

Tobacco News

Executive Farm Management Program

Farmers can sign up for the 2020 Executive Farm Management (EFM) program offered by North Carolina State University (NCSU). The cap for number of participants is 41, so if you're interested in taking this 12-day course, then apply today. Keep in mind that it is a first-come, first-serve application process which is open until participant slots are filled.

Program tools

Michelle Grainger, managing director of the EFM program at NCSU's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and managing director of the Center for Innovation Management Studies in the Poole College of Management, says the program is mainly for large, commercial and family owned farm operations in southeastern states. The program covers aspects and tools such as strategy, financial management, human resources, succession planning, risk management, family business, market assessment, key partnership building and assessing, supply chain management, strengthening value propositions, and crisis management.

She says one of the most important goals of the program is to provide "a set of *new* [new to participants] managerial tools, and the confidence—as well as competence—to apply these tools to *their* family owned operations across the southeast.

"These tools, the accompanying coursework, and the expanded personal network of each participant, provide the needed framework to identify opportunities for new-value propositions, including classifying, and entering into, new partnerships as well as making the 'tough calls' to portions of the operation that are no longer returning profit," Grainger says. "The faculty of EFM want to ensure that the material and content we provide during the course of our 12-day program is relevant, is relatable and is applicable once back at a participant's operation. Most importantly, that it helps participating operations further ensure they have the ability to continue to operate a profitable business which is viable [and] to continue



Participants of the Executive Farm Management Program, offered by North Carolina State University, work together a program session. Photo courtesy of Michelle Grainger, NCSU

to be passed down from one generation to the next, for generations to come.

"We often hear farmers in the United States state how they feel that they have been *called* to work the land, in which generations before them did the same, that they are producing the majority of our country's food, and materials for both clothing and housing, yet they face mind-boggling pressures, of which, so many are well beyond their control," she says. "This course equips these modern-day heroes with the framework, confidence, tools and skills needed to ensure their and their family's livelihoods for the future."

Blake Brown, a NCSU Extension economist in the Agricultural and Resource Economics Department and a Hugh C. Kiger professor, is executive director and founder of the EFM program. He says his primary goal in developing the curriculum was to "improve the business skills of farmers and farm managers of highly diverse and specialized farms, like those in the southeast."

Brown also believed that strategic thinking and planning, human resources and

labor management, financial management, and succession planning were core elements of the program. "We teach these in an interactive, hands-on fashion, with a case study farm [that resembles the farms in the program] that allows farmers with varying backgrounds of training—we have everything from high-school grads to MBAs [masters of business administration]—as participants to actually apply the skills they are learning as they learn them."

Many other topics are added around this core curriculum. The topics are established "based on our experience working with farmers, input from our advisory board, and surveys and input from our participants."

Of course, he says production and business management studies are very important for diverse and large farms.

"These operations can be very complex where the owners [farmer, farm family] must be able to manage managers they hire to manage particular enterprises or components of the operation," Brown

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says. “For example, a large sweet potato

and tobacco farm may have a manager in charge of tobacco, one in charge of sweet potatoes, a labor manager or even a person that focuses on GAP [Good Agricultural Practices] compliance issues, especially if the farm also includes fresh produce.”

As Brown alluded to, instructors teach these areas of study using a fictional case, called The Brown Family Farm. Course participants go through this program in three different sessions over a six-week period between January and February.

“So you’re never off your operation longer than four or five days at a time,” Grainger said during the 2019 North Carolina Tobacco Field Day. “We also work to link our sessions with other events you might be attending such as the Southeast Regional Fruit & Vegetable Conference in Savannah, Ga., the Southern Farm Show in Raleigh, N.C., and our third and final session is in Charleston, S.C.”

Matt Vann, an Extension specialist with North Carolina State University, says the EFM program reaches out to farmers here in North Carolina, “and it does something that I felt like we have really missed in Cooperative Extension for a number of years now. We focused really hard on the fundamentals of growing a crop, growing tobacco, peanuts, etc., but what [the EFM] program does is really take that to the next level with a lot of the business side of running a farm.”

