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Mary Wiedenhoef

Iowa State University, mwiedenh@iastate.edu

Steve Simmons

University of Minnesota

Ricardo Salvador

Iowa State University

Gina McAndrews

Iowa State University

Charles Francis

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cfrancis2@unl.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Mary Wiedenhoft, Steve Simmons, Ricardo Salvador, Gina McAndrews, Charles Francis, James W. King, and David Hole

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Mary Wiedenhoft,* Steve Simmons, Ricardo Salvador, Gina McAndrews, Charles Francis, James King, and David Hole

M.H. Wiedenhoft, R. Salvador, and G. McAndrews, Dep. of Agronomy, Iowa State Univ., Ames, IA 50011; S. Simmons, Dep. of Agronomy and Plant Genetics, Univ. of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108; C. Francis, Dep. of Agronomy and Horticulture, 225 Keim Hall, Univ. of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0915; J. King, Dep. of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications, 300 Agricultural Hall, Univ. of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0709; and D. Hole, Plants, Soils, and Biometeorology Dep., 4820 Old Main Hill, Utah State Univ., Logan, UT 84322-4820. This work was supported in part by a USDA Challenge Grant (no. 95384112511). Published as College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, Journal Series no. 02-1, Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln.

*Corresponding author (mwiedenh@iastate.edu).

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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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