



Food Systems Core Competencies Project (Summary)

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Under a cooperative agreement between USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Courtney Long and Dr. Craig Chase brought together a diverse set of U.S. food systems practitioners to collectively identify core competencies that those practitioners deemed essential to their food systems work. The full Iowa State University Core Competency Final Project Report can be accessed at https://www.extension.iastate.edu/ffed/wp-content/uploads/2020_CoreCompetencyFinalReport.pdf. The Curricula Tool and Directory (Excel) resulting from the project can be found at <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/ffed/curricula-tool-and-directory/>.

How the Project Was Conducted

AMS engaged in this effort to support coordinated information about learning opportunities for Extension educators and others who provide technical assistance that aligns with the AMS mission to develop and expand agricultural market opportunities in the local and regional food sector. Iowa State partnered with the following leading partner organizations, each of which has historic and current efforts to develop curricula, competencies, experiential trainings, and communities of practice for Extension educators and other food systems professionals:

- eXtension/North Carolina A&T: Dr. Kathleen Liang and Katie Wright
- North American Food Systems Network: Duncan Hilchey and Dr. Gail Myers
- North Carolina State: Dr. Dara Bloom and Hannah Dankbar
- The Wallace Center at Winrock International: Andrew Carberry and Cheryl Danley

Historical Context and Literature Review

Conducted by Iowa State University in collaboration with leading partners; identified resources, literature and reviewed previous survey results from leading partners.

Core Competency Development

Facilitated discussion with 30 national partners on competencies needed for practitioners working within food systems.

Topical small group discussion with rotating areas of interest for collective thinking.

Outreach and Confirmation

Distributed a National survey through partner organizations to understand and confirm core competencies for practitioners in food systems.

Confirmed 9 competency areas.

Learning Objectives

Facilitated working session with 30 national partners to develop subcategories for competencies and draft learning objectives.

Output: Example learning objective matrix.

Directory

Distributed a National survey to identify existing curricula that meets identified competency-based learning objectives.

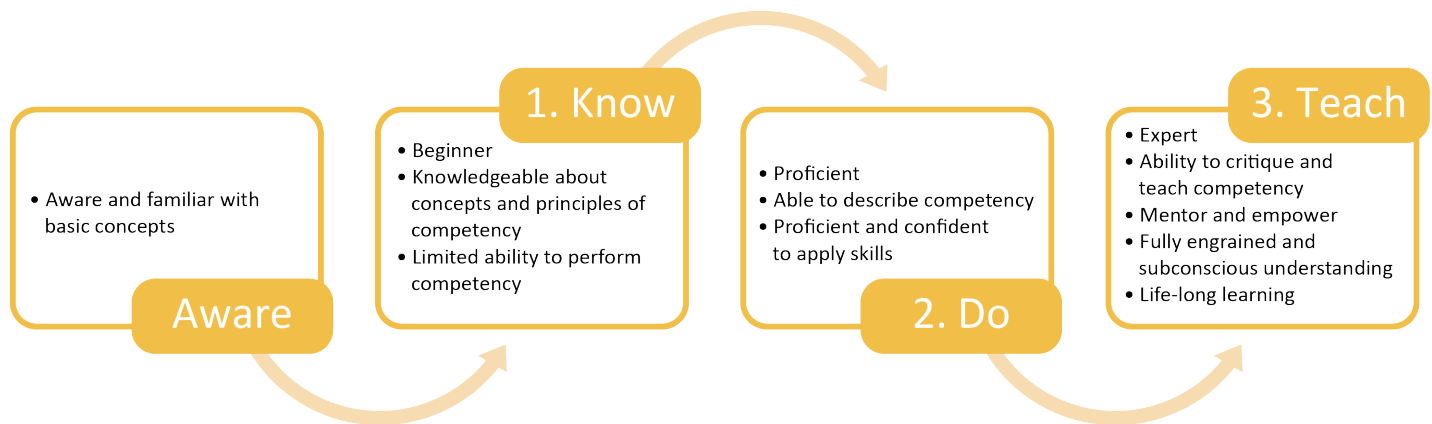
Output: Draft spreadsheet portal developed to highlight curricula available.

The leading partners and 30 other national partner organizations (combined with input resulting from additional outreach to the sector) identified nine core competency categories as follows.

1. Community Capacity
2. Food Systems
3. Equity
4. Government and Policy
5. Natural and Built Environment
6. Economy and Business Development
7. Public Health and Wellness
8. Leadership
9. Evaluation

What did the Project Find?

Of these nine categories, AMS determined that “Food Systems” and “Economy and Business Development” most closely aligned with the original project goal, as well as AMS’ market development authorities and capacities. The group then created a set of sample learning objectives related to each competency, after first considering the different levels of mastery within the competencies.



Conclusions

For their final phase, Iowa State researchers conducted an initial collection and competency mapping of existing curricula from providers across the U.S. who represented their curricula to both fulfill an identified competency and to meet one or more of the sample learning objectives.

Several of the key findings of the project and report relate to AMS priorities to develop and expand market opportunities for farmers, with a particular focus on curricula aimed at the Land Grant University and Extension and Outreach system.

These key findings included:

- Extension educators have a need for information and competencies that address emerging markets and consumer trends;
- The competencies identified by the project will likely assist local food systems practitioners to be more effective in expanding or improving new and existing markets for farm and value-added agricultural products and improving local food businesses and farmer profitability;
- Of the identified Food Systems curricula aimed at Extension educators, a majority of curricula were found to have “knowledge change” as a primary learning objective, implying an existing gap in curricula meeting higher level learning objectives (such as “proficiency” or “mastery”);
- Creation of an online public access portal is needed to identify and highlight existing curricula based on the identified competencies, as well as links within the portal to assist food systems practitioners in understanding the logistics of accessing the curricula (costs, registration, etc.).