

Value Chain



Partnerships

*An Iowa-Based Network for Food
and Agriculture Working Groups*

Community of Practice Resource Guide

For use with the Community of Practice Workshop

www.communitiesofpractice.ning.com

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Definitions

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are groups of people in organizations who come together to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work.¹

Through our work in Value Chain Partnerships, we have found that communities of practice (CoPs) function strategically as:

1. *Catalysts for cooperation* of diverse interests to create solutions for food and fiber producers and businesses;
2. *Hubs* which create, capture, document, and leverage knowledge and deploy this knowledge as technical assistance to assist value chain partners;
3. *Magnets* to attract funding, and for leveraging, channeling, and distributing funding to research and development efforts for differentiated food and fiber products; and
4. *Scouts* to identify emerging value chain opportunities with high potential to deliver economic benefit to sustainable agriculture stakeholders.

Knowledge Management is a framework for designing an organization's goals, structures and processes so that the organization can use what it knows to learn, and to create value for its customers and community.²

1 Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

2 W.C. Choo, The FIS Knowledge Management Institute, session presentations, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto.

Case Study I

Wenger, Etienne, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Press. 2002. Chapter 1: Communities of Practice and Their Value to Organizations pg. 1-4.

In 1988, when Japanese competition was threatening to put the **Chrysler** Corporation out of business, no one suspected that the resurgence of the company (now the Chrysler unit of DaimlerChrysler) would depend in part on the creation of an innovative knowledge system based on communities of practice. While some of its competitors took as little as three years to get a new vehicle to market, a typical new-product development cycle at Chrysler easily ran five years. This was no way to compete. The first order of the day was to achieve a dramatic reduction in this product-development cycle.

The story is well known, though the role that communities of practice played is less widely understood. At the time, Chrysler was a traditional organization typical of large manufacturing operations, with functional units such as design, engineering, manufacturing, and sales. The design department would send a new design to engineering, which would send it back for redesign a few times. The design would then go to manufacturing and be returned for reengineering until the vehicle was deemed “manufacturable.” The localized focus of the various functional units limited interaction between departments and thus gave rise to these unavoidable interactions. Repeated hand-offs, duplications, and therefore slowness, were built into the system.

The decision was made to radically reorganize the unit. Engineering would now belong to “car platforms.” These platforms were product-oriented, cross-functional structures that focused on a type of vehicle: large cars, small cars, minivans, trucks, and Jeeps. Each platform was responsible for all phases of development associated with the whole vehicle. Engineers of all specialties reported to supervisors within the platform on which they worked. As a result, their primary focus was on the development of a specific vehicle. For instance, if you were a brakes engineer, your main allegiance, your reporting relationships, and your performance evaluation were no longer with the brakes department, but with a platform, such as small cars or minivans.

Eventually, the move to car platforms succeeded in reducing the product-development cycle from five to two and a half years, with a corresponding cut in research and development costs. But the restructuring did not come without its own costs. A host of new problems started to appear: multiple versions of the same part with slight variations, uncoordinated relationships with suppliers, innovations that did not travel, and repeated mistakes. The company had gained the advantage of product focus, but compromised its ability to learn from its own experiences. Something had to be done to save the platform idea.

With a clear need for communication across platforms, former colleagues from functional areas started to meet informally. Managers recognized the value of these informational meetings in fostering learning processes that cut across platforms. Still, they wanted to keep the primary allegiance and formal reporting relationships of engineers within the platforms. Rather than formalizing these emerging knowledge-based groups into a new matrix structure, they decided to keep them somewhat informal but to sanction and support them. The Tech Clubs were born.

Tech Clubs began to take more active responsibility for their areas of expertise. For instance, they started to conduct design reviews for their members before a design went through quality gates. In 1996, an engineering manager revived the old idea of creating an Engineering Book of Knowledge (EBoK), a database that would capture the relevant knowledge that engineers need to do their job, including compliance stan-

dards, best practices, lessons learned, and supplier specification. The EBoK vision could succeed only if the engineers themselves took responsibility for creating and maintaining the content. Some Tech Club leaders saw the project as an opportunity for consolidating Tech Club knowledge and taking stewardship of it. Documenting engineering knowledge has been tried several times before, but now it was part of the activities and identity of specific communities in charge of designated areas of engineering. This communal responsibility for producing the EBoK was key to its success.

Over time, Tech Club progressively established their value and they have become an integral part of engineering life at the Chrysler division. Engineers have discovered that participating helps them do their jobs better, and the time spent together is a good investment. It often saves them time later and increases their confidence in their own designs. It gives them a chance to get help with specific problems, to learn what others are discovering, and to explore new technologies. Today, there are more than 100 officially recognized Tech Clubs, plus a few emerging new ones. They are responsible for a host of knowledge-based activities such as documenting lessons learned, standardizing practices for their area, initiating newcomers, providing advice to car platforms, and exploring emerging technologies with suppliers. Through the Tech Clubs, Chrysler realized the value of what today people call “communities of practice.” Theirs is among the pioneering stories, but it is no longer unique. It reflects a movement spreading all over the world.

Companies at the forefront of the knowledge economy are succeeding on the basis of communities of practice, whatever they call them. The World Bank delivers on its vision of fighting poverty with knowledge as well as money by relying on communities of practice that include employees, clients, and external partners. Shell Oil relies on communities of practice to preserve technical excellence across its multiple business units, geographical regions, and project teams. McKinsey & Company counts on its communities of practice to maintain its world-class expertise in topics important to clients who are themselves becoming smarter and more demanding. The list could go on and on. In all industries, companies are discovering that communities of practice are critical to mastering increasingly difficult knowledge challenges. They are learning to recognize and cultivate these communities. Moreover, once these communities find a legitimate place in the organization, they offer new possibilities – many yet undiscovered – for weaving the organization around knowledge, connecting people, solving problems, and creating business opportunities. And because communities of practice are not confined by institutional affiliation, their potential value extends beyond the boundaries of any single organization.

Case Study II

Wenger, Etienne, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Harvard Business School Press. 2002. Chapter 6: The Challenge of Distributed Communities, pp. 113-155.

When a geologist in **Shell's** Exploration and Production Ventures (SEPIV) group learned how the Turbodoudees informally share cutting-edge ideas and insight, he realized that there would be tremendous value in establishing the same kind of group globally. Of course, there would be daunting obstacles – how to maintain informality and build trust across time zones and distance, how to share ideas across different organizational units, and how to honor different national and organizational cultures. He knew this would not succeed if it was seen as a “U.S. initiative.” But SEPIV management also thought the idea was worth pursuing and formed a small cross-functional team to identify, design, and implement a few pilots. Their goal was to create a structure through which people could share knowledge about oil exploration and development in deep (over 500 meter) ocean water. To do this they planned to build a set of global, technically focused peer communities. They planned to build these communities with people from each of the operating Shell companies as well as representatives from Shell’s labs. In the end, they would span 18 time zones and 20 independent Shell companies. The team’s vision was for these communities to bring the world’s leading expertise, no matter where it was located, to bear on problems and issues, no matter where they occurred.

The team interviewed more than 50 people from the Shell companies to identify technical focus areas, barriers to global networking, and the level of energy people had for networking. They found that most people were excited about the idea, but concerned that global sharing would be inhibited by barriers such as knowing who else was interested, reluctance to contact people in other units without preexisting relationships, or business constraints on sharing information across boundaries.

From these interviews, the support team identified three important technical areas in which they would create pilot communities; one focused on geology, one on reservoir engineering, and one on well engineering. These areas included people from both scientific and engineering disciplines.

Because the communities spanned many different companies, it was important to get the support of business unit managers. While most supported the general idea of communities, several were concerned about the amount of time their staff might spend with people from other business units. In addition, there were conflicting priorities among business units. Some, for example, invested heavily in cutting-edge technology; others were too small to do so. To build support, the community-development team created a video about the role and potential value of communities to the organization, gave talks at senior management meetings, and traveled the world, meeting with business unit leaders and potential community members. Most of this involved one-on-one discussion, which altogether took the support team six months to complete. Although they did not get the active support of all the business unit managers, they did convince a critical mass of business units to participate.

The structure of the global communities reflects their diversity. Given the disparity between business units in national and organizational cultures, and the variations in how community members in the local business units were organized, the design team created a structure for the communities that allowed local variation while linking to the larger structure. Each community was composed of a set of local “cells.” This made it possible for each business unit, or regional groups of business units, to organize their community in whatever way they saw fit. Some held weekly meetings, like the Turbodoudees. Others networked with each

other informally. By having local community events and relationships, this structure also made the community visible. People could participate in community activities and experience being part of a local community while maintaining a global connection.

Local communities were knit together with a network of coordinators. Each local community designated a coordinator who not only facilitated local knowledge sharing but also connected people to the other cells around the globe. The local coordinators formed a network that shared ideas and offered advice; they held regular teleconferences and occasional face-to-face meetings. They got to know each other as well as the issues in each other's region.

This structure created a group of people – the network of local community coordinators – who ultimately felt collectively responsible for keeping the global community alive. But as in any community, it took some time to discover the value the community could provide. In one community, a local coordinator soon realized that the coordinators' network could be a valuable source of help with his local problems. He regularly began asking if other coordinators had used a certain supplier, tried a new pipe-fastening mechanism, or used a new tool. After several months, the other coordinators in the network learned from his example. Once the local coordinators realized the power of the community, they started to put more energy into building the global community as well as their respective cells.

Of the three pilot communities, two were quite successful. One of them remained rather small. The other grew rapidly, merged with another community, and eventually involved over 1,500 members. It became a model for other global Shell communities. The third never quite clicked, and after a year its members joined other global communities.

Value Chain

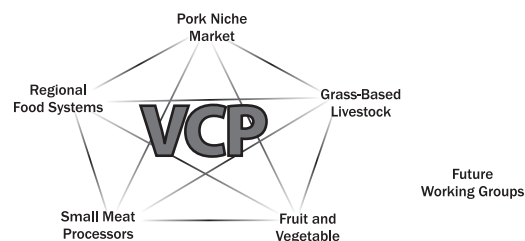


Partnerships

An Iowa-Based Network for Food and Agriculture Working Groups

Value Chain Partnerships is an Iowa-based network of food and agriculture working groups. These groups bring together a diverse ensemble of producers, processors, and private, non-profit, and government organizations across a variety of market-driven food and agriculture issues to deliver social, economic, and environmental benefits to clients and communities.

The working groups in Value Chain Partnerships provide four core functions: acting as information hubs, catalysts for cooperation, magnets for funding, and scouts for new opportunities (see below diagram).



