

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Extension and Outreach

Success Story

Title

O' Rourke Extends Knowledge And Empowers Women In Agriculture To Create A More Sustainable Iowa

Author: Madeline Schultz

Author's Location

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AMES IA
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CoReporter(s) - ISUEO Staff

- O'Rourke, Melissa R [EXTAG]
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Relevance

Women have significant employment, management and ownership on family farms and agribusinesses in Iowa. The 2017 Census of Agriculture reported 49,085 women farm operators, representing 34 percent of all farm operators in Iowa. The census indicates a majority (60.9 percent) of these women also have off-farm careers. Women own 47 percent of all Iowa farmland according to the Iowa Farmland Ownership and Tenure Survey 1982–2017: A Thirty-five Year Perspective. Women have become more than half of the undergraduates in the Iowa State University (ISU) College of Agriculture and Life Sciences representing 54.6 percent for the 2019-2020 academic year. There is a critical need for education directed specifically to women in agriculture to help them make good decisions that contribute to food security and agricultural sustainability.

Response

Melissa O'Rourke was honored in June 2021 as the recipient of the Bob Wells Memorial Award. The award is given annually by the national Annie's Project - Education for Farm Women NPO to recognize outstanding educators serving women in agriculture.

As a member of the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Farm Management Team and an attorney, Melissa enjoys teaching farm management courses for women. Since 2012, she taught 15 Annie's Project farm business management courses, including Iowa's first all-virtual course in 2021. Melissa is instrumental in developing new courses based on requests from women. She helped create and then taught six Managing for Today and Tomorrow farm transitioning courses, and one Heartbeat of the Farm human resource management course. Melissa taught these courses in 12 different counties across Iowa reaching 400 women. She also contributed video presentations and articles to online courses for women on the topics of farm transition planning and human resource management.

Melissa is involved in many grant projects for women in ag. Most recently she is a project co-director on the new 2021-2023 USDA NIFA Critical Agriculture Research and Education grant to support women farmland owners in enhancing profitability, conservation, and succession planning. Melissa is a founding member of the ISU Women in Ag Leadership Conference Advisory Committee, now in its fifth year. She advises on conference planning and has served as a conference speaker.

Melissa designs programs to educate and inform women 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 feels being able to share relevant resources and answer specific questions is how she makes the biggest impact. When she teaches a class, she thinks about how she is not only teaching these women, but helping them impact their farms, extended families, and communities.

Type of Change(s)

- Learning Changes
- Behavior Changes
- Condition Changes

Impact Statement

The Annie's Project and other programs taught by Melissa helped women connect with others and enjoy a positive learning experience they carry into their everyday lives. When Melissa extends knowledge and empowers women in agriculture, they create a more sustainable Iowa through expanded agricultural businesses, conservation of natural resources, and stronger connections to their communities. By improving agricultural sustainability, women in the industry are key stakeholders in the production of safe, plentiful and accessible food.

ISUEO Signature Issues

Outcomes

Donna Boss, a farm woman and Delaware County Economic Development Executive Director, enrolled in Melissa's Annie's Project and Managing for Today and Tomorrow courses. 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."

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 stated, "I've been pleasantly surprised over the years to hear how grateful and thankful women are for the programs we offer." She has also worked with NRCS Women, Land & Legacy groups in multiple Iowa counties where she presented educational programs on farm estate and transition planning as well as how to be good farmland owners and landlords. Aside from that, she spends time meeting in small groups or one-on-one with past class 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.

The impact Melissa has on her audience shows through the pre- and post-course evaluation survey results, as well as the leadership conference survey results. Women in her 2021 virtual Annie's Project course gained knowledge and took important business management actions.

Location / Participant(s) Came From

- Multi-State
- County
- State
 - Cerro Gordo
 - Mitchell

Partner(s)

- Business and Industry
- County Extension Staff