Revisioning Process for the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Agriculture
Phase 1 Report

Jed Colquhoun, Randy Jackson, and Jack Kloppenburg
Departments of Horticulture, Agronomy, Community and Environmental Sociology
University of Wisconsin-Madison
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Introduction

In March, 2009, Dean Molly Jahn of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) at the University of Wisconsin asked us, three CALS faculty members, to assess the views of Wisconsin’s agrifood community on the possible revisioning and restructuring of the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (WISA). This report contains our distillation of the opinions, observations and ideas collected from faculty, staff, administrators, students, farmers, citizens and representatives of interested organizations who participated in listening sessions held during the months of April and May. It outlines three different approaches to a revisioning of WISA and suggests a format for proceeding to a second phase of this restructuring process.

Background

There now exists a widespread sense that all elements of society can be making more sustainable choices. This is nowhere clearer than in the food and agricultural sector. Climate change, rising energy costs, environmental externalities, and shifts in consumer demand have highlighted the need for land grant universities to increase their commitments to supporting farming practices and marketing arrangements that are consistent with the “triple bottom line” – social, environmental, and economic - of sustainability.

Over the last three decades, the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) at the University of Wisconsin has responded to this growing need in a range of ways. The Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program was first funded in 1979. In 1989, the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) was formed to provide an institutional focus for research and outreach on sustainable agriculture generally. Subsequently, the Nutrient and Pest Management program (NPM) was created to serve particular needs and clienteles. Additionally, over the last decade both individual faculty and many units in CALS and other parts of the university have oriented their work toward exploring and enacting what may be broadly characterized as sustainable agriculture. This tendency has been powerfully reinforced by a positive shift in societal attitudes toward sustainability, and especially by the preferences and mandates of public and private funding agencies that are increasingly committed to supporting work on sustainability.

As early as 2004 it was recognized within CALS that, however effective CIAS, NPM, and IPM might be as individual units, they might achieve even more if they could be better articulated. A February, 2005 report from an ad hoc faculty Realignment Committee cited “increased visibility,” “effectiveness and synergy,” “collaboration across disciplinary and institutional boundaries,” “an increase in competitiveness in seeking external funding,” “improved service to clientele,” and “enrichment of CALS teaching mission” as anticipated
benefits from the integration of those programs. In April 2006, an ad hoc faculty implementation committee submitted a report outlining a structure for a proposed “Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems.” In January 2007, the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Agriculture was created to “unify several programs, centers and units within CALS and UW Extension under one umbrella structure.”

In 2008, Dean Molly Jahn became concerned that the realignment of the units that constituted WISA had not produced benefits to the degree anticipated. In March 2009, she asked the three of us to explore how a further revisioning and/or restructuring of WISA might facilitate realization of those benefits.

We share with the Dean a sense that although many faculty and many units in CALS are working on elements of sustainability, these efforts are not now as well integrated or as synergistic as they might be. We believe that CALS could, and should, have a robust, institutional framework for guiding its contributions to the development of sustainable agrifood systems for Wisconsin, the nation, and the world. We believe that taking the opportunity now to reconsider, rethink, and perhaps restructure CALS’ approach to agrifood sustainability is timely and could be very productive. However, this is not a simple undertaking, nor is it one that can be accomplished quickly. This report of our work over the past three months should be understood as Phase 1 of what will need to be a longer and more involved consultative and deliberative process. We hope that we have laid an adequate foundation for Phase 2. That second phase will require both time and resources, but we believe they will be well invested if their deployment allows the full value of a serious rethinking/revisioning to be realized.

**Our Process**

The work performed in CALS is not simply the province of the faculty. Certainly, the research undertaken must meet faculty interests and objectives, but that research should also be a vehicle for student training. Further, and in concert with both the mission of land grant universities and the *Wisconsin Idea*, it should also serve the expressed interests and needs of Wisconsin’s citizens. We therefore felt that our assessment of WISA should involve a consultative process that would include faculty, staff, students, and citizen stakeholders.

