

Cultivating Cultural Competency

For Nontraditional Farmers, Things Can Get Lost in Translation

When doing a study, sometimes the resources sought out during the research process can lead one down a slightly different, but ultimately fruitful, path. For example, while developing a relatively straightforward marketing analysis for a vegetable cooperative in central Minnesota recently, Emily Reno was struck by who she was talking to while gathering research. She conducted 39 interviews in all, mostly with people who farmers rely on for general services and support: University of Minnesota Extension personnel, Natural Resources Conservation Service and state Department of Health staffers, as well as nonprofit groups, for example.

"I noticed that among the people who I interviewed, there were no people of color," recalls Reno, who recently wrapped up her master's work in urban and regional planning at the U of M.

In this situation, that was particularly relevant given that the cooperative she was doing the market analysis for was Agua Gorda, which is operated by Latino farmers in the Long Prairie area. Agua Gorda needed a market analysis done because it was finding it inefficient to haul most of its produce to the Twin Cities region, which is a two-hour drive away. The cooperative was interested in learning how it could increase wholesale markets in the Long Prairie region, thus reducing travel time and helping bring healthy food to local eaters.

Reno soon realized that especially for farmers of color, marketing success isn't solely tied to better transportation and a spiffy website. As a result, when she finished up her final report this spring, Reno didn't just offer logistical advice to the farmers of Agua Gorda on how the produce cooperative could gain greater access to local wholesale markets: communicate better with the local community, seek out specific markets, partner with local institutions that can provide marketing support, etc. Reno also included an analysis of what role the wider community, particularly all those agencies and

institutions she had come into contact with, could play in helping enterprises like a local farm cooperative become successful.

What she concluded was that it all came down to developing what's called "cultural competency" — an ability to interact with people who are from a different background and who are unfamiliar with how things "work" in their new home. Cultural competency requires learning about the other person's culture, and understanding why, for example, they may not see credit or business management practices in the same way as is considered the "norm" in a certain

area. Although language differences can undermine cultural competency, Reno makes it clear remedying the situation is not just about offering a Spanish or Hmong version of a basic fact sheet, application form, or website.

"It's so much more than just a language barrier," she says. "It's creating a sense of belonging for people — that they are there for a reason, that they can contribute, and that they have just as much dignity as anybody else."

Creating an environment of cultural compe-

tency at, say, the local USDA or Extension office is key, given that farmers rely heavily on the services such places provide. Everything from advice on agronomic practices and marketing classes to food safety certification and cost share funds for structures like high tunnels and conservation practices are available through these agencies and institutions. Most farmers take access to such services for granted. Pile on top of that the fact that many nontraditional farmers are utilizing methods and systems — small-scale organic vegetable and pasture-based livestock production for example — that local service providers used to dealing with large cash crop producers



"It's so much more than just a language barrier," says researcher Emily Reno. "It's creating a sense of belonging." (LSP Photo)

"Don't be afraid to fail and to stumble along the way and make a fool of yourself. What matters is the attempt, and the intent."

— Emily Reno

Give it a Listen

On episode 244 of the Land Stewardship Project's *Ear to the Ground* podcast, Emily Reno talks about the market analysis she did for Agua Gorda Cooperative and what it revealed about the important role "cultural competency" can play in supporting farmers of color: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1323.

may not be familiar with, and the barriers to access start to become significant.

In a February 2020 report to the Minnesota Legislature, the state Department of Agriculture identified numerous barriers nontraditional "emerging farmers" face, from lack of culturally appropriate education and resources, to difficultly navigating regulations. Although farmers of color represent a tiny percentage of the general farm population — .03% of Minnesota farmers are Black, .36% Asian, .16% American Indian, and .58% Latino — the report concluded that these types of farmers could serve an important role in the future of the state's agriculture, given that the average age of a Minnesota farmer is now 56. The report's authors made several recommendations, such as providing trainings to farm service providers that help reduce barriers for emerging farmers. That could include workshops on equity and implicit bias, as well as alternative models of agriculture.

The Messenger

White service providers can learn cultural competency, and they should take opportunities to do that, says Reno, who lauds the Minnesota Department of Agriculture for its recent efforts to reach out to nonwhite farmers through its Emerging Farmers initiative. But there also needs to be a concerted effort to hire more staffers who are of the same background as some of the nontraditional farmers that walk through the door.

"It's not the message, it's the messenger — if the person sharing this information with them doesn't necessarily share any of their cultural values or their language, it's challenging, even if the attempt is

from a good place," says Reno. "If you don't have leaders and role models that look like you, talk like you, there's a lot less validity in what's being said."

During her interviews, Reno talked to service providers about hiring more people

Cultural, see page 13...

of color, and was surprised that for some, such an idea was not even on their radar. People actually thanked her for bringing it to their attention.

