Session 1 How to Start and Sustain - Student Recruitment, retention, and placements

- Study Team Title -- Student recruitment, retention, and placement
- Participants -- Juliet Tomkins (facilitator), Michael Bell, Mike Campbell (note taker), Abram Bicksler, Stephen DeGloria, Justin Ellis, J. Marcos Fernandez, Hugues Foucart, Dave Goorahoo, Matthew Harbur, Bill McKelvy, Joel Morton, Catherine Perillo, Sandy Rikoon, Charlotte Rosendahl Pedersen, A-reum Sung, John Wheeler

- Questions & Topics --
  - How to cultivate interest in sustainable agriculture among new and existing students
  - How to build sustainable agriculture programming without alienating "conventional" students
  - How to support and retain sustainable agriculture students
  - How to assess employment opportunities and implement placement programs

- Materials & Resources Used
  Participants (noted in summary below) with experience related to these questions shared their knowledge/impressions.

- Summary & Conclusions

Recruitment
McKelvy described how the University of Missouri reconfigured their Sustainable Ag program to make it more attractive to students. They split it into two options - Integrated Crop and Livestock Farming Systems (focus on food production) and Community Food Systems (focused on social and community).

Perillo (Washington State) remarked that it is important to work closely with Admissions people to be effective in recruitment. She noted that Washington State offers five different majors within the Agricultural & Food Systems BS program, and that the Organic Agriculture Systems major has been most important in attracting students.

DeGloria remarked that caps on enrollment (within departments) affect recruitment to their program at Cornell, and that they recruit from a broader pool of students after they are matriculated in the University.

Tomkins (Wisconsin) asked if any participants had experience with high school programs facilitating recruitment of students into university sustainable agriculture majors. Rosendahl (S. Utah) indicated that they have had students enter their program from a high school in a neighboring town where a single teacher involved her students in starting a garden. Tomkins suggested that high school teachers need training in sustainable agriculture for this to be an effective mode of recruitment. Goorahoo (Cal State Fresno) asked if access to FAA groups could be a potential link to attracting high school students.

Fernandez (Penn State) indicated that programs with "hands-on" and interdisciplinary features are attractive to students; information about favorable job placement percentages is not as important in attracting new students as conveying to them how enjoyable their learning experiences will be.

Morton (Farm Aid) indicated that his organization maintains a database of regional agricultural support organizations, which could possibly be helpful for making contact with parents and prospective students; items in newsletters of such organizations regarding educational opportunities or scholarships, or developing internship opportunities with these groups could be beneficial for recruitment efforts.

Upper-level students who have successfully completed internships or are involved in research projects could serve as "sustainable ag ambassadors" to help recruit prospective students and get them "plugged in" to the program once they matriculate. Maintaining contact with graduates and the organizations which have employed them can also be helpful in establishing networks beneficial for attracting new students and placing future graduates.

Retention
Helping students "connect" with other students in their major early on in their education, and keeping them "attached" every semester are important for retention of students in sustainable agriculture programs. Perillo mentioned that the first class that new students take could be used to get them connected to others in their major; involving new students with the research projects of higher-level students can also help. Tomkins mentioned that the support group/club concept can help in keeping students connected, and asked participants to share examples from their experiences. Rosendahl indicated that in Denmark, new students are assigned "aunts" and "uncles" among upper class students in their department. The aunts and uncles indoctrinate the new students to the resources (facilities, courses, etc.) available to them; faculty are involved in guiding the development of the student mentors. Morton described a "theme house" concept for housing students with shared academic interests. Harbur indicated a similar arrangement results if students live and work together on student farms.

Garahoo suggested that new sustainable agriculture programs would benefit from starting with a number of organic farmers to establish the support community for student internships. Tomkins suggested looking at the whole system of sustainable foods beyond organic production on the farm (e.g. research & development, private industry investors, business community) in building community networks to support sustainable agriculture students.

Campbell (Mercyhurst) indicated a need for information regarding career opportunities for students in sustainable agriculture. Placement data for
students graduating from agriculture programs is apparently kept by Iowa State and Penn State, and may be available from their agriculture schools. Holding a workshop that includes prospective employers of sustainable agriculture grads could be instrumental in demonstrating the marketability of students with this kind of training. Ther are sources of job prospect information available on-line from organizations such as the USDA ERS (Economic Research Service).

Student advisors are in a position to help with recruitment and retention of students in sustainable agriculture programs, although they need to be supplied with good information about this career field. McKelvy suggested one-on-one communication to advisors works better than mass e-mails to get the word out about sustainable agriculture courses, and that it pays to cultivate "allies" among faculty advisors who are already "leaning" favorably toward sustainability issues. Managing communications about sustainable agriculture courses and programs via a coordinator who is a non-academic staff person is helpful.

Support for sustainable agriculture within a school or department could be increased by holding a faculty workshop (with a paid stipend) or bringing in a panel of industry representatives to address the opportunities available. Top-level administrative support would seem to be essential for successful promotion of sustainable agriculture within an institution. It would also be important to cultivate support from potentially competing departments within schools. County extension people could also be a good source of support from outside the institution.

DeGloria asked whether a 4-year degree (alone) in sustainable agriculture is enough to equip graduates to succeed. A 5th-year "Practical Professional Masters Degree could be instrumental to provide students with a meaningful practicum/professional experience. Funding students' professional practice experience is potentially problematic, since funding is easier to acquire for graduate students involved in research activity. Some fee incentive (e.g. reduced tuition rate) may provide an incentive for students to pursue a practicum-type experience. Rosendahl questioned the marketability of a Masters degree with a practical rather than a research experience. Perillo indicated that Washington State offers a Certificate of Sustainable Agriculture as a post-baccalaureate program.

Ellis (Odum School of Ecology) suggested utilizing guest lecturers from outside the school (e.g. from industry or graduate programs) as possible motivators to help retain sustainable agriculture students. Involving students in undergraduate research in this field could also help.

Fernandez noted that there appears to be interest from the federal government in funding (for agriculture) things besides basic science, and that developing training/experiences in "soft skills" (e.g. ethics, communications, sociology, etc.) to better equip graduates to more effectively apply their technical/science knowledge could be important for advancing sustainable agriculture.

Follow Up Action Items

Action items are included within the foregoing summary.