We also recognized that “sustainability” is a value-laden term that can be interpreted in multiple ways by constituencies with different interests. Not only does CALS have a diverse external clientele, it is also internally diversified. The current configuration of the WISA does not encompass all the CALS units and programs that are, or could be, contributing to agrifood sustainability. Moreover, other colleges and institutes outside CALS also have human and institutional resources relevant to its agrifood work. We therefore also felt that our assessment of WISA should offer opportunities for participation to the full range of constituencies within and beyond CALS, UW-Madison, and the UW System.

Accordingly, we arranged a series of 10 listening sessions each of which was geared to accommodate a particular set of stakeholders. These were:

- faculty and staff of CIAS
- faculty and staff of IPM and NPM
The meetings were widely advertised on e-mail and the web, and anyone with an interest was invited to attend one of the three open sessions. A web site was created for the provision of input from people unable to attend a session or who wished to supply additional comments. Each of us also spoke informally with a wide range of individuals and organizations.

All three of us were present at almost all of the listening sessions. After a brief explanation of our charge and process, we primed the conversation with three questions:

1. Does CALS need to develop a revised approach to food and agricultural sustainability, and what should be the role and structure of WISA in particular?
2. What processes might be used to develop that approach?
3. What resources need to be mobilized to develop and support this initiative?

We then opened the floor to whatever comments those in attendance wished to make or issues they wished to raise. Discussions were not recorded, but all three of us took extensive notes on which we have relied for preparation of this report.

It is important to note that these listening sessions occurred during uncertain economic times that understandably created some level of anxiety about the future at the university and beyond, including the programs of which WISA is currently comprised. However, our charge was specifically to address the broader future of WISA, and not the status of its constituent programs. While we worked very hard at directing discussion toward WISA and away from individual programs and centers, some of the listening sessions were quite reactive to the perceived challenges to those units. With our original charge of a broader discussion in mind, our report focuses on the WISA-oriented elements of discussions.

What We Heard

The listening sessions were attended by a variety of individuals representing a wide range of organizations and interests. The points of view and opinions were correspondingly diverse. Nevertheless, we were gratified to find a number of patterns emerging from the commentary. From our collected observations, we have distilled an array of themes that we feel were widely – though by no means universally – shared by participants in our sessions. We report these common themes below and suggest that they might be regarded as a set of guiding principles that should inform the restructuring of WISA or the development of its successor. We regarded these listening sessions as just that – an opportunity to listen, without judgment – and to report what we heard without an attempt to filter or correct expressed perceptions.
The first set of these themes relates to what is problematic about the current structure of WISA. In this sense, they may be regarded as a body of precautionary principles, warnings about what should be redressed or avoided in any revisioning or restructuring. Listening session participants suggested that WISA’s effectiveness has been compromised by:

Realignment, Not Restructuring. The creation of WISA involved the realignment of units on an organizational chart rather than a functional restructuring of mandate, mission, operation, authority or financing. It simply juxtaposed IPM, NPM, and CIAS without specifying, mandating, or facilitating any changes in the interaction between them. While respected faculty members were dedicated over several years to creating the WISA vision, in implementation it appeared to lack a concise charge or charter beyond the vague admonition to be an “umbrella organization.” WISA is widely perceived by CALS faculty to have been an exercise in bureaucracy, although interestingly it was conceived by faculty themselves. Few faculty outside of CALS even knew about WISA. CALS’ external clientele were similarly unaware of its existence or purpose.

Centrifugal Forces Not Overcome. Absent the gravitational field that might have been provided by a clear mission or structure, WISA’s component units simply continued to go their own ways. This centrifugal tendency was reinforced by differences in scale and programmatic orientation among the units. IPM and NPM are oriented to a relatively narrow set of technical problems, and almost entirely involved in service activities. CIAS is engaged in a broader range of social and technical issues and has become increasingly dependent on external grant funding. Although all three units are involved in work that can be characterized as sustainable, simply identifying them as being part of WISA was not sufficient to materially alter their independent trajectories.

