

**An Examination of Montana Young and Beginning Producer Experiences as a Guide for Post-Secondary Education**

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### **Introduction/Need/Theoretical Framework**

The return of young and beginning farmers and ranchers (YBFR) to rural communities plays a significant role in the sustainability of the agricultural industry as well as community development. In fact, overcoming barriers to transition has become so important, that numerous government programs and policies continue to be developed to assist those entering production agriculture (Ahearn, 2013). Many of these policies attempt to address three of the major barriers identified in the literature: the aging population of our nation's producers; significant capital and land resource acquisition issues; and operational practices that correlate with financial performance (Ahearn & Newton, 2009; Mishra, Wilson, & Williams, 2009). While the challenges identified in existing literature and legislation are important, minimal research has been made to assess the issue directly from the perspective of the YBFR who face these barriers. Such information could help identify whether there are gaps in current knowledge about existing challenges. Moreover, this information would help complement existing research that seeks to develop strategies for education that helps overcome these challenges and "strengthen farms, agricultural workers, and communities" as outlined in the AAAE National Research Agenda Priority Three (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). At all levels, our educational system can play a large role in helping overcome these critical challenges by working together to produce knowledgeable, skilled individuals to enter agricultural careers with technical and soft skills (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011). An important avenue for success is helping individuals develop a career identity and an understanding of who they are and how their work is meaningful to them (Andreas, 2012; Meijers, 1998). Career identity resources focus on an individual's career goals, occupational interest, values, and the overall importance of the individual's work regarding their feeling of self-importance (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Meijers, 1998). The critical career resources framework focuses on four main variables for career success and development: human capital resources, social resources, psychological resources, and career identity resources (Andreas, 2012).

### **Purpose/Objectives and Methods**

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to examine the business and professional practices of established YBFR agricultural operations in Montana. The objectives were to describe what, how, and the essence of Montana YBFR experience from entry to establishment of their operations. The two main objectives of phenomenology research are to describe what the individuals experienced and how they experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A criterion sample representative of established and successful YBFR was chosen to reflect on their experiences and give insight useful for educators who prepare future agriculturalists (Ahearn & Newton, 2009). The use of semi-structured interviews, independent reviewers, and debriefing sessions allowed sufficient inquiry and provided ample data to reach study objectives and data saturation (Creswell, 2013; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Following Moustakas (1994) analysis, a panel of reviewers highlighted significant statements relating to what and how the participants experienced the phenomenon, or horizontalization. Clusters of meaning were then developed into themes. Next, a textural description of what the participants experienced and a structural description of how they experienced the phenomenon were constructed. Finally, descriptions were combined to write a composite description of the "essence" of the phenomenon, including common experiences written as descriptive passages (Moustakas, 1994, p. 61).

## Results

The seven themes revealed were: access to land, capital, and equipment are significant barriers; a network of peers and mentors is critical to success; governmental programs positively impact business practices; risk mitigation strategies instill security; family and peers influence business decisions; education increases competitiveness; and financial competence influences decisions. *The Essence:* A YBFR faces significant challenges when starting an agricultural operation. Regardless of whether a young producer comes from a family farming background, access to land, machinery, and capital were the most common identified challenges to starting an operation. Participants felt that established producers had a significant advantage in financial resources as well as risk taking ability, putting YBFR at a competitive disadvantage. Finding land and securing financing for capital needed to start an operation was reportedly overwhelming. YBFR also indicated deficiencies in experience and knowledge about effectively managing finances and resources. Continued education and inquiry about availability of government programs was critical to success, particularly those that offered risk protection for their investments. YBFR highly value the sense of security that risk mitigation programs, such as crop insurance, bring to their business. Preparing students for life-long learning and continuing to provide these resources throughout their careers is essential to meeting the AAEE priority to “strengthen farms, agricultural workers, and communities.” YBFR valued networking with peers and mentors to shape their experience and guide their success. Such relationships provide important insights about the complementarity of formal and non-formal education. There was a consensus among the group that access to continuing education to acquire new knowledge were critical in their success.

## Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

The testimony provides evidence that there are common professional practices and experiences that can help overcome barriers outlined in previous research (Ahearn & Newton, 2009; Mishra, Wilson, & Williams, 2009). Participants consistently referred to seven themes and reinforced career resources for success (Andreas, 2012). Inclusion of all four resources provides a strong foundation useful for post-secondary education. To do so, educators must design a revitalized undergraduate program approach to build career skills in the areas of technical content, business practices, soft skill development, and networking. To reinforce human capital resources, inclusion of real-life agricultural case studies into courses will enable students to practice skill development. Teaching strategies should incorporate business concepts and higher order thinking to build confidence in financial management and decision-making skills. Networking experiences inside and outside of the classroom can build social capital resources prior to graduation. Workshops on how to identify a mentor and expert speakers can provide valuable insight into careers. Post-secondary education should explore creative ways to build psychological and career identity resources into the curriculum to instill self-efficacy, resilience, and career outlook. Structured internships, service learning, research, and academic conferences can positively influence career decisions. Future research must be conducted to better understand the impact of networking, education, and influences on YBFR career decisions and on post-secondary skill development models and strategies to better prepare the younger generation to enter into agricultural careers.

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