Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Agriculture

Phase II Recommendations: April 24, 2010

Background:

In March 2009, College of Agricultural & Life Sciences (CALS) Dean Molly Jahn requested a review of the Wisconsin Institute of Sustainable Agriculture. In response, a committee of 3 CALS faculty members (Colquhoun, Jackson and Kloppenburg) was formed in spring 2009 and led 10 listening sessions on the future needs and elements of an Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. Several themes were held in common among the diverse participant body. Stakeholders and campus communities felt strongly that we needed to get out of our “disciplinary silos” as faculty and staff, and take a more holistic, systems approach to issues. Networks were identified as an opportunity to engage all parties, from campus and beyond, around a similar opportunity or issue in sustainable agriculture. While stakeholders were pleased with the level and breadth of expertise at the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison, they felt that the connectivity of this expertise to citizens could be strengthened, particularly through place-based learning or “working landscape laboratories”. These stakeholder values and others identified in the listening sessions are incorporated into the vision, a way forward, and guiding principles as described below.

Given the expertise on sustainable agriculture issues on campus, the current widespread interest in the topic as documented in the listening sessions, and the diversity and importance of agriculture in the state, the UW-Madison is uniquely positioned for developing and leading an Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. The creative approach outlined below may serve as a model to change the way that land-grant colleges conduct their research and outreach activities.

Phase II of the redevelopment process included the formation of a Steering Committee that was charged with developing a vision and structure for an Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. The Steering Committee is composed of leaders both within and outside CALS with expertise that is as diverse as Wisconsin agriculture (see Appendix for committee members). This report reflects the valuable input and wisdom of the Steering Committee.
Our Vision:

Our long-term vision is to develop an Institute whose networking with client groups helps develop and share knowledge that promotes a diverse Wisconsin agricultural and food system that is environmentally sound, socially just, and economically viable.

More specifically, the Institute will promote research, education and outreach programs that:

- Are trans-disciplinary and implement a systems approach to the study of food and agricultural production throughout the supply chain.
- Stimulate innovative and entrepreneurial relationships within and beyond UW-Madison and UW-Extension.
- Engage stakeholders, including but not limited to growers, food processors, retailers, public agencies, non-government organizations, and citizens.
- Develop or support farmer/stakeholder networks as a means of stakeholder-to-stakeholder outreach.
- Develop and enhance undergraduate and graduate student learning experiences.
- Involve place-based learning and extension, beyond the laboratory or research station and in conjunction with stakeholders, when appropriate.
- Focus on current issues or opportunities in Wisconsin agriculture and food production, and are nimble and adaptable to a changing society and landscape.
- Are based on our current collective strengths, but add value beyond current efforts.
- Value and promote the diversity of Wisconsin agriculture as a strength and form of resiliency.

We will soon “test-run” this vision with three theme-based projects selected by the Steering Committee in the recent competitive redistribution of Institute for Sustainable Agriculture special grant funding from USDA. These projects include key components of the vision, demonstrate a strong likelihood to leverage resources well beyond this initial investment, and address current stakeholder needs and opportunities.

A Way Forward:

The proposed model for a reinvigorated Institute for Sustainable Agriculture is innovative enough to attract attention and resources, yet reasonable enough to be self-sustaining in the long term. This proposal abides by our guiding principles described below, fulfills our vision and reflects the values communicated by stakeholders and members of the Steering Committee:

- Theme-based research, education and outreach. Timely and forward-looking projects will be undertaken in a trans-disciplinary way with collaboration among faculty and stakeholders.
- Efficient use of resources. The proposed model is grounded within the current context of dwindling resources in CALS and the university. In fact, the Institute will leverage and distribute
new resources among faculty and staff to address timely issues and opportunities, and as such will not only be self-sustaining but will support existing programming.

- **Administratively lean.** The Institute will be intentionally light on personnel with majority administrative appointments, thus reducing the risk of duplicative leadership efforts. The proposed model will empower existing personnel to step beyond their current responsibilities in innovative and trans-disciplinary ways.