No Unit Left Behind? A striking feature of WISA’s framework is the failure to incorporate a number of other relevant units. Within CALS, the Program on Agricultural Technology Studies (PATS), the Environmental Resources Center, and the Agroecology Program all have clear commitments to addressing agrifood sustainability. Outside CALS, the Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment (SAGE) is engaged in a number of research initiatives germane to enhancing the sustainability of food and farming systems. Inclusion of any or all of these units might have made WISA considerably more robust, although it should be noted that these units were not excluded in any way from participating in WISA, and in fact many were encouraged to engage.

Inadequate Faculty Involvement. A key characteristic of most of the units that were not included in WISA is their primary orientation to research rather than service and outreach. A corollary feature is the significantly higher level of faculty engagement in those units than in those that are part of WISA. While IPM, NPM, and CIAS perform exemplary service and outreach, faculty involvement is related mostly to administrative and advisory activities. Without a vigorous connection to faculty and their research, WISA lacked the vitality that accompanies articulation to the core function of the university, and could not be the appealing funding target its architects had envisioned.
Insufficient Resources. No additional administrative or financial resources accompanied the creation of WISA. The layering of enlarged expectations on an unchanged resource base rarely has a positive outcome.

Commentary in our listening sessions made it abundantly clear that, as currently constituted, WISA has not delivered any of the benefits envisioned at its creation and is not now itself a sustainable entity. It may be of some solace that WISA’s sins have been of omission, not commission – it simply hasn’t done anything. It should be clearly understood that WISA’s failure does not derive from problems with the performance of its constituent units. Indeed, we heard clearly and consistently that within the parameters of their current missions, IPM and NPM and CIAS are effective programs that are highly valued by their clienteles. The creation of WISA has not, however, forged them into an integrated institute of sustainable agriculture but has left them looking, as a faculty director of one of those units commented, like “alphabet soup.”

If the participants in our listening sessions agreed that WISA is not now a useful vehicle through which CALS should be exploring or enacting agrifood sustainability, thoughts about what sort of structure might replace WISA was largely underdeveloped. Our discussions did elicit a wide variety of specific suggestions in this regard, but they tended to be quite fragmentary. Most of the commentary in the listening sessions was not focused on details, but revolved around the larger questions of what actually constitutes sustainability, the nature and conduct of agrifood research, and the relationship between the university and its clienteles. We found this discourse to be rich and stimulating. From it we have distilled a second set of themes which are fundamentally affirmative in nature. That is, they represent a set of positive attributes that participants thought should be part of any CALS initiative for agrifood sustainability. These themes included:

Revisit “Sustainability.” On one matter there was near-unanimous agreement: “sustainability” is a problematic term the meanings and uses of which are subject to considerable debate. “Sustainability” appears constantly and ubiquitously in current discourse as a shorthand for all that is good and green. As a result, all stakeholders – farmers, faculty, administrators, students – claim to be doing sustainable work. This tendency is reinforced by the widespread perception that a person or practice to which the term is not applied is, by implication, “unsustainable.” The issue of what “sustainable” means in the specific context of the Wisconsin Institute for Sustainable Agriculture was raised in all of our listening sessions. All stakeholders expressed considerable concern over the possibility that a particular definition of the term would be used to allocate resources under WISA. In several sessions the bulk of discussion was given to animated and sometimes divisive debate on this matter. Client concerns were also mirrored, though much less strongly, by faculty participants who also wondered how their work might be labeled. Continuous, frank discussion of what is meant by sustainability is useful as a heuristic and reflective exercise. However, too great a focus on definitional clarity can easily divert intellectual, organizational and material resources into unproductive and paralyzing conflict. A number of session participants with varying backgrounds suggested deleting “sustainable” from WISA’s name and incorporating terms such as “systems,” “holistic,” “diversity” and “discovery.”
Honestly Recognize and Engage Fault Lines Among Producer Communities. Debates among participants in our listening sessions over the nature of sustainability revealed clear fault lines among communities associated with different types of producers. We are mindful of the great diversity of farmers and farm enterprises in Wisconsin, and of the analytical flattening that accompanies reduction of this diversity to simple dualisms. However, it was hard not to be struck by the contrasts in the content of our sessions with, for example, the Organic Advisory Council on the one hand, and the Wisconsin Agriculture Coalition on the other. Both organizations would support the restructuring of WISA as long as that revitalization met their own needs. Those needs, however, can be quite different. The “mainstream/commodity” community perceives allocation of resources to organics and “marginal” enterprises as inefficient use of resources. The “alternative/value-added/organic” community perceives attention to their interests, and especially the work of the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, as a significant opening to a university that has not historically been receptive to their concerns. Listening session participants emphasized that a restructured WISA capable of attracting additional resources must be prepared to recognize and engage these different interests. One possible approach is to focus on honoring the diversity of food and farm systems in Wisconsin, strengthening the full portfolio of enterprises, and offering producers a wide variety of options.