Value Chain Partnerships Core Functions

Information Hubs	Catalysts for Cooperation	Magnets	Scouts
Provide an information clearinghouse	Create solutions collaboratively	Attract funding	Identify food and agriculture challenges
Benefits include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to larger portfolio of knowledge and expertise • Greater awareness of available programs/expertise • Research opportunities available 	Benefits include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate more effectively • Coordinated use of resources • Deconstruction of organizational boundaries • Access to a support network 	Benefits include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to leverage resources within the private and public sectors • Increased probability of funding because network is established 	Benefits include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better grasp of emerging challenges • Improved decision making to modify strategies • Ability to bring in new partners and champions

In addition, the Value Chain Partnerships leadership team relies on its broad experience with a wide range of food and agriculture working groups to educate others who are interested in utilizing this model.

Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG): initiated 2001

This working group is comprised of niche pork companies and supporting groups. The group works to create and maintain more competitive and viable operations for smaller-scale players in the pork sector.

Regional Food Systems Working Group (RFSWG): initiated 2003

This working group is comprised of practitioners and community leaders organized by geographic location. The group works to increase the investment in and support for local and regional food businesses in Iowa.

Small Meat Processors Working Group (SMPWG): initiated 2006

This working group is comprised of small meat processors, state agencies, and producer groups. The group works to improve the vitality of small-scale meat processing plants in Iowa.

Fruit and Vegetable Working Group (FVWG): initiated 2007

This working group is comprised of fruit and vegetable growers and buyers and their assistance providers. The group works to build the production, handling, and marketing capacity of Iowa's fruit and vegetable industries.

Grass-Based Livestock Working Group (GBLWG): initiated 2008 – a Leopold Center cross-initiative group

This working group is comprised of people from grass-based farm and food businesses and the outreach professionals who support them. The group works to promote viable grass-based livestock production, diverse market opportunities, and environmental services in Iowa.

Why Do We Use “Working Groups” Rather Than “Communities of Practice”?

When we began the Value Chain Partnerships project in 2002, we had not heard of the term communities of practice. All of our groups were called working groups. In 2006 we began our work with the Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture and were introduced to the terms communities of practice and knowledge management. The communities of practice definition seemed to fit well with the way we were running our working groups, but we continued to call them working groups to avoid confusing our participants. Within the Value Chain Partnerships team, we used the two terms working groups and communities of practice interchangeably.

In 2008 we hired Sue Honkamp to help us with branding and marketing Value Chain Partnerships. Sue helped us reflect on which term would be best to use in our branding message. After much discussion, we decided to stick with the descriptor “working group” rather than change the ending of each group’s name. That said, Value Chain Partnerships is a network of working groups that uses a communities of practice framework. Why is this framework so important? As communities of practice scholar Richard McDermott said in his article “Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice”³:

“Communities of practice present an odd irony. They have always been part of the informal structure of organizations. They are organic. They grow and thrive as their focus and dynamics engage community members. But to make them really valuable, inclusive and vibrant, they need to be nurtured, cared for and legitimated. They need a very human touch.”

And so it is with the working groups in Value Chain Partnerships. Each of our working groups is very different, shaped by the working group leader and participants’ skills and expertise, yet all of the groups function in a collaborative atmosphere where everyone is both learner and teacher.

3 Richard McDermott, “Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice,” *IHRIM Journal*, March 2000.

Comparing eXtension to Other Communities of Practice Models

Many in university extension are familiar with the term “community of practice (CoP)” with regards to eXtension, and there are many similarities with the way we conceive of CoPs. eXtension CoPs are virtual teams of extension professionals working together to develop public-oriented online content and tools for a particular information “content area,” such as dairy cattle, personal finance, or consumer horticulture. There is a large element of collaboration with the aim of developing the “best of the best” by bringing many experts to the same table.

Our working groups incorporate these elements and take them further in several ways:

1. Our CoPs have missions; they focus on making connections and positive change in particular areas (niche pork, fruit and vegetables, etc.). They are not limited to producing online content as their output. Products have included workshops, manuals, and profitable business connections. Furthermore, information produced is not produced for its own sake; our CoPs focus holistically on sector-wide impacts, targeting resources towards the most pressing needs. While our CoPs contain many “experts,” they come together as equals with the “clients” (farmers, processors, and other businesses) to generate useful and relevant information together.
2. Our CoPs meet physically, typically with lively unscripted interactions and conversations that carry on well after meetings have formally ended.
3. Our CoPs are limited in scope geographically (most of them are found in Iowa), making it easier to get all the necessary players to the table to make an impact in our region.

Example of eXtension CoP: HorseQuest

www.extension.org/horses

More than 50 university extension horse specialists and other experts operate as the HorseQuest CoP “to harness the Cooperative Extension System’s best information to provide traditional and expanding clientele a source of reliable and up-to-date horse information on equine science and management.”

Timeline and History of Value Chain Partnerships (VCP)

- 2001 Preliminary meetings on niche pork producer needs
Concept paper submitted to W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- 2001 Pork Niche Market Working Group formed
Kellogg foundation provides \$100,000 to jump-start Value Chain Partnerships
- 2003 Kellogg Foundation, Leopold Center, ISU and others provide \$800,000 over the next three years to Value Chain Partnerships
Regional Food Systems and BioEconomy Working Groups formed in fall
First MBA student with a minor in sustainable agriculture is hired
- 2004 Value Chain Partnerships working groups coordinate dozens of new projects and begin plans to add a fourth group focused on organic flax
- 2005 Kellogg provides one additional year of funding to help transition Value Chain Partnerships to a market-based change model
Flax Working Groups gets underway
Pork Niche Market Working Group receives \$400,000 USDA grant to study cost of production and herd health of niche swine herds
- 2006 Value Chain Partnerships works with Wallace Center for Sustainable Agriculture to develop a new market-based change proposal using Performance Leadership model as developed with business consultant; proposal funded in partnership with the Leopold Center and ISU Colleges of Agriculture & Life Sciences and Business
Regional Food Systems Working Group evolves to build capacity of local groups
Bioeconomy Working Group closes
New evaluator joins Value Chain Partnerships
- 2007 Flax Working Group closes
Small Meat Processing and Fruit & Vegetable Working Groups begin
MBA assistantships continue
Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative receives funding from Kellogg Foundation
- 2008 Value Chain Partnerships focuses on sustainability plan for project continuation after Wallace funding ends
Regional Food Systems Working Group expands to six local groups
Small Meat Processors Working Group produces first of several new publications
Connection made between Value Chain Partnerships and the Wallace National Good Food Network
Value Chain Partnerships hires branding specialist
Leopold Center funds new Grass-Based Livestock Working Group (coordinator is former Value Chain Partnerships MBA student)
Value Chain Partnerships receives funding from North Central SARE PDP program to hold workshop on selecting, initiating, managing, funding, and branding communities of practice (a.k.a. working groups)
- 2009 Value Chain Partnerships completes branding and positioning work and prepares to hold workshop on selecting, managing, funding, and branding communities of practice
Small Meat Processing Group begins looking for new leader for 2010
Pork Niche Market Working Group asks its members to provide partial support for group
New tagline for VCP: "An Iowa-based network of food and agriculture working groups"

Pork Niche Market Working Group

Establishment of the Pork Niche Market Working Group

The Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG) began in September 2001 when a face-to-face meeting of various niche pork businesses was held, featuring a facilitated discussion of challenges they faced. Two subsequent meetings were held later that fall with staff representing nine different agencies and groups. Strategies to address challenges were discussed, which led to the creation of four work teams: 1) Credit and Investment, 2) Business Plans and Feasibility Studies, 3) Promotion and Certification, and 4) Herd Health. The different groups attending also considered what they could offer to a coordinated effort to address these pressing issues. At the second meeting, the idea of creating a working group to coordinate activities, developed by the Leopold Center and Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), was presented. The consensus was to proceed with forming the PNMWG.

The group's first meeting was held in January 2002. Start-up funding of \$25,500 was secured from the Leopold Center, Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa State University, Iowa Farmers Union, and the Iowa Institute for Cooperatives. Initial leaders on the PNMWG steering team were Gary Huber of PFI, Rich Pirog of the Leopold Center, Mary Swalla Holmes of ISU Extension, Marty Schwager of the Iowa Pork Producers Association, Jackie Gunzenhauser of the Iowa Farmers Union, and Dave Holm of the Iowa Institute for Cooperatives. The responsibilities of the steering team were to:

1. Provide advice and counsel to the PNMWG coordinator;
2. Provide guidance on the mission, framework, operations and future directions of the PNMWG;
3. Work with the PNMWG coordinator to identify and develop new cooperative strategies to address the challenges identified;
4. Pursue opportunities to bring financial resources to the group to address challenges and create new opportunities for Iowa producers;
5. Work with the PNMWG coordinator to develop the agenda for PNMWG meetings; and
6. Help make decisions about allocation of funds provided to support the PNMWG from Kellogg Foundation R&D monies that flow through the Value Chain Partnerships project

What are the functions of the PNMWG?

Mission Statement of the PNMWG

The mission of the PNMWG is to foster the success of highly differentiated pork value chains that are profitable to all participants, incorporate farmer ownership and control, and contribute to environmental stewardship and rural vitality.

Participants include individual farmers, staff from more than a dozen niche pork companies, and representatives of various agencies, groups and other businesses. The group has met 27 times since January 2002, typically with about 25 people attending. The meetings are used to discuss recent niche pork developments, report on projects, discuss challenges, and strategize ways to collaborate to address challenges. PNMWG has developed and helped implement more than 30 projects supported by more than \$1,000,000 in funding. It has disseminated information on niche pork topics through 14 niche pork newsletters, a web site, and presentations at numerous meetings, workshops, and field days.

How does the PNMWG operate?

Initially, the four PNMWG work teams developed strategies to address the challenges that the whole group had identified. However, it wasn't until receiving \$27,000 in R&D funds from a 2002 Kellogg Foundation grant for the Value Chains Partnerships project that significant progress was made to tackle these challenges. A system to solicit and evaluate proposals was developed that involved 1) limiting grants to \$8,000, 2) requiring submitters to be involved with PNMWG, and 3) requiring that projects be focused on addressing challenges identified by PNMWG. Project selection was made by the PNMWG Steering Team. Using VCP funds, five projects were approved in 2002 and eight in 2003.