- **Nimble and adaptable.** Resources for the theme-based work will be allocated in a time period long enough to have impact, but with periodic review and reassignment often enough to remain adaptable to changing needs and opportunities. Additionally, the proposed model does not create a cumbersome structure that will outlast utility.

- **Catalyze change, not fight for existence.** The Institute, through its theme-based work, will collaborate with those who gravitate toward its core principles and vision. Teams will be assembled around needs and opportunities in food and agriculture, driven by a shared common expertise or passion but regardless of department, center, program or institute affiliation. Conversely, the Institute will intentionally not be charged with leading individual centers and programs as this would reduce its nimbleness and coalesce resources around historical structure instead of timely themes. The Steering Committee recognizes that some centers and programs have taken a similar “incubator” approach to developing programming and leveraging resources and hopes that such entities would collaborate on shared core principles without duplication. However, the Steering Committee also recognizes that such approaches have understandably been quite narrow in focus given the available resources. The Institute for Sustainable Agriculture includes a more expansive vision to take the theme-based weaver approach well beyond current efforts, to address a much greater need and broader audience.

The model focuses on the strengths of personnel we have called “weavers” as originally described by Dr. G.W. “Steve” Stevenson. Simply put, weavers will align stakeholder needs and opportunities with resources and expertise. The weaver is critical in the stakeholder network development process and represents a very innovative approach to reinvigorating the listening portion of the Wisconsin Idea.

Components of such a model include:

- **A “Lead Weaver.”** The lead weaver will serve as an initial point-person among stakeholder groups and internal personnel. The lead weaver will ensure internal communication among departments, centers, programs and institutes with common interests to avoid duplication, and in a similar manner, will coalesce external stakeholder groups working toward similar goals in a manner that optimizes individual resource investments. This approach will open new doors to stakeholder groups that have not been affiliated with CALS efforts and rekindle the Wisconsin Idea among groups that question the practical relevance of academia.

Colquhoun has “test-driven” this weaver role for the past 5 months. This effort has already paid dividends in terms of opening new doors among stakeholders, connecting timely issues and opportunities with UW expertise, and securing new resources that are then redistributed among
interested parties. Early results include over $530,000 in new funding that will be redistributed among teams of faculty and staff, with about $750,000 additional funding pending to support sustainable agriculture-related programming. It is important to note that resources have been identified that are tied to themes, such as integrated pest management or nutritional security, and not existing structures, such as centers or departments – again an indication that stakeholders are interested in a more nimble way of doing business with CALS. Stakeholder-driven projects currently in the works as a result of weaver-related activities range from an innovative “Field to Foodbank” project uniting the Wisconsin vegetable processing industry with foodbanks to improve nutritional sustainability to a project related to sustainability metrics for the fast food industry. We recognize, however, that this task is too large for a single person – in a 10 week period late in 2009 Colquhoun attended 46 meetings in the weaver role. Thus, we also propose theme-based weavers as described below.

- **Theme-based Weavers.** We propose 5 theme-based weavers that will be competitively awarded for an initial 3-year period from among existing faculty and staff. Themes will be openly solicited from and nominated by stakeholders and UW personnel, and selected by the Review Board outlined below. Examples of current topics that are not fully developed but could be addressed by theme-based weavers might include organic production, water quantity and quality in agriculture, urban agriculture, implications of sustainability standards in agriculture, nutritional sustainability and food security, and grazing. Theme-based weavers would build and engage stakeholder networks around the selected theme, build a resource base to address needs and opportunities, align teams of expertise and interests from among existing departments, centers, programs, institutes and external entities, and develop a research and outreach plan. Theme-based weavers would also tie stakeholder networks and place-based learning opportunities into undergraduate and graduate education through innovative lab experiences, seminars and graduate training – effectively taking the classroom to the state as a reflection of the Wisconsin Idea.

The theme-based weavers would be selected in a competitive proposal process similar to that used for endowed chairs or in the recent development of the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. Selected theme-based weavers would be alleviated of a small portion of their existing position in exchange for the ability to work in a trans-disciplinary, creative manner for a few years. Theme-based weavers would receive the monetary equivalent of a 50% time Research Assistant, with the use of this funding at the discretion of the theme-based weaver based on an assignment that would alleviate some burden of their current position. The added responsibility for programming leadership will be recognized with a modest and temporary base salary increase of 5%. Additional resources would include a modest travel, supply and personnel budget to accomplish the networking goals.

