

## **Melissa O'Rourke Extends Knowledge to Help Women in Agriculture Succeed**

By Cora Carpenter and Madeline Schultz

August 7, 2019

### **Relevance**

Women have significant employment, management and ownership on family farms and agribusinesses in Iowa. The USDA 2017 Census of Agriculture reported 49,065 women farm operators in Iowa, representing 34 percent of all farm operators. Of these women farm operators, 61 percent had part-time or full-time careers off the farm. Women were 53 percent of the undergraduates enrolled in the Iowa State University (ISU) College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in 2018-2019, indicating continued strong interest in agricultural careers. The Iowa Farmland Ownership and Tenure Survey 1982–2017: A Thirty-five Year Perspective, shows women have steadily owned about 47 percent of the farmland in Iowa. Iowa women in agriculture make influential decisions contributing to farm profitability, land and water stewardship and strong rural communities.

### **Response**

As a member of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm Management Team and attorney, Melissa O'Rourke enjoys teaching local, multi-session small-group courses for women in agriculture. Since 2012, she taught 16 Annie's Project farm business management courses. Melissa was instrumental in developing new courses based on requests from women. She helped create and taught six Managing for Today and Tomorrow farm transitioning courses, and one Heartbeat of the Farm human resource management course. Melissa taught these 23 courses in 14 different counties across Iowa reaching 417 women. Melissa helps women make a strong impact on their farm businesses and rural communities.

The farm management team's programs for women are designed to educate and inform women involved in, or wanting to be involved in, all types of farms and agribusinesses. Melissa stated, "My goal is always to empower women and give them more confidence in their decision making." Traditionally, agriculture in Iowa has been male-dominated. Melissa explains once women gain more knowledge and learn about the resources available to them, they become more confident and are more willing to ask questions and make key decisions.

When planning courses for women, Melissa talks to women and brings together steering committees and to find out what the needs in the county are. Since there are several different risk management courses available to women in Iowa, Melissa works with county Extension professionals to gather feedback and identify educational requests. Melissa believes it is important to work closely with the county professionals. She strives to inform, encourage, and

build confidence in these staff members because many of them do not have a background in agriculture.

Melissa works with Women, Land & Legacy or other county-based groups. She often presents one-session educational programs on farm estate and transition planning as well as how to be good farmland owners and landlords. She also spends time meeting in small groups or one-on-one with past participants after the courses to dive deeper into topics and help answer questions. Melissa knows everyone's situation is different and tries her best to provide resources that will be specific to the people or person she is helping.

Melissa feels being able to share relevant resources and answer specific participant questions is how she makes the biggest impact. When she teaches a class with 18 to 25 women in it, she thinks about how she is not only teaching these women, but helping them impact their farms, extended families, and communities. Melissa's favorite part of programming for women in ag is hearing how the advice, resources, and classes in general are making a difference in people's lives. She has seen many women increase in confidence and move forward with business plans. Melissa added, "I've been pleasantly surprised over the years to hear how grateful and thankful women are for the programs we offer."

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm Management Team works together to serve the audience of women in agriculture. Since 2004, Melissa and others delivered more than 115 Annie's Project courses and 63 other multi-session, local, small-group farm management courses, reaching 2,896 women in Iowa.

Melissa is proud to be part of an efficient team. When she started doing programs, she had to prepare her own brochures, educational materials and evaluations. Now, she can rely on the team. "The on-line registration started out with a few bumps in the road, but now it is a good reliable system that makes it easy for women to register for programs," stated Melissa, "And, there are times that I just want to bounce ideas off others, and it's terrific to have a team."

## **Results/Outcomes**

Melissa's Annie's Project courses were successful in increasing knowledge in the five agricultural risk areas of finance, human resources, legal, marketing and production. Evaluation results indicated a statistically significant difference in the overall mean knowledge gains from pre-course assessment to post-course assessment in all content areas combined. Survey respondents also took important actions to manage risks during the courses. In an open-ended question, one 2018 Managing for Today and Tomorrow survey respondent wrote my goals for applying what I learned from this course are to "Gather my documents and put them in an accessible place, go to the next estate planning workshop, and review my will."

Donna Boss, a farm woman and Delaware County Economic Development Executive Director, enrolled in Annie's Project in January 2018, and Managing for Today and Tomorrow in January 2019. **Donna** stated, "Melissa has great resources. She takes time to explain our questions. We

went back and spent more time on trusts as this can be such a confusing issue as to what is best for your farming operation.”

### **Impact Statement**

The Annie’s Project and Managing for Today and Tomorrow courses taught by Melissa O’Rourke helped women connect with others and enjoy a positive learning experience they carry into their everyday lives. Women took important actions to manage financial, human resources, legal, marketing and production risks. When Extension and Outreach extends knowledge and empowers women in agriculture, they create a more sustainable Iowa. Women expand agricultural businesses, conserve natural resources, and support each other as a community of women in agriculture.