Two important developments occurred after the first few years. One was that as people began to organize their activities around projects, the work team structure was abandoned. The second was that in early 2004, the steering team approved a shift in the project selection process that involved targeting funds for specific needs not adequately met within the request for proposals process. This new system identified gaps in the project portfolio and proceeded to work with people who had the expertise needed to develop and submit proposals for projects to fill these gaps. The resulting proposals accessed the VCP R&D funds and funds from other sources.

Significant additional grants included \$149,759 from U.S. Department of Agriculture-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) to address niche farrowing challenges, \$108,544 from USDA-Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program for a feasibility study for niche pork value chains for foodservice markets, and \$400,000 from USDA-National Research Initiative (NRI) to use records and veterinary diagnostic services to address production challenges facing niche pork farmers.

While the work continued on various projects, the PNMWG continued to meet quarterly. At these meetings, the participants shared information on recent niche pork developments, reported on projects, and discussed next steps for projects and the PNMWG. Another critical PNMWG function is an annual evaluation each September that assesses member perceptions of various topics, including progress made and issues on which PNMWG should focus.

What has the PNMWG produced?

The PNMWG developed and helped implement 31 R&D projects supported by more than \$1,000,000 in funding. Here are some examples:

An Evaluation of the Importance to Consumers of Selected Niche Pork Attributes

This project was a collaborative effort of PNMWG and the National Pork Board aimed at providing niche pork companies with specific, actionable data on consumer demand for niche pork with various unique attributes. The findings included estimates of the percentage of sales niche pork products would achieve when placed in retail meat cases along with conventional pork products at two premium levels. It provided data niche pork companies could use during sales calls with retail meat case managers.

Maximizing Carcass Utilization in Niche Pork Companies

A key challenge identified by PNMWG was the difficulty of marketing the entire carcass at premium prices. This study identified opportunities to combine underutilized pork cuts from different niche companies and collectively market these cuts to processors interested in buying these items. This research led to the formation of a new company, Prime Pork Supply, which has been successful in helping to market previously underutilized carcass parts to processors, which in turn has helped these companies increase revenues.

LTL Trucking Terms and Process Guide

One challenge in supplying niche pork products to distant markets is the need to ship small quantities. These less-than-truckload (LTL) shipments are more costly per unit than full shipments. This guide looked at costs, the process of selecting a carrier, and sample shipping rates to various locations. It subsequently was used by various niche pork companies. It also led to collaborative trucking relationship between two companies involved with the PNMWG. The report's author, a student at ISU, also was subsequently hired by a niche pork company.

Costs, Returns and Production Performance of Niche Pork Farms

The PNMWG was responsible for helping ISU obtain a \$400,000 USDA grant to use records and veterinary diagnostic services to address production challenges facing niche pork farmers. Production and economic data were collected from nearly farrow-to-finish niche pork farms. These data had never before been assembled, and the results identified areas with the greatest potential for improvement. Subsequent projects developed and delivered outreach activities focused on these areas.

Niche Pork Production Handbook

ISU animal scientists and Extension staff compiled a 101-page *Niche Pork Production Handbook*, which is divided into 30 stand-alone sections. Topics covered included housing options, bedding management, sow feeding, boar fertility, stockmanship, and improving feed conversion.

Beyond these and other projects, a PNMWG evaluation identified several areas (described next with substantiating quotes from members) where the PNMWG delivered benefits to members.

- Built Relationships, Shared Information, and Deepened Understanding
 - » *"All of a sudden everybody else is talking about some of their problems and I realized that some of our problems were the same."*
- Increased Markets, Business Skills, Job Opportunities, and Collaborative Business Relationships
 - » *"Actually [my business] came out of a project I did for PNMWG within the past year. Through this project we identified a need [for pork brokering services between producers and buyers] and thus formed the business to meet those needs."*
- Improved the Financial Stability of Niche Pork Farms
 - » *"[My business has] changed 100 percent since we [took part in a PNMWG project]—we changed everything in production. We've doubled the pigs per sow per year."*
- Leveraged Resources and Increased Agency Support for Niche Pork Enterprises
 - » *"I think the group as a whole, all of the information that it was pulling together, and the focal points that it was creating, helped Iowa State itself identify some research priorities."*

Future Development and Growth of the PNMWG

All of PNMWG's members share in a strong interest in niche pork production and marketing. Some are competitors in the marketplace, but they see value to having PNMWG work to help address common challenges. Others are technical assistance providers or industry associations that are finding ways to apply their expertise to a segment of the industry that previously had been difficult to target and assist.

Regular face-to-face interaction is crucial to PNMWG's longevity and successes. The development of trust and open communication among its members also is important, as is the ability to secure funds for projects

that further address challenges cited by the members. Skillful facilitation of meetings also is crucial, so that PNMWG members have a forum to continue to learn from each other and from project work, and to help set future priorities. Another key component of success has been the attention given to managing projects so that they are completed with maximum positive impact.

Learning, Knowledge Sharing and Communication

Knowledge is generated and learning occurs through PNMWG's quarterly meetings, projects, and communication activities (i.e., newsletters, web site, and presentations). We cultivate ongoing connections among members through meetings and emails to members. We evaluate the group's continued effectiveness with an annual assessment process each September.

Regional Food Systems Working Group

Establishment of the Regional Food Systems Working Group

The Regional Food Systems Working Group began with a needs assessment meeting of local food practitioners in April 2003, followed by a strategic planning session in August 2003 attended by 12 people from the April session. Based on those two meetings and discussions among the leaders of the Value Chains Partnerships project, a decision was made to form a Regional Food Systems group. In October 2003, invitations to attend the first planning meeting were sent to local food practitioners and farmers across Iowa. More than 30 people attended the event where Pat Boddy served as facilitator. Rich Pirog, VCP project director, coordinated these meetings with assistance from Andrew Hug (VCP program assistant). After two additional meetings, the last in February 2004, the group had developed a mission statement and definition of a regional food system.

What are the functions the RFSWG?

Mission statement of the RFSWG

To support education, conduct research and facilitate partnerships to increase investment and support of community-based, sustainable and environmentally responsible regional food enterprises.

Participants in RFSWG include farmers, community leaders such as bankers and local economic development staff, county and regional ISU Extension staff, representatives from state agencies and various non-profit organizations involved in food system work.

RFSWG defined a regional food system in the following manner:

A regional food system supports long-term connections between farmers and consumers while helping to meet the health, social, economic and environmental needs of communities within that region. Producers and markets are linked via efficient infrastructures that:

- **Promote** environmental health,
- **Provide** competitive advantages to producers, processors, and retailers,
- **Encourage** identification with a region's culture, history, and ecology, and
- **Share** risks and rewards equitably among all partners in the system.

After two years of awarding competitive grants on local and regional food projects, evaluation feedback indicated that the group was not sufficiently focused and was in danger of losing momentum. RFSWG underwent a process to refocus its efforts by engaging with partners who were working in specific geographic areas of the state. In 2006, RFSWG finalized a new set of objectives:

- **Identify** key elements found in specific close spaced geographical areas that create a vibrant and sustainable food system,
- **Work** with leaders in food businesses to identify key elements that are not yet developed,
- **Help** identify and measure key changes in different regions to determine whether there is positive change, and
- **Develop** and implement a continuous learning process across Iowa to determine what it takes to make a regional food system more vibrant and sustainable.

How does the RFSWG operate?

RFSWG changed its operation mode in 2006. It started with a pilot program in one new geographic area (Northeast Iowa Food and Farming Coalition) and then through a competitive process added additional groups representing other geographical regions. A steering committee comprised of RFSWG members, the RFSWG leader, and VCP program assistant reviewed proposals and made recommendations. After a proposal was accepted for seed funding, each new group presented their ideas to the entire RFSWG to get feedback before developing a plan of work.

RFSWG meets on a quarterly basis. As of 2007, local group leaders work with the Leopold Center to plan the agenda for these meetings. The meetings start with a brief check-in on the mission statement followed by introduction of all participants and welcoming of any new participants. A sign-in sheet is used and all new participants are added to the RFSWG mail list. RFSWG conducts an end-of-meeting survey as a way to get feedback on the direction of the group and the format and content of meetings.

As RFSWG began to focus its efforts on geographic-based areas, a small percentage of participants not directly living in or involved in some capacity with one or more of these groups stopped attending. However, attendance at these meetings has grown from an average of 40 people in 2005 to the current average of 70 people. This growth is due in part to the addition of new geographic areas and increased interest in the work of the group by students, farmers, and community leaders.

By engaging local RFSWG leaders in the development of the agenda, RFSWG members have obtained a high degree of ownership in the group. Two notable issues remain critical for a minority segment of the group:

1. A desire to reduce the amount of time in presentations and increase time spent in discussion on key issues, and
2. A desire to use some resources to start sub-groups to tackle specific issues such as business start-ups, distribution and processing, immigrant farmers, food safety, food policy, and others.

What has the RFSWG produced?

(from RFSWG evaluation 2007)

- Leveraging legitimacy and credibility
 - » *"[RFSWG] adds more credibility to local efforts because of state support... If we tried to do it cold turkey, we probably wouldn't have gotten as good a response—we would have been considered just a bunch of renegades."*
- Leveraging time on food systems work
 - » *"I see more interest from my bosses to invest more of my time in local food systems."*
 - » *"[New collaborations resulting from RFSWG] mean for grant programs that I run, food is a lot more on the front burner than it's been in the past."*
- Building skills
 - » *"I am better learning how to communicate with people who aren't part of the choir."*
- Improving knowledge and learning
 - » *"I think [RFSWG] is willing to address the economic hardships of local agriculture even though it's more difficult. ... They want to take an honest look at it and a complete and deep analysis of what we're up against. That milieu is a better learning environment instead of people avoiding those issues"*

- Improving organizational efficiency
 - » “I think that it has made our job easier in the sense that instead of trying to hunt down and find all of these resources, you go to [RFSWG] meetings and it’s just everything you need to know and the people you need to know are all right there.”
 - » “[Through RFSWG] I can hear stories where people have struggled—it’s nice to let someone else make the mistake so I don’t have to.”

In 2007-2008, RFSWG:

- Exceeded year-two goals for increased sales of community-based local food over year one sales by more than \$330,000
- Exceeded year-two goals for documentation of new baseline purchases of local food by more than \$118,000
- Exceeded year two goals for leveraging local resources by more than \$59,000
- Played a role in helping Pottawattamie County pass a proclamation that would provide \$30,000 each year for four years for a foods council that will help increase commerce of local foods in the Omaha-Council Bluffs trade area
- One food cooperative in northeast Iowa tripled in size and increased the number of local food vendors from 18 to 78
- Added two new local groups; RFSWG now covers more than 35 of Iowa’s 99 counties
- Conducted economic impact analysis in five northeast Iowa counties for a set of production and nutritional goals, with analysis in southeast and southwest Iowa set for fall 2009.

