

Review Panel Report

November 13-15, 1996

The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) is described as a partnership of community members and the University of Minnesota. Since its establishment in 1992, MISA has striven to bring together the common interests of the greater agricultural community in Minnesota, the people, organizations, producers, and the University. Together these interests under the umbrella of MISA have cooperatively pursued an agenda to develop, promote, and support a sustainable agriculture in Minnesota.

As one part of a mandated five-year review of MISA, an independent seven-member review panel was established. This panel was charged to study and review the accomplishments and functions of MISA during the formative five-year start-up period (1992-1996). Panel members selected were:

- Tracy Beckman, Minnesota Senate, St. Paul, MN
- Marilyn DeLong, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN
- Jerry DeWitt, Iowa State University, Ames, IA
- Mary Hanks, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, St. Paul, MN
- Marvin Johnson, Producer, Maple Plain, MN
- Margaret Smith, Iowa State University, Iowa Falls, IA
- C. J. Weiser, Oregon State University (retired), Corvallis, OR

The review panel was provided with extensive print resources and documentation of MISA including information on structure, research and education teams, the Sustainable Agriculture Information Exchange, endowed chair, research task force, collaboration, and evaluation. Also available to the panel were publications MISA 96-02 (The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture: A Partnership of Community Members and the University of Minnesota) and two reports (MISA 96-03, The Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture: Perspectives on Accomplishments and Future Challenges, and an unpublished report: Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture-Survey Results, November, 1996) from Dr. Mary Ann Casey, an independent consultant.

The review process allowed for approximately nine contact hours of interaction with twenty-eight individuals over a two-day period. A preliminary oral summary report on the findings of the panel was presented on November 15, 1996 to 1). representatives of The MISA Joint Seminar and MISA Board, 2). Dean Michael Martin, and 3). interested individuals at an open forum at Borlaug Hall on the St. Paul Campus.

Structure and Organization

MISA is an evolving and dynamic entity. MISA Board members, supporters, and staff have demonstrated the ability to successfully work in this environment adapting to changing needs and challenges. MISA has adopted an encompassing, holistic view and definition of a sustainable agriculture embracing production, environment and community. The MISA Board members are unquestionably talented individuals who are respected by their peers. By the unique structure of the Board, they represent their individual views and good ideas and not officially any one organization. This is perceived to be an important operational principle for MISA and has helped ensure its success. Future partnerships and models may well forge structure and representation after this model. The Joint Seminar and Sustainers ' Coalition which is composed of organizational representatives makes it possible for the MISA Board to be organizationally independent and to function constructively. This structure of balance and creative tension appears to be appropriate, representative, and productive for sustainable agriculture in Minnesota.

In fact, MISA represents a working model of where no one entity or organization holds control, but where power and opportunity are shared, and where good ideas and persuasion are the negotiable currency for the

common good. This spirit of the model should be maintained; it is working. The review team had the fortune of witnessing the numerous examples of successes expressed energetically by MISA supporters sometimes interwoven against a backdrop of high unmet expectations and frustrations over the last five years. The review team encourages all MISA supporters to recognize that the most significant accomplishments brought forth by MISA may well be the incremental and widespread shifts in attitudes, priorities, partnerships, and processes created and adopted during the last five years by not only those directly, but also those indirectly associated with or influenced by MISA. These changes impact not only the academic community but the organizations and individuals eternal to the University as well. MISA supporters should consider means of recognizing and celebrating both the tangible and intangible successes such as both publications and partnerships, legislative funding and attitudinal shifts, and other accomplishments regardless of magnitude.

MISA is unquestionably at a major crossroads in its development and growth where transitions in several areas of operation would be both timely and appropriate.

The Review Team specifically encourages the consideration of the following possibilities:

1. Goals Revision

Consideration should be given to MISA partners reviewing and revising the goals of MISA. Specifically, it may be time for MISA to more explicitly state, emphasize, and pursue the goal of changing agricultural practices in Minnesota while continuing the pursuit of changing and influencing policy at the University of Minnesota. Considerable progress has been made on the latter which is a key means to the ultimate goal of achieving a sustainable agriculture across Minnesota.

2. Increased Partnerships

The Team senses that in order to effectively meet the long term goals of MISA it may be timely to consider broadening the cast of players in MISA including the Joint Seminar Group, The Sustainers' Coalition, The Board and other appropriate entities. Specifically, the Team senses that MISA is on solid conceptual ground and that it would be healthy and productive to soon begin to directly involve other constituencies in MISA including especially more conventional sectors of Minnesota agriculture such as the Farmers' Union, Minnesota Extension and others, and to visualize that broader participation including critics will ultimately be both required and helpful to fundamentally change the nature of Minnesota agriculture.