Theme-based weavers and the themes will be reviewed against the Institute’s vision by the Review Board and with stakeholder input at the conclusion of their 3-year term. If the theme has become self-sustaining or outlasted relevance, the position will be reassigned.
• **Advisory Review Board.** A Review Board will be assembled that is representative of Wisconsin’s agricultural diversity for the purposes of annual lead weaver and theme-based weaver review, prioritization of themes, and selection and reassignment of these positions. In a broader sense, the Review Board could also be useful in providing CALS administration with information applicable to shaping our college vision. The Steering Committee will continue to meet in the short term to determine the role, structure and selection process for such a Review Board, as well as to evaluate and amend WISA implementation.

• **Stakeholder networks.** While the “bottom-up” approach and stakeholder engagement are emphasized in the Institute’s vision and guiding principles, the importance of the networks is worthy of inclusion as a specific and critical component. Stakeholder networks will engage interested communities around the themes, tie grassroots efforts to the University and Extension, and lead place-based learning and outreach. The success of WISA will be driven by stakeholder engagement, particularly given the leanness of the proposed internal structure, and as such, we can no longer afford to view these as “outside groups” but instead as team members. The recognition of this team approach should also include sharing of resources where appropriate and useful.

• **Development Specialist.** A development specialist will leverage external resources from preliminary work conducted under the umbrella of the Institute. The long-term strength of the Institute’s foundation will be based on the ability to leverage external resources from relatively small but strategic initial theme-based investments. While the expertise and interest in addressing current sustainability issues currently exist on campus and beyond, the greatest limitation realized by all parties in the aforementioned listening sessions was the availability of resources to address such issues. Thus, we propose to hire a part-time development specialist who will leverage initial investments for larger and more self-sustaining resources to fulfill the Institute’s vision.

The development specialist will engage the networks assembled by the weavers, identify potential resource pools congruent with the expertise and interests of the network, and assist with proposal submission and fundraising. Potential funds will be sought through state, regional and federal grants programs, private foundations, citizens, and corporate relations when appropriate. The hiring of a development specialist will allow the networks to focus on their substantive, technical and creative work.

The success of the development specialist will rely heavily on identifying a candidate with past success in these complicated tasks along with the communication and facilitation skills to work with potential donors. This success will also depend on a strong communication line between the weavers, the networks and the development specialist. The development specialist should also have or develop strong ties and background with existing fundraising entities, such as the UW Foundation.
• Coordination of resources among existing centers, programs and institutes. The Steering Committee recognizes the strengths of existing entities and thus the opportunity for synergy and not duplication. Working relationships with other CALS centers, programs and institutes in the areas of outreach, information technology, publications and project evaluation would be valued by WISA. It is important to recognize that we value these resources where they currently exist, but do not recommend reassignment of resources. The Steering Committee will reach out to these entities, including but not limited to Nutrient and Pest Management (NPM), Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS), Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS) and the Environmental Resources Center (ERC), among others, to identify potential collaborative opportunities.

Institute for Sustainable Agriculture Guiding Principles:

Agricultural production is a complex biological system overlaid with an equally complex management system. The diversity of Wisconsin agriculture is similarly complex and based on differing values and historical context, but this diversity is widely recognized to be one of our greatest assets. We currently find ourselves with the great opportunity of determining the future role and structure of UW-CALS and UW Extension research, teaching and outreach in building a resilient future for Wisconsin agriculture. However, with this opportunity comes the great responsibility to conduct this process with dignity and in a manner that respects and values the diversity of Wisconsin agriculture. As such, these guiding principles will be followed to provide focus and to act as a filter for engagement and direction.

• Sustainability. We agree that the word “sustainability” has become freighted with contention because it implies that some production systems are sustainable while others are not, and thus we will not use sustainability itself as a measurable parameter. The components that are most often included in definitions of sustainability – economic, environmental and social – are valuable and include measurable parameters of an agricultural system’s function and stability and therefore are worthy of continued investigation.