The Common Ground (Nature of Members’ Relationship)

All members of RFSWG share a desire to build local capacity for local and regional food commerce that will support economic and community health. Each meeting provides a forum to build that common ground.

Future Development and Growth of the RFSWG

The Leopold Center will continue to convene and facilitate meetings. The Center has adopted a servant leadership approach to move RFSWG toward an increasing share of self-governance by its local group leader members in an attempt to increase ownership and effectiveness.

Learning, Knowledge Sharing and Communication

Creating and documenting knowledge

Knowledge is created and then shared by group members through presentations, discussions, and general networking during the meetings. There is a great deal of networking outside of meetings where tacit knowledge is shared. Leaders of other working groups regularly attend the RFSWG meetings and contribute their expertise and assistance to local leaders.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the RFSWG

End-of meeting evaluations and a recurring in-depth evaluation using appreciative inquiry by the VCP evaluator make sure that assessment is ongoing.

Frequent communication with local group leaders occur through e-mails and conference calls. A social networking site for RFSWG is being established for its local leaders.

Dealing with conflicts between leaderships own work and working groups work

As leader of the RFSWG and the Leopold Center's Marketing and Food Systems Initiative, I continue to seek ways to integrate the two by encouraging Leopold Center grantees to actively participate in RFSWG or other relevant VCP working groups.

Flax Working Group

How the Flax Working Group was established

The Flax Working Group was established in 2005 as a new working group in the Value Chains partnership project. Spectrum Organics had partnered with American Natural Soy in Cherokee, Iowa to build a new processing facility for organic flax oil. They formed a new company, Biowa Nutraceuticals, and constructed their crushing facility in 2004. Iowa organic farmers and some conventional growers as well were eager to learn about growing flax and the potential to increase their profitability by adding an additional crop to their rotation.

Why a Working Group for Flax?

A “binding force” was needed for flax development activities. Traditional support from Iowa State University for new crop development would come from the Agronomy Department, but would not provide business development support. For a specialty crop, such as organic flax, development of the production methods without concurrent development of the market would have been unlikely to yield success. Only a limited market exists for this crop. In addition, the specialty food market has specific grain and food quality standards for flax and other products that must be met for farmers to achieve a profit.

Flax Working Group Structure and Function

The Working Group was co-facilitated by Iowa State University Value Added Agriculture and Practical Farmers of Iowa. Members of the Flax Working Group included:

- Organic and conventional crop producers
- A flax oilseed processor, Biowa Nutraceuticals,
- Flax buyers (for food and feed)
- Agronomists
- Faculty working on seed processing
- Extension outreach personnel
- Practical Farmers of Iowa

The Working Group met three times each year, with two winter meetings and a summer field event. Field events featured on-farm research and production and on flax processing.

Accomplishments of the Flax Working Group

The Flax Working Group took a comprehensive approach to the investigation and development of organic flax for Midwest production and marketing. The group:

- Contributed to agronomic research for flax, both on-farm and on the research station,
- Helped coordinate flax harvesting and cleaning research,
- Conducted grower surveys and interviews to gain producer input into production and harvesting guidelines
- Conducted outreach and education with summer field events and articles in the popular press,
- Developed the Flax Production Guide for Iowa (ISU Extension PM 2020) (www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM2020.pdf), and
- Developed a production and marketing financial budget for use by growers.

In two years, the Working Group leveraged an additional \$58,089 for research and development from the ISU Agronomy Department, the ISU Agronomy Endowment Fund and Spectrum/Hain Celestial.

Challenges for the Flax Working Group

In late 2006, Spectrum Organics was purchased by Hain Celestial, a large organic food company. The company's interest of the in sourcing local product was less than we had experienced initially with Spectrum Organics.

Both our agronomic research and farmers' experiences pointed out big challenges for flax production, and particularly for organic flax production in the Midwest. Flax is an extremely non-competitive crop and is challenged to compete with weeds in organic systems in the Midwest. In the typical growing areas, North Dakota and Canada, flax is a full-season crop with different competing, cooler-season weed species. Flax grown in the north often is harvested after a frost, which renders weeds less of a problem in the harvesting process. In Iowa, a lot of foreign plant material that collected in the combine with the flax often resulted in lower product quality. In addition, flax grown farther south has lower amounts of the desirable fatty acids that make flax an attractive dietary supplement.

Most farmers who experimented with flax did not find it as profitable as their other small grain alternatives. The number of farmers growing flax declined in 2006 and 2007, and today there are only a handful of Iowa farmers growing organic flax and selling to Spectrum/Hain Celestial. The group was discontinued in 2007.

Lessons Learned from the Flax Working Group

A focus on one crop is too narrow to maintain a vibrant working group. Continued funding was not available for such a narrow focus. In addition, the market outlet focused on only one buyer. Other buyers were sought and recruited into the Flax Working Group. Two feed buyers in the Midwest do purchase small amounts of organic flax for their businesses. These feed companies can source cleaned flax from North Dakota at reasonable prices, and are not likely to buy from Midwestern growers.

A crop-based working group with a broader emphasis would likely have more longevity and potential for greater impact over time. A focus on specialty grains or specialty oilseed crops or organic crops would have wider appeal, attract a larger membership, and likely would result in more impact for these industries.

BioEconomy Working Group Narrative

How was the Bioeconomy Working Group established?

The Bioeconomy Working Group was one of the initial working groups formed in 2003, the first year of the Leopold Center's Value Chains Partnership project. At that time, the federal BioPreferred program had just been launched. The existing federal legislation, dictated that any federal entity, when buying products--- whether it was office furniture, cleaning products, fuel, etc.--- was required to purchase a biobased version of the product, if it was available at comparable quality and cost. The legislation further stated that, in order to meet the biobased standard for this federal requirement, the biomass used in the product needed to be produced domestically.

HON Industries, of Muscatine, Iowa, manufactures office furniture and office space dividers. In 2003, 25 percent of HON's furniture sales were to the federal government, so they were very motivated to develop a line of biobased products. They embarked on a research and development program to make biobased office partitions, biobased chairs, and biobased tack boards. They needed to source the fibers for these products locally, so they were very interested in working with the Bioeconomy Working Group to establish a supply chain for the needed feedstock.

The Mission of the Bioeconomy Working Group was to make Iowa a leader in bioproduct feedstock production, materials, engineering, and advanced manufacturing.

How did the Bioeconomy Working Group function?

The BioEconomy Working Group met four times each year in Ames. Over time, two of those meetings were held jointly with Advanced Manufacturing Research Collaboration Cluster in other cities across the state. Research and Development Grants were made once yearly. Topics covered in meetings included research reports and updates, business development strategies, and identifying needs in the plant fiber value chain that were to be addressed

Accomplishments of the Bioeconomy Working Group

- Recruited and convened a group of committed people who worked to make a difference in how value chains developed for biobased businesses in Iowa
- Sponsored the 2004 Biobased Industry Outlook Conference in Ames, Iowa
- Received funds for research and development projects, for support staff and for honoraria to participants
- Developed a sustainability matrix for the biofiber economy in Iowa
- Awarded a total of ten research and development grants, four in 2003 and six in 2004

Research and development projects included:

- Biofibers as strengthening agents and extenders in injection-molded plastics
- Kenaf production methods for Iowa
- Kenaf fiber characteristics in fiber mats
- Flax fiber quality and characteristics
- Transportation logistics of corn stover for biofiber
- Study tours to Texas and Michigan to investigate kenaf production and processing

Membership and Relationships / Developing the Community of Practice

The Bioeconomy Working Group developed a partnership with AMRCC. This cluster of industries is a collaborative partnership of Iowa end product manufacturers and their Iowa suppliers. Its purposes are to promote the use of advanced technologies, engineering, and processes; conduct collaborative research; and provide user-to-user sharing of technologies and best practices in Iowa. Their goal is to make Iowa the leader in engineering and advanced manufacturing. Members in AMRCC include John Deere; Pella Corp.; HNI (formerly HON) Industries; Fischer Controls; Rockwell Collins Inc.; Shafer Systems, Inc.; Vermeer Manufacturing; Iowa State University; University of Iowa; University of Northern Iowa; Iowa Manufacturing Extension Partnership; Iowa Business Council; Iowa Department of Economic Development; and Iowa community colleges.

AMRCC formed a Biomass Working Group in conjunction with our Bioeconomy Working Group. The objectives were:

- Promote the use and commercialization of bioproduct materials through engineering and advanced manufacturing;
- Conduct collaborative research and development;
- Share knowledge, technologies, and best practices that will benefit the corporations and citizens of Iowa; and
- Encourage the state, county, and local entities to purchase Iowa bio-renewable products.

Discontinuing the Working Group

About three years into the project, the federal legislation requiring biobased product purchases by government entities was changed. The requirement for the biomass to be domestically produced was removed. Therefore, HON (now HNI Industries) and other manufacturers could source their fiber (at a much lower cost) from Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. The opportunity for Iowa producers diminished considerably, as manufacturers like HNI didn't have to worry about developing the supply chain for domestic fibers --- they simply imported the products from offshore.

HON was excellent to work with - they dedicated a number of people in their technology development center to the fiber production and marketing chain project for several years. They respected the farmers and knew they needed to make a profit. However, the company is like most commercial enterprises - when the legislation changed and they realized that they could import the fibers more easily and cheaply, their interest and support for Iowa farmers developing a system to supply the fibers they needed.

Even if there had been continued market "pull," there were additional issues with local production and processing of kenaf. Among the challenges were:

- Limit to the ability of existing machinery to deliver clean, properly-sized kenaf fibers to the market;
- Profit potential to compete with the bio-renewable energy corn and soybean economy was marginal; and
- Kenaf was and is not supported in the Federal farm program.

Lessons learned from the Bioeconomy Working Group

Although the working group was not conceived this way, it developed a narrow focus of one crop fiber source and one potential market. This is too narrow a base or value chain to support long-term ongoing work. When the one potential market disappeared, there wasn't enough incentive to continue the working group.