Use Existing Institutional Resources Effectively. In the current economic climate, the need to use existing resources efficiently and effectively was especially clear. Many listening session participants commented that they would not support any restructuring of WISA that would increase administrative costs and enlarge the bureaucracy. WISA’s creation was widely perceived to have done no more than redraw boxes on the organizational charts. Faculty were acutely aware of the many centers and institutes now on campus (240) and in CALS (19), the missions and activities of which overlap with or logically could articulate to those of WISA. Any new version of WISA that might emerge should involve arrangements for productive and cost-effective collaboration with such units.

Initiate Creative, Unique Research. Just as there is no value-added if WISA simply duplicates institutional structures, there is no value-added if WISA simply encompasses research that is already being done or would be done anyway. New knowledge is what all producers expressed an interest in having generated. If WISA is to be revitalized, its central function should be as a platform for the motivation and facilitation of creative, unique research that would not otherwise have been envisioned, funded, or accomplished. There is little or no energy for more of the same. As one participant put it, “Let’s think big, or don’t do it all over again.”

Faculty Must be Integrally Involved. The operational core of the University of Wisconsin as an institution is the faculty. Not only is there a powerful tradition of faculty governance at UW, but faculty are almost exclusively responsible for setting their own funding, research and teaching trajectories. Deans and department heads are actually quite limited in the influence they have over faculty participation in centers and institutes. If WISA is to have the vitality it requires, it will need a cadre of faculty who are excited to be part of it. Further, that involvement must not be limited to an advisory capacity or to outreach activities, but must be grounded in active research.
Out of the Silo: Beyond Departments and Disciplines. A characteristic feature of the best contemporary knowledge production is its refusal to be bounded by the confines of department or discipline. In our listening sessions, we were struck by the number of times in which producers, students and faculty used the metaphor of the “silo” to describe an approach to research, teaching and outreach that they found insufficiently rewarding and productive. There was a widespread sense that the research required to shape a path to sustainability is going to emerge from the creative interaction of faculty whose capacities are grounded in different types of knowledge. It was felt that such interactions could often emerge unpredictably from the free association of faculty who discover the intersection of their interests, motivations and skills in a variety of formal and informal settings. Participants felt that WISA could function as an institutional facilitator for the development of this sort of multi/trans/inter/non-disciplinary research. A number of faculty emphasized that while funding is a useful attractant, a more powerful motivator is actually the opportunity to do exciting work with enthusiastic and exciting colleagues.

Out of the Silo: Beyond Farming. Our listening sessions for clients of CALS were heavily populated by farmers and producer groups. But over the past decade it has become increasingly clear that the agrifood system – encompassing input supply, farm production, transportation, processing, distribution, consumption, and wasteflow – is a more useful frame for analysis. Although some organizations were invited to attend, we did not hear from representatives of farm workers, the food insecure, or consumers. Participants suggested that CALS faculty and staff needed to get out of their disciplinary silos and think in a systems context that extends well beyond the field and crop production. Domains to which WISA might extend its attention included transportation, energy, human nutrition, farm labor, food processing, and food safety. A revitalized WISA could be the vehicle through which CALS navigates the transition from an orientation to farming to an orientation to the agrifood system and all its parts.

