CASH, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY: DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE GEORGIA ORGANICS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

by

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(Under the Direction of Eric Rubenstein)

ABSTRACT

Market interest in local produce continues to expand and provides new opportunities for produce farmers to grow, maintain and expand their businesses. These farmers look both to other farmers and service providers for technical assistance. A new program, the Georgia Organics Accelerator Program, gives an opportunity to examine the impact the program has had on farmers and provide clues as to what type of outreach, education, and technical assistance is most meaningful for produce farmers selling to local markets. This thesis addresses the needs and motivation of produce farmers using the process of narrative inquiry, capturing their stories to lead the discussion of results and next steps.

INDEX WORDS: Georgia, produce farmer, small-scale, education, service providers

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DEDICATION

To Judith and Joe for opening the door. Rashid for making the path and letting me walk it with you. Kristin for your never-ending patience and kindness. Cara for always inspiring me to do a little better. Laurel for providing so many opportunities and answering so many questions. Megan for showing me how to ask all questions. And my parents for creating a life where I had the chance to explore, fail, and succeed over and over and over again – not always in that order.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Consumers and the marketplace both desire and demand local produce, needs that have partially been met by local farmers selling their produce through options like farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, restaurants, and small-scale wholesale distributors (Gaskin, 2001). To sustainably meet those needs, farmers must have strong business models to meet the challenges of maintaining or growing their operations year after year. Meeting those needs may also allow farms to grow from small-scale to mid-scale farms, a size of farm that shows significant promise in the Southeast (Gaskin, 2001). Unfortunately for these diversified produce farmers, there is little research, resources, or infrastructure to support them as they maintain, grow and/or professionalize their farms (Dimitri et al., 2019; Gaskin, 2001). This study aimed to determine if farmers desire to learn new strategies to meet existing challenges by examining the successes and lessons learned from educational opportunities provided to these farmers.

Currently, there are multiple government programs designed to meet the needs of these farmers. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), on their Small and Mid-Sized Farmer Resources website page, programs tailored toward small and midsize producers. Some programs included opportunities to access capital with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) Farm Storage Facility Loan (FSFL) Program and a micro-loan program that provided loans of up to $50,000. There was also cost-share support available that covered the costs of organic certification. Risk management programs were designed to help farmers access tools like crop

insurance to help manage production risks and have reduced crop insurance costs for beginning farmers and ranchers. Market opportunities through USDA's Farm to School Program and the National Farmers Market Directory worked to increase access and sales to local markets. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) developed land and water management plans and had a cost-share program for high tunnels. USDA has also recently expanded its educational opportunities to assist small and mid-sized farmers ("Small and midsized farmer resources," n.d.).

The USDA's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) focused on training and education for new and beginning farmers by providing grants to organizations. The University of Georgia previously utilized grant funds provided by BFRDP to develop a program called "Developing the Next Generation of Sustainable Farmers in Georgia: A Comprehensive Training Program", also known as the Journeyman Farmer Certificate Program. A partnership between UGA Extension, Georgia Organics, Fort Valley State University, Georgia Department of Agriculture, the UGA Small Business Development Center, and the Ag Credit Union of Georgia, the program included "Small Farm Business Planning Training/AgAware Training, a Small Fruit & Vegetable Production Training or Small Ruminant Production Training, and a Hands-on internship/mentorship/incubator opportunity" ("Journeyman farmer certificate program," n.d.)

Description of Accelerator

A private program developed that focused more on existing farmers than new and beginning farmers was the Georgia Organics Farmer Accelerator Program (hereafter referred to as Accelerator) which began in 2020. Georgia Organics, a member-supported, non-profit

organization, has the stated mission "of investing in organic farmers for the health of our communities and the land" (Georgia Organics, 2022, para. 1). The Accelerator was designed to combine "expert coaching with tailored, on-farm investments to grow the vitality and resiliency of Georgia farms and improve the quality of life for its farmers" (Farmer Services, 2022, para. 5). Farmers in the program were able to access coaches (sometimes to referred to as consultants) to help with bookkeeping, solutions to labor problems such as hiring, retaining, and managing workers, analyzing their profits and crop rotation, becoming certified Organic, and developing food safety solutions. The coaching was valued at $2,000 and was coupled with an additional $10,000 to assist with infrastructure needs. Those needs included purchasing tractor implements or cover crop seed, providing stipends to employees, covering health care costs, or investing in additional continued education.

The Accelerator was developed to find a new way to offer programming that helped farmers meet and overcome challenges. Altman, one of the service providers interviewed for this study, was motivated to help develop the Accelerator based on the struggle that, as a service provider, he felt he was not meeting the needs of farmers. In particular, Altman saw struggles within the funding and "parameters of the BFRDP program grants." Altman had worked with a few BFRDP grants and was thankful for that support. Those grants were used "to support our conference," but Altman also recognized that "the challenges farmer faces far outpaced that level of support. We had to think of something better." That thought was to co-create the Accelerator, a program that Altman hoped would "be more impactful."

The Accelerator has had two rounds of cohorts, and each cohort included many different types of farms: flowers, produce (fruit and/or vegetable), and livestock. These farms were located in the state of Georgia. For the purpose of this study, we have focused on one type of

farm in the Accelerator - diversified produce farms. These farms made the majority of their income from selling a mix of fruits and vegetables.

The Accelerator was also designed to meet multiple needs because, as Altman shared, “every farmer has a gap, whether it's an FSA loan or a college for their kids or a two-week vacation, there's a gap” that could use support to be accelerated. To entice and encourage farmers to apply, the $10,000 in capital for farmers to spend on what they thought would accelerate their farms was designed to be a significant motivator. Altman found that the money helped “to get farmers into the mindset that they're open to exploring” issues, challenges, and solutions for their farms.

That type of direct funding to a farmer exceeded what was normally available from a USDA grant program. Still, Altman said that he and the other services providers he worked with believed those funds were what was necessary so that “they could deliver the programming that they believe was best for their farmers.” To receive that type of capital, Georgia Organics sought funding from private individuals who supported their mission and movement to promote sustainable agriculture. To develop their fundraising messaging, Altman said that Georgia Organics considered the amount of funding they were trying to raise and asked themselves, “what would you do with that, with the sole purpose of helping farmer prosperity.”

Once the funding was secured, Altman “devised the program to be incredibly flexible.” Participants have a curated list of coaches they can choose from, most of whom are private industry consultants, but can also engage with coaches outside of that list. Altman described multiple options to meet multiple needs with the $10,000, including using “2000 bucks for a website” or dedicating funding to “deer fencing. There's enough money for that.” The farmers

could also, according to Altmann, use the funds towards “soil health, marketing, cold storage. Whatever it was, we could cover some of it, not all of it.” He also saw the funding as a way to engage the farmers with “record keeping and the coaching that could help with other things.”

To enter the program, the farmers went through an online application and an interview process. The application was reviewed, and according to Lisa, another service provider with the program, the data from the applications went into **“**a very beautiful spreadsheet with lots of nice formulas to track the scoring and everything.” Using that data and some robust conversation and debate, participating farmers were selected by a committee of people from within and outside the funding organization. Once the farmers were selected, Georgia Organics began an intake process.

The intake process was a chance for Altman and others to begin collecting data and act as case managers for the farmers. Altman said that “we get financial data; we do goal setting . . . We do this analysis that are like your top challenges, your top successes, some things to maximize.” For all those questions, there’s paperwork to track their answers. Each farmer has a case manager whose job it is, as described by Altman, to check in and provide “little nudges.” Altman described the process as him basically asking “How's it going?” and moving the farmers forward to decide “What are we going to spend that money on? And then hear those ideas and check with the goals.” As the goals developed, Altman said the program is “engineered to get incredibly specific with farm needs.” Lisa reflected that they are “trying to go deeper rather than wider with farmers.” Rene, the third service provider interviewed for this study, referred to the check-ins as helping get the farmers and service providers on a “maintenance schedule” for the program. The maintenance schedule was designed to happen once a month or more as needed.

Altman shared that the program is motivated by "our sincere belief that it will help" farms, and some of that is "trying to put a set of values onto a set of farms . . . I am saying financial sustainability." Altman recognized that farmers don't farm "so that they can do Excel spreadsheets and accounting" but believed that record keeping was a key piece of financial sustainability. Multiple coaches for Accelerator focused on business health.

As Lisa described it, the program was designed so that the farmers "see the value in the knowledge and the capital." They described the knowledge from the coaches as "the brain capital." Rene also saw each part of the program as valuable, from check-ins to coaches to capital. She said that "you get $10,000, you get $2,000. It's like you get these things, and they are equal to the check-ins. The coaching is equal to the infrastructure. Investment is equal to the check-ins."

Throughout the year, the farmers utilized monthly check-ins, capital, and coaching. For Rene, "the exit interview is also the opportunity to be like, these are all the things that were offered in the program. Did you use all these things?" The service providers were able to gauge what was used, what wasn't, what brought value, and what didn't. The intent being those interviews helped the program evolve and change year after year.

Statement of the Problem

The Accelerator was developed to engage farmers and provide opportunities for them to move past challenges and toward a more sustainable farm business. After two rounds of the Accelerator, little has been published or shared as to what participating farmers learned, how they invested resources, or what challenges had been met.

Many issues regarding the challenges facing small and mid-sized producers have been documented in agricultural literature (Dimitri et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2016). These challenges may include soil health, food safety, accounting, succession planning, and more. Also, the literature has focused on the best way that adults and adults who are farmers learn, be it from each other or service providers. There can be, at times, a lack of the farmer's voice in this research. A majority of the data is often collected through surveys rather than interviews.

Farmers and service providers consider outreach and education to be important tools for a farmer's success. These learning opportunities provided farmers and service providers with different avenues to better understand challenges, develop solutions, and grow networks. In order for service providers to stay relevant and conduct meaningful and impactful work, they must examine the work they do and experiment with new strategies that meet the evolving needs of farmers. With the effectiveness of the Accelerator program uncertain, the problem this study investigated was the program's impact using the stories and experiences of farmers and service providers who participated.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine what new knowledge has been gained by farmers participating in the accelerator program and to document existing knowledge of the farmers and service providers who have participated in this program. By capturing their narratives, we may build collective self-efficacy within the farmer community and point service providers toward areas where research, resources, and education were needed.

This study was important because of the essential role farms and service providers play in creating healthy communities; from growing and providing food, establishing economic

opportunities, and creating areas that bring both environmental and social sustainability. The USDA recognized that "small and midsize producers provide new opportunities for American agriculture across the country" (USDA, 2022, para 1.) Without the proper support and resources, the promise and potential of local farmers, including the mid-scale produce farmer (Gaskin, 2001), to engage in American agriculture may be lost.

The research objectives that guided this study and data collection during the interviews were as follows:

1. Describe the agricultural experiences of small-scale farmers prior to their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
2. Determine the motivating factors that encouraged small-scale farmers to participate in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
3. Describe the evolution of their agricultural practices based on their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
4. Determine how small-scale farmers define success in a diversified produce operation.
5. Determine the perceived needs of small-scale farmers that exist after the Farmer Accelerator Program.

General Definitions and Key Terms

- Farm - "USDA defines a farm as any place from which $1,000 or more of agricultural products (crops and livestock) were produced or sold or normally would have been sold during the year under consideration" (Newton, 2014, pg. 1).

- Georgia Organics - A member-supported, non-profit organization with the stated mission of investing in organic farmers for the health of our communities and the land (Georgia Organics, 2022, para. 1).
- Georgia Organics Farmer Accelerator Program - The Georgia Organics Farmer Accelerator Program combined expert coaching with tailored, on-farm investments to grow the vitality and resiliency of Georgia farms and improve the quality of life for its farmers. Coaching includes accounting, business and finance, profit analysis, loans and leasing, production, and employee management. Each Accelerator farm was eligible for financial support to offset the cost of infrastructure, continued education, employee stipends, healthcare costs, and climate-resilient investments - $2,000 in professional expert coaching plus nearly $10,000 in on-farm capital investment (Farmer Services, 2022, para. 5).
- Informal education – Everyday learning and self-guided learning. This kind of learning is not graded and credit is not awarded. Informal education is the least structured form of learning (Agrilinks Team, 2016).
- Mid-Scale Produce Farmer – A producer who works 10–49 acres (Thompson & Gaskin, 2018, p. 125).
- Narrative Inquiry – A method that focused on the stories of the individuals with experiences related to the problem being studied (Clandin & Connely, 2000).
- Nonformal education – Planned and systematic educational experiences that occurred outside a formal educational institution. Learning may or may not be graded, and credit may or may not be awarded. Nonformal education is typically much less structured than formal education (Agrilinks Team, 2016).

- Service Provider - An individual or organization, including not-for-profits, land grant universities, or the USDA, that offers assistance to and with farmers.
- Small-Scale Produce Farmer - A producer who works 10 or fewer acres (Newton, 2014).
- Sustainable Agriculture – Focused on profitability, environmental stewardship, and quality of life.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide an overview of the literature that was relevant to this study. The conceptual and theoretical framework that guided and was influenced by the interviews will also be detailed.

The literature was organized into two major themes. The first was the power of narrative inquiry and oral history as teaching tools for a student-centered educational practice. The second were the issues facing diversified produce farmers as they aimed to run a sustainable business. While reviewing the literature, a few key questions have been considered. When have opportunities to collect stories directly from farmers been conducted? How were those farmers identified? How were the questions posed to them prioritized? For research conducted on the barriers to sustaining or building a successful farm business, was the farmer's voice present in the research? Did the farmer contribute their ideas or did they simply respond to the researchers' best guesses? What themes, success stories, and barriers emerged?

Oral History and Educational Best Practices

DeLind (1998) detailed their firsthand challenges of starting and operating a full-time CSA program and showcased the benefits of providing first-hand experiences as a teaching tool. “They are the basis for a more complete knowledge and a more organic existence, individually, collectively, sensually, and intellectually” (DeLind, 1998, p. 3). The author also found that, as academics, “we favor the abstraction, the pattern, the sanitized rule of thumb and we present

them with an assurance that frequently belies the mental and physical struggles that brought them into being" (DeLind, 1998, p. 4). This removal weakened the resources created - instead of sharing specific stories to add depth to a pattern or abstraction, educators simply abstracted. By presenting only numbers and data, educators removed the opportunity for the farmer to see themselves in the research and caused them to believe that it's just another study removed from their on-the-ground reality. DeLind's challenging experience starting and maintaining a CSA provided reminders of barriers for both the direct-to-consumer models and scaling up to wholesale. There are hyper-local challenges to each operation, managing a financially sustainable farm on the ground is more complicated than it looks on paper, and while most of the public supports local food, only a minority wanted to or had the privilege to share in the risk of growing that food.

Eckert & Bell (2005), in documenting conversations with small-scale farmers, developed an interview pool using referrals from service providers and participating farmers and researched Web sites and articles on successful farmers. This approach allowed for a diverse set of voices and for the farmers to be involved in the process, helping to uncover farmers that may not have been in contact with service providers. The authors identified three themes of mental models that guided interview questions used in our study (emphasis added mine) - "farmers' mental models of farming are *influenced by prior values* and knowledge, serve as guides in *learning and decision-making*, and are *unique* to each farmer" (Eckert & Bell, 2005, p. 1). This uniqueness, referenced by DeLind (1998), emphasized that while patterns emerged during interviews, it was worth noting the individual aspects of each farm. The farmers often referenced the past, indicating they take previous knowledge in the farming community seriously. They also identified sustainable farming across a spectrum - economic sustainability, environmental

sustainability, and personal and social sustainability. These themes pointed to resource needs, potential barriers, and potential interview questions. That "farmers are more likely to attend to information and ideas that are congruent with their current mental models of farming" pointed to the need for resources that collected and reflected the farmer experience (Eckert & Bell, 2005, p. 7).

In *Cultivating narratives: Cultivating successors*, the authors reviewed the oral histories of eight northwest Ohio farmers to better understand the theme of farm succession (Steiger et al., 2012). The value of oral history was that it provided "an opportunity for the interviewee to define the issues instead of having them defined for them by the interviewer" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 92). This provided a different opportunity than a survey or pre-determined set of questions would have allowed. The oral history strategy placed both the interviewee and the interviewer in a place of authority and knowledge and, together, produced "new understandings and knowledge" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 93).

At the end of the day, it was still the authors that did the final storytelling, and these authors picked up on a few emerging themes. The first was that the farmers don't view things in just one way - that is to say, they don't make decisions just based on financial or cultural values but are influenced by many competing factors. The second was that, for these farmers, succession and who will take on the farm after they are gone is an important goal. This may have reflected farmers who are in a more established period in their farming careers, no longer as worried about building a business as they are about ensuring the land stays in farming and the business continues after they are gone. These farmers found that diversifying their sales to include direct-to-consumer sales, especially as more consumers move to the countryside as cities expand, made "sense not just from the point of view of future succession (keeping the productive

land in the family), but also is economically viable to meet the needs of the current family" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 102). A sales tactic many local farmers, including those in the Accelerator, seem to have followed.

The authors also uncovered lessons learned that may be useful for Extension and other service providers. From an academic position, it was easy to create a theoretical picture of farmers and what they may need - the process of oral history forced them to listen and the authors found what they heard to be "both surprising and illuminating" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 102). Often, the solutions offered by service providers "do not necessarily solve the

problems of the people they are supposed to help" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 103). This may happen more when service providers are positioned as the experts and the farmers as the ones in need of the service providers' expertise (Steiger et al., 2012). The authors recognized that that approach may have communicated a lack of respect for the farmer and why some farmers learned to be "reluctant to seek the help of farm service and economic development professionals" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 102). "Listening is an act of respect" (Steiger et al., 2012, p. 103). By being in conversation and actively listening, a service provider can show respect and gain a deeper understanding of a farmer's motivations, needs, and goals (Steiger et al., 2012).

Participatory learning is a fundamental aspect of sustainable agriculture (Pretty, 1995). To develop meaningful resources for farmers, we must "connect teaching practices to specific learning outcomes and objectives" that "builds on a foundation of personal attitudes and individual growth'" (Galt et al., 2013, p.71). Resources created must reflect farmers' attitudes and beliefs with clear objectives linked to those values. If there is a need to create resources that challenge existing attitudes and beliefs, sharing the voices of other trusted farmers who farm differently may help craft an effective teaching tool. In addition, self-dialogue and self-

assessment are effective ways for learners to learn (Galt et al., 2013). A narrative inquiry that captured the stories of other farmers and the strategies they used to overcome barriers will enable farmers reading those stories to reflect, self-assess, and identify potential barriers in their operations while immersing themselves in the experience to allow for "relatively rapid progress" (Galt et al., 2013, p. 79).

"The use of stories for teaching has roots in concepts of experiential learning described by Dewey" (Vozzola, 1998, p. 290). Conducting an oral history project, Phelps (2005) explored "how can capturing oral history enhance Extension program development and impact reporting?" (p. 1) and discovered that it "enhanced my Extension program development and impact reporting skills" (p. 2). Oral history can be used to "create new programs, and promote intergenerational programs" (Phelps, 2005, p. 4).

Using a social constructivist framework, student reflection within learning - both in the classroom and in the field - helped "instructors to better understand students' learning vis-a`-vis our teaching" (Galt et al., 2013, p. 129) and that "field-based learning experiences helped bridge the gap between academic and lived experiences in a very tangible way" (Galt et al., 2013, p. 135). Galt et al. have outlined values, like building an awareness of what a learner values in a relationship and developing the ability to ask powerful questions, that farmers scaling up may consider and guided questions in our interview process. Galt et al. (2013) also found that the "non-judgmental comparisons of learners with their peers" (p. 131) can allow adult learning to become both more "meaningful and transformative" by allowing it to take place through thoughtful discussion.

