



# Organic agriculture program viability study

**Abstract:** A survey was conducted to determine the viability of offering an organic agriculture program and classes at Western Iowa Tech Community College.

## Principal Investigator:

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**Budget:**  
\$14,433 for year one

**Q** Is there sufficient need or demand to develop and offer a college-level organic agriculture program (curriculum) for the Siouxland area?

**A** The survey findings indicate that there is interest in organic agriculture education as a non-degree and no-credit option, but not as a major diploma or a degree program with college credits.

## Background

Woodbury County has enacted policies that promote and support organic farming in the Siouxland area. Local businesses such as Hy-Vee and the Floyd Boulevard Local Foods Market have invested time and resources to support production and marketing of organic agriculture products. However, there were no local educational opportunities for those interested in starting out in organic farming. To meet this need, Western Iowa Tech Community College proposed to develop and offer courses in organic farming techniques.

There was no previous college experience or any research-based data to guide curriculum development, delivery methods, scheduling and level of interest in community college courses in organic agriculture. The goal of this project was to determine how much interest existed for an organic agriculture degree program or classes in organic agriculture at Western Iowa Tech Community College in Sioux City, Iowa.

## Approach and methods

A mail survey was used to identify and analyze the perceptions of 1,000 Siouxland residents regarding their: 1) interest in organic agriculture education, 2) preference for class scheduling, 3) preference for credit/non-credit and/or degree/diploma options, and 4) their interest in subject areas such as livestock, field crops, fruits, etc. The sample was drawn from a target population of all students who have taken Western Iowa Tech Community College credit and non-credit courses, received a certificate, diploma or a degree in various fields, and reside in the tri-state area of Siouxland.

The questionnaire considered these questions:

- 1) Are the participants concerned about the safety of foods that are not produced using organic farming methods?
- 2) If so, are they interested in learning organic farming methods and taking courses in organic farming?



**MARKETING**

- 3) Do they prefer face-to-face, on-line, hybrid or independent study for course delivery?
- 4) Do they have specific scheduling preference(s)?
- 5) What specific areas of organic farming interest them most?
- 6) What barriers are hindering them from pursuing organic agriculture classes?

## **Results and discussion**

The majority of the respondents were females between 30 and 60, who had a diploma or degree from a two-year college. More than 90 percent of the respondents were concerned about food safety, food freshness and food cost. Further analysis of the data showed that food safety concerns increased as age increased. Women in this study were concerned or very concerned about genetically modified foods, while men were unconcerned or somewhat concerned.

Nearly 70 percent of the participants indicated interest in organic farming and/or organic products. Fifty-six percent of the participants knew little or nothing about organic farming, and 63 percent showed interest in learning about organic farming methods. However, the level of interest dropped to 34 percent when they were asked if they would consider taking a college-level class in organic agriculture. Participants aged 41 to 60 years were somewhat interested in learning more about organic agriculture.

Respondents preferred independent study methods using CD/DVD/VHS options, on-line delivery and face-to-face delivery for learning organic farming methods. Fifty-one percent of the survey participants preferred weekend classes. Daytime class scheduling during the week was the least preferred time. As for specific aspects of organic production, participants indicated interest in vegetables (67 percent), orchard produce (63 percent) and herbs (59 percent).

## **Conclusions**

Overall, women seemed to be more concerned about food safety. People who were born between 1950 and 1970 seem to be most interested in organic agriculture. Participants perceived that organic foods are higher priced. Based on qualitative comments, participants seem to be either for organic agriculture or against it, with a much smaller number of undecided participants in the middle. There was little or no interest in pursuing a college degree, diploma or certificate in organic farming and there is some interest in learning more about organic agriculture on a non-credit basis. Weekend scheduling and independent study with media resources were preferred methods of course delivery for these participants.

Based on the findings of this survey, the researcher recommends the following actions:

- Design and offer non-credit organic agriculture education classes
- Develop easy-to-follow educational materials for independent study.
- Offer non-credit short courses on weekends

- Conduct further research to understand why participants who were under 40 and over 60 years of age were not interested in organic agriculture.
- Additional research may be needed to understand organic agriculture issues that polarize people.
- Similar surveys could be conducted in other regions of Iowa to see if opinions varied by area.

### **Impact of results**

The study findings will make educational planning more responsive to the needs and desires of the community in the Siouxland area. Information from this study may help guide organic agriculture curriculum development, design of learning processes for organic farming methods and the decision to invest in or determine future direction for the organic agriculture program development.

Western Iowa Tech Community College has maintained or made available existing organic agriculture classes for interested students. However, as yet they have not developed a diploma or a degree program in organic farming/agriculture based on the survey findings. The Woodbury County rural economic development office has a strong interest in organic agriculture and has been promoting and supporting efforts toward that goal.

### **Leveraged funds**

Western Iowa Tech Community College made in-kind contributions to the project, including SPSS software for data analysis, office and computer access, survey population lists, and administrative assistance.

***For more information,  
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