Founding thinkers

Brown developed the program and curriculum at the urging of farmers Johnny Barnes of Nash County, N.C., and Richard Anderson of Edgecombe County, N.C., and Richard Linton, dean of the NCSU College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. They still provide support along with the faculty of the various schools involved. He says a distinguishing feature of the EFM program is its involvement with business schools that may work outside of agriculture. The program leaders also involve agricultural economics faculty, not only from NCSU, but other land-grant universities in other states.

“This strengthens the program tremendously since farmers get cutting edge management tools and see how businesses outside the program navigate issues often similar to their own,” he says. Partner institutions working in the EFM program include: N.C. State College of Agriculture and Life Services, N.C. State Cooperative Extension, N.C. State Poole College of Management, Clemson University Coop-

erative Extension, East Carolina University College of Business, and University of Georgia Extension.

Anderson says he became involved because he went through similar programs. “We thought we needed something on the east coast that was a little more tailored to the type of farming that we do here.”

Other programs were heavily geared toward large grain and mechanized farm operations. Of course, North Carolina has that too, “but it didn’t quite speak as much to the vegetables, specialty cropped production in southern agriculture like we really thought we needed. What you find out—even though people are growing different things, doing different things—at the end of the day there’s a lot of commonalities between vegetable grower, or row-crop grower, or greenhouse/specialty-crop grower, and ornamental orchard people.

“There’s the continuing education element,” he continues. “It’s more about management than it is bona-glorified, Extension production meetings where we’re going to learn the nuts and bolts about growing a crop. We’re going to learn nuts and bolts about how to profitably and sustainably stay in business and create a business that can last for multiple generations. A lot of what you talk about is getting right back to basic business practices. That’s what they’re trying to teach you, more tools for the tool belt.

“So we kind of have our own unique platform,” Anderson adds. “It seems from the classes they’ve had already, the feedback is phenomenal on what people got out of it, would they do it again and do they recommend it for the future. We think it’s got legs.”

He says one of the main benefits of the program is that participants hear different points of view during discussions. The beauty of the program is it attempts to motivate people, shows them how to follow documentary procedures and perform those tasks consistently.

“Most people in it are getting a lot of exposure to things they’ve never been exposed to before,” Anderson says. “It’s an effective program. It really is. You get your money’s worth out of it. They work you. [It’s] not some seminar class where you just go, hang out and kill time. From the type of course that I’ve taken like this before in other areas, this is much more intensive.”

Stats so far

In 2019, Grainger says 28 participants accounted for nearly 84,000 acres from 21 unique operations in North Carolina,

Georgia and South Carolina. From that number, they represented 84,111 acres of crops, with tobacco acreage making up 4,566 acres. Corn, peaches and soybeans represented 12,100, 16,180 and 18,473, respectfully.

They used 2018 as a planning year for expansion of the program into the southeast.

The 2017 class consisted of 24 participants, representing 17 unique tobacco and sweet potato operations from North Carolina.

Looking beyond

In the future, Grainger and Brown plan to purposely and cautiously expand the EFM program to more states. In fact, in addition to farmers in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia, they are recruiting for participants in Virginia and Florida in 2019. The goal is to include a large number of farmers in the southeast, and eventually in all states in the United States.

“We believe the program is particularly well-suited to meet the needs of the specialized and often diverse farms of the southeast,” Brown says. “Our goal is to expand the program to include more of the southeast and include more of the variety of farms in the southeast.

“A distinguishing feature of the program is the interactive, highly facilitated learning environment of the program customized to the needs of the participants. We believe the program could also be beneficial to diverse, specialized farms in other regions like California.”

As for Grainger, she has high expectations for the EFM program. “I hope that we reach a point where we have a wait list per year to participate, where we have enough demand that we are offering our program more than once a year,” she says, “Where we not only have our traditional program curriculum [what we are offering today], but that we are able to expand to offer meaningful and relevant programs [perhaps shorter in duration] to specific groups that we may cater to. This may be ‘Women in Agriculture/Farming’ or specific species of livestock producers, or perhaps even those who work within the seafood industry or other such unique subgroups of the overall agriculture industry.”

Grainger says the 2021 application process is scheduled to open in early summer 2020.

To learn more about the EFM program, contact Michelle Grainger at mgrainger@ncsu.edu or 919-414-0035. *TN*