3. Recognizing Team Work

The Team recommends that the Dean of Agriculture and MISA consider actions to recognize and reward effective team efforts in order to improve the institutional climate for faculty and staff involvement in MISA and related teaching, extension, and research activities designed to address and support sustainable agriculture and MISA. Working as a team member is often the only effective way for individuals to contribute to complex cross-disciplinary issues. There are disincentives to working on a team including time and effort to communicate effectively, control and leadership, sharing credit, and coordination of efforts. Universities are historically focused and structured to recognize individual scholarly work. Efforts should be focused at the unit or departmental level to build support for recognition and reward of scholarly teamwork achievement. Specifically, the Team encourages consideration be given to the development of a annual reporting category for faculty and staff such as "Results of Team Efforts"; also the development of a college-level team award(s) and key awards by and within MISA to help foster peer and partner recognition of excellence may be fruitful.

4. Extending the MISA Model

The proposed regional centers, possibly modeled after MISA, provide a major opportunity for MISA partners

statewide to influence and assist in the development of College programs partnered with and designed to serve regional agricultural and community clientele. If properly organized such centers could play a major role in ultimately achieving MISA's sustainable agriculture goals. The Team encourages MISA partners to proactively provide their advice, experience, and support to establishing and shaping the regional centers recognizing that this new model will ultimately involve persuasion, compromise, and vision and not one of day-to-day oversight or control.

5. MISA Executive Director Position

The Team recommends that the Dean in consultation with the Departmental Head and the MISA Executive Director establish a specified term of service for the Executive Director appointment. An established (and renewable) term of service is preferable to an open-ended arrangement. A regular term ensures intensive, periodic review and possible reappointment based upon the wishes of the involved principles, past accomplishments, and the expected and needed leadership for the future term.

6. MISA Staff Evaluations

The Team recommends that the Dean establish a regular, annual performance evaluation procedure for all MISA staff. Specifically, the Team feels that the Dean should participate annually along with the appropriate Departmental Head in evaluating the performance of the Executive Director. The Dean should on behalf of the broader college interests focus on MISA activities and accomplishments while the Departmental Head would provide review of the assigned departmental responsibilities such as research, teaching, and/or extension. Salary adjustment decisions would be made in concert upon recommendations initiated by the Department Head. Similarly, the annual evaluations and salary adjustments of all other MISA staff should involve both the MISA Executive Director and the appropriate Departmental Heads working in concert.

7. The Endowed Chair

The endowed chair is impressive in design, concept, and flexibility and holds great promise for MISA, the agricultural community, and the University. Well-qualified candidates both internal and external to academia may not fully appreciate or realize their potential contributions to MISA. MISA partners should implement an aggressive nomination and recruitment process to ensure that well-qualified and diverse candidates are identified.

Team Activities

The Review Team noted the enthusiasm and synergy exhibited by the participants of the educational teams. The flexibility of how teams are organized and operate leads to their success. Teams learned from each other and apparently experimented with new enhancements. The one-model approach was not embraced and each team developed operational guidelines and diverse membership to meet their specific needs. The personal changes in philosophy and approach to research and education were apparent across team members. Researchers spoke to the team experience leading to change in not only "what they did but also how they now do it". Others shared a renewed commitment to outreach and extension activities even though they were not on specific appointments. Also noted was the opportunity to leverage MISA resources for additional in-kind and monetary support. The Panel recognized the necessary cost of time and resources spent in building trust among team members. The process of team building cannot be rushed and this is a relatively new approach to research and somewhat unfamiliar to most researchers, farmers and government staff. The process of building teams should become easier as more individuals gain experience working in team atmospheres and with diverse team memberships. MISA and the teams will be continually challenged to provide balance in process and production of tangible outcomes.

8. Investments in Teams

MISA should continue to invest resources in the support of the development of teams and assist teams in procuring and leveraging additional resources from other sources.

9. Process and Trust-Building

Trust has become a vital and significant element leading to the accomplishments of the educational teams. The process of trust-building has been worthwhile and educational efforts must be continued in support of teams. The investments of time and resources into trust-building and process must be recognized and wisely and effectively used. Trust must be both developed and earned and the process should not be unnecessarily prolonged.

10. Timely Transitions to Outcomes

Frustrations at times exist concerning process versus outcomes. Both must be recognized and an appropriate balance must be struck in all activities. Plans and programs should be constructed to ensure that appropriate and timely emphasis is transitioned from needed process activities to expected outcomes.

11. Team Research and Extension Linkages

MISA should develop efforts to increase initial and continuing connections between the team research findings and outcomes with Extension and outreach activities.

12. Expanding the Team Influence

The influence of teams should be expanded to reach more faculty and staff, educators, and others with diverse views and experiences to raise awareness of the team approach and prepare a broader audience to participate in future activities. Efforts to create more interest and participation in the Joint Seminar activities on campus should be undertaken by the University.

Research

The impacts of MISA on research efforts were apparent and readily visible upon study and review of the various team efforts underway. Although the four teams varied in size, mission, and approach, all were perceived to be successful models and no one exemplified the preferred approach to research. Similar attributes existed across the teams.

Consistent across the four MISA teams reviewed were a dedication to whole-farm approaches to research involving "farmers from the beginning". The importance of interaction between researchers and farmers was acknowledged. The value of trust and balance were continually identified by team members.