• Systems focus. Programming efforts will be directed toward comprehensive study and measurable outcomes that positively impact food and agricultural systems. We recognize the current strengths of disciplinary research in UW-CALS and beyond, and will strive to assemble this research, teaching and outreach expertise into focused programming at a systems level.

• Stakeholder driven. Stakeholders in this case include participants in agricultural systems, ranging from agricultural producers to consumers. Consideration of stakeholder needs and opportunities in programming efforts will be inclusive and transparent, and will be based on respect for the diversity of Wisconsin agriculture. Programming efforts will maintain a continual conduit for stakeholder input and evaluation.

• Stakeholder involvement. Programming will emphasize direct stakeholder involvement in research, teaching and outreach efforts. Stakeholder involvement will be a critical factor in evaluating potential programming efforts, and will be required from project conception to
implementation and evaluation. Where applicable, programming will be valued that is conducted in stakeholders’ place-based research and learning centers.

- **Broadly applicable programming.** Research, teaching and outreach efforts will be focused enough to have a positive impact on the system, but broad enough such that results can be replicated in similar systems and by other stakeholders. While stakeholders involved in a specific project should benefit from the outcome of the programming, the programming and benefits generated must be readily available and accessible to all.

- **Transparency.** While stakeholder involvement will be critical in all stages of programming, it will be conducted in a transparent manner, without exclusivity agreements or confining relationships that restrict access to this Institute by others.

- **Nimble and innovative programming.** Systems programming efforts will not be confined to specific departments, programs, centers or institutes, but instead will draw on applicable expertise from multiple disciplines and sources. Additionally, programming efforts will be nimble and change with time as appropriate to stakeholder need and opportunity.

- **Integration among research, teaching and outreach.** In addition to the systems focus, efforts will be valued that integrate research with undergraduate, graduate or professional teaching opportunities and outreach efforts that will lead to a beneficial impact for stakeholders. This integration will lead to timely adoption of new practices by stakeholders and a cutting edge integration of new research into the classroom.

- **Engagement of faculty in innovative and entrepreneurial ways.** Faculty will be encouraged to open lines of communication and collaboration with a diversity of audiences, including but not limited to stakeholders, students, public agency personnel, non-government organizations and agricultural groups. These outreach efforts and relationships will be recognized and the value of which will be communicated to decision-makers.

- **Development of networking capacities.** Complex agricultural and food systems research often yields broad results. Therefore, outreach efforts will rely heavily on stakeholder-to-stakeholder communications and networks that allow for local adaptation and implementation of research results. The alignment with community leaders, or “integrators”, as network educators will be valued. Additionally, stakeholder networks will be valued for their own potential for information development and exchange, aside from their engagement in UW-CALS research, education and outreach. Also, networks have the potential to assist stakeholder segments in finding areas of common ground as they work to resolve common problems.

- **Awareness of surroundings.** Research, teaching and outreach efforts will engage other programs, centers, and institutes where appropriate and beneficial, including others in the UW system and non-university entities.
Appendix: WISA Steering Committee membership

- Jed Colquhoun, Committee chair, UW CALS and Horticulture
- Jim Munsch, grazier, Deer Run Farm
- Steve Diercks, potato, vegetable and grain grower, Coloma Farms
- Laura Paine, organic and grazing specialist, Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection
- Jeff Polenske, consultant, Polenske Ag Consulting
- Bob Goeres, President, Lodi Canning Company
- Margaret Krome, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
- Laura Daniels, dairy producer, Heartwood Farm
- David Perkins, CSA/vegetable grower, Vermont Valley Farm
- Heidi Johnson, Cooperative Extension County Agent, Jefferson County
- Jack Kloppenburg, UW Community and Environmental Sociology
- Jeff Wyman, UW Entomology, Emeritus Professor
- John Shuttske, UW Extension Administration
- Randy Jackson, UW Agronomy
- Doug Reinemann, UW Biological Systems Engineering
- Brad Barham, UW Agricultural and Applied Economics
- Erin Silva, UW Agronomy
- Dan Schaefer, UW Animal Science