Out of the Silo: Beyond CALS. If WISA might be the vehicle for CALS to articulate to the agrifood system as a whole, it could also function as a vehicle for the articulation of CALS to other parts of the university that share an interest and concern for the many social, cultural and technical dimensions of how food is produced and consumed. In our listening sessions we heard from a representative of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies who expressed an interest in collaborating with WISA. Other university units working on food issues include Facilities Planning and Management, the Memorial Union, Housing Services, the Business School, and the Medical School. WISA’s institutional location is appropriately in CALS, but it could be the center of gravity of a constellation of university-wide collaborative initiatives.

Out of the Silo: Include Students. Student participants were clear in their desire for an educational process that would get them out of the silo and insisted that WISA ought to have a defined pedagogical component. Students suggested that WISA ought to foster a broader look at sustainability that could be incorporated into existing or new curricula. They also suggested improved experiential learning opportunities, such as undergraduate internships, place-based learning, and hands-on coursework. To the extent that WISA could facilitate faculty working together out of the silo, this opportunity could also be offered to the Research Assistants they support and the students they advise.
Out of the Silo: Enhance Client Connectivity. All client participants were adamant in their insistence that university personnel – faculty, administrators, extension staff – need to get out of their ivory tower silo and listen to and interact more with the people they purport to serve. This is not a new observation. For their part, university participants are well aware of the mandate of the “Wisconsin Idea” and feel that they are reaching out. Still, the persistence and force of this criticism from all client groups strongly suggests that the “connectivity” available needs to be taken to a qualitatively different level. In particular, it was strongly suggested that WISA could be a path for improved communication and incorporation of clientele ideas and issues into both fundamental and applied research. Such enhanced connectivity would not be limited simply to better “listening.” A variety of participants suggested that infrastructure be provided on campus for short courses and mini-conferences in which researchers and students and clients could interact in stimulating and creative and non-traditional settings and contexts. CIAS was frequently cited as having become an effective entry point for producers who found a receptive university audience. Representatives of all agricultural communities spoke in favor of a participatory, dialogic approach to consultation. Additionally, these communities encouraged a stronger engagement of county extension in the sustainability discussion.

Problem Orientation. Many participants noted that a hallmark of sustainability work is a holistic approach to concrete problems. It was felt that what best galvanizes productive interaction of researchers from different disciplines and farmers is often common attention to a particular problem. An example cited was the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center (GLBRC), which has used a compelling problem to attract funding and to accrue a disciplinarily diverse set of researchers. The collaborative activities of faculty and students in both the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery and Center for Sustainability and the Global Environment were suggested as potential models for what is possible with a problem focus.

Wisconsin’s Competitive Advantage: Diversity. There was interest in how sustainable agriculture programs have been developed and structured at other institutions such as Iowa State and Michigan State. Participants also recognized that a restructured WISA might well find itself in competition with such programs for external funding. In that context, there was conversation about what Wisconsin’s comparative advantage might be. It was observed that Wisconsin is unique in its social and biophysical diversity. The state encompasses a wide range of landscapes, a wide range of crops, and a wide range of production systems. Most important, it has a wide range of successful farm types, from CAFOs to CSAs. The university reflects this diversity in the range of the departments and disciplines it can bring to bear on knowledge production from sociology to molecular biology. What Wisconsin can uniquely offer is the opportunity to work across the full range of production systems using a full portfolio of scientific resources, rather than focusing on one end of the farm spectrum. A new element of the Wisconsin Idea might be the notion that diversity enhances stability and sustainability.

The Significance of Place. Several participants argued strongly that sustainability implies coming to an adequate understanding of complete systems, and that it follows that research ought to be undertaken in the material context of a particular place. It was suggested that some agriculturally significant biophysical entity (e.g., a watershed, or a landscape type) be identified and a long term effort be made to study its full systemic dynamics. On a smaller scale, there was
interest in using a variety of university farms and other properties as “working landscape laboratories.”

Looking for a Leader. It was clear to all, and especially to participants associated with the university, that leadership of a restructured WISA is absolutely critical. It was strongly suggested that a full time faculty director would be essential. The challenge of navigating client attitudes toward sustainability, facilitating connectivity within the university and between the university and its clients, developing programming, and seeking funding is not a part-time job. A director would ideally be a strong leader who is innovative, entrepreneurial, communicative with a variety of audiences, and with the weaver/broker skills to enable acquisition of resources to drive multi-disciplinary research and outreach.