Fitzgerald and Morgan (2014), through their experience interviewing and establishing a food council, point to the role that Extension professionals can play in building relationships

across sectors (including those working on the ground, in not-for-profits, and in Extension) to help build systems and capacity. They also noted that often these issues would be siloed, with organizations working on them isolated from one another rather than in collaboration and that Extension could play a role in dismantling that isolation and building collaboration (Fitzgerald & Morgan, 2014). To better understand that role, they both worked within the system by participating in the establishment of a food council and gave the people within the chance to reflect and share by asking them open-ended questions around themes that included the motivation and catalyst for establishing a Council, success stories, and challenges faced (Fitzgerald & Morgan, 2014). This allowed them and points to how Extension can move away from "simply conveying the subject matter knowledge" (Fitzgerald & Morgan, 2014, p. 2) and instead facilitate and stimulate collaborative skills to build capacity across the entire community.

Barriers to Scaling Up a Farm Business

Data from the Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS) indicated that the number of small farms in the U.S. is increasing. Ahearn & Sterns (2013) note that "although seemingly poised to offer a market opportunity, the evidence to date suggests that the Southeast U.S. is lagging behind the other regions in terms of incorporating direct-to-consumer components in the development of its regional food system" (p. 498). To help build farm financial sustainability in the Southeast U.S., we needed to develop "a better understanding of the farm-level economic challenges faced by producers in the southeastern region, including the marketing environment for direct-to-consumer sales" (Ahearn & Sterns, 2013, p. 499). The growth in the number of farmers' markets may not have been enough to sustain a farm financially. As a farmer explored other markets, factors such as off-farm jobs, land access, debt, age, proximity to markets, and diversifying land use by placing land in Conservation Easements

or other programs could play a role in long term financial sustainability. Using farm-level data, Ahearn & Sterns (2013) documented that product quality, product mix, commitment, experience, and trust all matter for success when scaling up. Trust must be within all partners in the system (Ahearn & Sterns, 2013). Extension would be able to develop trusted resources by incorporating farmer quotes and stories within resources.

The ability to create a profit is a traditional indicator of a successful business. Schmit et al. estimated benchmarks using samples of produce farmers who primarily sold into local markets channels (2019). The authors found that these benchmarks provide benefits for producers and Extension. For producers, the opportunity to determine if their market channels are the right ones for their business. For Extension, "a rich source of information . . . in developing programming around local foods marketing opportunities and business planning" (2019, p. 1). There was a growing recognition that existing benchmark and financial planning tools may not meet the needs of small-scale farmers selling into local markers - the complexity of growing 20 crops on 2 acres is different than growing 2 crops on 20 acres. There was evidence that farms selling through local food markets require different business models with different resource requirements. Traditional benchmarks may not have provided "meaningful planning advice" (2019, p. 2) in particular if farmers did not know how the requirements, challenges, and costs of selling to a wholesaler may affect their bottom line.

Rissing argued that a strict focus on finances is not helpful and "that a new farm's finances do not reliably indicate its longevity (2019, p. 149). For many producers, while being financially sustainable is important, making money is not the only motivator and many more factors are built into long-term success. This means taking an approach that helps service providers and farmers understand all the factors that lead to success or contribute to deciding to

no longer farm - not just the financial ones (2019, p. 149). Rissing found that many educators believed that if farms more closely resemble the logic of a manufacturing business, they will become resilient (2019, p. 152). This may be seen in the work of teaching accounting and tracking sales and labor along with a large number of Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) projects that focus on business management and planning. We also see this emphasis from federal programs, such as NRCS cost share programs and FSA loans, that require financial paperwork to be able to access those programs:

> Economic experts—both the people making loan decisions for beginning farmers and those teaching farmers how to think about finances— repeatedly emphasized that the only way to break into farming and stay in was to master the financial intricacies of determining which enterprises could be profitable enough to support a decent salary and ruthlessly eliminate anything else. (p. 152)

This ruthless focus overlooked the other factors at play for farmers, including environmental and social responsibility, "and yet a farm's finances are never separate from its constituent relationships, ecologies, and histories" (2019, p. 154). A strict focus on making it through money alone weakened the overall value of educational opportunities for producers. While farmers definitely "grapple with questions of whether to take on debt or cash flow their operation," they must also grapple with "their own satisfaction with physical, outdoor work, the personal relationships that support the farm, and the farm lifestyle" (2019, p. 154).

Dimitri, Oberholtzer, Pressman, & Welsh (2019) found a key component to our problem of understanding the needs of farmers scaling up is that "until recently, understanding the state of direct-to-consumer and intermediated marketing channels was a difficult task because few data existed about these channels" (p. 179). Evaluating multiple papers, they explored something that may be better revealed through narrative inquiry - "the entrepreneurial spirit that some of these market channels embody" (Dimitri et al., 2019, p. 180). While growth had been substantial and

some successes evident, the papers also pointed to the challenges facing farmers who are trying to improve the economic situation of their farms: “not every venture was successful” (Dimitri et al., 2019, p. 180). They also expanded on previous research using comments and perspectives provided by regional foodservice distributors, schools, hospitals, and chefs to provide insight into what worked and what didn’t on the buyer side of the equation.

Gaskin (2001) developed indicators for sustainable agriculture that were useful to consider when interviewing producers and service providers. A few of these indicators included generating profits over the long term, supporting a family at a standard of living that provided for health care, education, and vacation, environmental stewardship, maximizing crop rotation, quality of life, allowing time for family, hobbies, and/or community participation, increasing the surrounding communities’ well-being, and encouraging the involvement of the next generation. Each of these could be an Extension resource or workshop unto itself. It may motivate experienced farmers to share knowledge through oral history if they know that their stories “may have the greatest potential to encourage young people to enter farming and begin economic development in rural counties” (Gaskin, 2001, p. 9). Knowing that their participation could make a difference in a young farmer's life may mean a lot to an older farmer who shared the indicated values above around sustainable agriculture.

“Despite these obstacles, communities of producers are crafting alternative middles” (Stinnett & Thompson, 2018, p. 73). Producers found ways to be successful – if they could. And they may have created systems and solutions that educators and service providers are completely unaware of (Stinnett & Thompson, 2018). Researchers like Thompson and Gaskin have explored whether small farmers can maintain their commitment to building community, soils, and crop diversity while moving towards a more professionalized or profitable model to gain markets.

Brislen examined the role(s) that food hubs and networks play in providing support and made the case that outside of just technical resources, it is their ability and opportunity to build trust and share knowledge across communities that impact their success (2018). These approaches encouraged us not to silo the needs of producers into any one category but take a larger bird's eye view of the challenges and ways to address those challenges. How we delivered and enabled knowledge sharing may be just as important as what knowledge we shared with and for producers.

Looking to the community for community-based solutions aligned with the concept of civic agriculture, “the embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community” (Lyson, 2005, p. 92) and a process that is “fundamentally about problem solving” (Lyson, 2005, p. 92). Much like the farmers interviewed for our research, civic agriculture was focused on selling to local markets and looked to be a part of the community with direct-to-consumer sales and other ways of direct engagement (2005, p. 96). It was also more reliant on hand labor and maximizing small spaces with more intensive growing practices that often have less capital to support them (2005, p. 96). Civic agriculture is seen at farmers’ markets and CSA programs and “have the potential to nurture local economic development, maintain diversity and quality in products, and provide forums where civic farmers and food citizens can come together to solidify bonds of the community” (2005, pp. 96- 97).

Wilson looked at community networks and found that community-based organizations provided the opportunity to build networks of small-scale farmers and community members (2018, p. 89). One farmer, reflecting on the key organizations in their network, shared that they are “a bunch of non-competitive nonprofits that mix with the universities” and that “they really help keep the energy of local food alive around here” (Wilson, 2018, p. 90). Key phrases there

include “non-competitive” and “mix with universities,” when service providers collaborate then the producer benefited. Most farmers already exemplified this collaborative model, an important characteristic that was mentioned again and again in the interview process for this research.

Lyson also pointed out that “local producer and marketing cooperatives, regional trade associations, and community-based farm and food organizations are part of the underlying structure that supports civic agriculture” (2005, p. 94). They reflected that the role of Extension was still primarily “to provide producers with the knowledge, skills, and information necessary to make the best decisions within the parameters of his or her own farm” (2005, p. 93). A new tactic may be to start looking at how Extension can build networks and use the facilitation and administration skills of its staff to create more opportunities for knowledge exchange across a network - it may be of more value for Extension to be behind the scenes rather than at the front of the classroom, chiming in when necessary but allowing the education to happen on a strong foundation built with Extension resources.

Across papers, networks stand out as a defining theme. Brislen found that “transforming food systems requires the work of a broad network of stakeholders” (2018, p. 106). Using semi-structured interviews, the farmers shared with Brislen that support for the “balancing act of growing in step with their production ethos and finding the best mix of market outlets to mitigate risk” (2018, p. 109) was provided by food hubs and Extension. This support ranged from technical assistance, bulk purchasing, and understanding the needs and wants of buyers - both wholesale and local.

Crawford et al. assessed communication networks to deliver technical and applied knowledge. For farmers who were asked to share what the most effective information source or information-seeking behavior was, “networking was mentioned most often” (Crawford et al.,

2015, p. 4). Interestingly, novice farmers most frequently mentioned organizations. This may be due to the fact that when new to a community, you don't know whom to reach out to and those organizations provide the chance to meet other farmers. One farmer shared:

> I think I got some basics [from books] . . . That's important to orient you with anything. Then once you know something about it, you can have conversations with people about it on a deeper level if you already have experience or education on it. (p. 4)

This may have been another indicator that just as important as it is for Extension and other service providers to have provided information, it was just as important to have facilitated farmer-to-farmer learning opportunities. The authors found that in the Southeast, new Extension hires with a genuine interest in Organic growing practices "have had great success building community among farmers and facilitating transfer of information through activities such as inviting farmers to discuss their farming operations with others on-farm" (2015, p. 12).

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Theoretical Framework for this study was built on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in particular the cultural-historical context and the self-regulated learning method of elaboration. The sociocultural theory focused on how one's interaction with their environment encouraged cognitive growth (Schunk, 2020). As farmers (learners) engaged with the changing world around them, their thinking changed, their prior experiences built upon what they knew, and their learning did not happen in isolation (Schunk). This last part was key - farming was often thought of as an isolating activity, and it could be, but successful farming was also built upon collaboration and community. Ask any service provider or farmer, and they'll tell you that farmers talk to each other.

Key concepts from Vygotsky include the need for education to be, and that we learn from, meaningful activity and meaningful work and lessons. Vygotsky also presented and

developed the idea of the zone of proximal development - what the learner is able to do on their own vs. what they can do with assistance from others. For this concept, social interactions are critical and the interactions between a teacher and student or peer to peer are those of sharing information back and forth. This can take the form of scaffolding, where the teacher leads and then the teacher and learner share responsibility.

Vygotsky's ideas shared concepts that narrative inquiry may build on, including reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, and cognitive apprenticeship. Traditionally, these are viewed as an in-person collaboration between a teacher and a learner. By interacting with the narratives of experienced farmers, the farmers and service providers reading the stories of the Accelerator may feel they are part of an interactive dialogue that shared social interaction, solved tasks cooperatively, and generated a feeling of mentorship. Storytelling, through narrative inquiry, allowed us to focus on how the farmers conveyed and communicated meaning and shared their stories as a way to communicate the results developed through the study.

Recognizing that prior experience enhanced learning, self-regulated learning was an important teaching method for reaching farmers (Schunk, 2020). Self-regulated learning told us that what we learn is remembered through stories. Not just our stories, but the stories of others (Snowman, 1960). Reading the stories of other farmers, farmers will have the opportunity to build their learning and see themselves in the material.

In figure 1 below, we see how the ability to learn is built off of social interaction. As the farmer (learner) interacts with a teacher or peer through a meaningful activity (for example, a workshop, discussion, or story), their knowledge builds and they gain new skills.

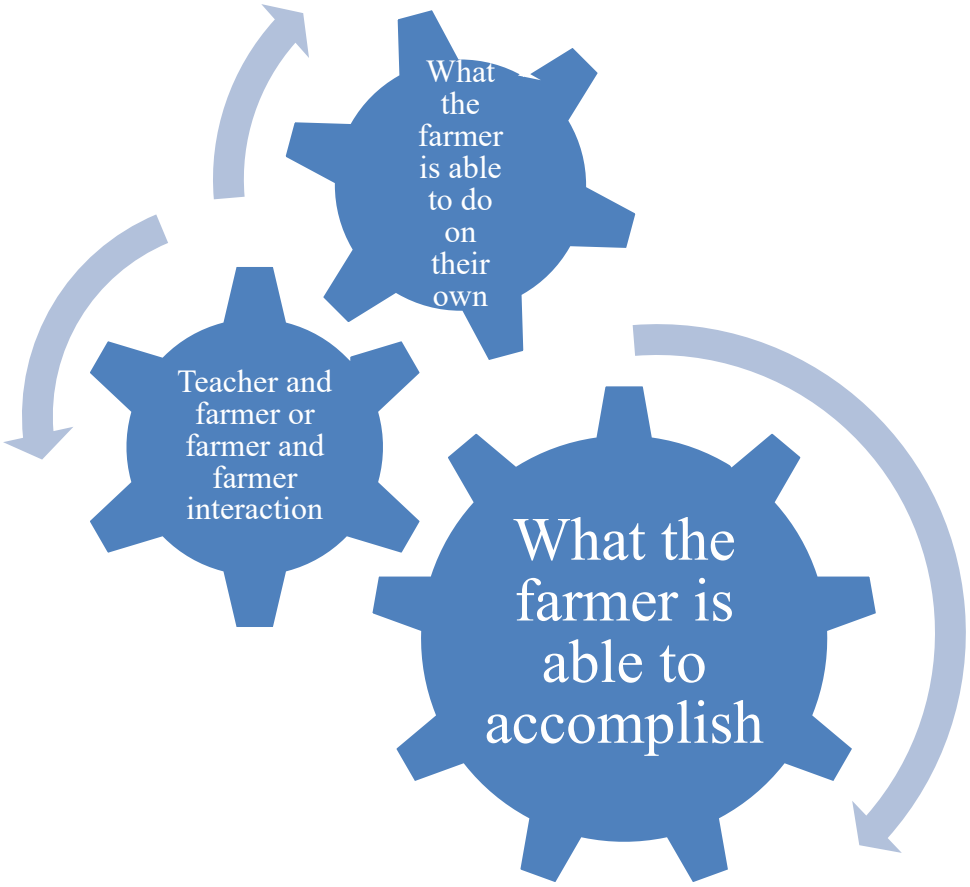

Figure 1: Sociocultural theory

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In this chapter, the research methodology that was used for this study will be described. In-depth detail on the Accelerator will be presented. How data was collected and analyzed, along with the steps taken to ensure the study met high standards of quality and trust, will be detailed.

DATA COLLECTION

The general approach to investigate the experience of and collect data on diversified produce farmers and service providers who participated in the Accelerator was using narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry allowed us to focus on the stories of those who lived the work and knew the needs firsthand (Clandin & Connelly, 2000). This type of qualitative research provided an opportunity to "understand the past and future dimensions of events and experiences" and "search for common themes, threads, and tensions, often working collaboratively with the participants" (Leedy & Ormond, 2019, p. 235).

This study was designed to yield valuable results based on the idea of restorying, the process of crafting and creating stories that use depth and detail to deepen the understanding of a lived experience (Leedy & Ormond, 2019).

To gain more information about the Accelerator program and its participants, we reviewed the publicly available information on the Georgia Organics website. We also used that information to determine which of the participants were diversified produce farmers and set that

as a limitation for the study. To gain a better idea of the farmer's operations, their websites were reviewed to see the size of their operations, what markets they sold into, and any background information that they shared about themselves or their farms. The information on who the service providers were was not publicly available. We conducted personal outreach to Georgia Organics and received some information on some of the participating service providers. As we went through the list of potential interviewees, we considered background, demographics, and location to create a diverse mix of farmers and service providers. Essential characteristics of this design included ensuring the diversity within the GA farming community was reflected and that an opportunity for farmers to have their voices reflected in future resource design was created.

A Literature Review search was conducted using the University of Georgia Libraries System, JSTOR, Journal of Extension database, and Google. Valued assistance in determining key phrases and finding relevant articles was provided by Dr. Jason Peake, Associate Professor within the University of Georgia Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication, and Kelsey Forester, University of Georgia Science Research and Instruction Librarian. The literature review included keywords vegetable, produce, wholesale, farm, oral history, narrative inquiry, Extension, and Georgia.

Leedy (2009) and Silverman (1993) provided a framework for collecting data during the interview. These included:

- Discover the perspectives on why farmers farm the way they do
- Determine why they believe they are or are not successful and how they define that success

- Collect information on behaviors they have demonstrated across their careers as farmers.
- Understand what their standards of behavior are - what problems have they identified and why did they act the way they did to solve them?

The research objectives that guided this study and data collection during the interviews were as follows:

1. Describe the agricultural experiences of small-scale farmers prior to their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
2. Determine the motivating factors that encouraged small-scale farmers to participate in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
3. Describe the evolution of their agricultural practices based on their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
4. Determine how small-scale farmers define success in a diversified produce operation.
5. Determine the perceived needs of small-scale farmers that exist after the Farmer Accelerator Program.

The narrative inquiry approach was full of promise. Active listening that utilized meaningful and powerful questions could bring depth and ensure the interviewer was not pushing for information but instead pursuing what was being shared. Using lessons from the past, a narrative inquiry approach may provide insight into the future of Georgia agriculture. As experienced farmers age out of the early part of their farming careers – or age out of farming completely - their knowledge may be lost if we do not take the time to capture it.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were based on an interview guide that provided structure and allowed space for the interviewees to move the conversation into unexpected places (See Appendix A and B). A list of general and probing sub-questions was prepared in advance and shared with the research committee before being submitted for Institutional Review Board approval. The University of GA Human Subjects Office determined that the proposed research was Exempt. The questions were generally limited to 15 total to meet the goal of a meaningful 45-minute to 90-minute in-person interview. A draft interview guide was developed and then revised based on feedback from an advisory panel

Data was recorded in two ways. Two audio devices, a professional microphone and an iPhone as backup, were used to capture the interview for transcription. Written notes were taken during the interview that identified key points at the moment or marked an area to ask more questions.

Five interviews were conducted with farms (a total of seven farmers) and three interviews with service providers. The transcription of the eight interviews resulted in a total of 615 minutes of audio and 220 pages of typed transcripts that were utilized in the data analysis process. The interviews were all collected in person and in counties in GA. Before the recording was started, time was spent reviewing the purpose of the study and building trust by getting to know each other through casual conversation. The interview started once the interviewee said they were ready and lasted, on average, one hour and 15 minutes. The interviews followed the structure of the interview guide, but at times branched in new directions based on where the interviewees led the conversation.

The initial coding process started with a list that included the above interview topics, such as basic facts, perspectives, beliefs, behaviors, and problems. Instead of just coding the entire interview, sentences and paragraphs needed to be coded separately (Leedy, 2009). The coding led us to identify emerging and unique themes, seeing what was mentioned repeatedly and what may have just been a problem or attitude situated within a particular geographic area, farm, or organization. Each transcript was analyzed separately and then the transcripts were analyzed together to identify the four themes and 6 factors that will be presented in this study.

We relied on member checking and peer review to verify the information. The interviewees were offered the opportunity to review the transcripts and provide feedback on the findings, potentially highlighting areas we had missed. Colleagues, both Extension educators and Graduate students working on similar projects, were asked to provide their opinions and insight on the information shared in the interviews to bring additional perspectives to the data. (Leedy, 2009)

While the information obtained from our interviews may not be generalizable, themes emerged and replicating this study with a similar set of farmers and their dynamic worldviews would add more depth to our general understanding of this community.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RIGOR

The delimitations of this study were participation in the Accelerator and types of farm operations. We only interviewed diversified produce farmers and service providers who participated in year one or year two of the Accelerator.

