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April 2003

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Wiedenhoef, Mary; Simmons, Steve; Salvador, Ricardo; McAndrews, Gina; Francis, Charles; King, James W.; and Hole, David, "Agroecosystems Analysis from the Grass Roots: A Multidimensional Experiential Learning Course " (2003). *Faculty Publications: Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication Department*. 35.
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Published in *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Science Education* 32 (2003), pp. 73–79.
<http://www.JNRLSE.org>

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ABSTRACT

An intensive, experiential travel course in Agroecosystems Analysis was conducted in Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska during summers of 1998 and 1999. The intended student audience was advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students. Pretravel readings and a week-long series of farm visits, which consisted of in-depth interviews with the farmers and their families, prepared student teams to analyze and evaluate the production, economic, environmental, and social sustainability of 10 farms. Students shared their analyses both orally and in written reports. Based on a multifaceted student evaluation process, we found that participants were highly motivated, strongly engaged with the course content and learning activities, and committed to learn from the interviews and group learning processes. They reported that this multidimensional learning experience was more valuable than other traditional courses at their home campuses. Faculty learned how to: (i) allow students the opportunity to assist in developing the learning environment and community; (ii) design an optimum travel schedule to permit adequate time for individual reflection and group process; (iii) deal with challenges in the small group setting; and (iv) design a useful multi-phased learning evaluation process. Based on this experience, faculty in Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska are highly motivated to continue this course and expand the opportunities for experiential learning.

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