

# EASTERN WYOMING COLLEGE

## REPORT ON AG FOCUS GROUPS

Spring, 2010

### Introduction

The agriculture programs at Eastern Wyoming College represent one of the largest student enrollment groups. The cluster consists of six Associate of Science transfer programs, one Associate of Applied Science program, and one Certificate program. The largest enrollment is in the Farm and Ranch Management AAS program. The other degree and certificate programs have small enrollments each year. However, many of the agriculture or related classes that are taught may be used in the various programs.

With the early retirement request of Tim Walter, a long-term agriculture program faculty member, the President and others asked for input into the future of the programs and recommendations from community members, EWC faculty and staff, EWC Board of Trustees members, current students, agriculture program alumni, and Wyoming high school agriculture teachers. Dr. Tom Armstrong charged Dr. Dee Ludwig, Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness, and Tami Afdahl, Director of College Relations with conducting a series of Ag Focus Groups and other methods of gathering feedback from the aforementioned individuals. At their spring meeting, the Agriculture Advisory Committee was instrumental in helping develop the discussion questions that were used for the study. The Ag Focus Groups were conducted in February and following the completion of those, a web-based survey and personal telephone surveys were conducted. The following summary highlights the primary discussion points made by constituents.

More than 250 individuals were invited or contacted to participate in the study. Approximately 60 individuals participated in the face-to-face focus groups. In addition, there was limited participation in the web survey and the telephone surveys were conducted with about a dozen high school agriculture teachers primarily from the College's six-county service area. This study was conducted with assurances to the participants that their comments would be handled in a confidential manner. This summary of results of the study is considered an **internal document** that will lead to further planning and discussion among appropriate groups and individuals—it is intended to represent a part of the process, not the end result.

### Familiarity with Ag Programs

Participants in the Ag Focus groups were given a short paper survey which asked them to rate their familiarity with agricultural programs at the College. The programs included Beef Production (1 year certificate), Agricultural Business (AS Transfer), Agric-Economics (AS Transfer), Animal Science (AS Transfer), Farm/Ranch Management (AAS Non-transfer),

Rangeland Ecology & Watershed Management (AS Transfer), and Agriculture Education (AS Transfer). The only program that participants indicated a “familiar to very familiar” majority was Farm/Ranch Management. All of the other programs showed a majority of responses in the “not familiar to somewhat familiar” categories. Overall the highest response column was “somewhat familiar” with the agricultural programs. The familiarity survey results are attached as **Appendix A** to this document.

The Ag Focus Group discussions were structured under four primary areas: future planning, marketing/recruiting/public relations, facilities planning, and workforce preparation. The following section contains the most often repeated or emphasized comments from the participants.

## **1. FUTURE PLANNING**

The Future Planning category had several discussion questions attached to it and represented a great deal of the overall responses which could give the College numerous areas to further study. In a review of the responses, several were reiterated in other categories. It should be noted that many of the same items showed up in various topics. Therefore, the items should be viewed in a holistic fashion as well as by category. These are represented in the bulleted items that follow. The complete results are attached as **Appendix B** to this document.

### **What steps should EWC take to make our Ag programs the best in the state?**

- Ensuring the college employs the “right” or quality, caring instructors
- Including more hands-on experiences for students
- Utilizing community resources or partnerships such as with SAREC, feedlots, sale barn, Ag businesses, ranchers, farmers, and implement dealers
- Exploring or emphasizing curriculum areas such as agronomy, soils, equine, organic farming, horticulture among others
- Building on strengths such as beef production, farm/ranch management
- Realizing that the programs should not and cannot be “all things to all people”

### **What should be the emphasis areas of the Ag program at the college?**

- Livestock—cattle are important, perhaps include other livestock such as hogs and sheep
- Farm/Ranch Management
- Lab experiences for curriculum areas
- Crop science, irrigation practices
- Ag business including sales, management
- Basic Ag mechanics
- Personal and business skills such as finance, computer and software skills, entrepreneurship skills

**What should the college do to improve the Ag programs at the college?**

- Review and support appropriate technology
- Determine what facilities are needed and ways to utilize community resources and existing facilities
- Improve resources
- Network locally, statewide, and regionally
- Have more internship experiences
- Include more hands-on experiences

**What barriers might exist for students in a two-year Ag program that would prevent them from finishing their degrees?**

- Emphasize importance of good advising
- Suggest and provide more tutoring for students who struggle
- Provide more hands-on experiences—better way to learn
- Scheduling of classes and labs so conflicts are lessened
- Provide options for students who may need more than two years to complete
- Encourage participation in clubs
- Provide more financial aid
- Know that instructors are key
- Help overcome lack of college preparedness

**2. MARKETING/RECRUITING/PUBLIC RELATIONS**

**What three things could the college do to increase the awareness level of the Ag programs in the community?**

- Host an EWC Ag Day, Open House, Ag Field Day, and/or Livestock Judging workshops
- Be more visible at County Fairs, State Fair, State FFA Convention, 4-H activities
- Attend Ag educator conferences
- Encourage faculty/student involvement such as with Farm Bureau, water board meetings
- Invite Ag resource people as guest speakers and invite community members also
- Target marketing by recruiters and College Ag faculty to high school counselors and FFA sponsors
  
- Make posters, write Ag articles, highlight student successes
- Continue with Sagebrush and Roses