Limitations involved identifying the farmers to be interviewed. Farmers are often based in hard-to-reach rural areas and have limited time to give away from the farm. In choosing only farmers and service providers who participated in the Accelerator, we may have missed key lessons that other farmers who did not participate have learned. Despite these limitations, this work was still important to pursue because of the farmer-to-farmer and farmer-to-service provider education these farmers and service providers provided with their stories and experiences. Farmers will be able to compare their experiences to the experiences of the Accelerator farmers interviewed, drawing their own conclusions on what is valuable and applicable. Service providers will have the opportunity to see new ways to reach farmers, new opportunities to teach, and recognize ways they may improve or strengthen their current ways of providing service. For the farmers, it was another chance to give back and discover lessons they may not have realized they had learned along the way. For the service providers, it was dedicated time to think critically and creatively about the work they had done. For the researcher and the reader, it's a chance to learn and have what we learn be led by the people who experienced it.

In doing this research, a few assumptions were made. The largest was that the farmers and service providers would want to and have the time to talk with us. Another was that the stories collected would lead to valid resources. The third is that when this study concludes, the need for resources for these farmers would still exist.

Out of respect for the farmers and the service providers and to protect their anonymity, they are represented by pseudonyms in the research. The names used for the farmers and service providers are generic names with no connection to their interviews or who they are as people. The names used for the farms were chosen based on themes that were revealed during their interviews, like an emphasis on a commitment to continued education or positive employee

management. The interviewees were provided a written assurance that, if they chose, the research would only be used for the study. They also had the option to sign and have their stories and quotes included in future educational resources and their recordings become a part of the University of Georgia Oral History Collection.

"When applied to narrative projects, two levels of validity are important – the story told by a research participant and the validity of the analysis, or the story told by the researcher" (Riessman, 2007, pg. 184). Care was taken with the interviews to both reflect the facts of the situation and attempt to understand the meaning behind situations and examples (Riessman, 2007). To help understand the events that made up the experiences of the Accelerator participants, they had the opportunity to review their transcripts. Steps were also taken to compare their experiences to each other in the thematic analysis to help better grasp what was learned throughout the program.

We received informed consent before the interview and a signed agreement to participate before the interview started (see Appendix D).

SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT

This statement recognizes my role in the research and the importance of reflecting on how my identity influenced research development. I am someone who engages "their feelings, values, and needs in the research process" (Barnett, 2005).

My interest in this topic is from my experiences as a small-scale produce farmer and service provider. I have worked within GA agriculture for the past 15 years, including as a small-scale produce farmer and a service provider for small and mid-scale produce farmers. I was motivated by a genuine interest in what the Accelerator did and did not accomplish, a belief

that storytelling is an effective tool for education, and a desire to learn best practices about growing food and educating farmers from peers and subject matter experts.

Some of my past agricultural work has involved collaborating with service provider organizations, including some mentioned in this study. Within those collaborations, I've built strong relationships, made mistakes, and found success along the way - all of which contributed in some way to the interview process. I knew the interviewees - there may have been tension, joy, disappointment, and excitement as we transitioned from a professional or personal relationship to a research relationship that placed them in a space to share their stories for and with their farming community. I have also freelanced for art and music publications and spent countless hours on the road as a farm auditor and educator developing the ability to find and arrive at very remote farms on time and prepared. Conducting these interviews across the state and in-person, the past experiences of being in the field, long drives, crafting rich narratives from interviews, and meeting deadlines provided a solid basis for the work.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter shares what the interviews revealed about the data collected using the research objectives of this study.

The research objectives that guided this study and data collection during the interviews were as follows:

1. Describe the agricultural experiences of small-scale farmers prior to their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
2. Determine the motivating factors that encouraged small-scale farmers to participate in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
3. Describe the evolution of their agricultural practices based on their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
4. Determine how small-scale farmers define success in a diversified produce operation.
5. Determine the perceived needs of small-scale farmers that exist after the Farmer Accelerator Program.

This chapter includes the four themes present in the data that were collected from farmers and service providers who were engaged in the Accelerator. The examined farmers and service providers were all located in Georgia. The population was acquired by examining the publicly available data detailing which farmers and participated in the Accelerator program and removing all farms that were not majority produce farms. Of the farms remaining, an effort was made to

choose a mix of farmers that represented the demographic diversity of Georgia agriculture. Through personal outreach, we asked Georgia Organics and received some information on who the participating service providers were since that information is not publicly available.

Five interviews were conducted with farms (a total of seven farmers) and three interviews with service providers. The transcription of the eight interviews resulted in a total of 6,115 minutes of audio and 220 pages of typed transcripts that were utilized in the data analysis process. Each transcript was analyzed separately. The transcripts were analyzed together to identify the four themes and seven factors that will be presented in this chapter.

Description of Participants

The interviews with farmers and service providers revealed a range of ideas and quite a few similar themes. There was some overlap, with the farmers and service providers all showing a strong commitment to their craft.

Description of the Farmers

Below is background information to provide context on the farmers.

Table 1. Farmers

Name	Year they were born	Years farming	Markets	Education
Always Learning Farms - Gail and Gabe	1986, 1989	Eight years	CSA, restaurants, local grocery stores, direct to consumer	Associates in horticulture science, self-taught

Elder Lessons Farms - Whitney	1995	Six years	Farmers markers, direct to consumer	Agribusiness
Employees 1st Farms - Mitch	1986	Five years	CSA, farm-to-table, farmers markets, direct to consumer, institutions, restaurants	Bachelor of music
Growing Jobs Ag - Rachel and Marc	1981, 1979	Seven years	CSA, farm-to-table, farmers markets, direct to consumer	Animal science and culture, Biology
Make Better Acres - Delilah	1986	13 years	CSA, farm-to-table, farmers markets, direct to consumer, roadside stand	Bachelor of fine arts in printmaking and metal sculpture

All the farmers shared a few qualities. They were located in rural settings and, based on the criteria, were diversified produce farmers who had participated in the Accelerator. They mainly sold into local markets and those sales make up a significant - if not all - of their income. They all had attended a Georgia Organics conference in the past and engaged with other service providers across the state and country.

Success for the farmers looked a lot of different ways. Their personal health, employee health, financial health, and health of their communities were all important. In some ways, they are connected. Gail, at Always Learning Farms, saw that the financial health of their community affects the financial health of the farm's business.

> It's so closely connected to the state of, well, to the economy, for example, because when you're farming for chefs or when you're farming straight direct to the consumers, to the community, how everyone's feeling about the state of the world is going to contribute significantly to how much money they're spending on local food and how much they're patronizing restaurants that source locally.

And, if the community does not have access to healthy produce, the health of the community is affected as well. All the farmers faced challenges and yet showed a desire to continue to learn, adapt, and farm.

Always Learning Farms - Gail and Gabe

Gail and Gabe, born in 1989 and 1986, began volunteering on a farm in 2014 and farming on their own in 2015 when they started Always Learning Farms. Currently, they are on 10 acres with one acre in annual produce production with some flowers and herbs. Their goal, according to Gabe, was "to grow into about one and a half acres of annual produce herbs and flowers while utilizing the additional eight and a half acres as animal forage systems and perennial orchards and paths and things like that."

They see their strengths as networking, marketing, and sales and have participated in past Georgia Organics programming, including a program that provided health insurance. While in that program, they had their first child and recognized that without that health insurance, as Gail put it, "things would've been very different." There is the potential they would have had to stop farming, or at the very least not have farming be their main profession.

Gabe has a background in horticulture science and Gail is self-taught. To help deepen their knowledge, they've worked with multiple service providers. This includes Extension for soil tests and tree identification, FSA for loans, NRCS for conservation infrastructure, and the Farm Bureau for community engagement.

Reflecting on what success means for them, Gail shared that it's taking their farm business and being able to:

> Grow it - and not necessarily to expand it into taking up more space - but grow it to a point where we're not just producing annual vegetables and selling them and making enough to pay for more annual vegetables for next year, but paying for upgrades to our

> systems, paying for the ability to plant trees and start our animal systems. It is beyond sufficiency, it's more like regeneration and sustained growth.

Gail added that it would also be nice to have "a mountain house or a full vacation home or go to the beach every once in a while. But I would consider myself successful even without those things, as long as I'm able to keep it all in sort of a closed communal loop." For Gail, an example of that closed loop was:

> A farm that isn't wasting any crops because every crop has a place to go . . . if we, God forbid, we don't sell everything that we harvest . . . we either eat or feed to the chickens, which in turn provide fertilizer for our beds, our plots.

Gabe also thought success, for a farmer, came "down to the mindset of the farmer. It comes into the brain of the farmer who is doing it."

Another metric for success was feeding their community. Gabe focused on the eater and said that "If the people are buying it and enjoying it and becoming healthy from it and they're leading better, better lives from it, then that makes the farm successful." Gail added, "you know, we always kind of laugh about how we are in farm country out here, but kind of a food desert because all the farms are growing either fiber, which isn't getting eaten or food that's not getting eaten by humans."

They were drawn to the Accelerator, at first, because Gail said we "thought that it was going to be just a straight up scholarship . . . I thought, okay, cool. This is like, this is money." She added that they were both glad that "it turned out to be more than that, which is great." Gabe also saw the program as a "way to get farmers fully self-sufficient." He saw that the program, through capital and coaching, would work with you because "you're right at the precipice of this being your full-time career, but you need a little extra boost to accelerate you into a place, to get some movement to where it's flowing on its own . . . and be a full self-sustaining business." Gabe saw the potential and said "Hey, let's accelerate into the fulltime mode."

Gabe remembered that they liked that the Accelerator would be "going to be actively working with us and other farmers." The case manager, he said, would provide value, almost like an "extra office person sending emails or calls saying like, 'Hey, just want to remind you to stay on top of this.'" Gail also liked that the coaches "were able to provide some advice and consultation on our practices."

At the end of the day, Gail shared that "part of what makes us successful farmers is our ability to adapt to change." Gabe added, with farming, "you're never really done."

Elder Lessons Farms - Whitney

Whitney of Elder Lessons Farms was born in 1995 and has been farming for 6 years. Currently, she is on six acres with two in production. She was motivated to become a farmer because she "wanted to be self-sustaining and self-sufficient as much as possible." She also "wanted to be mostly outdoors." She went to college to study agribusiness and defined one part of success as being profitable. For Whitney, "for it to be successful and sustainable, it needs to be profitable."

With that said, right now, she feels "successful even though I'm not profitable. I feel successful getting produce to the market. Like just to be able to grow this and distribute this, I feel it's a success." Her farm had two main missions:

> Sustain the food system and sustain the land through organic food production. It's a very simple mission. And when I say sustain the food system, it's about producing and distributing food for the community and serving, just serving our role in the food system, local food system. Yeah. Because that's what I'm serving now. But you know, as we may expand, it may look like a regional food system, but right now, we're working to sustain this local food system.

Whitney had good experiences with service provider organizations in the past, from educational offerings from their Extension office to the Georgia Organics annual conference. One reason they were motivated to apply for the Accelerator was that, like many farmers, she found “lack of capital” to be a major barrier. The funding would make a huge difference. Another factor for her was that it was “a program available for organic farmers in Georgia. It was very specific . . . that drove me.” Whitney liked that they “were trying to get not just beginning farmers but experienced farmers,” and the program was advertising that “we're going to uplift you and empower you.”

Employees 1st Farms - Mitch

Mitch, from Employees 1st Farms, was born in 1986 and was in his sixth season. He was growing on about 7 acres and has cultivated a reputation as a farmer with a great employee training program.

Mitch, as will be detailed later in this report, had no prior experience before co-starting the farm with his business partners. Mitch defined success in a few ways. One way for him was that he feeds their community by treating his land and employees with respect so that he “could do this ethical thing . . . and make a living off of it.” He tied that into the “financial success of payroll, bills. And you know, you don't want to tie everything to money, but that is the reality of running a business.” Reflecting on the community of farmers and their eaters, success for him was also looking at “how many families we're feeding” and “it is cool that, collectively, we can still have an impact on the people who choose to shop and consume in this way.” Success in farming also meant for him that “we have a healthy work-life balance and . . . our employees have a healthy work-life balance.” Mitch found that there is:

> The mental health side of it. Finding a balance to where you still love what you're doing, where it doesn't eat you alive . . . Success is being able to find a balance in which we still love what we're doing and can find joy in what we're doing."

Farming, for Mitch "is a lot deeper than just throwing seeds in the ground."

Mitch had worked with service providers in the past, in particular with help in selling produce. At the start of COVID, the farm was caught flat-footed after they had planted 14,000 strawberries and then lost their planned market of a U-Pick.

> I talked to Rene, and I was like, hey, 'I need help. I've got so many strawberries. Can you help us?' And she's like, 'how many you got?' And literally, within 12 hours, she had moved everything we had. We went from being like, 'oh my God, what are we going to do? We're so screwed!' To being like, 'hey, we got to go out to the field! We need like 25 more pounds!' You know, it was incredible.

At first, his motivation to participate in Accelerator came from the fact that his wife let them know she applied and their farm got into the program. "I have to really credit my wife for that. To be honest with you, I didn't even know that she had applied for it." When Mitch learned about it, he assumed **"**we're just doing this business training class" and it was a thought experiment. What would you do with $10,000? He did not know the money was real. So then, he asked his wife, "what do we have to do? Like, what's the catch? Nothing, you were accepted into this program." Mitch let out a loud laugh and remembered saying to his wife, "thank you so much. Oh my gosh, this is incredible." Part of what can make a farm successful is the people you work and live with. Mitch reflected that "thankfully for her, she's always on her toes. She is. That's a beautiful thing in a partnership."

Once Mitch learned more, the other big motivator was that the Accelerator was building "a farmer network hub, especially for Georgia . . . it's just really just being a part of the network."

Growing Jobs Ag - Rachel and Marc

Rachel and Marc, of Growing Jobs Ag, were born in 1981 and 1979 and had been farming together for around 7 years. Marc, who "was raised on the farm," viewed himself as farming "30 plus years" with some breaks. One of those breaks was to study Animal Science, Rachel and Marc met each other while attending the same university.

When they started, their budget was a barrier to farming becoming a full-time career. Rachel remembered that "we did it just working full time, farming full time. So, everything had to come as the budget permitted." She said that they were "funding everything out of pocket" and literally watching some investments get gobbled up. Ruefully, she shared that "we plant, and we do all this stuff, and then deer will come through and eat like 60% of it." Another reason she said they kept working was "we needed insurance."

Recently, they have moved their farm to a new location and were growing on about an acre. Success for them was multi-faceted. Rachel said one layer of "success is on the basis of how many people we can provide veggies for" and that is part of what motivated her and Marc to move to where they are farming now.

> This space, it's 87% African American. It is a food desert. I mean, there's absolutely nothing going on. We talk to the people and they're like, man, you know, we've been wanting something that's fresh. We've been wanting fresh veggies.

Another layer of success for her is:

> The jobs. That is, I don't know if there's anything more important than having a community that is working and benefiting from, you know what I'm saying, a farm. I

> mean, that's huge. And having the commissioner and the mayor come to the farmer's market, and you know what I'm saying, people, send signs and stuff like that. Honestly, I think that is a success as well.

The last major layer of success for their farm is that profit is important. Marc shared that "profit for us meant that we can begin transitioning off grid" and that "I think you can't do anything unless you can just at least get to that, that bottom line when comes to operating costs." For Rachel, part of that meant that "our household is sustained too.

Rachel and Marc were focused on problem-solving and fixing bottlenecks in their operation - they viewed the coaching as a way to strategize and the capital as a way to pay for those strategies. This would help them improve their systems, and as Marc shared, they are always looking for "any system that needs to be put in place that will increase the longevity or that will decrease any kind of stoppage from seed to sale."

Make Better Acres - Delilah

Delilah, from Make Better Acres, was born 1986 and had been farming since 2009. She said noted that the farm was on a "54 acre piece of land" that she owned and "we grow on probably three acres." Delilah "didn't have a degree in agriculture" but instead "bachelor of fine arts in printmaking and sculpture metal sculpture." To learn how to farm, she said she "took the first farming opportunity I found, which happened to be in Georgia." Laughing, she remembered that "a friend of a friend of a friend's sister had land in Georgia and I was 22 and had nothing to lose. So, I moved directly to that land after college."

After 13 years of farming, success for Delilah means:

> I want to have time with my family and . . . I want to feel good. I don't want to be stressed. I don't want to be financially stressed. I don't want my partner to be stressed. I don't want our workers to be stressed. I just feel like if the farm can be going smooth and making enough of a living that we can keep going and pay everyone a living wage and

> have a decent life, where we're not sacrificing healthcare or education or other fundamental things, that would be success.

Delilah had interacted with many service organizations over the years, from FSA to NRCS to Extension, but she shared that "Georgia Organics was the one nonprofit that I've had sort of ongoing experience with over the whole time I've been in Georgia farming." Delilah was motivated, at first, to apply for the Accelerator because, they say with a laugh, "free money." It was also an easy application, so easy that Delilah wondered:

> Is this even real? Because I don't understand how they're getting any information from these questions. How am I going to be weighed against anyone else? Because the application is so basic. How could you even determine one recipient over another? So that was surprising to me.

It was also refreshing compared to how bureaucratic and paperwork-heavy some other program applications can be. Delilah was also interested in being able to "maximize the benefit of this money" by working with the coaches. She said the money was "a special thing," because she knew she would be able to invest time "thinking about ideas and thinking about what to do" and then actually spend the money to do it. "Honestly, it would've been really frustrating to have a consultant to be like, you really need to get this piece of equipment," and for Delilah to realize, "well, I can't afford that."

Description of the Service Providers

Below is background information to provide context on the service providers.

Table 2. Service providers

Name	Year they were born	Years providing service	Services provided	Education
Altman	1973	14 years	Healthcare, Organic certification, sales, policy	Journalism
Lisa	1995	Three years	Healthcare, production, sales	Sociology
Rene	1984	Four years	Planning, sales	History

Altman

Altman was born 1973 and had been a service provider for 14 years. The majority of the farmers he worked with were under 10 acres. Over time that role has had many different focuses. Currently, he served "farmers by advocating for better policies that will affect their success." In the past, he said that he had also worked with a "program that provided free health insurance for certain farmers, the Kaiser bridge program," acted in a more educational role working with farmers through a conference, and provided one-on-one "technical assistance for folks seeking organic certification."

As part of the Accelerator, he shared that he also saw his role as someone who figured out "who's a good farmer for accelerator" and, once farmers were in the program, acted as a "friend/coach" in their case manager role. He also placed a big emphasis on record keeping, with one of his end goals of the Accelerator being **"**to get a farmer ready to get their FSA paperwork so they can get that loan and be a farm owner" or be prepared for any other opportunity that would require paperwork. It's also a path to better work/life balance. Altman looked at vacation

as an indicator of success and thought that if it's "a family farm, the family is able to take a vacation all together at the same time." To do that, Altman added, "they have to have their finances in order to spend disposable income and go to wherever they want to go." Paperwork and accounting can play a huge role in that.

Altman thought "that service providers are idealistic. As are a lot of farmers." To be an effective service provider, he said it's important to think about "maybe tempering or combining that idealism with some realism to make it practical. To make our dreams and our ideas work."

Rene

Rene was born in 1984 and had been a service provider since 2019. She said that she worked with farms that were "anywhere from an urban farm that's less than an acre to probably 15 to 20 acres in vegetable production." Before her work as a service provider, she had worked on and managed farms.