Small Meat Processors Working Group Working Group

Establishment of the Small Meat Processors Working Group

Small-scale meat processing plants are necessary for the vitality of Iowa's agriculture and rural way of life. In 1965, there were more than 550 small meat plants in Iowa. Today there are fewer than 200. To address this decline, interested researchers and groups came together to form the Small Meat Processors Working Group (SMPWG) in the summer of 2006. The group has sought to locate, map, and coordinate the resources available at the local, state, and national levels to assist small Iowa meat processors who seek to begin, upgrade or expand their businesses. ISU graduate student Arion Thiboumery coordinates the group's meetings and activities. In fall 2007, the SMPWG joined the Value Chain Partnerships cluster of working groups.

How does the SMPWG function?

To help small, Iowa meat processors expand, upgrade or build new facilities in order to promote rural development and increase agricultural opportunities.

Intended audience

The SMPWG targets three main groups:

1. Meat processors,
2. Organizations and agencies that can provide assistance for meat processors, and
3. Individuals and groups, such as producer groups, that depend upon meat processors.

The SMPWG seeks to coordinate efforts by these different groups with similar interests to help this sector become (and remain) a vital economic segment in Iowa agriculture.

How does the SMPWG operate?

To form this group, a broad swath of stakeholders from the three targeted audiences were interviewed and questioned about several options:

1. How would you conduct this project?
2. Who (else) needs to be part of this working group?
3. How would you envision coordination of comprehensive support for small meat processors?

The key underlying question was, "How would this be valuable to you?" This line of discussion simultaneously began to encourage commitment beyond a perfunctory level, set direction for the group, and establish a foundation to identify how these diverse support elements could best be coordinated to complement each other most effectively.

While many suggestions emerged to direct how the group would function, the approach that clearly rose to the top was to use a project orientation for the group, with three objectives:

1. Work with three "test cases"—small Iowa meat processors actively seeking to expand or upgrade their operations—in order to fully explore, in a highly grounded manner, what support was needed to help these businesses prosper.
2. Produce a guidebook of resources available to small meat lockers that will serve both as a reference for working group member organizations and as an educational tool for small meat lockers

and organizations that work with them.

3. Cultivate inter-organizational trust and familiarity and social capital among working group members so as to facilitate ongoing partnerships.

The original agreement was to hold four working group meetings over nine months, with meetings every two months. It should be noted clearly that many of the CoP members became interested in the group to support objectives 1 and 2, and not so much number 3. The concrete study design and the objective of producing a real, usable product (the guidebook), were much more appealing than nebulous qualities such as “familiarity” and “social capital.”

For the next year, meetings were held by conference call every two months. While convenient, this arrangement was not wholly desirable, as most preferred some face-to-face interaction. Group participants presently are trying to gather for face-to-face sessions to encourage more processor input when the board of the Iowa Meat Processors Association meets.

A significant amount of working group activity takes place between meetings with different combinations of group members joining together to carry out projects. The group’s coordinator spends a fair amount of time “walking the halls” to help coordinate activities and keep folks on the same page.

What has the SMPWG produced?

- Iowa Meat Processors’ Resource Guidebook (www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/pubs/contents/189.htm)
- Guide to Designing a Small Red Meat Plant with Two Sizes of Model Designs (Iowa State University Extension PM 2077)
- Open House Mini Grants (two years)
- *Iowa Poultry Slaughter, Processing, and Sales Guidelines for Small-scale Producers* (Iowa State University Extension PM 2068) (<https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=13044>)
- Beef and Pork Whole Animal Buying Guide (Iowa State University Extension PM 2076)
- Group members have taken the lead to provide support for small meat processors
 - » Product Costing Workshop (two years)
 - » Plant Productivity Workshop
 - » Succession Planning Workshop
 - » Marketing Workshop
- Extensive media coverage for meat processors and group members
- Broad notice of meat processor-related activities by ISU Extension

The Fruit and Vegetable Working Group

Establishment of the Fruit and Vegetable Working Group

The Fruit and Vegetable Working Group (FVWG) is one of the most recently created working groups in the Value Chain Partnerships (VCP). Funds through the VCP became available at the sunset of the Flax Working Group and the Bioeconomy Working Group (see the narratives for these working groups highlighting the reasons for their closure). As a member of the VCP, the FVWG is focused on building local food systems that reward farmers who use high standards of environmental and community stewardship.

At the start of 2007, the VCP core group conducted a needs assessment. With the help of the VCP advisory group, it was determined that there was a critical need for capacity building in Iowa's fruit and vegetable industry in Iowa. As a result, the FVWG was officially launched with a working group meeting in Ames, Iowa, in November 2007. Invitations to the meeting were sent to producers, academics, retailers, wholesalers, state agencies and non-profits across Iowa to attend what essentially was to be a planning meeting. Approximately 60 people attended the first meeting. Mike Bevins, the State Horticulturalist was the keynote speaker and he gave a synopsis of the horticultural industry in Iowa highlighting strengths, weaknesses and needs of the industry. The main portion of the first meeting was dedicated to a needs assessment that outlined and ranked the most important areas for work in the fruit and vegetable sector. This soon was followed by a web-based survey to gather additional information on the industry needs. From the initial meeting and the web survey results, desired specific topics for education were determined to be:

- Post-harvest quality control
- Marketing / selling to institutions / advertising and promotion
- Educational, financial and other resources available for growers
- It's more important for the group to foster cooperative efforts and working together than providing information for *individuals' needs*"
- "Encourage small grocers to buy from local farmers"
- "Help make a connection between producers and buyers / brokers"
- "Start with small, achievable steps; leverage the success; evolve like the Niche Pork Working Group"

What are the functions of the FVWG?

Mission Statement of the FVWG

The Fruit and Vegetable Working Group will build the production capacity, marketing capacity and financial capacity within Iowa's fruit and vegetable industry, by taking actions that directly address identified constraints.

The working group strategy to fulfill its mission will be to:

- Increase Iowa's capacity for fruit and vegetable production by
 - » Fostering new growers, and/or
 - » Assisting existing growers to increase production levels sustainably, and/or
 - » Increasing total acreage under production
- Identify and meet the needs of Iowa's fruit and vegetable producers
- Increase the quality and the amount of relevant information available to Iowa's fruit and vegetable growers

- Increase the availability of relevant information to Iowa's fruit and vegetable growers
- Explore the possibility of partnering projects with other VCP working groups

How does the FVWG operate?

The Fruit and Vegetable Working Group has met with more than 100 Iowa growers, buyers, processors and distributors during the past year. The group is coordinated by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Iowa State University (ISU) Extension.

The FVWG meets four times a year: two workshops (spring and fall) and two field days (summer months). Members of the working group play the key role in determining programs for the workshops and field days, as well as the areas of research that the industry needs. Generally, the meetings start with a brief check-in on the mission statement followed by an introduction of all participants and welcoming of any new participants. A sign-in sheet is passed around to ensure that new participants are added to the FVWG mail list.

At the beginning of 2009, a six-person advisory team from within the FVWG membership was established. The role of this team is to help in decision making for the working group as well as to encourage internal leadership/ownership within the group.

What has the FVWG produced?

Start-Up Vegetable Enterprise for Beginning Farmers

The project developed example scenarios and a decision aid for new farmers interested in growing vegetables. Several scenarios were constructed with different mixes of vegetable enterprises for a five- to six-year start-up period.

Post-Harvest Handling Decision Tool for Vegetable Growers

A Decision Tool for vegetable farmers was developed to help them make informed choices about their post-harvest handling needs. This will be applicable to start up vegetable production businesses and those looking at expanding.

Future Work

Two research projects will be undertaken in 2009. In addition, the FVWG and its advisory team will identify qualitative and quantitative indicators to chart the group's progress. Examples of possible indicators are:

- Number of fruit and vegetable growers in Iowa
- Number of new beginning fruit and vegetable growers in Iowa
- Increases in production levels as a result of FVWG activities
- Relevant information available to aid capacity increases for fruit and vegetable producers
- Increased accessibility to relevant information
- Producers' sales of Iowa grown fruits and vegetables
- Number of acres of Iowa fruit and vegetables under production
- Purchases of Iowa fruits and vegetables by key groceries, food cooperatives and institutions

Future Development and Growth of the FVWG

The current FVWG coordinators, Malcolm Robertson and Margaret Smith, will continue to play key leadership roles for the group; but they agree that the coordinator position must be compensated financially, and not be simply a volunteer position.

They also intend to put structures in place to begin to create a shared leadership model, both to augment the roles the current coordinators play and to pave the way for new leaders to come.

- Part of this shared leadership will be established through the creation of the working group's advisory team from within FVWG membership.
- During 2009-2010, the existing FVWG coordinators will continue to facilitate the major portion of the planning and development of FVWG meetings, research and outreach.
- As FVWG begins to coalesce as a community of practice, the existing coordinators will identify and foster potential leaders in the group to:
 - » Disperse responsibilities for projects and administration
 - » Ensure long-term sustainability and resilience for the administration of the working group
- FVWG will look to develop or strengthen partnerships with:
 - » Iowa State University Extension and the ISU Extension Value Added program
 - » Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
 - » Practical Farmers of Iowa
 - » Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship
 - » Iowa Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association
 - » Value Chain Partners
- FVWG has submitted a proposal for funding through USDA's new Cooperative Research, Education and Extension Service (CREES) Specialty Crop grant program.

Grass-Based Livestock Working Group

Establishment of the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group

The Grass-Based Livestock Working Group (GBLWG) is the newest of the five working groups in the Value Chain Partnerships (VCP). GBLWG was initiated by a strategic investment from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in summer 2008. Grass-based livestock is a topic that spans all three of the Leopold Center's strategic initiatives in Marketing & Food Systems, Ecology, and Policy because:

1. There is an expanding awareness of, and market demand for, grass-based food products and their perceived health benefits,
2. Well-managed grass farming tends to have positive environmental effects (e.g. greater water infiltration, reduced erosion potential, increased carbon sequestration, year-round land cover), and
3. Some greater degree of education and policy incentives will be necessary before grass-based livestock production can hold a place amongst the most reputed agricultural ventures in Iowa.

The Grass-Based Livestock Working Group had its first general membership meeting in August 2008 at the Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. Producers and academics from ISU made up the bulk of the 55-person crowd, but state agencies and non-profits also had a noticeable showing. A representative of the Iowa NRCS gave a presentation about CRP-to-Grazing, but the main point of this meeting was a large-scale needs assessment outlining and ranking the most important areas for work in the grass-based livestock sector, framed around four conspicuous, yet interrelated thematic areas: production, marketing, ecology, and policy. The priorities that ranked highest included networking, branding and product differentiation, valuing ecosystem services, and, especially, cost-effective grazing models.