“It was so eye-opening — it was a helpful reminder for me to recognize that we have a lot of work to do, and we have to start somewhere,” she says.

Reno, who recently began working as an assistant planner with the West Central Initiative Foundation, undertook the market analysis for the Community Assistantship Program, which is coordinated by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and the Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships. As a result of the slight side path her research took, Reno feels the final report has a wider audience than she had originally envisioned. Besides cooperatives like Agua Gorda looking for tips on how to access local, wholesale markets, the study has a message for anyone interested in creating communities that have room for all types of food and farming enterprises, owned and operated by all sorts of people.

Lack of local wholesale markets in the communities farmers live and work in is a problem for a lot of producers, and Reno says at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is showing the fragility of the mainstream food system, there’s a prime opportunity to create a more resilient infrastructure based on localized production and distribution systems. That’s an important lesson to keep in mind for any farmer, business owner, or local service provider, no matter what their color.

“We get excited about this idea of local foods and selling to urban centers, but there’s so much more diversity within our food system that doesn’t get a lot of attention, especially in Minnesota,” says Reno. “There’s a whole other side of the population that lives in small towns and rural places, and they want to eat good food too.”

And those eaters, through their buying choices and support of public policy, can have a lot of influence over what type of farm and food system dominates their community. Reno says for her, this research also brought home an important lesson about how widespread change occurs in our communities — it starts with individual action.

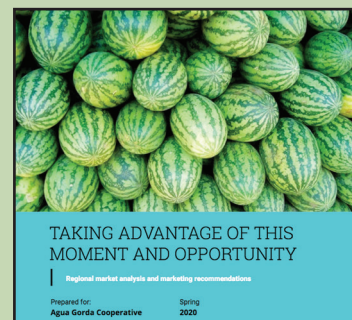
“Figure out where you are on your spectrum of cultural competency and understanding and don’t be afraid to fail and to stumble along the way and make a fool of yourself,” she says. “What matters is the attempt, and the intent.” □

Taking Advantage of this Moment & Opportunity

Emily Reno’s spring 2020 study for Agua Gorda Cooperative is available at conservancy.umn.edu by searching the title “Taking Advantage of this Moment and Opportunity: Regional Market Analysis and Marketing Recommendations.”

Emerging Farmers

For more information on the Minnesota Department of Agriculture’s Emerging Farmers initiative, including its recent report to the Minnesota Legislature, see www.mda.state.mn.us/emerging-farmers-working-group.



LSP’s Core Values: Stewardship, Justice, Democracy, Health & Community

Vision for the Future: 2019-2024 is the Land Stewardship Project’s long range plan for working toward our goals of creating a sustainable, just, farm and food system. The plan opens by presenting LSP’s core values:

→ **Stewardship** is the value of living in right relationship with the land and all that is connected to it: the soil, the water, the air, the plants, microorganisms, animals, and our climate. It means giving to the land and receiving from it, and caring about the entire biotic community. Conservation-minded farmers who live on the land, farm it, and care for it are essential to stewardship of farmland.

→ **Justice** means there is economic, racial, and gender equity for farmers, workers, and all those who are engaged in the food and agriculture system. It means the achievement of related rights like food sovereignty for all communities, and high-quality healthcare for everyone.

→ **Democracy** means a society in which

the people hold the power to govern, in which those people directly impacted by issues name solutions, set priorities, and win change. It means the health and well-being of people and the land is put before corporate profits.

→ **Health** is the value of nourishing the beauty, function, and vitality of an ecosystem made up of people, landscapes, plants, animals, soil, and water. The health of the land is a gift that current generations are obligated to provide for future generations.

→ **Community** is the value of understanding our interdependence and caring for the relationships that sustain each of us. Living in community we are more resilient, creative, resourceful, and powerful — we have greater ability to be the change we seek in the world. □

LSP’s long range plan is available at www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/longrangeplan. Free paper copies are available by calling LSP’s Minneapolis office at 612-722-6377.

LSP ‘Rural Voices for Racial Justice’ Videos

The Land Stewardship Project has launched a new video series, “Rural Voices for Racial Justice,” featuring LSP members across the Upper Midwest who are amplifying their voices for racial justice in the food and farming system. Links to the video series are on LSP’s Racial Justice web page at www.landstewardshipproject.org/about/racialjustice.

Racial Justice E-letter

While on the Racial Justice web page, you can sign-up for *Amplify!*, LSP’s racial justice hotlist. Stay up-to-date on LSP’s equity work, upcoming events, and opportunities to engage while connecting with other people doing important racial justice work in their communities.



Hog farmer Dayna Burtneiss speaking on a “Rural Voices for Racial Justice” video.