classes in the College and in other colleges for it to truly be internalized

in the University.

Research

Some people believe MISA is helping to change the type of research done and the way research is done at the University. They cite the research teams and the conversations between researchers and sustainable agriculture practitioners as indicators of openness to different ways of doing research. They provide examples of individual faculty members transforming their approaches to research through inclusive and participatory methods. The farmers who were interviewed were excited about these changes. However, several people said that many faculty say they do sustainable research but that they aren't doing anything different than they did before.

Extension

People have seen the least internalization of sustainable agriculture within extension (when compared to teaching and research). However, there have been changes. The Minnesota Extension Service's (MES) Sustainable Agriculture newsletter is a positive sign that MES is listening to sustainable farmers. Also, people said MES has individuals who are very knowledgeable and committed to sustainable agriculture, but that the commitment to sustainable agriculture within MES is not widespread. One person explained that it is difficult to focus on both conventional agriculture and sustainable agriculture, and that most extension educators put their energy on conventional agriculture because most farmers use conventional methods. Another suggested that more sustainable agriculture publications be distributed through MES as a way of internalizing sustainable agriculture within extension.

Working with Rural Communities on Sustainability Issues

Most people said they weren't aware of any work MISA had been doing with rural communities.

In summary, the people interviewed said MISA has made inroads on its goals, but it has a long way to go before real change is made. Far from criticizing MISA, people went out of their way to say that limited progress is due to the difficulty of the task, not shortcomings of MISA. People pointed to factors which make the job daunting: institutional inertia, resistance of some faculty, the University reward system, University culture, and the continued misperception of sustainable producers as "fringe," "organic," or wanting to turn back the hands of time.

Staff

People interviewed said the MISA staff is "excellent." They also said the staff is competent, hardworking, and personable and that they have been effective spokespersons for MISA, sustainable agriculture, and the University. A number of people commented on how hard the staff jobs must be -- to bridge the different cultures of the University and the sustainable agriculture community.

While almost all the discussion about the staff was positive, several people suggested that the staff needs to be more aware of when to step in and take control versus playing a supportive role. Some felt staff members occasionally overstepped their roles by doing too much for people or making decisions for people which results in a lack of ownership.

Board of Directors

People appreciate the diversity of the Board and most feel it has the right balance and types of people on it. (One person said it would be wise to include a state agency or legislative representative to get more buy-in from the state.) However, people said progress has been slow and meetings frustrating because individuals on the Board and Joint Seminar have been overly protective of their philosophy, ideas, or the organization they represent rather than concentrating on what would be best for MISA. One Board member said s/he would like to see the Board grow to be "more open to challenge and less protective of our philosophy."

Some talked about the struggle of bringing the Board together and building the trust needed to work together. Others talked about the endless "process stuff" which turns some people off, particularly faculty. Some MISA supporters are just refusing to go to more meetings. While people agree that much of MISA's success is based in its ability to develop trust among the players, some are weary of what seems like never ending process. Several people said MISA needs to find more balance between process and product. One person suggested MISA be more aware of which settings and causes require process work and which don't. Another said process is important but funding will certainly be cut if sustainable agriculture organizations aren't able to show research results.

Should MISA Continue?

Everyone interviewed said MISA should continue. They said MISA's work is not done, its work is not being done by any other organization, and the work continues to be important. However, two people qualified their statement by saying they would not want to see it continue if it was co-opted by COAFES administration or by corporate agriculture.

Biggest Challenge in the Future?

Funding is one of the biggest challenges people see for MISA. Several people said additional resources will be needed to move to the next level of impact. Several said additional research dollars are needed.

Another challenge will be getting additional people to support sustainable agriculture. This includes faculty and administration, elected officials, community members, and conventional farmers. This is not only important to reach the next level of impact, but also because some supporters are getting burned-out.

Interviewees said that to attract funding and new people, MISA must have a clear message and be able to make the case for sustainable agriculture to different audiences -- policy makers, academics, consumers, producers, corporations. What does sustainable mean? Why are we better off with sustainable agriculture? What impact would it have on me as an individual? What are the economic, environmental, and social arguments for it? Against it? MISA's message must be clear, convincing, and motivating. It must move people from not knowing about sustainable agriculture, to awareness, to understanding it, to believing in it, to taking action. As one person said, "theoretically it [sustainable agriculture] may make sense, but to live it and really change the way we do things, that is the greatest challenge."

Most Critical Sustainable Agriculture Issues?

According to most interviewees, the most critical sustainable agriculture issue in Minnesota today is the social impact of agriculture on the future of rural communities. They see structures like the mega-farm undoing the threads of community. Some broadened the issue from sustainable agriculture to sustainable communities. They want family farms and rural communities to thrive and they want the University of Minnesota to help make that happen. But to do this, the University must see sustainable agriculture and rural communities as viable in the future. Some people wonder if the University really believes these things have a chance when well respected University faculty continually predict bigger farms run by fewer people.

Other topics mentioned, though not with great frequency, were profitability, the privatization of research, unquestioning of the consequences of growth, marketing, risk management, crop diversification, bioengineering, food safety, hog confinement, the Minnesota River, the link between consumer choices and health, and the need for more people to carry the sustainable agriculture message.

What Should MISA Do in the Future?

- Many said MISA should do more of what it is already doing.
- It should become a larger voice in the College and the University.
- It should draw new people into its activities.
- It should build more grassroots support.
- It should talk more to people in power (elected officials, policy makers).
- It should find champions for sustainable agriculture and build their leadership.
- It should continue to facilitate others in work around issues of sustainability.
- It should enlarge its cooperation and involvement with other sustainable agriculture organizations.
- It should reach out to conventional agriculture groups -- be open to talking, sharing ideas, without feeling threatened.
- It should expand its work with rural communities.
- It should help consumers understand sustainable agriculture.
- It should hold more meetings, conversation, seminars out in the state.
- It has only scratched the surface of research -- much more is needed.
- It should help research teams find funding.
- It should spur more researchers to work with MISA.
- It should continue to build trust and relationships but should also produce outcomes.
- It should acknowledge, respect, and embrace what science can contribute to sustainable agriculture.
- It should ask faculty who aren't currently involved what it would take to get them involved.
- It should bring visibility to and honor research teams and their work.
- It should hold up its shining examples of success for others to see, not only in the College and in Minnesota, but also nationally.
- It should be patient.
- It should celebrate.

"The biggest accomplishment of MISA is opening up the channels between the University and the sustainable agriculture community."

"There has been a lot of trust built up with certain University people and some people in the sustainer community. There still could be a lot more trust, but to even have what we have is a huge step."

"If you think of two lanes on a bridge, the lane from the sustainable community to the University is taking more traffic than the lane of the University to the sustainable community."

"It is the MISA grants that have made the biggest difference in getting more sustainable agriculture research done."

"At times I would like to see the Board a little more positively aggressive, more open to challenge, less protective of philosophies, of turf, more open to saying this is an issue -- let's pursue it."

"... it is a daunting challenge, MISA is off to an excellent start and it is very important to give it an opportunity to continue to make progress."

"Continuing to get people together but to move from trust building to actually generating more outcomes -- that is a big challenge."

"Continue to work hard to draw new people into its activities in a way where they really put their strengths on the table."