The number of attendees to the second and third quarterly meetings of the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group, which occurred in November 2008 and February 2009, respectively, has stayed consistent around 50. There have been educational components at each meeting, which have included presentations on grazing native grasses in the Chichaqua Bottoms and patch-burn grazing in the Grand River Grasslands, as well as a producer panel on accessing alternative markets for grass-based livestock products. Half of the second meeting was spent with attendees broken out around the four thematic areas – production, marketing, ecology, and policy – and coming up with ideas for research and demonstration (R&D) projects that might take advantage of the \$24,000 in seed money provided by the Leopold Center. Each thematic area got its own listserv, in addition to the general mailing list, for further discussion after the meeting. As a result, when the request for proposals for these funds was released in December, there were already several leadership teams that had congealed around a proposed project.

What are the functions of the GBLWG?

The GBLWG statement of purpose

Our statement of purpose explains that the GBLWG exists to: 1) create a diverse and inclusive support network for grass-based farm and food businesspersons, 2) promote innovation, conservation, and information-sharing in the grass-based livestock sector, and 3) help grass-based livestock agriculture realize potential ecological, economic, and social benefits.

This working group was intended to serve as a peer group for graziers from all along the continuum, from the conventional cow-calf operations, to the certified-organic, holistically-managed, grass-finished operations, and all of those in between. Although the primary focus would be on beef production, since the majority of

pasture/forage acres in Iowa are used toward this end, the working group should have diverse representation from the grass-based dairy and small ruminant sectors. As such, the working conception of grass-based livestock is intentionally loose; grass-based livestock animals derive a substantial portion of their nutrition from pasture/forage for a significant period of their lives.

How does GBLWG operate?

So far, the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group has gotten together every three months and will likely continue that quarterly schedule for the immediate future.

All three of our meetings have been in central Iowa, two on the ISU campus in Ames and one in the Des Moines metro area. The idea of holding GBLWG meetings in other areas of the state where grazing operations are more prevalent (e.g. southern Iowa or far northeastern Iowa) is still being considered, but GIS mapping of participants' addresses has actually shown that a Story County meeting location minimizes the total travel distance for all participants. Plus, by changing locations, we may lose just as many participants as we gain.

Outside of face-to-face meetings, GBLWG participants have the opportunity to interact using e-mail listservs. As mentioned earlier, there are currently five such lists; one for the entire GBLWG membership, and four others, one for each of the major thematic areas, which were developed primarily to facilitate conversations about ideas for R&D grant applications. At this point in time, the grazing, wildlife, and ecology list is by far the most active. Soon, the Value Chain Partnerships project will sponsor the creation and hosting of a Grass-Based Livestock Working Group web site, which will be used for transmission of the working group's information, scholarly work, timely news, and events related to grazing and grass farming.

What has the GBLWG produced?

The Grass-Based Livestock Working Group received requests totaling \$37,000 for \$24,000 in available R&D funds. At the third GBLWG meeting, one grant was awarded in each thematic area. Regarding production, an ISU Extension Livestock Field Specialist will be comparing the economics of 12-15 grass-based beef farms grouped by grazing intensity: continuous, low-intensity rotational, and high-intensity rotational grazing. Regarding marketing, Practical Farmers of Iowa are going to hold a workshop on branding and marketing for grass-based livestock products. Regarding ecology, the Iowa Beef Center and Iowa Native Lands will hold a conference on grazing native plant species and to develop several case studies of producers successfully grazing natives. Finally, regarding policy, an ISU master's student will compile existing literature and information to conceptualize a baseline state of the grazing sector in Iowa, outlining management practices, as well as incentives and disincentives to change.

Future Development and Growth of the GBLWG

Going forward, the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group must address several concerns to ensure its sustainability. First, the GBLWG does not exist in a vacuum; there are several other peer-based groups that support grazing and graziers throughout Iowa including the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, the Iowa Forage & Grassland Council, the Southern Iowa Forage & Livestock Committee, and numerous regional grazing clusters organized and funded by the Practical Farmers of Iowa. As such, the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group is going to have to coordinate closely with these other initiatives, leverage the capacities of partner organizations, and continue to strive to differentiate itself and its offerings. Secondly, the intentionally large net cast by the GBLWG to attract graziers of all types has resulted in a certain degree of difficulty in appealing to all factions of the grazing community with any one educational topic. As such, panels and presentations at meetings must be planned carefully, and post-meeting evaluations must continue to be heeded, so that conventional

farmers, alternative farmers, and graziers raising species and products apart from beef cattle will all be motivated to attend and to bring their friends. The coordinator will also continue to actively recruit members from sectors that are underrepresented. The strength of this working group must be in its diversity.

Learning, Knowledge Sharing and Communication

Creating and documenting knowledge

The working group has audio recordings of the three GBLWG meetings, as well as archived webinars which were used to transmit educational presentations to participants joining from a distance. These will be made publicly available as soon as the GBLWG web presence is up and running, along with reports and documentation on the status of funded R&D projects.

Evaluating the effectiveness of GBLWG

The Grass-Based Livestock Working Group hires the time of an Extension sociologist for evaluation of the working group. An online questionnaire is delivered via e-mail following each quarterly working group meeting. Given that the meetings do not yet have a set-in-stone format, the evaluation questionnaire does not either, although we are trying to move towards a template that contains questions that will be adaptable to most situations, simply so we can monitor changes in individual metrics over time. The questionnaire asks about satisfaction with different components of the meetings – e.g, research discussions, practitioner presentations, informal networking, etc. – and about the likelihood of implementation of the information.

Dealing with conflicts between leaderships own work and the working groups work

The main “conflict” I have experienced as coordinator of the Grass-Based Livestock Working Group is that people assume I have a much greater knowledge about grass and grazing than I do. I was not selected to coordinate this group because I am a trained animal scientist or an experienced grass farmer, but more so because I am willing to try to unite disparate interests behind a motivating topic. As such, I have developed a network of specialists in Extension and state government that are very well-versed in the technical details of grass-based livestock production, and I have called upon them frequently to answer questions from working group members that I can not fully answer.

Evolution of Value Chain Partnerships: The Iowa Network for Food and Agriculture Working Group

(Sue Honkamp — June 2009)

Tagline

Iowa's Network of Food and Agriculture Working Groups

- Quick description of VCP
- Consistently use this tagline following the name VCP in *all* communication

Positioning

- Value Chain Partnerships is an Iowa-based network of food and agriculture working groups. We work to deliver social, environmental, and economic benefits to our clients and communities. We leverage funding and expertise to identify food system challenges, foster learning and innovation, and implement solutions
- A more thorough description of VCP
- VCP must use clear and concise messaging
 - » A brand positioning statement is a clear and concise description of what VCP stands for
 - » The brand positioning statement will identify VCP's:
 - *Target audience*: Who should VCP address?
 - *Frame of reference*: What type of organization is VCP?
 - *Point of difference*: Why is VCP unique?
 - *Reason to believe*: How does it work?

Objective

- "Increase the viability of Iowa community-based agricultural businesses that produce and market products that result in positive social, environmental, and economic benefits"
- This objective will meet VCP's goal to:
 - » Foster significant social, economic, and environmental benefits for Iowa farmers, businesses, and communities
 - » Become a sustainable multi-organizational program with strong and stable commitments from its core partners and increasing demand for its services by a wide range of organizations and businesses

Target Audience

VCP must identify the target audience that will help them pursue the VCP objective.

- Who are they?
 - » Members of the agricultural community and beyond: farmers, processors, producers, agencies, academics, policymakers, investors, community members
- What do they believe in?
 - » Support local agriculture
 - » Support community prosperity

- » Support environmental stewardship
- » Support economic profitability
- What can they do?
 - » Share knowledge
 - » Support the group
 - » Invest resources, including monetary support
 - » Work to change policy

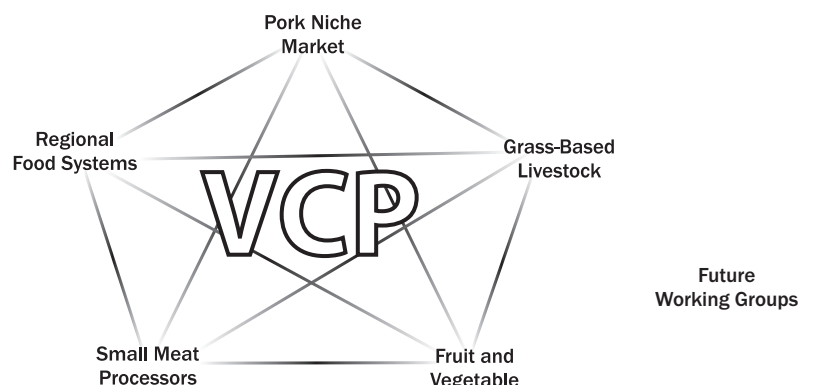
VCP's core target includes individuals, businesses, and organizations who are part of the value chain.

VCP must reach out to potential supporters while resonating with existing supporters. The four categories of supporters (some of whom may fall within more than one group):

- Core target
 - » Working group members
 - Individuals and their organizations contribute to the group by identifying opportunities, sharing expertise, and working to resolve issues
 - Farmers, businesses, and state and federal organizations included in the value chain
- Peripheral support
 - » Partner organizations
 - Ensure that the group stays on track
 - Provide resources
 - Existing partners include Leopold Center, PFI, ISU, Extension
 - » Benefactors
 - Provide financial backing to one or more working groups or VCP as a whole
 - Funders, investors, grantees, foundations
 - » Influential advocates
 - Publicly support the team's efforts and bring work to mainstream
 - Policymakers (including legislators, council members, and advisory boards), media, food buyers, community leaders, educators (including Extension)

Frame of reference: What type of organization is VCP?

VCP is an Iowa-based agricultural network that provides positive social, environmental, and economic benefits in our communities.



Communities of Practice: Useful Information for Selecting, Initiating, Funding, Managing, and Branding

Value Chain Partnerships have established a dynamic set of working groups using a community of practice framework. In doing so, we have developed an extensive knowledge base devoted to initiating, managing, funding, and branding working groups. As our store of information and experience increases, we can apply what we have learned to make our groups more effective and resilient, and to share that information with others. We have organized our findings in the following sections:

- Conditions for success when selecting a community of practice (CoP)
- Suggestions for initiating a community of practice
- Considerations for managing an effective community of practice
- Considerations for funding a community of practice
- Considerations when branding a community of practice
- The roles and skills needed for a leader/coordinator of a community of practice
- Organizational, professional, and business benefits to leading or participating in a CoP
- Assessing performance
- When is it time to end a community of practice?