The research efforts are not only transforming research methodologies, they are also impacting process and organizational and institutional activities. For example, the Experiment Station commitment of resources for sustainable agriculture and faculty positions, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture grant program modification of involving team building aspects, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency work through CINRAM are examples of significant changes.

Additional professional changes on a personal level were noted and characterized by researchers who recognized that they were now working in a different manner. Also acknowledged by non-university

representatives were feelings of increased trust in the University as a result of the team efforts. Frustrations of difficulties in obtaining significant, recurring resources for sustainable agriculture were expressed. The current MISA budget (minus the Executive Director's salary) from the College is approximately equivalent to what the USDA estimates it takes to establish and support one research scientist position. In addition, developing a critical mass of supportive researchers was also expressed.

13. Measuring Success

MISA and the College should consider developing and determining an expanded set of measurements of success associated with research team activities and efforts. True indicators beyond biological, financial and social should be identified including attitudinal and process-related aspects. Successes should be identified, shared, and celebrated.

14. Financial Support

An annual plan of financial support to allow for a recurring and stable financial base should be developed and articulated widely by the Dean.

15. Community Aspects

Research related to work with rural communities and sustainability should be expanded and be made more visible. A broader definition, recognition, and articulation of sustainability may provide more community focus and support opportunities.

Outreach, Extension, and Education

Outreach efforts have brought both credibility and visibility to MISA. The Sustainable Agriculture Information Exchange provides targeted and appropriate outreach efforts of sustainable agriculture information and education for MISA through funding via the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Efforts to extend information through established partnerships, new technology (WWW), print, and referral services are in progress after a brief start-up period. The Information Exchange is pursuing appropriate goals especially through bridging the gap between current information needs and existing sustainable agriculture information, and by identifying research and educational gaps and directing resources to address the identified gaps. The impacts of these goals, however, are not yet apparent so soon after funding (May 1995).

Perceptions arose concerning Minnesota Extension's new educational role and its relationship to MISA. Extension currently is focusing on wholesaling education rather than retailing education to the individual. This poses a potential problem because primary audiences for Extension education are often suppliers, buyers, marketers, and service providers to agriculture as it exists. These potential audiences are unlikely to be early advocates of sustainable agriculture practices. This was perceived to be a possible detriment to the rapid dissemination of sustainable agriculture information and education.

Field staff in Extension were generally perceived to be more supportive of sustainable agriculture than campus-based staff and faculty. Because of this observation, the research and teaching communities were perceived to have progressed more in the integration of sustainable concepts and programs than Extension. A perception exists that parallel programs exist in Extension regarding sustainable agriculture, i.e. a conventional agriculture program and a sustainable agriculture program. The designation or alignment of MISA staff in a more formal association with Extension may be helpful and bring increased visibility and recognized value to Extension's sustainable agriculture efforts. Articulation of these relationships and partnerships would likely be advantageous for faculty and staff understanding. Consistent visibility and credit of MISA-supported products and programs was deemed important for MISA's future. Products developed cooperatively with MISA support which the Team noted were the Sustainable Agriculture

Newsletter, Knee Deep in Grass, and Monitoring Sustainable Agriculture with Conventional Financial Data.

Although changes to and involvement with communities was stated as a MISA goal, visibility and targeted successes were limited and not readily apparent. This may present an opportunity for increased partnerships between MISA and Minnesota Extension. Extension could also be helpful in extending MISA's findings beyond the state borders at an appropriate time.

Resident education and instruction in sustainable agriculture is enhanced and made more visible through the minor in sustainable agriculture systems for graduate students and through an internship program and curriculum for undergraduate students. These are laudatory efforts and lead the nation in major agricultural universities. These efforts hold great promise for MISA, students, faculty, and staff. Although only a small number of students are officially minoring in these programs, a considerably large number of students benefit from the courses being taught. Several theses have resulted from efforts with the educational teams.

16. Resident Instruction and Education

MISA should consider the opportunity to facilitate and coordinate the graduate minor in sustainable agriculture, internship program and undergraduate curriculum. The diverse experience and partnerships within MISA would add value and unique opportunities to these offerings.

17. Relationship to Minnesota Extension

The Dean, in concert with MISA and Minnesota Extension, should explore new opportunities and strategies for enhanced, seamless partnering to expand the delivery of sustainable agriculture information and education statewide. Enhanced partnerships should be both on and off campus. Clientele both expect and deserve this approach.

18. Visibility and Marketing of MISA

MISA should determine methods to more consistently ensure strategic marketing, visibility, and credit for all MISA-supported programs and activities. The full partnership of players must be a part of this process.

Summary

The Review Team was impressed with the staff, people, and programs of MISA, the University, and its partners. A groundwork of change opportunity in sustainable agriculture has been seeded in Minnesota through the vision, commitment and dedication to MISA. Skillful nurturing is now needed to bring fruition to MISA and its goal of changing the landscape of Minnesota's agriculture, people, and communities.