

Local Agriculture and Population Health: Grow the Growers Farmer Training Evaluation Report 2023



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INTRODUCTION

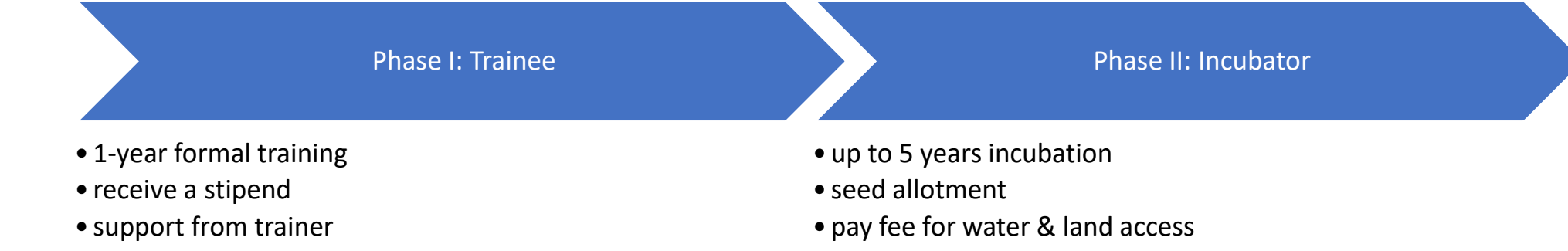
The Grow the Growers (GtG) Farmer Training Program was crafted with the overarching goal of offering aspiring farmers a thorough education in agricultural methodologies, sustainable practices, and business management strategies. GtG employs a multifaceted approach, incorporating hands-on field demonstrations, interactive workshops, and mentoring to ensure a well-rounded and practical learning experience for participants.

In 2019, to assess the effectiveness of the program and ensure improvement, a multi-year evaluation plan was developed in collaboration with the UNM College of Population Health, Assessment, Planning & Evaluation Lab (APEL). A continuous assessment was carried out to outline GtG, encompassing its principles, organizational framework, activities, accomplishments, and challenges. The aim was to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, offering recommendations for enhancement.

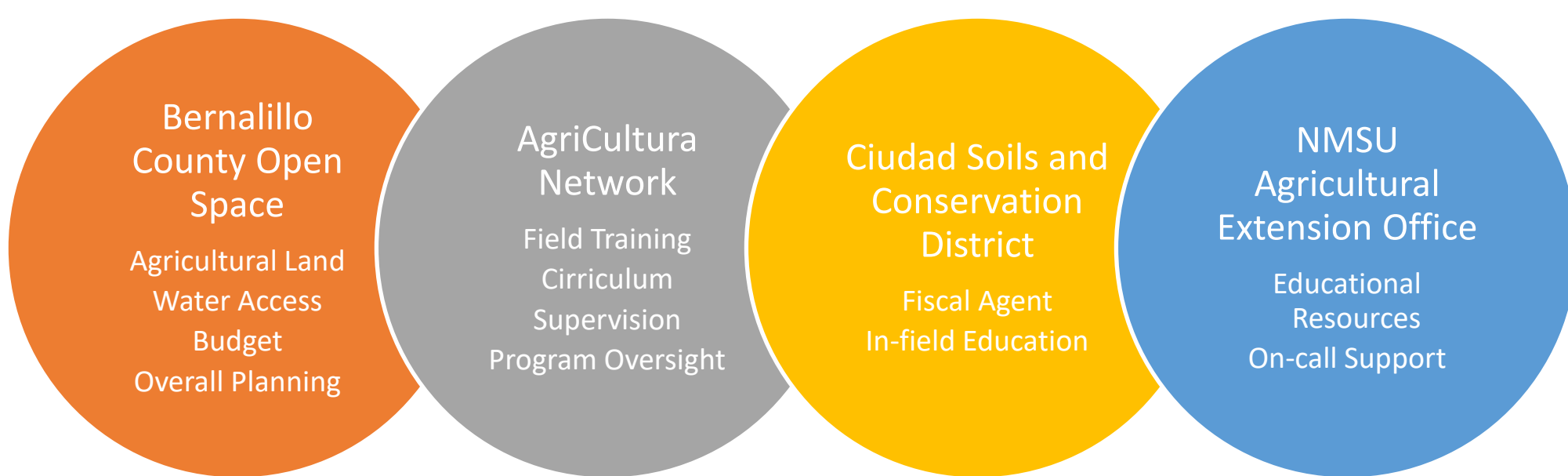


PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Grow the Growers (GtG) program is a farm training and business acceleration program designed to help beginning farmers learn traditional agricultural practices, start a farm, and establish a business.