Before Accelerator, her main focus was a farm-to-restaurant program. A mix of around 14 chefs and 17 farms, it was managing sales, relationships, workshops, and data. She found that part of her role as a service provider was that she could act for farmers as "a counselor, a coach, a parent, a therapist" and "give them perspective." The values she found that this brought was that "farmers get in their heads a lot and I think the ones that are receptive to having a different point of view or balancing ideas off of someone else, it just benefits them."

"The art of farming is time management," Rene said. She added that "there's always a billion things to do. It's just, how are you going to set these things up to flow in your workday?" She brings that same focus to time management when thinking of their service provider work.

She said that if you are going to meet with a farmer, “after you have the check-ins, you would allot time for note taking, and then you would send them an email with the notes.” She noted that just like on a farm, “not having enough time or resources, like personnel resources” can make the service provider work challenging and puts a large emphasis on being effective and efficient. For her, “that time and that capacity is important.”

For Rene, farmer success has “a couple of elements. I would say success to me is like both qualitative and quantitative.” She said there is the profit element, that “you're making enough money to sustain the business and maybe making some profit on top of that.” She also sees that there’s the work-life balance element of “being able to take at least a day off a week where you literally do not do farm work.” She added to that the mental health element that:

> The farmer would have to enjoy what they're doing. Not always running, you know, or being stressed out. I would say maybe growing something that gives joy that you know, like at least like a couple of things that bring joy that maybe just break even . . . something that encourages you to keep going out and doing that hard work, something that interests you like historically, personally. The need to continue to educate yourself or that urge to kind of educate yourself and improve on systems.

Lisa

Lisa was born in 1995 and shared that they “studied sociology in college. My final paper was on young and beginning farmers who come don't come from non-farming backgrounds.” Lisa had been a service provider for “just about three years.” Before that, they were a young and beginning farmer and spent time working on a farm. They viewed farmers as “food system leaders and they're educators. Farmers are educators, philosophers, scientists, business, people, artists. The list goes on.” They see a major part of their role as helping to create “the next

generation of food system leaders." Reflecting on what farmers do and how service providers can support them, they shared that:

> You need people that can actually lead us into the future and help us feed the country in a new way that is sustainable and leaning towards being community based. You can't really have that without people that can help you get there.

They have worked providing health care, creating sales opportunities, and organizing workshops. They also co-developed "the Accelerator application and scoring guide and executing the first-year onboarding." They shared that "I like data a lot."

One of the workshops they organized was their first time working with Extension, an experience they did not have as a farmer. They remembered that "my experience as a farmer, being a farm worker, you didn't really get access to those types of conversations with people." Working with Extension was a good way for them to build their network of service providers and other farmers.

They saw an important piece to being a service provider and a case manager for Accelerator was to provide a "kind of a status check." They said that it was an opportunity to check in and ask "did you have anything you wanted to talk to me about and creating space in general for them to share what they need." Lisa said they are working to become "a bit of an expert in facilitation." They also worked with farmers on generative conflict, something "that has become really important to me in my personal and work life over the past few years." They see it as an opportunity "to seek understanding with people when conflict arises" because conflict will arise on a farm or at an organization.

When they think of a successful farm, they see different farming communities view success in different ways:

> I feel like a lot of the black farmers that I have seen their answers to this type of question, or I've talked to them about it, it's more about supporting the community. And to be honest, I feel a lot of the white farmers that I have talked to about this, it's more focused on the like individual success of the farm itself. Financially and where profit comes into that.

They also stressed the importance that "whatever reason that you're farming, they all deserve support because they're all doing different types of public service and educational work." They also worked with farmers to remember that farming is a job. They know "that farming's also a lifestyle, but I think it's important to remember that it's a job that you're doing and that you can be a dynamic person who has more to do in your life than just farming." That means looking for balance so the farm does not consume you - "I think if you are doing well, hopefully, you have space to take on a hobby or get a drink with a friend like once or twice a week and go to your cousin's wedding."

Themes

From the analysis of the data, four themes were established. Those four themes were: consistent challenges, networks, program success, and program polishing. Within those four themes, 7 factors emerged: knowledge, infrastructure, soil, labor, farmer networks, service provider networks, and informal education.

Consistent Challenges

Rachel put it plainly. **"**You work, work, work" she said, and then "you get so tired that when you do get home, you don't want to do anything but . . . eat, sleep, and that's it." That tired feeling came from the simple fact that farming presented consistent challenges. Those challenges, as Delilah says, meant that as she farmed, she recognized that "just the rigors of farming was difficult." Part of that comes from the fact that those challenges and rigors evolved

as the farm evolved. Mitch found that things "could be different every year for five years in a row." Mitch saw that only consistency was change and that "consistency is hard." Delilah reflecting on the challenges of farming over time, said:

> In those first couple years, we have a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm . . . I remember at the beginning being like, I cannot ever imagine burning out. I love this. I love how hard it is. I love it. <laugh> I never want to stop. I love the challenges. I love feeling sore. I love it. I love it. And I don't feel, I do love it still, but like that burnout, it's almost like for some people it might happen in the first three to five years. For some of us, it might happen in the 10 to 15. It's not like, just because you get past that initial hump, that you're safe. Right. It almost gets harder as it gets easier. As those initial, as the low-hanging fruit become more complex, more nuanced, and harder to see as the rest of the life stuff happens. It becomes those investments. Those fixes become like, like I can't just upgrade the truck with a van and be satisfied anymore. I need to upgrade the van with an ice van, you know, and that becomes more expensive and more stressful. And now there's debt. And, you know, and you're also coming closer to the age that you're not going to be farming anymore. <laugh> . . . there is an interesting way that it gets almost harder as it gets, as some things get easier.

Knowledge

While some farmers had formal training in agriculture, all pointed to the fact that farming is a continual process of learning. Gabe found that only by "living through the seasons on a farm" can you start to get the knowledge and experience you need. Mitch shared that he entered into farming with "a kind of blind ignorance with no farming experience at all" and, even after living through a few seasons, that he and his partners "still feel like we're very green. I don't know if that ever goes away." Just like Gabe learned it by living it, Mitch reflected that "we just started working our way through, embracing our failures and successes, and trying to continue to mold our game plan. I mean, that's still happening now."

When Whitney started, she worked with "a collective of farmers where we also started to use the land to grow, but we really didn't know what we were doing." Like Mitch, Whitney said a challenge was "just a lack of education on how to run a farm." Now that Whitney was more

settled and experienced, new and inexperienced farmers came to her - “a lot of folks come to me and they want to begin and don't even know where to begin.” Delilah recognized that for farmers that are just starting out or starting out on new land, “we're starting our farm when we're not experienced and knowledgeable and continually improving it here and there and scrapping it together.” Even for Delilah, who now has years of experience and was viewed as a leader in the farming community, she said she can “spend a lot of time trying to reinvent the wheel because I didn't benefit from that agricultural education early on.” Without that educational support, she sees that “it's like sink or swim out there for small farms.”

Lisa saw this lack of formal education and knowledge among the farmers they serve. They said that “a lot of the farmers that we work with nowadays, also come from non-farming backgrounds.” That non-farming background meant you might think you have an idea of what farming is like, but, like Delilah shared about herself, “I actually had no idea what farming would entail or what it would be like.” Delilah wanted to live without money, rarely interact with people, and live in a rural area where everyone else was a farmer. As she started to farm, she realized how far off base she was. She had started to run a business that needed to be financially sustainable, was mostly selling direct-to-consumer at farmers markets that involved a lot of people interaction, and her rural area did not feature a lot of produce farmers – or other farmers in general.

Not knowing what it meant to run a farm did not stop any of the farmers from starting. Whitney had “a lack of education on how to run a farm.” Gabe and Gail dove in, with Gabe reflecting that “we were self-taught, so we learned everything that we knew from reading books and YouTube videos.” Gabe said that he and Gail also took other jobs to learn more about the farmer/chef relationship:

> We were working at farm-to-table restaurants because we knew we wanted to sell to chefs once we got the farm started and really producing. We got into that to make money while we were starting the farm, but equally important to learn the industry. We were kind of getting an idea for what chefs like to buy and how they like to buy and how to feel. We just developed real comfort with the restaurant setting to the point where now we walk into a restaurant, talk to the chef, and talk to some of the servers.

Mitch remembered that "every little thing that we had to do on this farm was like Google or how do you do this YouTube?" He was serious that it was every little thing, from "changing the oil on the tractor, changing transmission fluid, replacing air filters, changing breaks on the farm vehicle."

Mitch's timeline of learning and scrapping it together, doing everything he could to not sink, was non-stop problem solving. First, he knew they needed a greenhouse so they ordered a greenhouse. He remembered that a semi-truck rumbled up to their farm and dropped it "off in our driveway with a little booklet on how to build it. I'd never built anything much more than a birdhouse. We stood there and looked at each other for a minute. Well, what are we going to do?" He Googled and asked around and got it built. But then, the next question was how does he water the plants in the greenhouse? So, again he Googled and asked around. This time, he remembered that he walked into an irrigation supply store and simply asked "Hey, how do I water my greenhouse? And they're like, oh, I mean, you put drip tape down." Which, of course, led to the next question - what's drip tape? It went on and on, each new answer leading to a new question or questions.

That constant learning cycle was one challenge of business management. Delilah said that farmers need "to do the homework that we have to do to run a business and make time for that. The challenge is making time to do my homework." You needed to be able to identify why you made choices and in what context. Maybe it's due to resources? Or the way land looked

when you inherited it? Once you've done that work, you can start to do the homework to improve your situation.

Facing business challenges is one area where a lack of knowledge can slow your business down as the needs continue to change. Most farmers gravitated towards QuickBooks to solve accounting challenges. Gail remembered that they saw "the program was called Intuit, so I figured, oh, I'll just be able to figure it out." With that, Gail began their tumultuous journey with accounting software. She knew recordkeeping was important. Without guidance or experience, she said it quickly escalated from keeping no records to "making a mess of our books." To clean up that mess, she moved to spreadsheets. And that was a good solution until it was tax time. Gail looked at her spreadsheet records and realized, "I don't really know - what have I done?" Tax time was a major motivator to learn. Whitney remembered looking at their books and being baffled about how she would "get my books ready for tax time." If you don't take the time to learn, those problems pile up. As Gabe reflected, "if you let things just pile up for too long, then bad things just happen . . . no real business can stay a good business if they're unorganized and out of control." Learning new systems to get organized, and staying committed to making new knowledge a priority, can help mitigate many of the challenges faced on farms.

The need for knowledge is important at the start of farming, building and maintaining the business, and when deciding how to transition out of business. Delilah, thinking of the future of farming and that the current generation of farmers she works with will someday decide to retire, added that there:

> Can't just be the assistance for farms like this in the very beginning and then never again. It needs to happen in the teenage years. It needs to happen at the milestone age. And then, honestly, it needs to happen to farmers who need to start thinking about farm transitions.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure of a farm, from plumbing to buildings to trucks to tools, was both a benefit and a barrier. When it worked, it made everything work better. But when it didn't, it was nothing but issues. Every farmer, like Gabe, found themselves learning every part of their on-farm infrastructure. Gabe remembered learning "proper watering techniques, setting up irrigation, learning different components of irrigation pieces and PVC and all that . . . learning what crops did . . . how to manage pests." There was also the challenge he faced of learning all the tools:

> Different tools like angle grinders and impact drills and different socket wrenches, and how to change a belt on a push mower, all these little things. Little technical things that you could pay someone to do, or you could learn how to do yourself.

This is an area where a lack of knowledge and infrastructure overlap. Whitney found that her main tools, like her lawn mower, tiller, and weed wacker, were sometimes being used in ways they weren't designed for. This increased the normal wear and tear that comes with any tools being used on a farm. She said that "I had to take all three of them to the shop, multiple times in a couple of years. I would love to be able to know small engine repair. I need to take a class on small engine repair."

Sometimes, like for Marc, you have a well but the well isn't fully operational. Some things worked just OK enough to get a job done, but worked so poorly that it was impossible to do the job in an efficient or effective way. His pump, he said, "it was such a small pump; we can only irrigate one portion of the area at a time." The infrastructure became a bottleneck.

Delilah's initial, and some ongoing, challenges were also the infrastructure that was just OK enough to get a job done. Duct tape was a theme and a common tool/solution to hold things

together, especially things that she said might have been “good enough for a beginning stage, but not necessarily for 10 years” of farming. With time in short supply and a never-ending list of challenges to be met, she found that the temporary solutions just kind of became permanent:

> You think of an extension cord and a temp pole as temporary, but, if you never actually have the resources to make the permanent solution, you know, to put the permanent solution in place, then a temporary solution becomes your long-term permanent solution and that sucks.

She added that when “not all of the spaces and not all of the equipment is working . . . or set up for what we need to do things properly or what we would like to do in the future” then that compounded issues and made it hard to “grow properly or expand properly.”

Transportation was another example of trying to make do with something that almost worked well and then, even when it was upgraded, struggling. Delilah said she started off with a “blue truck, which really wasn't even good enough then.” Slowly, that was upgraded because it didn’t have AC and wasn’t big enough. The upgrade was a van - that still wasn’t really good enough but did have AC. She noted that the upgrade was “25 years old and rickety and having all sorts of maintenance issues . . . definitely good enough for years two through five, but now it's no longer big enough . . . It's not good enough now.” The needs changed over time, especially as the farm changed and grew. She saw that with that growth came “a clear progression of infrastructure and tools and that we need more better, more reliable stuff.”

Land management systems require infrastructure. A major component of farming for Gabe was “dealing with grass.” Without the right systems and tools, Whitney said that land management “is a task that takes time.” She then laughed and added, “it's just like, oh God, more grass . . . and I had to figure out a way to just manage everything.” Each tool brought pros and cons - time, money, maintenance - and the need to learn how to best utilize them.

Soil

Walking onto land for the first time, farmers can see the potential. When Mitch placed his hands into the soil of his land, or tried to, he learned that he had "terrible compacted clay" and felt the lack of potential. The health of a farm rests on the health of the soil, and knowing how to maintain and build soil health was a consistent challenge and long-term commitment.

One challenge, like for Gail, was that their first land was a rental. It's hard to know how much to invest in soil that may not be yours to work with next season. Altman saw "investing in soil health, and that's compost or soil tests and good analysis and feedback on the soil health" as a barrier that Accelerator would help farms meet. For Altman, soil health was one of the key indicators of "whether a farm's going to survive."

When discussing their challenges, farmers rarely mentioned soil health as a concern. Yet, when we see the data on the benefits the program delivered, soil came up again and again.

Labor

Not knowing anything about farming when starting to farm is a challenge. It also gave farmers perspective, allowing that challenge to become a strength when hiring from a labor force that also did not know anything about farming. The farmer remembered that feeling! For Mitch, "every little thing that we've had to do, we've had to learn from scratch." He said that meant he went from "having no clue how to do it, to having to learn how to do it because you can't afford to pay everybody to do everything." Meeting the challenge of hiring from an inexperienced labor force, Mitch will say to their team:

> It's okay if you don't know how to do it. I also didn't know how to do this two years ago or three years ago. And now I'm very good at it. You can learn how to do this and become very good at it very quickly.

A labor force that doesn't know what it's doing can take a toll on a farm, but it also takes a physical toll on the bodies of those doing the work. When farming, Marc shared that "you do some dumb stuff out there" with your body. That dumb stuff can cause long-term issues for your back, eyes, legs, etc. Marc reflected on the importance of "having an understanding of just how the body works, how to lift properly, muscle mechanics, what you can do to strengthen and stretch while you're working and combining the two." If not, you might find yourself in a similar place as Marc, constantly having to twist and turn in certain ways because of how your body feels after years of labor that could have been done more safely. Marc, while stretching in his seat, continued to stress the importance of "taking care of the body, how to bend properly, how to squat properly, how to lift properly. Those things that we don't typically do . . . you know, this is one of the most dangerous jobs."

To lead a crew, you have to lead by example, not just stewarding the land but also stewarding your body. Thinking of the titles farmers give themselves or are given, Rachel said that "we give ourselves these titles like land steward and it sounds so important. It sounds like I really need to be taken this seriously - but you can't steward anything" if you are not stewarding yourself and "learning the importance of that mental, physical, emotional wellbeing." Rachel knew that "a lot of people want to get away from that hustle bustle of the city and traffic and all of that and just kind slow down," but she warned that you could start farming and realize it's all hustle.

Delilah reflected that*:*

> In those first couple years, we have a lot of energy and a lot of enthusiasm . . . I remember at the beginning being like, I cannot ever imagine burning out. I love this. I love how hard it is. I love it. <laugh> I never want to stop. I love the challenges. I love feeling sore. I love it. I love it. And I don't feel, I do love it still, but like that burnout, it's almost like for some people it might happen in the first three to five years. For some of us, it might happen in the 10 to 15. It's not like, just because you get past that initial hump, that you're safe. Right. It almost gets harder as it gets easier. As those initial, as the low-hanging fruit become more complex, more nuanced, and harder to see as the rest of the life stuff happens. It becomes those investments. Those fixes become like, like I can't just upgrade the truck with a van and be satisfied anymore. I need to upgrade the van with an ice van, you know, and that becomes more expensive and more stressful. And now there's debt. And, you know, and you're also coming closer to the age that you're not going to be farming anymore. <laugh> . . . there is an interesting way that it gets almost harder as it gets, as some things get easier.

It's hard to find people to work the land. Whitney, when looking, found a "lack of labor." She needed it for the basics of "just getting plants planted, harvesting and just production in general." She said she just "needed more hands." This challenge of getting those hands out to the fields has been consistent for Delilah as well. Hiring, maintaining, and firing labor are all challenges.

Lisa provided insight into the unique labor challenges that come with farming:

> People working on farms is a really interesting space because working on a farm, isn't like a lot of other jobs, especially if you live there, but even if you don't. A lot of times, you're at the farmer's homes and the babies are around and the dogs. It's oftentimes a couple and there's the conflict of personal lives.

That conflict arose on farms for various reasons, from personal to professional. Lisa believed that when that inevitable conflict happened, you needed to engage it. They said that "to be a good employer, you have to be able to communicate and facilitate hard conversations" to create a good environment and maintain your employees because "it's just a better business investment to be a good employer."

Lisa saw that a lack of documentation and paperwork made communication hard and caused conflict on farms because "a lot of the farmers have never gotten a lot of stuff out of their

head and on paper." This meant expectations may be unclear for the farm and their labor force, making communication difficult for everyone. Lisa finds importance in being clear with what others might see as common sense, sharing they think a farmer should document for employees "what time are you expected to show up" to "if you need to know what our rules are on like drugs or alcohol, what attire to wear, or like how to plant a specific thing or what our daily flow looks like" and that helps make it clearer for the farmer and the staff.

Networks

Through farmer and service provider networks, informal and nonformal education was highlighted again and again. Networks also changed drastically due to COVID. Altman saw the struggle of reduced in-person interactions as they had been without "social networking for going on three years. No conference. Very limited program delivery." The Accelerator felt this struggle. Due to COVID, Georgia Organics was not able to visit the farms during the selection process nor were case managers or coaches while they provided service. The farmers in the Accelerator were only able to meet up as a group using Zoom. This reduced what they could see and reflect on, taking away an integral part of in-person and on-farm relationship building. It's hard, some might say impossible, for farmers and service providers to get the whole scope of a farm without walking it together versus seeing it through a screen. The community aspect of the farm was important for these farmers, and the opportunity for the Accelerator cohorts to become a new community or integrate into existing communities was greatly diminished.