Conditions for success when selecting a Community of Practice (CoP)

- Critical Mass
 - » Are there enough active, enthusiastic and committed potential participants (producer-led businesses and people representing organizations that provide services to those businesses) to form a functional community of practice?
- Line of Sight to Benefits and Impacts
 - » Are there clear and measurable economic, social and/or environmental benefits for target clients for this particular community of practice?
- Focused on an unmet need
 - » Will this community of practice be appropriately focused on an unmet or underserved need?
- Interest from stakeholders
 - » Is there sustained interest from community members, local businesses, local government and/or regional government?
 - » Is there a grass roots effort already underway? If yes, will this group duplicate existing efforts?
- Leadership Potential
 - » Are there a set of key champions for this issue within local and/or state organizations and businesses?
 - » Are there skilled facilitators identified in Iowa State University Extension and/or other organizations who can assume the responsibility to coordinate the group?
- Potential to attract external resources.
 - » What federal, state and local funds would be available to this Community of Practice (from university, state, federal, private business, angel investors, nonprofit organizations, etc.)?
- Market Potential
 - » Is there a clear, growing demand for the issue or market on which this group will focus?
- Policy Incentives
 - » What agency or government policies are in place that would support or inhibit the success of this CoP? How will policy issues be handled by the CoP?

Suggestions for initiating a CoP

(Requires advance planning and several group meetings)

- Convene key stakeholders and conduct a thorough needs assessment of the issue, including the challenges and opportunities
- Agree on key challenges the group has the capacity to address with existing and potential resources
- Identify individuals and organizations willing to make an initial commitment to work together to address the challenges. This commitment could consist of time, money, or in-kind resources
- Form follows function. Determine if a community of practice or other collaborative group is the best “form” to address the challenges
- Develop a mission, goal, or purpose statement for the group
- Develop a draft work plan and resource plan (see section on funding communities of practice)
- Form a leadership group (steering team) made up of a cross-section of members that will provide input to direct the CoP, and that has the authority to approve uses of CoP resources to assure wise choices, reduce redundancy, etc.

Considerations for managing an effective CoP

- An appropriate amount of discretionary funds is available to conduct projects that will help address needs (see section on funding)
- Shared purpose. The mission, goal, or purpose statement provides direction and a way to choose appropriate activities to keep the group focused
- Shared responsibility. Participants work together to address needs
- Shared ownership of the CoP by its members, which results from conducting activities in a way that empowers members and organizations to believe in the group
- Accountability for performance on research and technical assistance projects
- Consistent, ongoing evaluation to provide feedback on the CoP performance
- Membership is open and can shift over time, with a core group base that provides continuity and direction. An appropriate balance of membership between businesses and/or community leaders and assistance providers/agencies personnel so that the majority of technical assistance needs can be met by group members
- Recurring (quarterly) face-to-face meetings to discuss progress on addressing key challenges, identify other pressing issues that may have arisen, and facilitate member-to-member networking and trust-building
- A clear agenda for every meeting, with adequate time for each agenda item and an opportunity for participants to suggest topics for future meetings
- Regular between-meeting communications via list serves, newsletters, web sites, and phone conversations between the coordinator and members
- Internal communication within partner groups and an environment of trust and openness to assure effective contributions
- The willingness and ability of the group to address sensitive and controversial topics in a respectful manner

- Safeguards to maintain confidential business or client information (where needed)
- A capable, mature coordinator with excellent facilitation and listening skills
- The capacity to recruit new members with the necessary skills to address identified challenges

Considerations for funding a CoP

- Adequate staff time for coordination and sufficient resources for projects are critical for successful CoP operation
- Commitment of in-kind and financial resources from key organizations is important to establish the CoP and to attract grant dollars
- All funders and investors want to see their resources leveraged
- A community of practice approach can help expand the funding pie to get work done rather than increasing competition for limited resources
- Funders will be more attracted to multi-organizational CoPs with similar goals that perform efficiently and show visible results than to individual organizations that cannot demonstrate collaboration with others
- A CoP that operates effectively and builds a reputation for success will find it easier to recruit new members with expertise and financial resources
- Resources devoted to evaluating the impact of the CoP and its project(s) are well worth the investment
- It is critical for projects undertaken by the CoP to have clear and easily measurable metrics as indicators for success. If you can clearly demonstrate through the CoP that you are making a difference, you are more likely to receive additional funding and increase the support for your work
- Grant writers need to cultivate relationships with funders, understand the goals of individual funders, and clearly communicate CoP project goals, objectives, outcomes, and impacts
- Requests for additional financial and in-kind resources should be coordinated across key members of the CoP to increase likelihood of added support

Considerations and suggestions when branding a CoP

Considerations

- Branding will give you the tools to clearly, concisely, and consistently communicate who you are, what you do best, and why it's working
- A more clear, concise, and consistent identity will help you to more effectively reach out to your target audience
- Targeted communication will generate support and increase your group's ability to make an impact

Suggestions

- Determine your objective
 - » What is the objective of your CoP?
 - » Ensure that it is quantifiable
- Identify your target audience
 - » Who will help you achieve your objective?

- » What do they believe in?
- » What can they do for your group (and what can your group do for them)?
- » Identify core and peripheral supporters
- Determine your brand positioning
 - » Identify your frame of reference
 - What type of organization do you have?
 - » Identify your point of difference
 - How is your organization different from other organizations within your frame of reference?
 - What benefit do you want people to associate with your organization?
 - » Identify the reason to believe
 - Why is your organization so successful?
 - What is the most convincing support behind your point of difference?
 - » Develop your positioning statement
 - The positioning statement is comprised of the *frame of reference*, *point of difference*, and *reason to believe*
- Evaluate your CoP's name
 - » Does your name reflect the objective of the group and clearly communicate the work being done by the group?
 - » When used consistently, a tagline can help clarify a name
- Determine your marketing objective
 - » What does your target audience need to do in order to achieve your business objective?
- Determine the marketing challenge
 - » What is the behavior or belief that needs to be overcome in order to get to the marketing objective?

The Roles and Skills Needed for the Leader/Coordinator of a CoP

Roles

- Help people think about sharing information and resources in new ways
- Ensure participants are aware of decisions being reached
- Engage participants (especially quiet or timid people) to keep them involved and contributing
- Maintain a balance between processes and goal-related activity
- Keep the discussion focused on the topic (maintain the fine line between diversionary off-topic items and helpful related-topic discussion)
- Approach controversial issues in an honest and respectful manner and seek common ground
- Synthesize ideas, concepts, questions, and concerns expressed in the group to provide focus and purpose
- Convene meetings and be the contact for questions from other parties interested in the work of the CoP
- Recruit for a diverse membership, and ability to communicate goals, expectations, ground rules, and direction
- Encourage a culture of collaboration across organizations, businesses, and/or communities

Personal skills and qualities for CoP leaders

- Positive mental attitude
- Strong commitment to the CoP mission
- Strong organizational skills and attention to detail
- General expertise in the CoP topic area
- Excellent facilitation skills
- Good listening skills
- Well-developed interpersonal communication skills
- Appropriate sense of humor and timing
- Ability to help the group reflect on its discussions and information being shared
- Capacity to summarize ideas and concepts in a clear and concise manner
- Ability to remain neutral until everyone has contributed ideas
- Awareness of what is *not* being said, and the ability to bring it into the discussion
- “Big picture” thinking balanced with attention to detail
- Capacity to be a “servant leader.” A “servant leader” is a *steward* of the resources (human, financial and otherwise) provided by the CoP, and remains focused on achieving results consistent with the CoP’s values and integrity.

Organizational, professional, and business benefits to leading or participating in a CoP

CoP Functions	Key Benefits for Producers and Businesses	Key Benefits for Organizations
<p>Information hubs that create, capture, document, leverage, and deploy knowledge as technical assistance to create solutions for value chain partners</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater awareness of a wider range of support providers and services • Greater awareness of and access to research-based information • Access to larger “portfolio of expertise to draw from” and “tacit knowledge”-- information unavailable anywhere else (i.e., not in print or electronic form) • Improved business skills and competencies • Opportunities to participate in research that creates new knowledge used to inform the industry/work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of challenges facing producers and businesses • Greater awareness of complementary technical assistance offered by other participating organizations • More effective organizations and employees due to improved knowledge and work competencies • Access tools others are using to encourage involvement and participation in food systems work • Participating organizations are better able to manage “local politics” associated with doing food systems/ sustainable agriculture work
<p>Catalysts for cooperation of diverse interests that create solutions for food and fiber producers and businesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater sense of teamwork and low level cooperation (low risk information-sharing) • Opportunities for “high-level” cooperation (where businesses share some risk, resources, and profits) • Access to support network • Private sector access to no or low-cost public sector support and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More coordinated use of existing organizational and state resources • Participating organizations work more with other groups and recognize other organizations as assets/ potential partners • Better relationships with an expanded group of partners, including commodity producers, people in other disciplines, and non profits • Deconstruction of organizational boundaries and negative organizational stereotypes
<p>Magnets that attract funding, and leverage, channel, and distribute funding for research and development of differentiated products</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector links with research agendas and consultants who initiate work that benefits producers and businesses • Participating organizations invest more resources such as money and staff time on work that supports the industry and benefits producers than otherwise possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating organizations collaborating with unlikely partners, including commodity groups, are more successful at receiving grants • Increased credibility that CoP brings to the work helps focus, coordinate, and leverage new sources of support • Participating organizations are better able to leverage their own organizational resources to commit more staff time and resources to food systems work
<p>Scouts that identify emerging value chain opportunities with high potential to deliver economic benefits to sustainable agriculture stakeholders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased access to new markets • Increased sales • Increased production • Improved financial stability • More efficient operations • Greater business viability due to better decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants engage elected officials and government agency staff in conversations emphasizing the need for policy to support the work, producers, businesses, and communities

Assessing the effectiveness of your community of practice

There are numerous ways to evaluate the effectiveness of your community of practice. The following template assesses performance across a number of key areas, including leadership, level of support and cooperation, achieving objectives, and sustainability.