The essence of the program lies in its commitment to providing new farmers not only with theoretical knowledge but also with the practical skills necessary to thrive in the dynamic agricultural landscape. Field demonstrations provide participants with firsthand experience in applying sustainable and productive agricultural techniques. Workshops serve as interactive platforms where farmers can exchange ideas, building a collective knowledge base. The mentoring component of the program gives trainees personalized guidance and support throughout their season-long learning journey. An informal mentorship network continues through the incubation phase.



PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS



"I'm proud to have taken the chance on farming and proving to myself I can do farming full time and that it is something could see myself doing for my whole career."

EVALUATION DESCRIPTION

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The GtG evaluation employs a comprehensive social ecological framework, focusing on five core areas that highlight the multifaceted impact of sustainable practices:

Environmental Impact: The program's sustainability, creating a symbiotic relationship between human activities and the environment. By fusing sustainable practices, the program contributes to a healthier planet and community. It also plays a role in driving economic growth while enhancing environmental quality.

Local Food System: The program recognizes the importance of a holistic approach to the food system. This involves integrating sustainability across food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management. By doing so, it not only ensures the sustainability of the local food supply chain but also addresses crucial issues like food security and access to nutrition.

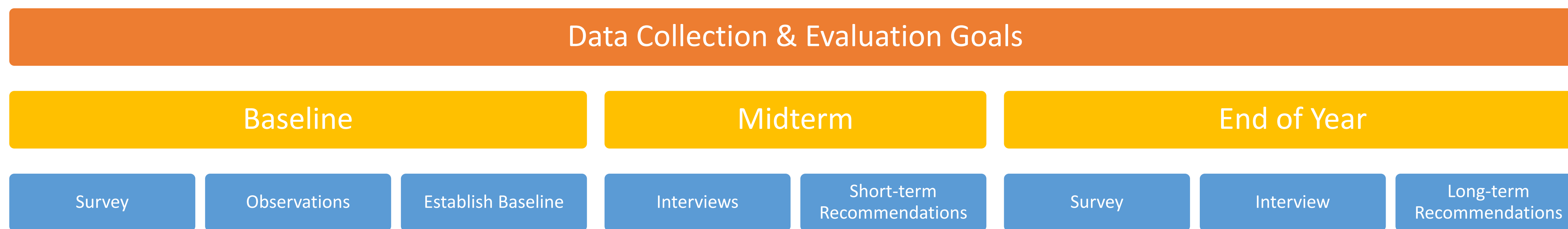
Health Impact: The emphasis on safe farming practices and knowledge dissemination within the program leads to a range of positive health outcomes. This includes a decrease in mortality and morbidity rates, the prevention of premature deaths, and an overall improvement in the quality of life for individuals. Furthermore, the promotion of physical activity through sustainable practices contributes to overall community health.

Economic Impact: The training contributes to community wealth by fostering locally based employment opportunities. This is achieved by boosting the income of local farmers, encouraging residents to keep their food expenditures local. Additionally, the initiative creatively repurposes vacant lots into productive spaces, generating income and providing avenues for job training and employment.

Social Impact: The training's impact extends beyond economic and environmental considerations to encompass social dimensions. It promotes human capital development by imparting new skills and creating economic employment opportunities. Through the cultivation of social capital, characterized by trust and cohesion, the initiative strengthens social networks, contributing to overall social well-being.



The evaluation methods employed for the baseline, midterm, and year-end reports are delineated as follows. The baseline assessment relied on a combination of mixed methods, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In contrast, the midterm evaluation primarily utilized qualitative methods to explore the intricacies of the program. For the year-end report, although quantitative data were collected, the predominant reliance was on qualitative methods. This shift is attributed to the constraints posed by a limited sample size, prompting a more in-depth investigation, and understanding of the nuanced aspects through qualitative analysis.



