

Training and Technical Assistance For New Farmers

A Brief Overview

History and Context

New Entry offers a comprehensive training and technical assistance program to support new farmers as they create, develop, and grow their farm businesses. Although many of the immigrant and refugee farmers we started working with when our program began had a history of smallholder, production agriculture, different climate conditions and market structures necessitated developing targeted curriculum to acclimate these growers to their new environment. Having on-farm technical assistance available to our program farmers during the growing season provides participants with real-time advice about pest and disease management – along with many other day-to-day concerns – and develops relationships of trust and continuity that help farmers achieve their goals.

We offer training through two major avenues; the Farm Business Planning Class (FBPC) during the fall and winter, and on-farm Field Trainings throughout the growing season. One-on-one technical assistance takes place primarily during the growing season on our farm sites, however farmers also have, and take advantage of, the option to come into the New Entry office to seek technical assistance from our staff. Farmers only become eligible for plots on our farm sites, and thus one-on-one technical assistance, after they have successfully completed the FBPC.

Staffing and Key Partners

New Entry's training and technical assistance coordinator is also the training site farm manager. This provides continuity for the farmers and for the program and allows the staff person who works most closely with the farmers to follow their progression from their first business planning class through their years on the farm sites and beyond. This position is full-time and year-round, but the roles played by this staff person vary significantly during the growing season and during the winter months.

New Entry has recently started offering an online FBPC concurrently with our in-person class. We have a contracted distance learning coordinator who also utilizes an intern to provide support for administrative aspects of the class.

The Training and TA Coordinator generally has a workstudy student to assist with teaching the FBPC in the fall and winter. During the growing season, New Entry hires one to two 32 hour per week interns to assist on the farm sites with technical assistance, farm maintenance, teaching the field trainings, and with special projects.

We partner closely with Lutheran Social Services in Worcester, MA to teach field trainings on topics such as post-harvest handling and food safety. The Training and TA Coordinator also takes advantage of many of the resources available to agricultural professionals in Massachusetts. These include trainings through Cooperative Extension offices throughout New England, online tools and databases for pest and disease management, and an informal community of farmers in the region known as the Eastern Massachusetts Collaborative Alliance for Farmer Training (EMass CRAFT).

Resources

Budget:

.75 FTE	\$41,444
Intern	\$3,000
Distance Learning Consultant	\$4,700
Library acquisitions	\$110
Events and meetings	\$626
Cell phone reimbursement	\$121
Field training	\$625
Local travel	\$1,191
Total	\$51,817

Key Activities

Training

- Teach 7-week Farm Business Planning Class twice a year in-person and twice a year online
- Provide ongoing technical assistance to class participants both during the class itself, between classes, and after class completion
- Develop and implement New Entry's on-farm field trainings (every two weeks during the growing season)
 - Hoophouse production
 - Water and irrigation
 - Equipment maintenance
 - Nutrient management
 - Disease management
 - Pest management
 - Weed management
 - Cover cropping
 - Composting
- Implement special projects directly related to farmer training and TA, such as food safety trainings, etc.
- Review and refine curriculum for all New Entry training components
- Work with outreach coordinator to promote training events

Technical Assistance

- Scout fields with each farmer once a week and provide written report with recommended actions
- Meet with farmers on a weekly basis to provide feedback
- Be available for one-on-one TA and impromptu discussions with farmers, as well as field walks
- Work to improve and develop programming associated with TA

- Research emerging best practices through attending conferences, workshops and CRAFT meetings

Lessons Learned

- Make sure advertisements for workshops state the goals clearly. Expectations should be managed and farmers should have the option to send questions in advance. These can help tweak lesson plans to better meet expectations.
- Assemble a crop history in Excel. At the end of the season, sit down with farmers to get an idea of what was planted where, what disease/pest issues they had, as well as information about soil and light conditions. This will help inform crop placement and choice in future seasons.
- Know your audience and try to gear your curriculum for field trainings and business planning classes to them. This can be challenging if you have a mix of skill levels, or a variety of literacy, or any number of other diverse characteristics present in the classroom or the field, so make sure to keep in mind that people have different experiences and may need specialized or one-on-one attention to get the most out of your program.