

CEDAM Food Forward MI: Agricultural Workforce Development Edition

June 2016

Michigan is seeing a decline in small and mid-sized farms across the state. This trend has negatively impacted the state's cultural heritage, economic stability and food security. Small and mid-sized farms play an important role in Michigan's diversified food system. However, many areas of Michigan, both rural and urban, actually have the potential to be food secure by relying on their own regional food systems given that the proper supports are in place.

Paradoxically, while numbers of small and medium scale farms decline, the need for year-round and seasonal talent grows. Interestingly, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation also identifies agri-business as one of Michigan's top growth industries. However, the gap between available talent and labor needed is expected to grow significantly over the next few decades, according to the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Once again, Michigan is at the crossroads of opportunity.

During 2016 statewide non-profit economic developer, Prima Civitas, surveyed Michigan agricultural small and mid-sized employers to better understand where and how disconnect such as this occurs. Several pieces of information came to light including employers underlining this difficulty in meeting workforce need, while noting that the level of skill requirement over time has increased – from basic picking to now requiring (in some cases) GIS and other more technically advanced applied knowledge. Surveyed workforce populations also indicated that many are unaware or do not have opportunity and programming in place to provide such skills training.

In Montcalm County, Rob Spohr, the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Montcalm Community College, is trying to address this issue by expanding curriculum through Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Strategic Growth Initiative funding. He says:

“The agriculture industry is competing for the same workers that are being hired by the manufacturing industry. The talent is just being taken in many cases by manufacturing before those interested can gain a better understanding of agri-business. The agricultural industry needs to define those skills that will translate to different companies cross sector so that we can create programming around those skill sets.”

It was also identified through discussion with Michigan Works! Association and other employment agencies that there are several lingering stigmas around the field of agriculture. In particular, the idea of agricultural work is often seen as low-paying and “dirty” work. Additionally, organizations such as Michigan Works! can be misinterpreted by employers as placement firms for those that are “difficult” or “unemployable”. It is acknowledged that agri-business re-branding and more communication outreach is necessary along with improved methods of reaching and attracting millennials by both government and business.

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To explore such attraction avenues, Prima Civitas worked with a Michigan State University capstone advertising class (composed of millennials) to conduct population-based messaging research and to develop strategically tailored campaigns drawing millennial, career transition, migrant, urban and rural populations to the field of agriculture. These research results and a communication toolkit will be provided through partner organization, One-Community Consulting, for distribution fall of 2016.

Prima Civitas found that surveyed employers were willing to participate in talent recruitment programs, but were unsure of what these types of programs might be and how to access them.

From the eastern side of Michigan, Jessica Billiau GST Michigan Works! Director of Communications, says:

“Small farmers are looking for flexibility and experience and trust in their employees. The jobs they are offering are usually seasonal making it hard to build that trust in a short period of time. Also the industry often can’t afford competitive wages making it hard to keep workers. I (do) see opportunity in the future. 200 jobs were just announced last month for Cass city. MichiganWorks! is looking to support this expansion with food training programs, basic computer and tech literacy programs and other scholarships to fill the available roles.”

While this disconnect between talent in Michigan and agricultural employer needs exists, there are pilot programs in development that may bridge this gap. One successful way in which employers within the Clinton County area worked to attract future talent began with a career expo day geared toward eighth grade exploratory learning and business tours. Along with formal career days, employers and government entities may also work together to develop representative employer councils or collaboratives that offer growth-oriented internship rotations across major industry positions.

This type of programming and more is being explored in joint partnership between Prima Civitas, One-Community Consulting, school districts and economic developers. To learn more, please contact Mary ZumBrunnen at mary.zumbrunnen@gmail.com and check back for employment toolkits and learning materials based on these model developments available at www.one-communityconsulting.com in fall of 2016.