Farmer Networks

"They are my backbone," Whitney said when reflecting on her network. She found immense value in that fact that "we all support each other. We're all supporting each other's

missions because we're concerned about each other's needs." She said they look out for each other and work "to uplift each other and empower each other and do things collectively." They purchase collectively, work in the field collectively, and are beginning to sell collectively. She added that:

> I call 'em my farmers for everything and anything. And even the farmers who aren't my core circle of farmers, even the people who kind of fall outside of that circle, who are just wanting to learn from us and being in communion with us. You know, they're part of my mission too, because to sustain the mission to sustain the food system, it's not just about my farm sustaining the food system. It's about us working together and empowering the people who want to farm because that's what's going to create a sustainable food system. If we're all farming and we are all doing good, the people are going to benefit from that. The whole food system's going to benefit from that. So not just uplifting my farm, but uplifting others is crucial to that mission. That's everything because otherwise you're going to feel alone. You're going to feel like this is a dead cause and you're going to lose inspiration. I mean, there's been times too where I was like, what am I doing this for? But then I talked to my moral support and I was like, ah, that's why. That's why I'm doing this. It's everything to me. And I think it's everything to the other farmers too. If you're in it alone, you're going to start to feel discouraged.

Informal Education with Farmer Networks

Farmer networks provided essential informal education and support to and with each other out of necessity. Before people came to Whitney to learn, Whitney worked "alongside elder farmers in the community, helping them with their properties and learning through them." That reason is why Lisa went to work on a farm - "I wanted to learn from the farmers about how to farm."

Gail, sharing about how interacting with other farmers is not an issue for her and Gabe, said "we love talking." Gabe knew that "some people are into farming because they don't like talking to people and it's not a skill that they have." Lisa also reflected that "I think that

farmers, in general, are like more plant people than people people a lot of times." For farmers who want to learn but might not want social interaction, they still have plenty of options to learn from other farmers. They can YouTube video after YouTube video of farmers shooting footage out on their farms. Gail and Gabe have their own YouTube channel. Marc has gone to social media or posted a problem on Facebook. Farmers also learned and expanded their networks by reading books written by and for farmers. Gabe pointed to "the lean style of farming that we learn from Ben Hartman" who wrote the influential book *The Lean Farm*. Mitch was influenced to get their start by the books of Jeff Poppen, also known as the Barefoot Farmer.

It can be tough to build a network. Mitch, along with not knowing anything about farming, also didn't really know any farmers. To solve that, he went to where other farmers are, the farmers market, and started reaching out. Mitch said he "just went around and talked to farmers. We just went around and met people." He shared their plans to farm and started to visit the farmers he met as market. Basically, he said, you "keep hanging around and keep talking, keep connecting, keep sharing experiences and stuff together. And then relationships just seem to kind of build right." By his first spring, the farm was selling at that market. The farmers had given him time, knowledge, and a now a place to sell. Perhaps unspoken, they had also given him their trust to be a part of their network.

The network became more important as time became more limited, for all sorts of reasons. At the start of farming, Gabe found that "time was a big resource, we had an unlimited supply of time." As the farm grew, so did their family and they had their first and then second child. Gail, smiling with one of their kids bouncing in their arms, shared that "time moves differently when you have kids." With less time to watch a YouTube playlist or dig

through stacks of books, the informal education provided by the farmers in the network - and the speed they can get a response - became more valuable. A quick text to a friend or putting another farmer on speakerphone in the greenhouse could solve a lot of problems efficiently and effectively. Delilah knows that they "can call my farming friends any time of the day and ask them, you know, a quick question here or there for free." For Mitch, it's a text that says "hey, I got a question about this. Is there a good time I could give you a call?" It's often to the more experienced farmers that they turn to for advice. Mitch said that "we are the kind of the young bucks in this game. We got other friends who have been doing it for 12, 15, 20 years. Those are the people I lean on." Whitney, laughing, said "I call my elders but, you know, I'm sure they get tired of me."

Marc remembered that the help they received for some of their earlier infrastructure challenges really came from other farmers in their network. In that process, Marc began to "fully grasp the knowledge is out there from people that have tons more experiences and tons more failures. And they have a lot more to give, you know?" Each farmer mentioned how they learned from other farmers and paid it forward by freely sharing knowledge with other farmers in their networks. Delilah solved challenges by reaching out to other farmers in her network to get advice on tools, seeds, and systems.

Lisa found that farmers, "the majority of the time, even if they're talking to other farmers, they're going to be educating people." They said that farmers will tell each other "I do know a farmer who tried it, and this is what happened. I know a farmer who tried this strategy." There is very little information hoarding as the farmers supported each other to be successful. Lisa pointed out that that part of the job of a farm is always that of an informal educator and that

“farmers, just selling their goods at a marketplace, are educating us about what can grow in Georgia.”

Lisa also saw the farmers learn by seeing other people be successful. That might happen at a farm visit, a workshop, or over social media. Service providers supported that by having space for farmers to network with each other at events. Even just walking the fields at an on-farm workshop, Lisa knew that “you're going to talk to the person that you're walking with.” Whitney also found value in those connections at events because farmers will share challenges, like sales or raising a bed, and another farmer will offer solutions, like a phone number for a buyer or a piece of equipment to work the fields with. Whitney also said that “farmers talk all the time.”

Rene found farm visits to be essential informal farmer education. She said that the chance to see “a different point of view or balance ideas off of someone else, it just benefits” the farmers. Visually, what a farm looked like communicated a lot to other farmers. Rene gave the example that “if you see farms that use landscape fabric and you're like, wow, this doesn't look like my farm that's freaking covered in weeds” then you’ve picked up a lesson in land management even if that was not the focus of the workshop or visit. She continued to say “that's what farmer to farmer does . . . you really respect that farm. You've been to their operation, then you're going to be more open and receptive to having their feedback or hearing their perspective on your farm issues.” That is the importance, Gail said, of “the social aspect of the farming community.” Always learning and sharing with and for each other.

Reaching out to other farmers, especially experienced farmer, might seem nerve-wracking for a new farm, but Gabe says “we just ask 'em. How do you do this? And they tell us. And then they'll ask us how we do something. We tell them, and generally, everyone gets something out of it.” It’s not just technical things, like how to hill potatoes. Gail found those

networking opportunities a great way to “commiserate,” be it about a lack of sleep or an abundance of cherry tomatoes. Marc relies on that type of farmer “network actually a lot to understand what other people are doing and how they're doing. How they're handling failures and situations and things like that.”

Delilah is part of a co-op that was:

> Really an idea that myself and another farmer had talking one day after seeing what this farming community needs and what a customer community in Atlanta needs and sort of wanting to join those two needs. Which dovetailed, so now there's a lot more farmer collaboration. But it sort of was born out of necessity and all of us having the same complaints and the same needs and pressuring, pressuring non-profits and organizations to meet those needs. Not always having them be met and then creating them ourselves if we need to, the best that we can.

Rachel was working on expanding their farm’s farmer network “as far as farmers that want to work with us and that are reaching out for that type of co-op type relationship.” Mitch and the farmers in their network also worked together to go in on a big order to purchase cooperatively or just ask “what can I do to offer some help?” Marc saw Extension, and specifically their office spaces, as a place that could support cooperatives and cooperative purchases. Marc said that:

> It would be nice to be able to grab bulk cover crop from the Extension agency . . . I wish they had like those type of resources where we could just get a couple 50-pound bags, run up there, pay for it. I don't even, it doesn't even need to be free. I just would like to have that access instead of paying those shipping costs.

The last farmer network to focus on, and arguably the most important, are the partnerships on the farm. Mitch credits their farm’s partnerships and dynamic for their success. “When you have the right group of people, it's a really cool thing because everyone's strengths can live and then you don't have to worry about your weaknesses so much.” Entering their sixth

year together, “we're just to the point where we know and trust that everyone is in their lane and it just functions.”

Service Provider Networks

Service providers play an integral role in the lives of farmers. Lisa reflected that the relationship between a service provider and farmer was positive when “the farmers feel supported” and there were opportunities to build long-term, dynamic relationships to participate in different projects over a long time period. Gabe resonated with service providers when Gabe can tell the service providers were **“**very interested in understanding our farmers.” Altman hoped that as service providers built trust with farmers and showed interest, that over time that benefits the farmers through increased “financial stability and increased social networking and connectivity. That there is decreased stress.” Lisa also thought a long-term relationship built on trust is “positive because the farmers feel supported.” Over time, as the dynamics of the farm changed, the dynamics of services offered may have changed as well and Lisa hoped the farmers wanted to “participate in different projects with us.” Along with that, farmers talked with other farmers and built a network of farmers for service providers to work with since Lisa saw that, for service providers, “it's hard for us to have the capacity to expand our networks because it takes a lot of effort in relationship building to find new farmers that have not ever heard of us before.”

The service provider network mentioned by the farmers included Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) like Georgia Organics, FoodWell Alliance, the National Young Farmers Coalition, Southeastern African American Farmer Organic Network, Rural Advancement Foundation International, Augusta Locally Grown, and the Athens Land Trust There were also land grant educational institutions like the

University of Georgia Extension, Fort Valley University Extension, and Tuskegee University Extension. The farmers also engaged with governmental organizations like the NRCS and the FSA. There were also the independent businesses that do a combination of selling and educating like irrigation and soil amendment companies and the consultants who offered specialties like QuickBooks or wholesale readiness. It's important to note that some service providers, including Georgia Organics and NRCS (through its cost-share programs), can provide monetary support. Extension is a type of service provider that cannot provide direct monetary support.

Each played a unique role in supporting the farmer while also being supported by the farmers. NGOs/CBOs and Extension provided education, community connection, and support service and needed the farmers to be engaged with these educational offerings and services for metrics and programming - without the farmers, they would not have jobs. NRCS and FSA provided farmers with needed conservation infrastructure and funding and needed the farmers to work with them for their funding to be spent in meaningful and impactful ways - without the farmers, they would not have jobs. The stores that supplied everything a farmer needed to work their land also needed the farmer to purchase those supplies - without the farmers, they would not have jobs. With all that being said, for most service providers, it was more than about getting a paycheck - they enjoyed the interaction and the education, the opportunities to work alongside someone to improve their operations, and the positive impact they viewed it had on the community.

Informal and Nonformal Education with Service Provider Networks

Community-based and informal or nonformal education was a theme that ran throughout the service provider network. Almost every organization had at least one, but often many,

employees who went out in the field and worked alongside the farmer. That support was appreciated. One way many farmers learned new information was through service providers setting up events.

The farmers seemed to view each organization as having distinct roles. Georgia Organics and their ability to have an annual conference, one that featured farmer and service provider led workshops, was an important place for the farmers to learn and connect with each other. It was mentioned multiple times how important those opportunities to learn and connect were. Delilah shared that "for a long time, I didn't know of any or many other farms." She met "people at these conferences and I discovered I was sort of reinventing the wheel after I met some people who were also doing the same thing." She added that "my brain gets all tingly and excited during those types of networking, educational, interfacing with other farmers, talking shop, raising problem, solving times." Conference was also where Delilah said she became "farming literate. Where I've even learned terms. Learned science terms. Learned industry terms. Become familiar with things that I just otherwise, not having gone to school for farming and not being from Georgia, would probably not know about." The service provider network provided the foundation for Delilah to build her farmer network and knowledge base. Marc also called out the education and networking of that conference as important to his farm's network. Mitch saw that "you go to these different little networking events and whatnot and meet people and kind of see the circles grow." Gabe, at the conference, "learned more from other farmers than anything."

Extension, NRCS, and FSA all offer educational components but, for the most part, farmers relied on them more for foundational services like soil testing (Extension), wells and high tunnels (NRCS), and loans (FSA). They also viewed the paperwork component of the NRCS and FSA programs to be a real barrier. For Delilah, the paperwork and bureaucracy felt:

> Like every step is a stutter or a hiccup . . . honestly, when you apply for something and it's just, even moderately annoying, that is in itself discouraging. Because I don't have that much time to spend doing anything that's not essential. And I definitely don't want to spend the time that I'm doing non-essential things to be annoying, irritating, or frustrating.

For most farmers in this group, there were some institutional reasons Extension provided baseline support but was not always seen as an educational resource. Delilah was not the only farmer interviewed who did not have an Agricultural and Natural Resources Agent in their county - and that's been a consistent challenge over their ten years of farming. Marc and Rachel also did not have an ANR agent in their county.

Delilah would visit the local "Extension office to get [soil tests] literally shipped to the right lab" but not for advice. The farmers, like Marc, really valued the soil tests. Marc felt that if you "haven't done a soil test and you want to plant, that's technically a bottleneck because you don't know what nutrients your plant needs."

Whitney worked with Extension beyond the soil tests and "reached out to them to come out and teach a class. So, they had hosted a class on organic production." Whitney had relied on Extension publications and "the UGA planting chart." Mitch had not had much interaction with Extension. Marc worked with Tuskegee, but not their local land grant, and was "involved with their program where they did some tests for three years at the farm on different organic products."

For service provider organizations, consistency of staff may be their biggest challenge. During the Accelerator program, Georgia Organics went through staff transitions and was not

always able to maintain consistency with the farmers. As we've seen, other service providers like Extension do not always have consistent staff in all their service areas.

One way that staff transitions, and the interruption in services that can cause a farmer, had been mitigated was through the service provider networks working together. Georgia Organics would host a conference and have Extension personnel there that might work in the soil labs or somewhere else, giving the farmers the opportunity to expand their network past their Georgia Organics and their county Agent and be able to access lab personnel. This had worked for Delilah, who by meeting the Extension specialist at the conference and learning "what their specialty is at UGA, I've been able to access the things I would still be accessing through Extension but not through an extension office agent." This gave Delilah multiple touchpoints. Extension offices have hosted farm-to-school workshops in their offices for the Georgia Organics Farm2School staff, providing opportunities for the farmers to meet more service providers and be exposed to different opportunities for support in the state.

Altman found value in networking across NGO/CBO service provider organizations. Organizations that he interacted with included the Organic Trade Association, Southern Sustainable Working Group, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Rural Advancement Foundation International, Farm Aid, Kitchen Table Advisors, the Southwest Georgia Project, and Pasa Sustainable Agriculture. Networking and conversing with those groups provided Altman with moments to "learn about other orgs and their struggles." With the organizations he had learned to trust, he said he started to "copy and paste their ideas all the time."

Noticeably absent from Altman's list was Extension, NRCS, or FSA. Reflecting on working, or not always working with those groups, Altman shared that it's not always been a

priority to collaborate. Sometimes, an outside organization puts together a training for farmers and Altman shared that "I have messed up . . . we show up and then the Extension agent, cause we're in their office, is like what's going on? And I'm like, oof, ow. I didn't see that" opportunity to collaborate or communicate. Thinking on how often they've partnered with Extension over the years, Altman said it was "very, very rarely."

Altman does see the value in collaborating with Extension and other non-NGO/CBO groups. They remember when UGA Extension "used to have this 10 or 20 member task force or whatever of Extension agents that were dabbling in organics." Altman saw that as:

> A really important project because we don't know about them that much. And they don't know about us that much. And by us, I don't mean our organization. I mean, um, the, just some of the very fundamentals of organic production, like what's OMRI listed. You know, some Extension agents are hostile to when an organic farmer walks in their room and hearing that, I guess it reinforces my own biases. I'm not biased against Extension, but I don't consider them to be allies for our farmers. I mean it's hard enough like even with an organization like NRCS, like soil health, it's part of their mission and service. And, many of them are allies and even more of them are not. It's unfortunate and um, there's another more negative word than that. There is an unfortunate cultural disconnect and I'm guilty of it.

Once anyone, farmer or service provider, has a real or perceived negative encounter with someone at an organization, it could be hard to re-dedicate more time and energy to that group. Altman had found a group of service providers they knew they could trust and were on the same page about organic agriculture. Smiling, Altman said that "the choir is right there, and they sing such lovely tunes."

NGOs/CBOs also had a role in building trust between farmers and other service providers who may have shown real or perceived bias against small-scale or sustainable farmers, especially if those farmers were farmers of color. Lisa thought that an important role service providers can provide was in "helping people trust that the institutions can be positive and recognizing the role

that places like the USDA have made it so that people don't trust them." Of course, if the service providers don't trust each other or work with each other, it will be hard for them to help the farmers build trust across networks.

Part of the work of being a service provider and building the network, shared Altman, was being committed to "long-term, slow, incrementalism, which is a struggle. It's really, really hard, but that is necessary for this type of work." That and, he added, just "showing up." Lisa also saw how consistency helped build trust and relationships. A big factor for them was "just the fact that I've been here for three years now." Trust was key for the farmers to engage with the service providers. "I would need to trust them," Delilah says, "and I would not just need to trust their intentions, but I would need to trust their experience."

Program Success

That trust was what led to much of the Accelerator's success. The farmers trusted and learned from the coaches and, putting that knowledge into action, used the funding to accelerate past multiple challenges. The trust allowed the farmers to explore the why behind recommendations being made and challenges on their farms. Whitney said she was "able to obtain capital to keep going," and that capital combined with coaching and capital was "a confidence builder." Whitney had gone from a farmer with very little foundational knowledge to, when thinking of new farmers coming to their farm to ask questions, said with a smile "send 'em to me because I might be able to give 'em some game."

Knowledge

Knowledge gained and knowledge shared may have been the biggest success of the program. In their exit interviews, farmers are asked if they have shared knowledge with other

farmers outside of the cohort. Lisa reported that, of the people they interviewed, “I think every one of them has said yes . . . That's knowledge being transferred.” Whitney was **“**going to pass on to the people that I'm teaching everything I'm learning about.” Whitney added that it “is going to go beyond me. This doesn't just stop here. It's pretty eternal.” That transfer of knowledge is so critical because, as Delilah found, for “a young farmer and a beginning farmer, there's a learning curve. A steep learning curve to actually producing and selling enough to make a living.”

Speaking of the benefits to his farm, Marc said it was “the education, networking, and building a better farm network . . . because farming is nothing more than just consistent learning education.” The learning was “a constant process,” Mitch said, and “that is what kind of makes it fun and interesting. It's always evolving.”

“It turns out it wasn't just the financial aspect of the scholarship,” Gail said. For her, “there was something even arguably more valuable than the money they gave us was the access we had to those consultants . . . that was honestly more helpful, I would say than the financial part.” This was consistent with the farmers - the money made a difference, and they would not have been able to make some of the changes they made without it, but it was the education that made the biggest impact.

The coaches, Gabe shared, gave “us a lot of good advice. A lot of systems that we can try over a couple years to work into the business.” Just as importantly, they also connected them with other farms. Gabe and Gail have already gone to visit, talk, and learn with and from those farms, like Employee First Farms, as well.

Working with the coaches allowed experienced farmers to bounce ideas off a trusted source and gain new perspectives. Altman saw his role as a case manager as facilitating that

“important space of just bouncing ideas. Literally. the farmer is verbalizing ideas, just putting them out there and having a sounding board.” That space, he said, creates “the time for them to deeply consider their decision.” Whitney liked that it gave time for brainstorming and that “it was comforting to know that somebody needed to, wanted to bring me to the next level and then for, or in order to do that, they had to understand where I was at and what I needed.” Whitney added, “that's the education that I wouldn't really have gotten elsewhere.”

“You need a little incentive,” Delilah said, “or like someone to help you make time.” For Delilah, that time to check in was “such a huge resource.” Bouncing ideas and making the time, it forced Delilah to:

> Understand the biggest challenges we were having and that some of those challenges weren't that we needed money or that we needed things exclusively. It was also that we needed to stop getting in our own way. We also needed to do the homework that we have to do to run a business and make time for that.

Those conversations led to long term behavior change. Reflecting on the long-term success of the program, Delilah shared that it changed “the way I think about the future and the way I think about how to arrive at future decisions.” Farmers like Rachel - “we had the experience; we had the skills” - and now she had the time to use those to solve bottlenecks. It gave Delilah the time to go from the “process of elimination to problem-solving.” It also gave her the time to reflect on how those problems had evolved. She reflected that “the first year you're solving all the problems, you're dealing with the obvious little ones. And then, once you get those solved, then you have the next level of problems or the next level of improvements to make.”

