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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Adapting Annie's Project in Maryland: Findings and Results

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Abstract: Annie's project is a national program designed to empower farmwomen to manage information systems used in critical decision-making processes and to build local networks throughout the state. The target audience is farmwomen with a passion for business and involvement in the farm operation. Annie's Project is designed as eight, 3-hour sessions that focus around the five areas of farm risk management. It has engaged and educated an increasingly large part of the farm sector that does not regularly attend Extension and production meetings. The program has received an overwhelming response by participants and produced significant impacts.

Introduction

Behind every farm, there are one, two, or more women who keep the farm, business, and family running. According to the latest United States Department of Agriculture - Census (USDA-NASS, 2007), women are running more farms and ranches, managing more land, and producing a greater value of agricultural products than they were 5 years ago. Of the 3.3 million United States farm operators counted in the census, 30.2% were women. The total number of women operators has increased to 19% from 2002 as well as the number of women who were the principal operators of a farm or ranch, which increased by almost 30%. Women are now the principal operators of 14% of the nation's 2.2 million farms (USDA-NASS, 2007).

Annie's Project, a national farm management course for women, is designed to empower farmwomen by giving them the knowledge and resources they need for a successful farm business, to manage risk, and to build local networks with other farmwomen. An all-female learning environment is an important aspect of

Annie's Project. Research conducted by Penn State concluded that 46% of their farmwomen surveyed preferred an all women audience (Barbercheck et al., 2009). Additionally, 58.7% of Extension Educators surveyed felt that women audiences have educational needs that are somewhat or very different from those of their male farmer counterparts (Brasier et al., 2009).

The course, Annie's Project, was named after a woman who grew up in a small town in the Midwest who married a farmer and successfully managed farm operations and records. The project reflects Annie's values by teaching farmwomen about the various aspects of farm business, empowers them to make critical decisions, and provides a forum for networking and discussion.

Program Description

Annie's Project has been implemented in 22 states and was adapted to Maryland in 2008, with 19 women participating in the first class. Through grant funding and the first class's valuable input, another course with 24 participants was conducted in 2009. The overall need addressed by Annie's Project is the opportunity for women interested in agriculture business to meet, learn, and discuss successes and difficulties. Annie's Project provides participants with the tools and resources needed to enhance and develop a successful farm business.

The course was held at Chesapeake College, a local community college serving a five-county area (Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, and Talbot) in Maryland. The facility is central and has ideal classroom space as well as the availability of a computer lab and onsite catering.

Participants completed a pre-class survey that develops a baseline of demographic and farm business information. The average age of the Annie's Project participant was 47 years. The participants then answered a number of questions regarding their farm business. The total number of acres managed and farmed by Annie's Project participants were 12,481 acres. The majority were sole proprietors or limited liability companies.

The program can be divided into three main areas: education, networking, and resources.

Education

Annie's Project is designed as eight, 3-hour sessions that focus around the five areas of farm risk management—financial, legal, production, marketing, and human resources (Figure 1). Sessions are taught by individuals from various sectors, including the university, government, private industry, and experienced farmwomen.

Figure 1.
Annie's Project Session Topics

Women in Farm Business: A Personal Experience
Balancing Farm Work and Life
Personality IQ
Crop Insurance
Understanding your Farm Insurance Policy
Farm Service Agency Programs

Developing Farm Risk Management Strategies
How Property is Titled: Who else is in business with you?
Cash and Crop Share Leases
Straight Talk about Farm Transfer
Estate Planning
Business Planning
Developing Grain Marketing Plans
Computer Basics and Minimizing Technology-Related Risk
Computers and Your Farm Business: Using Excel and QuickBooks
Financial Documents on the Farm
Retirement & Estate Planning

Networking

Group work, worksheets, and discussion are also incorporated into the sessions to allow for learning and interaction among the participants. Dinner is part of the evening sessions and allows time for networking and conversation among participants, facilitators, and presenters. This is a valuable component of Annie's Project and part of the national model. The dinner creates a comfortable, social environment in which the women can discuss farm operations, session topics, and current information.

Resources

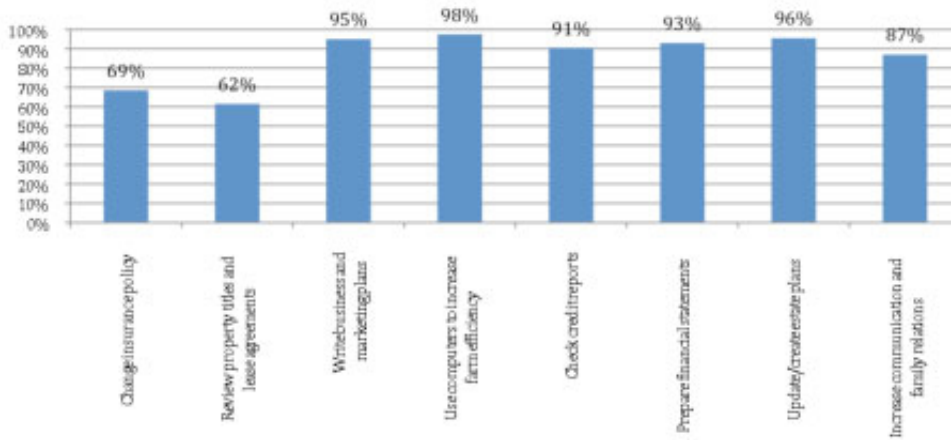
A manual of handouts, presentations, and fact sheets is assembled to provide information, resources, and follow up on sessions. Each participant receives a leather portfolio to organize their materials and to serve as a reference following the class. Spreadsheets, fact sheets, and other electronic resources are included on an external USB drive that the participants learn to use during the computer sessions and take home following the class.

