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Modifying and Supplementing Annie's Project to Increase Impact in New Jersey and Beyond

Abstract

Annie's Project is a widely known risk management program emphasizing five areas of risk and creating support networks for women in agriculture. Designed as an 18-hr course delivered through a series of face-to-face classes, it can be adapted to meet the learning needs and time constraints of the target audience and instructors. This article describes modifications and additions to the traditional program delivery that were implemented by the Annie's Project New Jersey team: synchronous learning at multiple locations, archived video-recorded classes, condensed 1-day workshops, a supplemental program about estate and farm transition planning, archived webinars, and international adaptations of the program.

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Introduction

Annie's Project Level 1 is a course developed by the Annie's Project—Education for Farm Women organization to address five areas of risk (financial, human resource, legal, market, and production) (Annie's Project—Education for Farm Women, n.d.). The course is traditionally delivered through face-to-face classes and has

been successfully adapted in many states (Dill & Rhodes, 2012). In 2011, this multiple-week 18-hr course was offered regionally in three locations in New Jersey (Carleo et al., 2012). Challenges to implementing Annie's Project programming statewide were identified and included a small educational team and farmers' lack of time for "traditional" classroom workshops. To address these issues, the Annie's Project New Jersey (APNJ) team implemented the following modifications to the basic course delivery from 2011 through 2016: use of synchronous learning, recording of sessions for widespread dissemination, development of 1-day topic-specific workshops, development of national webinars, and expansion of outreach to international audiences.

Synchronous Learning at Locations Throughout the State

In 2011, live webinar technology was used to broadcast APNJ sessions from an originating site to two off-site locations (Figure 1). The site with live speakers rotated among locations from session to session. Each location had a site facilitator who communicated with the other two site facilitators by using the chat feature of Blackboard Collaborate and cell phone texting. The result was a seamless experience for participants and successful "behind-the-scenes" management by site facilitators. A technology team ensured that audiovisual communication was successful.

Figure 1.

Structure of Multiple-Location Synchronous Sessions

Recording of Sessions

Audio and video recordings and handouts of all speakers' broadcasted presentations were posted online. Sharing these multiple formats facilitated synchronous learning by workshop audiences while preserving the information for re-viewing by attendees and future audiences asynchronously. The New Jersey Farm Women

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Resource Center (https://vimeopro.com/cpemedia/anniesproject2012) was launched to house all training modules.

One-Day Workshops for Busy Farmers

While an official Annie's Project course includes 18 hr of instruction, this format excludes many New Jersey women farmers who hold off-farm jobs and lack the time to attend a full course. Approximately 50% of New Jersey farmers have a nonfarm job as their primary occupation (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012). Roughly 62% work off-farm, and 77% do so 100 days or more annually (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012). To program within these time and availability constraints, the APNJ team created several 1-day educational farm business management workshops touching on all five areas of risk. Participants had the opportunity to work with the experts to develop key parts of their business plans. The program, which was offered at three locations (http://cpemediapro.wix.com/njfwc) in 2013 and one central location (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbsiTonqzFa6nZcscUwNg7TuwOiQ1nfsg) in 2016, challenged participants to evaluate their farms and identify strategies to improve their operations.

Surveying of past APNJ participants showed that planning for farm transitions in later life was something farmers tended to leave for the future or ignore and that a majority of respondents did not have the knowledge or confidence to develop such plans (Melendez, Polanin, Carleo, Brumfield, & O'Neill, 2016). The APNJ Team developed Preparing for Later Life Farming, a 1-day workshop inspired by the Annie's Project Farming for Today and Tomorrow course. This workshop focused on assisting multigenerational farm families with estate and transition planning (Melendez et al., 2016). The program was offered in three locations in 2015. Presentations focused on farm transfer methods, financial decision-making strategies, approaches for finding legal and financial experts, and, most importantly, communication skills needed to begin the farm transfer discussion with family members and business partners. Course materials and recorded presentations were archived online (http://laterlifefarming.rutgers.edu/) to continue the educational efforts related to farm estate and transition plans.

National Webinars

National webinars supplementing the Annie's Project Level 1 curriculum were conducted to expand the reach and effectiveness of the APNJ team's programming. In 2013, 132 individuals from 28 states participated in the webinars Do's & Don'ts of Writing Your Agricultural Business Plan and Identifying & Reaching Your Target Audience, both offered twice on the same day. The most popular viewing time for the live webinars was noon to 1 p.m. Eastern Time. In 2014, 45-min webinars were offered on five additional topics: business and personal finance, crop insurance, on-farm food safety, production decisions, and disease control in vegetables. Recordings of the webinars and PDF copies of the slideshows were archived online (http://anniesproject.rutgers.edu/resources.html).

Taking It International

In 2011, APNJ team member Dr. Robin Brumfield exported the program concept to a village in Turkey, where it became Suzanne's Project. An assessment of women farmers' learning needs led to development of a course that addressed business management assistance, technical and computer training, a Facebook page, and a website. All participants completed a business plan, and a survey of participants 18 months posttraining

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indicated that the training had lasting positive effects (Brumfield, Özkan, & Carleo, 2016). Suzanne's Project was repeated in other Turkish villages and in 2013 was offered in Guyana. A successor program, Empowering Women Farmers with Agricultural Business Management Training, is a European Union–funded train-the-trainer program provided in English, Turkish, Spanish, and German.

Conclusion

Farmers and educators in each state encounter unique challenges. In New Jersey, implementing multiple synchronous classes eased workloads on a small educational team. Video recording these classes for asynchronous learning allowed the team to reach a larger audience and enabled busy farmers to learn at their own pace. One-day workshops and webinars on supplemental topics were more convenient for farmers who could not attend a traditional Annie's Project program, and they allowed the APNJ team to cover poorly understood topics such as estate planning in greater detail. Annie's Project content and principles were also successfully applied to women farmers around the world. In summary, the Annie's Project curriculum can be modified and supplemented to address learning needs that are unique to farmers in a specific location. Educators around the globe can use the ideas presented here to better serve women farmers.

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