Financial literacy was an area that the farmers showed new confidence in. Lisa thought that to build long-term success, “especially if we're like trying to build the next generation of food system leaders, we need people who are financially successful in this work to be able to do

that sustainably on their own." One of Altman's goals was to get farmers "to know how much money they're making or how much money they're not making and what they're spending on things." Rene, thinking about a lesson they learned working with another coach, said that it was reinforced that "it's really important to understand your cash flow." The financials point to farm health. The idea for Rene had been reinforced that "knowing your books is like knowing the vascular system of your body. You need to know what goes in and what goes out . . . it is the blood flow. It is the life force for your business, your accounting."

Through the experience working with farmers and other service providers in the program, Rene "learned that a lot of farmers don't do their QuickBooks correctly because farming is a very specific business and it has its own type of accounting nature, like its own personality when it comes to farm accounting." Gail, reflecting on working with her coach on their farm's accounting, shared that they "basically started over with QuickBooks and she got us set up really nice. Now we're able to manage it, you know, for the most part. We're kind of rolling with it and our books are good." This brought added confidence, including that if Gail's farm wanted to "work with the FSA again in the future to take out more loans or work again with the NRCS, I mean, having your reports and books in order is crucial." Whitney also found encouragement in being able to "learn financials and management . . . I knew that I needed that training." The education changed the way she handled their finances and kept records. Laughing, Whitney said that "I don't know if I can ever get rid of QuickBooks. Like, I'm pretty loyal to it now."

Whitney also found that learning how to keep better records for their farm increased her overall knowledge of her farm business. She listed off increased knowledge of sales, inputs, fertilizing, production, and food safety that all improved from record keeping. That knowledge allowed Whitney to "plan ahead, understand what works and what doesn't work . . . I'm finally at

a place where I'm creating systems that work for the farm and that's, that's good." It's also, she added, "prevented me from making some pretty dumb mistakes."

Rachel also "use QuickBooks now." The choice came down to learning how to simplify systems and eliminate those bottlenecks. Before, they used Square, PayPal, Venmo, CashApp, and more. She said the farm used "whatever people wanted to pay us in." But now, she said, "we just streamline." Marc found it:

> Extremely beneficial to know what you're spending, how you're spending, and seeing that data on where and what things are going to. I've always been into data. Seeing it makes it so much easier to kind of analyze what needs to be done when, what changes should be made, what habits that we have, and we know which is important.

Like Gail, Rachel saw the benefits it brought to financing and loans. Gail and her farm "now can pull documents that they request for us to offer there." For Gail, looking at her financial records and all that data had also "opened our minds up to different streams of income besides vegetable."

Infrastructure

Knowing what infrastructure to invest in, and when, was a challenge. Working with her coaches, Delilah started to identify "things that there really aren't a luxury, but nice tools that do a specific job." In the past, identifying the tools was the easy part but investing in them was never easy - it was why she made do with so many temporary or just OK solutions. Now that Delilah had the chance to combine the coaching with the capital on infrastructure, she could "see the benefits of investing in other ways that I didn't before."

A greenhouse watering system was one of the changes she made.

> It was an automation that I know we could have done without the accelerator, but we never made time or money for it. And it saved a ton of time and it was totally worth it. I wish we had done it seven years ago.

It was a small but necessary change that made a big impact. Delilah thought of the greenhouse as the heart of the farm:

> If we can make the transplants we need on time, you know, that helps us make everything else in the field work. If we can't do our own transplants, then we have to either outsource them or we're growing sick plants, which means that has a ripple effect into the entire season and into all of the money that we make. And then also, at the same time, by having all these greenhouse infrastructure improvements, we've been able to do more plant sales stuff, which is another obvious source of income that other farms are tapping into that we aren't able to tap into, or like not able to feel confident in. And that's also, my retirement plan is I'm going to retire into being a nursery business because that's so much easier than being a farmer.

The automation also meant that she and her employees were able to leave the farm in the hottest part of the day, once a week, or even once a month, and not have someone have to be there to do those watering chores in person. It had created, for Delilah, "a complete day off for everybody from certain chores because we've automated it."

For Whitney, investments in cold storage and a wash/pack station made a big impact. She shared that the cold storage improved things on her farm because "if I'm able to store more, I'm able to produce more. I'm able to produce more, I'm able to sell more. It seems like a small component, but it's a small component in a very big system." The cold storage impact rippled across their farmer network. The other farmers she works with had been able to store "produce in my storage container" when their storage may be overflowing or nonexistent. She said that "when I completed it, I was like, this is amazing." Similarly, through his experience as a case manager, Altman learned "that cold storage is even more important than I thought already . . . I consider that to be crucial."

Whitney's other big investment was in a covered wash/pack space to wash and pack her produce. It helped with produce quality and safety, but it also became more than that. She said that it's "not only just a wash station now. It's like the common space of the farm. It's where we can actually like sit in the shade . . . a dedicated, comfortable break space." The investment improved the quality of the produce and the quality of life for Whitney and their crew. For her, "what I've acquired . . . it really leveled me up."

Mitch found value in talking through infrastructure ideas because it was a chance to "think big picture . . . and make sure you're investing in something that is going to bring you a return long term." For Mitch, that's also asking, "how can we protect our crops?" He chose to invest in protected culture. He said that included a "caterpillar tunnel and two large shade cloths for our big greenhouses and three smaller shade cloths for those cat tunnels." The shade cloths, like the greenhouse improvements for Delilah and the wash/pack for Whitney, had a ripple effect.

They were able to keep it cooler in their greenhouses and caterpillar tunnels, which improved germination and that led to an increase in the number of crops they could grow and sell. Mitch saw it as a "super impactful investment. That was an incredible investment for us." Part of knowing it would be such a good investment was working with their coach to both bounce ideas and crunch numbers.

For Gail and Gabe, the capital had an immediate impact on their infrastructure. They were able to pay off an operating loan, which led to applying for a microloan, which led to accessing an NRCS EQIP grant for the funding of a well and the ability to finish other essential infrastructure. They also invested in a caterpillar tunnel because, for Gabe, "growing in the tunnels just makes things grow so much more reliable."

One last bit of infrastructure, marketing infrastructure, was logos, brands, and merchandise. Whitney spent time and money on a logo to help find the right design that would communicate to her community what the farm's mission was. Altman saw another farm find success with Facebook ads and ads in a local newspaper and that the farmers "said that made all the difference in the world for them." A couple of other farms made t-shirts, which Altman described as being "walking billboards for their farm" that were very popular in their community. He said that "they've gone through three orders. They sold out of the t-shirts within like two or three weeks and made money off of it." Mitch also used the funds to get "awesome farm shirts . . . we give shirts to our crew and then we like sell 'em at market, and we actually sell quite a few at market." Like with the shade cloths, the shirts became an investment that paid dividends for Mitch:

> The cool thing with the shirts is we kind of recoup the initial investment and then can order more or kind of keep that money to the side . . . once we recoup that, we just kind of choose what else we want to do with that marketing money. And I'm like, okay, we could get more shirts. We could get like cool printed duffle bags, like market bags or, you know, whatever. It was fantastic.

Soil

Soil health was not identified as an initial major challenge, but through working with their coaches, many of the farmers saw new ways to improve their soil health. One of the coaches, who was not interviewed for this study, came up again because she was, as Gabe shared, "the biggest soil nerd probably on earth." Altman found that working with a coach on soil health set the farmers "up for, which is an Accelerator goal, a better chance, an increased chance of getting to financial stability, sustainability more quickly." Lisa saw that farms "wanted to focus on their soil health and were able to get a lot of great advice."

For Whitney, it was seeing the benefit of understanding how, where, and how much fertilizer, compost, and other inputs you should use. That helps a farmer, as Lisa noted, to keep "building soil health." Gail said they are

> Still building soil to a point where we can count on certain yield based on certain planting . . . all farmers experience, crazy weather and pests and crop losses and whatnot, but we'll be able budget essentially better and forecast better once our soil is to a place where we've got it more reliable and predictable.

To get to that point, Gabe said that Always Learning Farms and the coach "took all six of our samples and went over each one from the different plots that we have" to help identify "how much compost and amendments we had to buy." On top of taking steps to improve their soil health, it also helped to improve their financial health by not over spending on amendments.

Rachel learned she could improve on how they fertilized. She realized that "we were not really fertilizing at the rate I think we needed for production . . . that was, to me, the biggest takeaway." She also learned how to optimize their infrastructure, like their high tunnels, with their soil amendments. One lesson for Rachel was that:

> If we do high tunnels, you need to pull the plastic back and let the rain just hit it and wash out all the fertilizer and then cover back up and you are good to go again. They were like, get all of that stuff out. So that was another thing that we wouldn't have thought of.

Labor

Accelerator helped Delilah to start a solution to their labor challenges that she'd been putting off for years - creating an employee handbook. She knew she wanted and needed it but didn't want to "teach people to something that isn't finalized." Time and seasonality were a challenge for Delilah as well:

> I didn't have time to make the ideal handbook. I just made nothing for years . . . I had really procrastinated it for a while because it just took time that I didn't feel like I had.

> We don't have an off season the way Northern farmers do. We grow all year. In the winter, we're still busy.

Now that she has the handbook, she really enjoys "having a document that I can refer to and that I can refer applicants to, to set clear expectations."

For Delilah, writing the handbook "helped force me to talk with the people I needed to." It helped Delilah "to understand the biggest challenges we were having and that some of those challenges weren't that we needed money and weren't that we needed things exclusively. It was also that we needed to stop getting in our own way."

Lisa was blown away by the handbook that Delilah created and the benefits it could bring. Lisa found Delilah's handbook to be "really insane in the best way."

> For one, it's really helpful when you have a lot of stuff in your head to just get it out on paper. And a lot of the farmers have never gotten a lot of stuff out in their head on paper. I think because communication can be difficult for everyone. It's better to just say what you're trying to say, have it laid out and just here, this is my thoughts on this. These are my expectations of you and what I need from you . . . if you need to know what our rules are on drugs or alcohol or what attire to wear or like how to plant a specific thing or what our daily flow looks like, then you have it all laid out. And I think handbooks are also helpful because for working with other people, because people are all different types of learners. And some people are visual. Some people need to practice, some people need to hear it and see it. Having it all written down, it's just helpful. And hopefully, you're also like reviewing that with everyone in a more hands-on way too.

Labor challenges are what partially motivated Delilah to write the handbook, and now it's also a tool to use with her employees to reduce challenges they might be facing. Delilah said that she wanted to review it with everyone and have her crew "help edit the handbook, make suggestions, make sure it's relevant, make sure it's accurate." Delilah would have it become "a working document that people can give updates to." It had also become a key part of their hiring. Before someone is interviewed, Delilah said that they need to read the handbook:

> I will say that everyone last year and this year, which are the two years that we've hired with the handbook, everyone said that it was super helpful. That it helped solidify their decision to come here in the first place, to choose us, and that it made them feel confident coming in and made them feel good coming in. Which was actually the opposite of what I thought it was going to do. I thought maybe it was going to like turn people away, but what it did is it really attracted the right people, which is exactly what we wanted it to do. I just didn't know if it would work. It has also made me feel like the other documents that I want to make fully fleshed out and utilize, that I still haven't necessarily made time to do, but I know that it's worth it to do that. I know that when we do that, it will pay off and we'll use those documents.

All that work didn't turn off Delilah from making and keeping records. Instead, she said, "if anything, there is going to be more documents and more training tools that I'm creating in the future . . . I learned that it's worth it to do that." It improved the farm for the whole community - a better experience for Delilah, a better experience for their employees, and potentially a better product for their eaters since the crew was happy and engaged.

Employee training was also a place where the lessons learned in Accelerator were passed on to the larger farmer network. Delilah learned that their employee handbook was discussed during a national call about employees and apprenticeships. Mitch, who Lisa found was "a really amazing employer," led a webinar that Lisa attended about employee training. She shared that Mitch "talked about creating a space for employees to come to him and share their thoughts" and ensuring that people "feel appreciated through small ways, even just like giving them snacks every once in a while. Or telling them, giving them gratitude, giving people specialized roles."

Right before our interview, Mitch had just left a meeting with his crew about "continuing to tweak our systems and modify and work on our efficiencies." He said that a guiding mission for Employees 1st Farms is creating a:

> Healthy work life balance for ourselves and for our crew. You know, because that's important too - their quality of life. Because you can't just come out here and work these people. I mean, these people are our friends, you know? We treat and feel like these people are family, you know? And they're around our kids. They're on our property in our home . . . success is keeping our people and taking care of them too, because that's been

> our goal the whole time. Finding a way to show that you can build a business farming and make a living farming. And your crew can also make a respectable living farming where it's not just this vision of the old broke farmer who's selling his farm or the bank's taking his farm and you're working people to death and their hands are bleeding and they hate it and they quit, you know? Yeah. It's like, and it may, I don't know if it's possible, I'm trying to do it. You know, we may be, it may be a pipe dream, but that's been our vision is trying to build this farm.

Mitch said he had used the Accelerator to "seek consultation from an extremely experienced individual who is doing, who has done for 40 years, exactly what we are doing." He trusted his coach and basically just gave her "a full under the hood look at everything." Mitch found those conversations validating. Feeling unsure about what they were doing, he remembered it was "a time where we were kind of in a tough spot and that was good for us to kind of get some outside validation of like, all right, we're going the right way."

A few other farmers were able to use the Accelerator, like Whitney, "for labor. That's literally what I needed at the beginning, you know, in the developmental phases of my farm. That was critical." Lisa worked with another farmer who hired their first employee "and they have a great relationship and it is working out really well." Rachel, thinking of her farm's employees, said **"**I love this community. Three of our employees are in the same family right now. I do like that we can help and provide jobs for people that they were not working before."

Rene and Lisa also found improvements to their service provider roles by participating in the Accelerator. Lisa said she enjoyed tracking growth over time by going "back and interviewing them and keeping track of their financial records." She liked that it gave the opportunity for consistent communication with farmers in the program and could be used for future farmers and service providers to "actually see how the support that we're able to give could potentially affect their success or not." Rene said "it has changed the way I operate and that I seek to be more clear with what my expectations are in all of my like relations with the

farmers." Rene also walked away with wanting to develop some new best practices, like creating "templates of how you do things" to help reduce confusion between the service provider and the farmer. She also wanted the farmers to write down the process of how they decided to make a decision and "why it matters to you and how much does it cost, so that I could take it and give it to another farmer and be like, this is what they did." This would also communicate the why of what there were doing. For Altman, he "learned that the variety of approaches to farming is more diverse than I could have thought possible."

Program Polishing

With an eye to the future, there are lessons to be learned for how to strengthen, or polish, the Accelerator that can be applied across other farm service programs. Looking back on the networks of farmers a service organization interacted with, Lisa noted that the scoring of potential applicants might skew towards farmers who already have a lot of support – especially ones that have been supported by Georgia Organics already. They said that "you know, there's certain things that we might score for that a farm that we've never heard of might not score on the high end because they don't have that kind of support that would help them." The program may be a good fit for farmers who have established a business that interacted with Georgia Organics, but may be missing another audience that needed to be served or who are almost, but not yet, ready for Accelerator. Lisa, like other case managers, talked about the need for a program that is "a smaller class of people that we feel like need a little bit more support, but could potentially get to Accelerator like the next year or something. That could look like maybe they get just $1,000 of consulting support." They added that it could also be "more intensive than a workshop but less intensive than like a year and a half long, $12,000 investment."

While all the farmers mentioned working with multiple service providers in their farming careers, Extension, NRCS, and FSA were noticeably absent in the Accelerator programming. FSA paperwork was recognized as motivator to create the Accelerator, but those agents and others in similar roles seem to have been absent from the planning and implementation of the program. The farmers prioritized education, with Lisa sharing that some decided to keep working with them regularly. This is both a win, the farmers have the resources they need, but also a struggle - those coaches cost money while there are publicly available experts who were not engaged. In addition, at least one of the coaches was impactful but not from the region. Mitch would like to see workshops with experts who have really "dialed in a system" for the Southeast.

Looking at the networks that were and were not engaged, only working with NGO/CBO service providers and only working with farmers who are already familiar with Georgia Organics may have created a situation where the program is only accelerating a certain type of farm. This could lead to an exclusive, instead of inclusive, network. Altman sees how **"**it's easy for somebody, a farmer to say, George organics has its favorites and plays favorites. That is completely valid." Lisa also saw how the organization "works with a lot of the same farmers over." Lisa, looking at the way they score farms, sees how a "farm that we've never heard of might not score on the high end because they don't have that kind of support that would help them get access to those points in a way." A lesson Rene learned was, "don't choose farms based on whether or not you personally like them." A good personal relationship with a farm does not mean they are ready or a good fit for the program. Rene learned how important it was for a farm to know "this is something that speaks to me in a specific way. And we've not been able to choose our farms based on what specific thing we want them to walk away with."

The farmers valued the check-ins when they were consistent. Altman said he heard and saw that feedback in the evaluation process. At first, the check-ins were quarterly. Then it was supposed to be monthly, but it wasn't always. "I would give it a C minus, not consistent enough," Altman said, and "I hope that improves." When the check-ins were inconsistent, he found that the case managers were "not delivering on getting farmers to think about their needs."

Rachel would have seen a benefit from consistent "interaction with the person that's mentoring us, because sometimes we would just get really busy and almost forget that we were even in that space." Marc remembered that "it was sporadic." For Whitney, "we weren't consistent, but we were as needed." Gabe would have liked more consistent check-ins because "the schedule, consistent like support/check in make sure the goals are being followed through with and measure how they're helping the farm." Gabe gave an example of what that check-in could have looked like:

> If I was working at Georgia Organics and the farm said, okay, we want to plant salad every week or we want to have it available every week. Then from my perspective, working with that farmer, I would make sure to send an email every two weeks and say, just want to make sure you planted two trays of salad. Just want to make sure you planted two trays in the field, how y'all looking, are you guys still on that goal? And if you're not on that goal, what's taken up your time?

The ability to meet, or not to meet, was based on capacity for both farmer and case manager. Whitney said that it "was hard to find a good frequency for both of us, but we made it happen." It could be, that the same thing happened with Whitney that happened with Gabe. Gabe shared that "I think that throughout the program, throughout the year, the energy of the interaction between us and Georgia Organics crew kind of waned."

Georgia Organics may not have been aware of the capacity and time needed to manage the program. Rene envisioned that a case manager needed to do the:

> Booking in advance. Consistent, pre-booking all of the check-ins. And then, as a case manager, it's your job a week before to poke the farmer and say, hey, we have a schedule check-in next week. Can you still make this time?

Lisa added that an effective case manager needed "to take notes when you are being a case manager so you can remember what you talked about last meeting." This way, you can be prepared for the next conversation. And all of that takes extra time as well - cleaning up your notes, sending follow-up emails, reviewing your notes, and prepping for the next call. Gabe would like to see the case managers create "seasonal or monthly kind of descriptive writeups of the projects or practices that we were doing."

Part of the time commitment struggle was that both case managers and farmers seemed unclear about the time commitment needed for the Accelerator. Gail felt something:

> That would've been more beneficial at the beginning and going forward . . . is provide the farmers upfront with an expectation of how many hours the farmers are expected to participate, because it may end up being a lot less participation than the farmers think that they'll need to provide.