**What would be the most effective ways to recruit students into the Ag programs?**

- Contact prospective Ag kids directly, show interest in them

- Have recruiters and Ag faculty at FFA convention and other natural congregating places
- Use students from the school—encourage word-of-mouth
- Improve the website for Ag programs
- Develop ads with student testimonials
- Award scholarships
- Get them on campus for events and tours
- Employ quality, supportive faculty members

#### **What guidance should be provided to students who are interested in Ag?**

- Develop information course or sessions about Ag in general to explore career choices, ag opportunities, differences in majors, college resource utilization
- Have strong advising practices to help determine goals of students
- Show interest and enthusiasm
- Help with job placement and host career fairs

#### **How involved should the community be in the Ag programs?**

- Involve the community in providing internships including summer
- Invite community members as guest speakers
- Invite community members to Ag focused forums
- Have short courses community members might be interested in also, such as Community Education or credit courses
- Serve as resources to support hands-on lab experiences
- Serve on Ag advisory group—have it full of strong and involved individuals
- Explore ways to share facilities

### **3. FACILITIES PLANNING**

#### **What hands-on activities should be incorporated into laboratory experiences for Ag students?**

- Technology such as GPS, pivot, computer applications
- Soil science and testing
- Agronomy, crops, seeds
- Diseases, pesticides
- Plots of land for testing
- Range management
- Farming practices
- Livestock experiences--working and handling cattle, artificial insemination, feeding, vaccinating, doctoring, calving, castration, genetics, evaluating
- Basic farm and ranch mechanics, maintenance, windmills

- Horticulture, green house
- Financial plans—budgeting

**What types of facilities are important to the success of an Ag program?**

- Look at what other schools have
- Have facilities match the curriculum
- Utilize community and partnership facilities more, ie SAREC, fair grounds, business partnerships
- Labs that are appropriate
- Livestock facility and/or space
- Greenhouse
- Land

**If the college were able to expand or build an Ag program facility, what should be included in the plans?**

- Depends on the focus
- Involve the community and use partnership resources
- Working facilities for livestock
- Short term animal facilities
- Small arena
- Place for Ag mechanics
- Flexible classroom space
- Land lab, farm

**4. WORKFORCE PREPARATION**

**What key skills or qualifications should graduates from the Ag programs possess or are most desirable?**

- Communication skills, written and oral
- Technology usage, computer programs
- Personal finance, math
- Ag etiquette, and “life basics”
- Good work ethic
- Management and marketing skills
- Critical thinking and decision making
- Strong livestock production background
- Livestock handling and knowledge

**In your opinion, what employment opportunities would exist for Ag program graduates?**

- Farm and ranch management
- Entrepreneurs
- Sales (all kinds)
- Animal nutrition
- Mechanics
- Government jobs
- Ag teachers
- Ag business
- Ag finance
- Tons of opportunities—need to research
- Experience is still important

**What entry-level wage might two-year Ag graduates expect?**

- \$10 to \$20 per hour
- Other compensation including housing, utilities, meat, commissions
- \$24,000 to \$35,000 per year
- Need to start somewhere and build on experience

**Are there any workforce certifications that should be considered?**

- Good driving record and CDL
- Pesticide/Chemical/Hazardous certifications
- AI, pregnancy testing
- OSHA
- Insurance and/or crop adjustors

**What is the perceived value of a two-year Ag degree?**

- Gets them in the door
- Basic foundation
- Shows learning skills, ie “trainable”
- Experiences and hands-on training is present
- Shows they stuck to something
- Technology knowledge

The last question or discussion point in these forums asked the participants if there were any other comments or additional points they would like to make. The following comments were heard repeatedly from numerous participants even if they were also mentioned in the previous categories.

## **OTHER COMMENTS**

- Commend the college for soliciting input from stakeholders
- Get more involved with Wyoming FFA
- Be more visible in community Ag events/activities
- Can't overemphasize hands-on learning
- Think outside the box—isn't all about facilities

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This collection of information provides several key areas for further review by the College Ag faculty, administration, Ag Advisory Committee, and others to study and develop. It represents only the beginning of a new direction for the agricultural programs and more time should be spent in developing strategic plans for this area that are forward thinking, cost effective, and reasonable. A common theme running through all of these discussions was the importance that caring, involved, and quality faculty members play in any program. The following recommendations are intended only as the beginning of what will be further conversations and planning sessions for the Ag department at EWC as we help make our Ag program the best in the state.

- It is recommended that a faculty member be hired to replace the vacancy left by the retirement of Tim Walter. The position advertisement should highlight skills or educational areas that are not present with other current faculty members such as agronomy and/or crop production.
- The Ag programs should build upon strengths by further clarifying and refining its Farm and Ranch Management AAS program and perhaps adding an emphasis area in that program for crop production.
- The department should consider narrowing the focus of the six transfer degree programs and try not to spread itself so thin if it is to achieve quality transfer Ag programs.
- Review the effectiveness of the beef production certificate program as a standalone program.
- Careful thought and planning should go into developing and/or purchasing appropriate Ag facilities for the programs.
- A strong relationship should be developed between the Ag faculty and community and state and regional resource people, organizations, and businesses.
- The Ag faculty should be highly visible and involved with state FFA and other Ag events and be proactive in recruiting high school students from Wyoming and Nebraska.