Results

End of Class

End-of-class evaluations were distributed during the final class and collected at the end of the evening. Participants report gaining answers to questions, resource materials, ideas to try, and people to contact. Topics that were of the most interest included QuickBooks, estate planning, grain marketing, crop insurance information, and access to new resources. Outcome-based data was also collected in which participants report what they plan to do following the program (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
End-of-Class Evaluation



Quotes from end of class evaluations include:

"Overall I learned so much - I feel empowered to run a farm business"

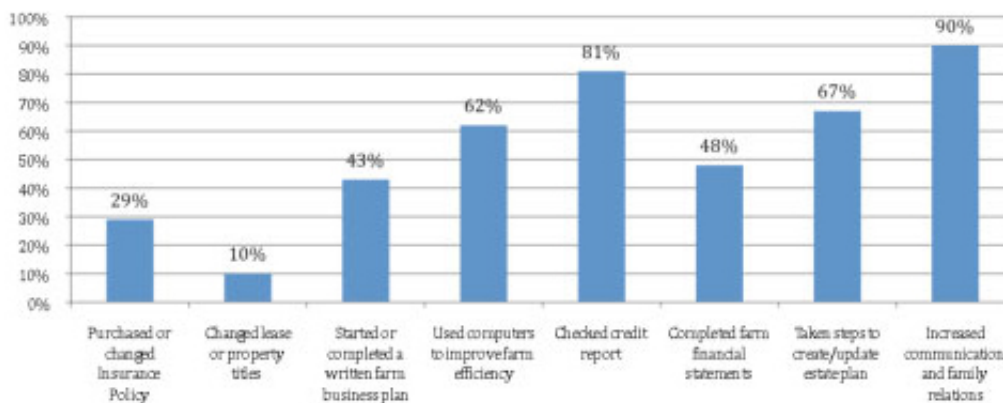
"All of it was good. There wasn't a day I didn't learn something"

"Meeting other farmwomen and learning together from Annie's Project, but most of all realizing that we were privileged to be part of the concept that finally farmwomen have been empowered."

One and Two Year Follow-Up

A follow-up evaluation was conducted online, using Instant Survey, of participants from Annie's class one and two in January of 2010. There were 42 participants invited via email, which included a web link for the survey. The survey was anonymous and had a 52% response rate. Participants were asked to complete ten questions regarding actions they have taken or implemented since they attended Annie's Project (Figure 3).

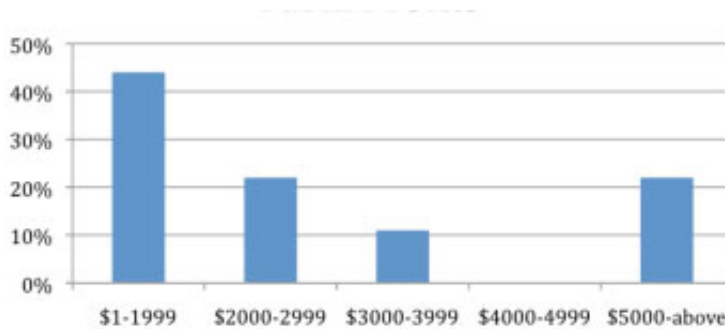
Figure 3.
Follow-Up Evaluation



The economic impact of Annie's Project was also surveyed. Participants were asked if Annie's Project increased their farm profits by either increasing revenue or decreasing expenses. Results indicate that 45% of Annie's Project participants increased their farm profitability. Those that responded yes were then asked

to estimate profitability levels (see Figure 4). Profit levels were then analyzed. Using the data provided by the follow-up evaluation it can be concluded that the average Annie's Project participant increased farm profitability between \$1,890 and \$3,110 with an average of \$2,500.

Figure 4.
Farm Profits



Quotes from one and two year follow-up include:

"We have had family meetings, formed a family limited partnership, and we are now aware of other things we can do to improve our farming efficiency"

"We have met with a lawyer to work on an estate plan"

"Launched a new agri-business entity since participating in Annie's"

"This is a very good program. It was a great way to learn and enjoy a friendly atmosphere to ask questions about farming and the speakers presentations."

Conclusions

Farm management programs that focus on women audiences are becoming more popular and satisfy an educational need. Annie's Project helps to do this. It crosses all lines of age, demographic, agriculture experience, and commodity groups with the same results. Farmwomen with a passion for agriculture business have gained new knowledge and taken steps to implement innovative strategies in all five areas of risk management. The participants have increased communications and positive family relationships, which are so important to farm business, in that most are family farms.

Programs that cover risk and farm management for women will be more and more important as changes occur in farm demographics, economics, policy, and regulations. Annie's Project classes as well as follow-up and regular communication with the women will be vital. The impacts and relationships made through Annie's Project have been both inspiring and rewarding. There is open dialogue among the women, facilitators and presenters, which creates an environment in which women share and learn.

The findings and results reported here show that Annie's Project can have positive impacts in farm business operations and profit levels. As women operators continue to increase so will the need for education, outreach and resources.

Acknowledgement

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