Meaning, a farmer may think it's four hours a month and it's really 10 - a big difference for any small business. That meant, as Rene shared, that of the "challenges that have come up, I would say time" was one of the biggest. Lisa saw that some of the farmers "didn't really have the capacity to participate in the program. It was harder for us to make the effort, for both of us to make the effort, to get on the phone and work the program." Rene added, "it really takes a lot of navigating over the course of a year or two years with these farms." She saw that it's important to "have expectations on the case manager end and on the farmer's end to have clear deliverables

. . . I'd say communication has been a barrier and lack of focus in the program." She thought it would be easier, or at least less time consuming, "if the cohort is all at the same level of QuickBooks, then you can have programming. But if you bring in different farmers that are in different levels, then you have to customize it and that takes time." The Accelerator could improve on setting priorities and knowing how long solving certain problems might take. One way, Renee saw, was to ask probing questions and share advice like "You want to get your books in order? You want to figure out if you can sell beef and that's making you money and you want to build a wash station. That's a lot for like a year." When the farmers and the case managers took on too much, Rene found that:

> Then you're setting yourself up for the potential to not get those things done. And that feels bad on the case manager's side, because our job is supposed to keep them, keep the ball rolling, and keep it on a timeline. Bu it also feels bad on the farmer's side, because at the beginning of the year, when you get onboarded, you're like, yeah, I have all these ideas in my head of all these things I want to do . . . we just need to be more specific and cut stuff out.

A focus on providing farm-based workshops instead of just webinars or Zoom calls would bring added benefit to the Accelerator. Certainly, COVID was the reason so much programming moved online. But, even before COVID, there was a lack of - or a perceived lack of - hands on, experiential workshops that had the farmer voice leading the conversation. For the Accelerator, there was almost no in-person interaction from start to finish. "The first two cycles, when we were selecting people," Lisa said, "we didn't go and visit the farms or have any type of interview with them." While Accelerator didn't do in person programming, Georgia Organics was hosting some in-person workshops. Whitney went to a tractor field day "and that was just great." They would like to see the same for Accelerator. Whitney felt a field day "could just be us all putting up a hoop house together, just all putting efforts into a project."

Lisa wanted “to do more in person opportunities for the cohort to get to know each other.” They added, the “farmers are so isolated and if you're in a cohort with people for over a year and you don't ever get to know them, I just think that is a bummer in general.”

Altman would like to track connections made and how isolation was reduced by the Accelerator but doesn’t see a way for Accelerator to that “track social connectivity. It just takes a different type of expertise and a lot more money to afford that expertise to be able to get the data back from a nonprofit standpoint.” It’s hard for the program to know if farmers made new connections, built new friendships, or were able to expand their networks. Rene said that they didn’t track that but wanted to find ways to do that. Lisa wanted to see the Accelerator “systematize the farmers communicating with each other, which would be easier once they have relationships.” That way, “they could continue relationships with each other. To have those types of conversations of, how's your business going? And, what are you thinking about for the future?”

An on-farm approach, led by farmers, is another opportunity for Accelerator to increase farmer-to-farmer learning and allow them to coach each other with regional, hard-earned experience. Gabe said they did “appreciate it, but I don't know if we gained a lot from the whole cohort meetups, the Zoom meetups, and stuff.” In-person might lead to a better outcome for the farmers, with Whitney wishing there was “stronger relationship building between the farmers and the program.” Whitney knew that:

> Everybody's spaced out in Georgia, but if it's a 12 month program, try to make an effort to meet up a couple times. I mean maybe once a season or something of that nature. I think that would've been helpful because I really feel like I could have learned from these other farms who are booming as far as organic produce goes and just got sales locked. I think I really could have benefited from communion with them.

Gail also saw “on farm workshops where we take a field trip to a different farm” as a way to increase social connectivity. Rene, knowing how important the Georgia Organics conference was for the farmers, envisioned at a future conference “a breakout session of the Accelerator farmers.” Delilah, the former art student, saw on-farm field days as a way to do critique. She said it gives you the opportunity for “interfacing with other farmers, talking shop/barn, raising problems, solving times.” She also shared that “I love that critique. I love it.” When asked to dive deeper into the idea, Delilah provided this description:

> This is a thing that I've really wanted to happen for a long time. I picture it as a group of farmers and farming professionals. It's definitely farmers. Maybe it's food safety people, maybe it's plant pathologists, maybe it's weed scientists. Maybe it's just foodie customers, who knows, but definitely farmers. People go to a farm and they take a walk around and they say, why this, why that, tell me about this. Why are all these extension cords here? Understand why it is the way it is. Not just observing it and looking superficially. Then sit around and be like, well, you know, it looks like you're doing this really well. It looks like you, like, you look really busy. <laugh> Maybe it also looks like maybe someone's not making time to get on the weeding when it should be done, which is when they're really small . . . I just need someone to come to my farm and say, look, it looks pretty good. But honestly you got a lot of piles of stuff that you probably don't need. . . . I'm just so used to seeing those piles that I can tune them out and like not see them anymore. I need fresh eyes to remind, eh, it really doesn't look so good over here, you know? Yeah. We're like, yeah. How does everything that lands really normally to me, land to other people?

That might seem harsh or scry, but most farmers want those perspectives. Gabe and Gail had a moment of back and forth thinking about someone visiting their farm:

> Gabe - Yeah. We want someone to come in and just tear us apart, you know, just tell us everything you . . .
> Gail - See is bad. Not tear us apart.
> Gabe - I want that.

Delilah, it sounded, wanted a positive way of someone coming in and tearing the farm apart. She wanted someone to ask:

> Huh, why that choice? And then you have to think like, yeah, why that choice? And that sort of goes back to the original thing of a lot of things were good enough at the

> beginning and we've just kind of like continued using them because that's what we had at the beginning. And I forget that that's not the way it was intended to be and that it's not even the way I intended it to be. And I forget that there's other ways because that's just what I'm used to.

Delilah emphasized that critique is not critical; it "means getting fresh eyes on your operation and being open to that. It's not even about it being good or bad, it's just about it being observational." Delilah added, to sweeten the idea, "there could be snacks."

The idea of critique may feel uncomfortable and Delilah also shared that it could also look like a SWOT analysis, an idea that may be more comfortable for service providers. SWOT, an acronym that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, is an opportunity to see what is working and what could be done to improve in the future and is used in many organizations. Delilah, in describing what she would find beneficial from a service organization, shared it would be "opportunities for guidance that involve internal assessment . . . and having that be structured so that everyone has a SWOT sheet in front of them."

There was a concern from the farmers and case managers that the coaches were not utilized as much as they could have been. Altman felt that while the money was an impactful "carrot to get farmers to take planning, record keeping, and the coaching more seriously . . . I don't feel like we nailed that part yet." If Whitney could go back in time and tell herself one thing before the program started, she "would tell myself to take advantage of the consultations more. Take advantage of the education that's available to me right now in this moment, because you need to acquire all the information you can." Lisa thought that some of the farmers realized just **"**how beneficial working with the consultants was." Gabe would "hate for farmers to get involved with the program and think, oh man, it's just like, here's some cash."

Lack of time, even when the Accelerator seemed long, was another problem identified by Rene. Rene noted that “one year is a lot of time, but it's also a very small amount of time.” Thinking of that time constraint, Rene said that they “really wanted it to be two years.” Delilah also likes “the idea of it being a multi-year thing, because that gives you a chance to do that low hanging fruit. Get the like obvious, urgent things.” After that, move one to the more in-depth problems. Mitch would also see value in a “floating year attached,” so you could postpone some purchases or some coaching as you saw how the initial investments and education impacted your farm. And, sometimes, your personality can get in the way of using the time fully. Gail, who is part of a farm team that loved to talk, said, “I'm a bit of a chatty Cathy. I spent a lot of my clocked hours just making conversation and, like, every minute counts.”

To solve the problem of limited time, and the coaches not being utilized as much as possible, Gabe felt the program could be:

> A little more focused. If a farmer came in and applied for the Accelerator Program and they said, I need to get my greenhouse. Right. I think the first thing would be maybe one of the organic Georgia organics members come out, take notes on their greenhouse, see how many trays are you losing? How, how bad is it? What do you want to change? Here's how we can put the money towards it. And then we're going to do the installation process. And then I think they do, it's a year and a half program. Once they get it installed, go through and then one year later or so after it's installed, kind of see, all right, how many trays are you losing now? Are your trays looking better? Are you able to grow more efficiently and get more income because the Accelerator Program got the, just the specific, just the greenhouse going?

Gabe saw this as a process for any infrastructure improvements. Gabe used purchasing tunnels as another example:

> Let's look at the money, let's look at your books and see how much you've made from the two tunnels you already have. And then let's take the tunnel that we put up and calculate how many hours it took you to install it and then keep very detailed records of like

> everything that comes out of just that particular tunnel and see how much of a difference it really does make.

Documenting steps like these would not only help the farmer, it would help future farmers in the program and their case managers make decisions around capital and capacity. What can they reasonably and meaningfully accomplish?

Mitch said, looking back on the coaching, that "I wish I would've been in a better place from a time management perspective to really be able to fully indulge into that." Later on, he added "it's so deep that you literally have to commit blocks and blocks of time to do that. And that's hard to do when you're running a farm and kids . . . it was difficult to find a way to prioritize that." Seasonality also played a part. For the coaching, Rachel would:

> Pick an off-season time where it's not so busy for us. Where we can put in more and mentally be in that space of learning, receiving, growing. And not so much we got a zoom call and I'm seeding while I'm on a call."

Marc added, "if you have that off-season to kind of analyze what's going on, how things are going to work, and what we need and so on and so forth, then you have time to obtain those things before the season kicks off."

Knowing what worked and what didn't was an issue for case managers. Lisa realized that "maybe where the program is lacking is, that I at least didn't talk a lot about, is where they weren't able to use the things that they got." The data has also not been systemized, tracked, or shared to produce resources for other farmers and service providers in Georgia. Rene saw that:

> At this point we haven't even had time to really fully synthesize like the benefit and the impact for 2020 . . . We haven't fully understood, qualitatively or quantitatively, which farms and how many of them like as a group and as individually like benefited from the program.

Having that data, Gabe thought, would mean that George Organics could look at new farmers in the Accelerator and "say, okay, this person is similar to this person that we had three or four years ago. Let's look back at that data and see how this helped them. And maybe they can apply it to the new farmer?" To help with this, Gail thought that the farmers should be asked:

> The same questions at the beginning. What are the strengths and weaknesses and what are you hoping to gain? And then at the end of the program, or even halfway like a checkpoint, getting those same questions again and then comparing them at the very end saying now if you'll recall, this is what you wrote down as what your goal was. Has that changed? Have you seen that met?

Gabe summed up the overall feeling of all the farmer interviews. "We're just thrilled that it's even a program that's out there that was created. It's been such a big help for us and gave us a confidence boost that we needed." The experience had a big impact, and he wanted to pay it back in their current and future farmer networks. Gabe would love to be part of a program that is "onsite visits from Accelerator farmers to the new farmers, just to . . . build the confidence and maybe point out some stuff they might not see."

"I think it's going to propel this style of small-scale diversified organic market farming way forward," Whitney said, and "I just really hope that it's something that it's a program that can continue to be sustained." Whitney was excited to see programs like Accelerator that will continue to:

> Support us, empower us, uplift us, provide resources for us to make that mission happen. And they've been doing that. I've been seeing it all, all these nonprofits, they doing it in their own ways . . . they want to see farmers be able to produce enough food to sustain their food systems and they want us to be profitable and sustainable. Yeah, they're doing good work.

Not just the NGO/CBOs like Georgia Organics. Farmers like Whitney wanted to rely on all the service providers in their network. Using Extensions as an example, Whitney wanted to continue to "look to Extension to continue to keep providing us with the research that we can't

do, give us the information that we all need and to be there to . . . just come out when I need him." Speaking of their Extension ANR agent, she said that "he's ready to roll, like he'll come out to your place."

To fully grasp the impact, the Accelerator has room to grow in collecting, using, and sharing data. Altman knows that **"**farmers share so much data with us." Using that data, Altman wanted to identify "the thing that really makes a difference for this type of farm." Moving forward, understanding what makes a difference and providing more opportunities for farmer-led and regionally appropriate education will continue to make a difference. The data should also support the need for funding. Thinking of programs like this, Mitch said that they need "more years, more money, more farmers."

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will present the conclusions based on the findings of this study. This chapter will also present discussions and recommendations for service providers and farmers on building informal teaching opportunities into their work.

The research objectives that guided this study were as follows:

1. Describe the agricultural experiences of small-scale farmers prior to their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
2. Determine the motivating factors that encouraged small-scale farmers to participate in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
3. Describe the evolution of their practices based on their participation in the Farmer Accelerator Program.
4. Determine how small-scale farmers define success in a diversified produce operation.
5. Determine the perceived needs of small-scale farmers that exist after the Farmer Accelerator Program.

The study was done to solve the problem of not having data from Accelerator, including the voices and stories of the farmers and service providers who participated, to capture lessons that may have been learned and the existing knowledge of the participants. By capturing their narratives and sharing some of their stories in the preceding chapters and this one, we may build

collective self-efficacy within the farmer community and point service providers toward areas where research, resources, and education are still needed.

The conclusions were:

- The opportunity to reflect led to positive change
- Soil, emotional, and financial health are interconnected
- Farmers benefit when they learn from and with each other.
- Farmers benefit from facilitated support
- Field-based learning benefits the farmer and service provider
- Timing is everything – programming should take into account how much time is needed and when it will happen
- Service providers who do not organize time and track data efficiently may not be serving the needs of farmers.
- Inconsistent funding threatens long-term support
- Disconnected service provider networks do not serve the needs of farmers

The opportunity to reflect led to positive change

The Accelerator provided an opportunity for farmers to take stock of where they came from, evaluate their present situation, and look toward the future. The farmers reflected that their educational and infrastructure needs changed as their farm changed, and what may have worked in year one was not working in year ten. In some ways, they had to experience a certain level of

challenge and hardship to learn how to be successful. The opportunity to evaluate with a coach or case manager and then act on it with capital was universally viewed as beneficial.

That reflection tied to what by DeLind (1998) saw as well, with farmers often referencing past experiences to help make decisions about their future choices. The coaches and case managers allowed the farmers to create their own oral histories, giving them a chance, as Steiger et al. (2012) noted, "to define the issues" for themselves (p. 92). Steiger et al. (2012) also documented how the service providers were surprised by some of what they learned by listening to the farmers, an experience that the Accelerator case managers, coaches, and farmers all seemed to have as they took the time to listen and reflect.

Soil, emotional, and financial health are interconnected

The program came at a time when these farms were in a developmental phase and ready to make changes. Part of the Accelerator's strength was that it allowed the farmer to reflect on how interconnected different elements of their agricultural business were and did not silo one part of farming from another, say by only focusing on QuickBooks or compost application. Instead, it provided the space to see how investing in one area – like soil, labor, markets, infrastructure, marketing, or community – could improve another.

The farmers talked about burnout and building a positive mindset and how other areas of their farm, from production practices to infrastructure, affected the emotional and psychological impacts of running an agricultural business. If it was chaos for the farmer in their life, it was chaos in the fields and markets. The Accelerator showed that the farmers see their farms as an integrated system, recognizing that each piece reflected and interacted with another. What these farmers learned, as they looked to build sustainable long-term agricultural businesses, was that it

was just as important to take care of the mind (education and mental health) and body of themselves and their crew as it was to take care of the soil and infrastructure.

Farmers benefit when they learn from and with each other

The farmers in the Accelerator saw their community as their greatest asset. They supported each other through every season of farming, like spring and winter, and every season of life, like births and deaths, and ensured they survived to make it to another. All the farmers learned from other farmers in their community, especially their elders, and they were interested in giving back to and playing that role for new and beginning farmers who needed guidance and support.

Farmers benefit from facilitated support

The farmers found value in the support that the coaches and case managers provided. The more that support was consistent, the more the value was amplified. This included taking the time to schedule meetings, taking and sharing notes with the farmer, and setting up group Zoom calls and other opportunities for the farmers to interact with each other. The farmers showed that they wanted to learn but also needed the tools to take that education and be successful. A knowledge deficit is not the only barrier to success, it's also the lack of capital and time to build upon that knowledge with the necessary infrastructure. One area of infrastructure the Accelerator provided was someone to set a schedule, capture information, and create space for knowledge capture and growth.

Field-based learning benefits the farmer and service provider

Field-based learning experiences, like the ones described by Galt et al. (2013), allowed the farmer and service provider to expand their learning. The farmers learned by seeing how other farmers operate, both at their farms and at their markets. Field-based learning created an

opportunity for academic research to connect with and be supported by lived experiences, especially if combining University based research with current farming practices. This built "the basis for a more complete knowledge" referenced and experienced by DeLind (1998, p. 3).

Timing is everything – programming should take into account how much time is needed and when it will happen

The seasonality of the farm often dictates what happens when, like seeding, planting, hiring, and making infrastructure improvements. Programming should reflect that seasonality, emphasizing building knowledge during the off season and implementing that new knowledge during the growing season. Farmers expressed frustration at not having the time to implement new practices or use new infrastructure because the knowledge or tools came at a time in the season when there was no space to use them. It also placed a responsibility on the service provider to schedule appropriately and use time meaningfully – farmers should be able to plan around the meetings, estimate how much time they will need to schedule before and after, and trust the service provider will use their time effectively. That also meant ensuring that a practical schedule is set up that reflected the capacity of the service provider and the capacity of the farmer.

It's important to recognize how much time can go into preparing for and starting a program. Fitzgerald and Morgan (2014) found that food policy councils can take "1 to 2 years of planning before a Council has its first official meeting. For some of the groups interviewed, it took up to 4 years" (pg. 4) Some councils were able to get off to a quick start, but most took a large invest of time to plan out assessment and decide how to engage with each other and their community.

Service providers who do not organize time and track data efficiently may not be serving the needs of farmers.

From the start, if the participants did not know what to expect, either content or time-wise, then they did not know what they could learn or how much time and capacity they would need to invest. Galt et al. (2013) noted that creating resources that resonate with farmers means knowing what the objectives to be learned are and ensuring they connect with the farmer on a personal level. When service providers were not organized and tracking data well, they may have missed the big picture of what was happening – emotionally, financially, and physically - with farmers in their community. If service providers are not consistently checking in, they may miss the small things that lead to big disasters, major burnout, or farms shutting down. The farmers felt the lost opportunity of more consistent check-ins and better data to base their decisions on. The Accelerator has shown what concentrated capital and consistent coaching can provide for a farmer. Documenting and acknowledging the knowledge and time farmers have shared with them and sharing that with the farmers and their wider network would provide a strong foundation to meet the needs of small-scale farmers. Collecting and sharing that data will help overcome the problem Dimitri, Oberholtzer, Pressman, & Welsh (2019) identified of how little data has been collected about farmers at this scale and their markets.

Inconsistent funding threatens long-term support

Another consequence of incomplete data collection and sharing is that it may impact future funding. For example, if Georgia Organics is not able to collect meaningful data and stories to both meet funder requirements and inspire more rounds of funding, they may find they

cannot continue the programming. Currently, the majority of the funding comes from private funders with some USDA funding support. An important step will be securing long term or potentially permanent funding to keep the program continuing and/or being able to set up similar programs to reach a larger audience.

Disconnected service provider networks do not serve the needs of farmers

One threat to the funding, and a barrier to meaningful work, may be the real and perceived exclusivity of the Accelerator. By working with mostly private consultants, not sharing resources from the program, and only being open to members of Georgia Organics, the program runs the risk of both missing out on and engaging with a wider network of farms and privatizing the service provider industry in GA. When publicly available service providers like Extension or NRCS are left out, and the private service providers or membership organizations that cost money are prioritized or the only option, it can cause a cyclical problem. The publicly available service providers, like Extension or NRCS, do not have the opportunity to learn with and from the small-scale farmers in their area. Nor can they show there is a need for them to work with those farmers - no one is asking. If a farmer does reach out, the farmer may feel put off that the service provider does not know much about their style of farming - which makes sense, they haven't been exposed to that style nor have they been able to prioritize learning more because they've been meeting the needs of the farmers who do reach out.