Assessing Performance: Community of Practice Scoring Template

CoP name: _____ CoP leader: _____ Number of years as CoP: _____ Date: _____
 Objectives for past period (from x to y): _____

Objectives for the subsequent period (from x to y): _____

Assessment Area		Score				
Assessment area and weighing %	Assessment questions, relative to CoP's life stage	Sub-score	Very weak	Weak	Strong	Very strong
Leadership: 10%	Has the CoP leader...		1	2	3	4
	...brought a cross section of key players to the table?		Comments:			
	...been able to engage, empower, and inspire the CoP team?					
	...established a clear direction, including a working plan?					
	...been an effective communicator?					
	...responded to the VCP team in a timely manner?					
...consistently contributed to the VCP core team?						
Support/ cooperation: 20%	Is there evidence of support from businesses, farmers, key organizations, NGOs, faculty, staff, and other CoP participants appropriate for the CoP's work activities?		Comments:			
	Is there evidence of cooperation among businesses, farmers, key organizations, NGOs, faculty, staff, and other CoP participants?					
	Is there evidence of satisfaction among businesses, farmers, key organizations, NGOs, faculty, staff, and other CoP participants?					
Benefits objectives effectiveness: 30%	Has adequate progress been made toward the current objectives?		Comments:			
Future objectives: 10%	Do future objectives significantly contribute to the goals of key organizations?		Comments:			
	Is work plan realistic and achievable?					
Sustainability objectives effectiveness: 30%	What percent of its resource target has the CoP leveraged toward the expected goals?		Comments:			
	Will further resources drive further proportionate results?					
Overall	Overall comments:	OVERALL SCORE:				

Considerations When Closing or Shifting Focus of a CoP

- Has the group accomplished its goals?
- Have other higher priority issues emerged for a majority of the group that call for a new focus and direction as well as shifting of resources?
- Have key stakeholders stopped participating?
- Are other groups or projects effectively carrying on the needed work?
- Does the group have irreconcilable differences that prevent continued progress?
- Are there no longer resources to operate effectively?
- Are there methods other than the CoP that can better address existing or new challenges?

Perspectives from a Masters student in Business Administration with a minor in Sustainable Agriculture

Andy Larson

For two years I worked as a graduate student within Value Chain Partnerships, and, at first, I really didn't get it. There were so many groups, personalities, politics, and acronyms. But, as I spent more time with Value Chain Partnership's core leadership team, I had the opportunity to experience the inner workings of all the communities of practice. I saw how working groups formed with some combination of passion, serendipity, and strategic intention. I observed how working group members' actions and interactions varied with the coordinators' respective leadership styles. I came to understand the amount of time and effort required to truly build trust within a group, whether the participants were peers or competitors. And I watched as working groups contracted and closed as their relevance came to an end. I still can't accurately describe everything about the community of practice approach that makes these working groups work, but things began to seem more sensible and more cyclical, and it became quite apparent that practical outcomes and mutually beneficial relationships were essential to success.

As graduation drew near and I prepared myself for an Extension position in Small Farm Sustainability, I agreed to contract a quarter of my time to the Leopold Center to coordinate the nascent Grass-Based Livestock Working Group. After the necessary arrangements were made between the Leopold Center and Iowa State University Extension, I convened an advisory committee of representatives from Iowa State University Extension, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Natural Resources Conservation Service, Iowa Cattlemen's Association, and the Leopold Center's Ecology and Marketing & Food Systems Initiatives. Together we drew up a list of people who should get together as a working group, mostly composed of graziers and the outreach professionals who support them from university, government, and non-profit sectors. There were also a handful of brokers, processors, and marketers on the list from other nodes in the grass-based livestock product supply chain.

Testimonials

Paul Brown

Current Position: Assistant Director, ISU Extension

Affiliation with VCP: Current member of Value Chain Partnerships Advisory Committee

- He believes that the Leopold Center has proven that Value Chains and Communities of Practice provide a “tried and true process”
- He intends to move from a facilitative approach (used for the last 50 years) to a community of practice approach within extension programming.
- “Using this approach, we will engage extension and clients in a topic of interest and journey with them to produce outcomes which result in change over time”

Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld

Current Position: Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; member of the ALCES Foundation

Affiliation with VCP: Former member of Regional Food Systems Working Group Advisory Committee

- While on staff at UNC, he still turns to the RFSWG for support in current projects
- At UNC, received \$18,000 grant that was written using the research conducted by the RFSWG
- RFSWG has “pioneered collaboration and created common ground” to do “real work, making real progress”

JoAnne Berkenkamp

Current Position: Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy

Affiliation with VCP: Former Value Chain Partnerships evaluator on behalf of the Wallace Group

- VCP will “foster transparency in a space that is often competitive”
- VCP has “honed and debugged the process”
- “Benefit (of VCP) is bringing a different cast of characters together to create (the) value needed to keep them there in an environment that supports and allows them to grapple with complex supply chains”

Sue Futrell

Current Position: Owner and Consultant, One Backyard Consulting

Affiliation with VCP: Regional Food System Working Group member

- “(The) benefit of VCP is the mix of people; that combination doesn’t typically happen anywhere else and I find it extremely valuable”
- “Importance of the VCP effort (is) to frame and energize more local food systems in Iowa”
- The VCP group has “evolved a model that is practice based, not just academic”

Duane Short

Current Position: Owner, Prime Pork Supply

Affiliation with VCP: Pork Niche Market Working Group member

- VCP allows for “open communication and a cooperative process”
- “A competitive group, meeting together to formulate strategies and answers to problems”
- “Not a typical supply chain but a collaborative one where all work together”

Books and Articles about Communities of Practice

Bierema, Laura, *Adult Learning in the Workplace: Emotion Work or Emotion Learning?* New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education. No. 120. Winter 2008, Wiley Periodicals Inc.

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Kerno, Steven J., Jr. *Tapping communities of practice: enjoying the benefits and avoiding the pitfalls*. (Statistical data), Mechanical Engineering - CIME 130.10 (Oct. 2008):22(5).

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Reference Guide: Creating "SMART" Objectives; Identifying Outcomes, Outputs and Measures for Your SEAC Proposal, Teacher and Education Development. <http://hsc.unm.edu/SOM/TED/Index.htm>

Saint-Onge, Hubert and Debra Wallace, *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advances*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003.

Wenger, Etienne, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

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Vandeventer, Paul and Myrna Mandell, *Networks that Work: A Practitioner's Guide to Managing Networked Action, Community Partners®*, 2007.

Internet Resources About Communities of Practice

<http://cpsquare.org/CP>

Square is a diverse community of practitioners that has gathered to share knowledge and build a practice around their passion for and belief in the potential of communities of practice as a vehicle for positive organizational and world change.

<http://nonprofit.about.com/od/foundationfundinggrants/tp/grantproposalhub.htm>

About.com provides information on grant proposal writing geared for not for profit entities, also includes information on foundations and non-profit management.

www.ewenger.com/theory

A brief introduction to communities of practice by author Etienne Wenger.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice

Wikipedia's definition of communities of practice.

www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/index.shtml

Community-enabled Strategic Results from Self-Organization with George Pór. The Community Intelligence Lab focuses on social, business, knowledge and technical innovation.

www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm

Infed.org is *the encyclopedia for informal education which explores informal education, lifelong learning and social action*. This link features the proceedings from a conference on informal education within a formal setting.

www.funderstanding.com/content/communities-of-practice

Funderstanding's mission is to inspire in people the love of learning. They achieve this by helping educators design better programs and products that engage learners fully, where the learning process is fun, meaningful, deep, and long lasting. This is their take on communities of practice.

http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED466030&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED466030

From the Education Resources Information Center, ED466030 - Conceptual Analysis and Research Questions: Do the Concepts of "Learning Community" and "Community of Practice" Provide Added Value?

www.anecdote.com.au/archives/communities_of_practice

Anecdote helps business leaders engage their people to be even better collaborators, leaders and change agents using the power of business narrative. Their clients often select us because their approaches are unashamedly pragmatic and practical and are based on our long experience in using these approaches to deliver business value. This page deals with stories of communities of practice.

www.a-i-a.com/capital-intelectual/KnowingInCommunity.pdf

Richard McDermott, *Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice*,

Organizations That Use a Community of Practice Model

www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do

This is a site for communities of practice for local governments in the United Kingdom.

www.communityofpractice.net

The VPE/CTO Community of Practice is a Silicon Valley-based membership organization for Engineering VPs, and CTOs where members solve problems, share their business experience and create opportunities.

http://semanticcommunity.wik.is/Federal_SOA_Community_of_Practice

The Federal SOA CoP is an open community of practice fostered to assist government and commercial organizations in achieving the promise of Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) through collaboration, demonstration and community efforts. The Federal SOA CoP is open to all.

www.sharedwork.org

The IDEA Partnership Communities of Practice are focused on advancing policy and practice in four key areas: (a) the intersections of the No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA); (b) school behavioral health services; (c) interagency transition, and (d) teacher quality. As partner organizations work together and with States, districts, local sites and individuals, they form Communities of Practice whose members learn from each other and take action together in coordinated ways. (Read more about this collaborative work at the IDEA Partnership website at www.ideapartnership.org)

www-304.ibm.com/jct01005c/university/scholars/training/replay/communities-practice.html

IBM's community of practice site.

Learnings from Workshop on How To Use Communities of Practice To Address Sustainable Agriculture Issues

(From SARE PDP Proposal)

Educators (Extension, government agencies, and other agricultural educators in the governmental, profit, and non-profit sectors) will acquire the skill set necessary to utilize a Communities of Practice (CoP) framework with farmers, ranchers, and the general public on developing programs and activities that enhance the sustainability of our food and agricultural system.

Long-Term Outcomes

Systematic Changes

- Support Extension programming
- Work across organizations, leveraging resources, and providing technical knowledge
- Increased efficiency of moving from tacit to explicit knowledge
- Diffusion of leadership roles among a larger group of stakeholders
- Increased, sustained buy-in of stakeholders
- More successful problem solving by sustainable agriculture educators

Intermediate Outcomes

Behavior, Practice, and Policies

- Change the way they deliver services to their clients, using the CoP model or elements of the model
- Create new communities of practice around their specific issues in food, fiber, and energy
- New/stronger relationships with new organizations/partners
- Leverage more state and local resources in providing assistance and education to clients
- Sharing CoP model and experiences
- Assist and advise new CoPs they organize and begin work
- Increase the total number of organizations using the CoP model to do sustainable agriculture and food systems work

Short-Term Outcomes

- First-hand participation in an existing CoP meeting
- Awareness of the CoP model as a viable way of organizing diverse stakeholders into productive, synergistic problem solving teams
- Awareness of the structure and function of CoPs and the benefits of using CoP approaches
- Knowledge to start, facilitate, manage, fund, and/or support CoPs in their own state or region
- Fresh perspective on seeking out, recognizing, and utilizing the human and financial resources available within their regions and subsequently their accompanying social and monetary resources
- Increased motivation and confidence to work across organizations
- Shared project leadership