RESULTS

SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES

- Recruitment and Program Reputation:**
- Participants and partner organizations expressed uncertainty about their roles in recruiting applicants, resulting in a decline in applicants and concerns about the program's reputation.
- Training and Compensation:**
- Trainers lacked formal training in pedagogy and mentorship.
 - Trainers felt stipends did not adequately match their responsibilities, causing discontent.
 - Trainees relied heavily on external jobs and emphasized the need for increased compensation during the training period.
- Logistical Challenges:**
- Dependence on personal vehicles for work-related activities impacted both trainees and trainers.
- Conflict Management and Emotional Well-being:**
- Conflict management persisted but showed signs of improvement from the previous year.
 - A structured framework for emotional communication through emotional intelligence training was deemed essential.
 - Participants called for robust strategies involving neutral third parties or mediators to address conflicts promptly and impartially.
 - Feelings of underappreciation and moral exhaustion were voiced by trainees, incubators, and trainers, highlighting the demanding nature of farming.

- Community Engagement and Morale:**
- Regular formalized celebrations were deemed important for boosting morale and group cohesion.
 - Importance of community engagement was highlighted for boosting inclusivity and shared purpose through on-site events.

ACTIONS TAKEN

- Partner organizations meet regularly to discuss challenges and make quick adaptations.
- Recruitment was expanded from two months to four months.
- Trainers were given a higher wage.
- Trainees were given an increased stipend.
- Structure of the program was changed from a full-time (40 hrs) to a part-time (20 hrs) training schedule.
- Options for conflict management and mediation were explored.
- Trainers and partner organizations plan to integrate more celebration and team building into the training

SUMMARY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Transformative Training and Sustainable Practices:**
- Trainees transformed unused spaces into productive landscapes, yielding approximately 13,000 pounds of food.
 - They made conscious efforts to use water efficiently, aligning with the program's sustainability goals.
 - Between 2020 and 2023, 24 people had participated in the training component, and 12 had continued on to become incubators.
- Impact on Individual Lives:**
- Trainees reflected on farming as a lifelong career, expressing pride and empowerment.
 - Participants unanimously affirmed the program's value, recognizing the substantial returns from their investment.
- Community and Environmental Impact:**
- Participants recognized the program's contribution to benefiting consumers and the environment through conscientious land management and sustainable food cultivation practices.
 - The program emphasized the interconnectedness between agriculture, the environment, and the wider ecosystem.
- Collaborative Problem-Solving:**
- Weekly meetings among partner organizations served as vital platforms for problem-solving and addressing program-related issues.
 - These meetings fostered a sense of community and built a collective knowledge base, enhancing the program's effectiveness.
- Desire for Closer Relationships and Community Engagement:**
- Participants expressed a desire for closer relationships with partner organizations and increased community engagement through on-site events.
 - They proposed events to provide a platform for community members to learn about the program and witness trainee progress.

- Recognition and Awards:**
- In 2024, the Grow-the-Growers program was awarded the "Heart of the Land Award" for its leadership in farming and ranching by the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council.

- Development of Human Capital:**
- The program equipped participants with practical farming techniques, business skills, and leadership qualities, preparing them for agricultural careers and beyond.
 - Many alumni had gone on to serve in leadership roles, contributing meaningfully to the program and to their communities.

DISCUSSION

- Using a social ecological framework, the program's evaluation employs mixed-methods to assess impacts, address challenges, and highlight achievements such as increased agricultural productivity, land stewardship, and development of human capital.
- The evaluation data from GtG characterize and typify program participants, exploring their engagement with sustainable agricultural practices and the impact on various aspects of their lives, such as health, safety, and community involvement, which have not been previously collected.
- This study is generating data and providing valuable information that may be essential for the allocation of resources to other similar farmer training programs across the country.

"I believe we are not only helping anyone who encounters the land we work on or the food we grow, but we are giving back to earth and ecosystem by working the land the way we do."

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the Grow the Growers (GtG) program contributes to the broader understanding of farmer training programs and their impact on occupational health and safety within the agricultural sector. GtG represents a holistic approach to farmer training, addressing not only technical skills but also health, safety, and community well-being. This evaluation highlights the importance of such programs in promoting sustainable farming practices while considering health and safety of farmers, ultimately contributing to the resilience of agricultural communities.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future directions for this evaluation could involve expanding the scope to include a longer-term follow-up to assess the sustained impact of the program on participants and communities. Additionally, exploring the scalability of successful elements of the GtG program to other regions or similar farmer training initiatives could provide valuable insights for broader agricultural development efforts.

SUPPORT & CONTACTS

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