This lack of social connectivity across service provider networks may lead to a breakdown of trust and lead Georgia Organics to have a smaller and smaller pool of applicants to choose from each year of the Accelerator. At a certain point, they will exhaust the possibilities with the farmers in their network and there will be little motivation for the other service providers in GA to encourage the farmers they work with to apply. Those service providers will

know next to nothing about the program, other than it is well funded, and may not want to or be able to spend the energy to recruit for a program that they feel has excluded them and may waste the farmers in their network's time.

Recommendations for produce farmers

The recommendations for produce farmers are:

- Recognize the importance of networks
- Understand the time needed to build those networks
- Embrace that committing to farming is committing to a life time of learning
- Soil health, financial health, and mental health are all interconnected.

The network of existing farmers may be their biggest asset. It may be crucial to spend time at markets, conferences, workshops, and other places where farmers congregate and start to make connections. If isolated, a successful strategy may be to rely on social media to make connections. The farmers in this study viewed each other as collaborators, not competitors, and credited each other with their successes and ability to overcome failures to keep farming.

Take time to understand the network of services available for farmers both locally and nationally and gain an understanding of the resources needed (time, paperwork, record keeping, etc.) to be able to use those resources. Often, the networks of service providers may each have something to offer and work together in different ways. An NGO/CBO service provider may be able to go with a farmer to the FSA office to build the relationships and navigate the paperwork to get a farm number, and that farm number will provide access to NRCS programs. A local Extension Agent may know the type of high tunnel that works best in your area and work with you and your NRCS agent to identify the best cost-share program.

It's important to know that committing to farming is committing to a lifetime of learning. As the seasons change, the challenges, joys, and needs also change. It may not feel important, or that there is not time to do it, but it is as equally important to take the time to take care of your mental and physical health as it is to take care of soil health and the health of the community that the farm feeds. The most successful farmers still learn new lessons every year and the fresh perspective of new farmers may be appreciated to help them solve old challenges.

Similar to what Rissing (2019) found, focusing on finances is helpful but a strict focus on finances may cause a farmer to lose sight of the bigger picture. It is important to look at a sustainable farming career as not just one that brings profit but also one that is sustainable for mental and physical health. Having steps in place to generate profit is important, but if there is not more to a farming career than the finances, then the farmer may burn out quickly.

Recommendations for service providers

The recommendations for service providers are:

- Lead alongside and from behind
- Focus on and assist farmers in building systems that change over time
- Set clear expectations on time commitments
- Work across programs and networks

Farmers are willing and eager to be engaged in teaching other farmers in their community. The farmers have hard-earned experience but may not have the time or skills to facilitate and build a workshop. This provides an opportunity for service providers to take a more behind-the-scenes approach to workshops, such as helping to build out an agenda that meets adult learner needs, making space for a farmer to practice their presentation with them, providing science-based research, and securing funding for workshops supplies, stipends, and

meals. The service provider can also provide time and space after the workshop for reflection to help promote and create behavior change – after a workshop, checking in and learning what new practices the farmers who attended and those who presented have or have not implemented and why. Use what they share to develop resources and factsheets, adding in practical knowledge with scientific research. This will both strengthen the farmer network, providing them with useful knowledge, and strengthen the service provider network by identifying areas where farmers need support and allowing service providers to learn more about the farmers they serve.

Farmers need workshops and education that focus on a continuum for the farmers, not just for new and beginning farmers. This also means considering the types of support and workshops that encourage a positive mindset and bring calmness, creating a better on-farm environment for the farmers, their employees, and their communities. This gives an opportunity to create workshops and resources that take a holistic approach and draw connections on how one practice can affect many areas of a farm and not just one. A workshop on how to harvest may be of interest. A workshop on how to harvest and then divert that harvest so that quality product goes to the CSA and lower quality goes to the chickens or compost would appeal to a farmer who wants to look at their practices in a deeper and more integrated way. Another example that might allow farmers to engage with the whole picture may be a workshop focused on bookkeeping that stresses the benefits of accounting beyond profits, such as helping to meet their mission of feeding people or paying a living wage.

When designing programs, service providers should be clear on the time commitment expected from the farmer. How many meetings and when? How much paperwork and reporting will be required? Approximately how much time outside of the meetings will the farmer need to

commit? This will help set a solid foundation for working together and help both farmers and service providers keep themselves from overpromising and under-delivering.

Service providers should work across programs and networks. The knowledge of one service provider or service provider organization should not be siloed. Instead, each organization should take the time to see what strengths their organization could provide to another and vice versa. Invite other service providers to your events and attend the events of other service providers. Thinking of Vygotsky's model, recognize that what you can do with the education provided for and with your peers is greater than what you can do on your own.

Recommendations for future research

Recommendations for future research are:

- Identify interventions, including the amount of capital and facilitated support, that positively impact farmers
- Develop strategies for effective farmer-led workshops
- Understand the resources needed for field-based learning activities
- Integrate the practice of narrative inquiry into educational resources

More research may be needed to identify what interventions are most successful for farmers. If capital plus coaching makes a significant difference vs. just capital or just coaching, that research can be used to influence public and private outreach and education opportunities.

Service providers would benefit from more research into how to host on-farm, farmer-led workshops. What strategies and styles bring about behavior change while meeting the educational needs of adult learners? What resources are needed for experiential learning activities for farmers? How can the practice of narrative inquiry and oral history be integrated into more traditional educational offerings that often lack the farmers voice?

Research around the impact that one-on-one meetings have with farmers could influence the way that service provider jobs are structured. It is important to know what the impact is for farmers from receiving behind-the-scenes facilitated support. How can that support be stacked, such as ensuring that when a farmer visits the office for a check-in they also leave with practical tools like supplies and instructions for taking a water or soil test. The service provider could collect qualitative impact statements and quantitative data on who was helped, how they were helped, and when.

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APPENDIX A

Interviewer Guide and Questioning Route – Interviews (Farmers)

CASH, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY: DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE GEORGIA ORGANICS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

The interviewer reads: Hello and welcome to our session today. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview about your experiences with the Georgia Organics Accelerator Program. For simplicity, I'll refer to it as the Accelerator for the rest of the interview. My name is Billy Mitchell and I am a Master's student in the Agriculture, Leadership, Education, and Communication program at UGA.

Before we begin, let me share some things that will make our discussion easier. There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your point of view. Please speak up and clearly. We are audio recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. You have the option of having this recording, with your name and farm name removed, submitted to the UGA oral history collection. Otherwise, the recording will not be heard by anybody other than myself and the other members of the research team and, once the recording has been transcribed, it will be deleted. We will be on a first-name basis during this interview but, in our later reports, your name will not be attached to the reported comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and listen. I will be asking around 10 questions. Our session will last about an hour and a half. If you are able, please turn off your cell phone. Let's begin.

Introductory Information

Interviewer reads: Let's find out some more about you. Please share the year you were born, how long you have been farming, how much of your farm is in production, and how long you have been producing at this scale.

Georgia Organics Accelerator Program

Interviewer reads: An area of interest for myself and other farm educators and service providers is how to best meet the needs of diversified produce farmers who are looking to maintain, grow and/or professionalize their farms with a focus on environmental and financial sustainability. Since you participated in the Accelerator, I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences before, during, and after that program.

- Before joining the accelerator program, what was your farming experience like?
    - Probe: What success stories have you had?
    - Probe: What were some of your greatest challenges?
    - Probe: How did you work with not-for-profit service providers, like Georgia Organics, to find success or solve challenges?

    - Probe: How did you work with Extension to find success or solve challenges?
    - Probe: Did you work with other farmers to find success or solve challenges?
    - Probe: Do you have a degree in an agriculture related field?
    - Did you have another "career" before farming?
- Please describe your motivations for joining the Accelerator.
    - Probe: Why did you decide to apply?
    - Probe: How did your employees or other farmers influence your decision to join?
    - Probe: Were there intrinsic, internal, motivators?
    - Probe: Were there extrinsic, external, motivators?
- Please describe your experience as a member of the Accelerator program.
    - Probe: How did you track your progress?
    - Probe: Did your motivations and goals change during the program?
    - Probe: Did the support you received to meet one challenge reveal new challenges?
    - Probe: What support was most beneficial?
    - Probe: Is there anything that was missing from the Accelerator program?
- Please describe something that you did not get, but still need, from the Accelerator program.
    - What resources do you need that you would use season after season that would benefit your farm?
    - What types of workshops would benefit your farm?
    - What types of community connections would benefit your farm?
- Describe what participating in the Accelerator meant for you and your farm?
    - Probe: What needs did the program meet for your farm?

    - Probe: What have you learned that you would share with other farmers?
- If you could go back and do one thing before starting the program, what would it be?
- Describe your definition of a successful diversified produce farm.
    - Probe: What role do not-for-profit service providers like Georgia Organics play in the success of a farm?
    - Probe: What role does Extension play in the success of a farm?
    - Probe: What role do other farmers play in the success of a farm?
    - Do you see a difference between organic and conventional farmers in terms of the tools necessary for success?

Concluding Discussion

We've talked today about your experiences participating in the Accelerator:

- What challenges have you faced in implementing practices, habits, or using new infrastructure that you developed or received as part of the program?
- What needs do you still have that additional education and resources could help you meet?
- Do you have any thoughts or comments regarding the Accelerator program development, implementation, and management that we have not discussed?

I am now going to try to summarize the main points from today's discussion. (*Interviewer lists the key messages and broad ideas that developed from the discussion.*)

- Is this an adequate summary?

Interviewer reads: As was explained at the beginning of the session, the purpose of this interview was to gather information related to your experience with the Accelerator program. Your comments today will aid in future resource development for diversified produce farmers who are looking to maintain, grow and/or professionalize their farms with a focus on environmental and financial sustainability. Also, other farmers will be able to learn from your perceptions and experiences related to the Accelerator.

- What questions do you have?

Interviewer reads: Thank you for taking time out of your day to share your opinions. Your participation is greatly appreciated and has provided valuable information.

APPENDIX B

Interviewer Guide and Questioning Route – Interviews (Service Providers)

CASH, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY: DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE GEORGIA ORGANICS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

The interviewer reads: Hello and welcome to our session today. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview about your experiences with the Georgia Organics Accelerator Program. For simplicity, I'll refer to it as the Accelerator for the rest of the interview. My name is Billy Mitchell and I am a Master's student in the Agriculture, Leadership, Education, and Communication program at UGA.

Before we begin, let me share some things that will make our discussion easier. There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your point of view. Please speak up and clearly. We are audio recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. You have the option of having this recording, with your name and farm name removed, submitted to the UGA oral history collection. Otherwise, the recording will not be heard by anybody other than myself and the other members of the research team and, once the recording has been transcribed, it will be deleted. We will be on a first-name basis during this

interview but, in our later reports, your name will not be attached to the reported comments. You may be assured of confidentiality.

My role here is to ask questions and listen. I will be asking around 10 questions. Our session will last about an hour and a half. If you are able, please turn off your cell phone. Let's begin.

Introductory Information

Interviewer reads: Let's find out some more about you. Please share the year you were born, how long you have been a service provider, the types of services you provide to farmers, and the types of farmers you work with.

Georgia Organics Accelerator Program

Interviewer reads: An area of interest for myself and other farm educators and service providers is how to best meet the needs of diversified produce farmers who are looking to maintain, grow and/or professionalize their farms with a focus on environmental and financial sustainability. Since you participated as Service Provider in the Accelerator, I would like to ask you a few questions about your experiences before, during, and after that program.

- Before joining the accelerator program, what was your experience of being a service provider like?
    - Probe: What success stories have you had?
    - Probe: What were some of your greatest challenges?

    - Probe: How did you work with not-for-profit service providers, like Georgia Organics, to find success or solve challenges?
    - Probe: How did you work with Extension to find success or solve challenges?
- Please describe your motivations for joining the Accelerator.
    - Probe: Why did you decide that you would be a good fit?
    - Probe: How did the farmers you already work with influence your decision to join?
    - Probe: Were there intrinsic, internal, motivators?
    - Probe: Were there extrinsic, external, motivators?
- Please describe your experience as a member of the Accelerator program.
    - Probe: How did you track your progress?
    - Probe: How did your motivations and goals change during the program?
    - Probe: How did meeting one challenge with a farmer reveal new challenges?
    - Probe: What support that you provided was most beneficial?
    - Probe: What elements are missing from the Accelerator program?
- Describe what participating in the Accelerator meant for you as a service provider?
    - Probe: What did you learn from Georgia Organics or other service providers in the program?
    - Probe: How have your practices changed since participating in the Accelerator?
- Please describe something not provided by the Accelerator program, but you believe farmers still need?
    - What resources do they need that they would use season after season that would benefit the farmers?

    - What types of workshops would benefit the farmers?
    - What types of community connections would benefit the farmers?
- If you could go back and tell yourself one thing before starting the program, what would it be?
- Describe your definition of a successful diversified produce farm.
    - Probe: What role do not-for-profit service providers like Georgia Organics play in the success of a farm?
    - Probe: What is Extension doing well?
    - Probe: What else could Extension be doing?
    - Probe: What role do other farmers play in the success of a farm?

Concluding Discussion

We've talked today about your experiences participating in the Accelerator:

- What challenges did you see the farmers face in implementing practices, habits, or using new infrastructure that you developed with them or helped them receive as part of the program?
- What needs do you believe the farmers still have that education and resources could help you meet?
- What thoughts or comments regarding the Accelerator program development, implementation, and management have we not discussed?

I am now going to try to summarize the main points from today's discussion. (*Interviewer lists the key messages and broad ideas that developed from the discussion.*)

- What is missing from this summary?

Interviewer reads: As was explained at the beginning of the session, the purpose of this focus group was to gather information related to your experience with the Accelerator program. Your comments today will aid in future resource development for diversified produce farmers who are looking to maintain, grow and/or professionalize their farms with a focus on environmental and financial sustainability. Also, other service providers and farmers will be able to learn from your perceptions and experiences related to the Accelerator.

- Have we missed anything or are there any other comments?

Interviewer reads: Thank you for taking time out of your day to share your opinions. Your participation is greatly appreciated and has provided valuable information.

APPENDIX C

IRB determination letter

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

August 12, 2022

Dear Eric Rubenstein:

On 8/12/2022, the Human Subjects Office reviewed the following submission:

Title of Study:	Qualitative Inquiry Examining Produce Farmer Success
Investigator:	Eric Rubenstein
Co-Investigator:	William Mitchell
IRB ID:	PROJECT00005944
Funding:	None
Review Category:	Exempt 2ii

We have determined that the proposed research is Exempt. The research activities may begin 8/12/2022.

Since this study was determined to be exempt, please be aware that not all future modifications will require review by the IRB. For more information please see Appendix C of the Exempt Research Policy (https://research.uga.edu/docs/policies/compliance/hso/IRB- Exempt-Review.pdf). As noted in Section C.2., you can simply notify us of modifications that will not require review via the "Add Public Comment" activity.

A progress report will be requested prior to 8/12/2027. Before or within 30 days of the progress report due date, please submit a progress report or study closure request. Submit a progress report by navigating to the active study and selecting Progress Report. The study may be closed by selecting Create Version and choosing Close Study as the submission purpose.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Kimberly Fowler, Director
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM

Exploring the Impact of the Georgia Accelerator Program and Resource Needs of the Participants

Researcher's Statement
You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Eric Rubenstein*
Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication
erubenstein@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: *William "Billy" Mitchell*
Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication
william.mitchell4@uga.edu

You are being invited to be in this research study because you participated in the Georgia Organics Accelerator program. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact the program had on participants, their motivations for participating, and any needs that still exist after participating in the program. The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. ***What knowledge, skills, and competencies do students perceive as important for successful diversified produce farming?***
2. ***What influence did their involvement in the Georgia Organics Accelerator program have on their farming careers?***
3. ***What gaps and resource needs exist for diversified produce farmers?***

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will allow the researchers to interview you regarding your experience in the Georgia Organics Accelerator Program. Researchers will use an interview

guide consisting of about 10 questions but may ask follow-up questions as needed. The researcher may ask you for clarification on answers to confirm the interpretation of your responses. There will be one session that will be approximately 90 minutes and will be held in person. This interview will be audio-recorded in person to allow the researchers to transcribe your comments. We are collecting your full name and phone number but they will not be retained and will be destroyed as soon as the interview data is transcribed and a pseudonym is given.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is a $125 stipend for participating in this study. There are no risks associated with this study. Your responses may help us understand the impact of the Georgia Organics Accelerator program and the resource needs that may exist.

Confidentiality of records
We will only keep your name with the interview and survey responses long enough to match your responses with interview. After the interview data is transcribed and a pseudonym is given, your name will be destroyed.

You have the option of having this recording, with your name and farm name removed, submitted to the University of Georgia Oral History collection. If you choose not to have the audio be part of the University of Georgia Oral History Collection, the Audio will be deleted after transcription. We do not plan to share this information with anyone who is not connected to this research study. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

It is possible that other researchers will cite this study or use the published information for future studies without additional consent from you.

Participant rights
If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

If you have any questions regarding this research study, please feel free to reach out to Dr. Eric Rubenstein or Billy Mitchell. We can both be contacted at:

Eric Rubenstein: erubenstein@uga.edu

William "Billy" Mitchell: william.mitchell4@uga.edu

By providing your signature, you are agreeing to participate in the research study.

_____

NAME OF PARTICIPANT

_____

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER

Please keep a copy for your reference.

APPENDIX D

Phone Call Script

CASH, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY: DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE GEORGIA ORGANICS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

The interviewer reads: Hello TBD, how are you doing today?

It's good to talk with you! My name is Billy Mitchell. I've worked alongside Georgia Organics over the past few years and have been to a few of their conferences. I recently read about the Accelerator program and saw that you were a participant – is that correct?

Great! It looks like a really interesting program! I'm interested in hearing what your experience was like and in learning what could be shared with Georgia Organics and other farmers about ways to improve the program. As a Master's student in the Agriculture, Leadership, Education, and Communication program, under the supervision of Dr. Eric Rubenstein at the University of Georgia, I have the opportunity to do research and am interested in interviewing the participants of the program as a research project. Do you think that type of research would be interesting?

That's good to hear! I plan on conducting 90-minute interviews that aim to capture the impact the program had on participants, why farmers/service providers like you decided to participate,

and any needs that still exist after participating in the program. People who are interviewed will receive a $125 stipend and there have been no risks identified with the study.

If this sounds interesting, I'd like to email you the consent form and take some time now to answer any questions you may have

Thank you for your time today! Will you please share your email address with me?

I will email you the consent form after we hang up and look forward to answering any additional questions you may have and potentially scheduling time for the interview. I'm looking forward to talking with you more.

APPENDIX E

Email Call Script

CASH, CAPACITY, AND COMMUNITY: DIGGING BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE GEORGIA ORGANICS ACCELERATOR PROGRAM

I'm pursuing a Master's Degree in UGA's Agriculture Leadership Education Communication (ALEC) program, under the supervision of Dr. Eric Rubenstein, and I have the opportunity to conduct a research project interviewing participants of the Georgia Organics Accelerator program to collect lessons learned and identify resources/programs that could be developed to assist produce farmers in GA.

The interviews will be around **90 minutes, in person**, and conducted from **August 28th through September 13th**. You will receive a **$125 stipend** for participating, your answers will be kept confidential and anonymous, and there have been no risks identified with this research project. The Georgia Organics staff are aware of this project, I'll be interviewing a few of them and some of the service providers from the Accelerator program as well. Should be fun!

If this sounds interesting, I'd like to have a quick phone call to answer any questions additional questions you might have and find a time for the interview. Feel free to send me a few good times to call you or just give me a call - (773) 343-6053.

Thanks! Looking forward to your thoughts and appreciate you considering it!