Sine Qua Non: Adequate Resources. Finally, participants frequently noted that however WISA might be restructured, it would have to be adequately funded to perform whatever mission it might be mandated to undertake. As important as the size of funding is its stability. It was suggested that the position of director be supplemented by administrative support for proposal writing, project administration, and outreach.

Recommendations for Phase 2

This report represents the culmination of Phase 1, a period in which we organized listening sessions with the objective of gauging opinion regarding the desirability of revisioning and restructuring WISA. We were determined to reach out to as broad a set of stakeholders as possible in our effort to identify the important considerations that might shape that initiative. We heard clearly from participants that WISA as currently constituted is not serving its intended function, indeed, it is apparently not serving any function. It should, we conclude and recommend, be either eliminated or restructured.

Phase 2 will involve the actual revisioning and restructuring needed to redraw the new mission and to craft a revised institutional architecture for WISA. We explicitly avoided this work in Phase 1. Development of the next iteration of WISA will require an extended period of careful deliberation and close attention to process. We recommend that this task be undertaken by a new committee invited and appointed by the Dean of CALS. While we are not making detailed recommendations about the exact size and configuration of this committee, we suggest that it be comprised of representatives of stakeholder communities from within and without CALS and the UW-Madison. Given the range and scale of the issues that this committee will need to engage, we anticipate that it would act as an executive or steering committee empowered to create and recruit personnel for a variety of subcommittees assigned to undertake particular tasks. We would expect that committee to review our Phase 1 report and to use our work to inform construction of a process that should result in the rebirth of WISA (perhaps renamed) in a form capable of making significant contributions to the development of sustainable agrifood systems.

Given the interests of CALS’ collaborators and clienteles, we suggest that close attention to adequate process will be critical to the success of Phase 2. In particular, the Phase 2 committee should consider the importance of:
**Participation.** The concepts of diversity, inclusivity, and transparency should be fundamental to the Phase 2 process. Many groups and individuals were involved in Phase 1 discussions and many indicated a desire and willingness to be a part of any Phase 2 process. The diversity of perspectives represented by these players should be catalogued and called upon for Phase 2. Moreover, Phase 2 effort should proceed in a way that allows stakeholders to monitor and provide input to the process as it evolves. This will result in a process that is slower than many desire, but should encourage buy-in and a result that is most likely to be broadly accepted as legitimate.

**Professional Facilitation.** It was repeatedly recommended that professional facilitation be engaged to help organize and direct the Phase 2 process. This is particularly useful when considering the philosophical chasm that exists between commodity groups and what has traditionally been referred to as the “Sustainable Agriculture Community”.

**Leadership Continuity.** It was frequently suggested that it would be important that our Phase 1 efforts not be re-made in Phase 2. Participants felt that there should be some carryover in leadership from our committee to the Phase 2 committee in order that “process memory” and insights gained over the past three months not be lost.

The Phase 2 process will also need to confront several key issues. Prominent among these are:

**Role of Current WISA Units.** IPM, NPM, and CIAS have strong records of service, education, outreach and in some cases, research. They have cultivated important relationships with constituencies in Wisconsin and beyond. Their staffs have worked hard for a more sustainable food system. The successful efforts within these programs should be preserved and could be integral components of a revised, multi-disciplinary WISA. CIAS, in particular, has developed extremely effective modes of consultation and participation with its specific client groups. This channel of access is highly valued as the “only portal into the UW we have” for some clients that have been traditionally underserved. The relationship of these units to any new version of WISA must be carefully crafted. Whatever restructuring might occur, it is critical that there be no net loss of the ability to successfully serve a broad range of client groups.

**Role of Non-WISA Units.** Sustainability is now a significant component of the missions and interests of many UW-Madison colleges and programs. With increasing frequency, there is overlap between the work of CALS and units located in other parts of the university. The Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies (IES), for example, has initiated a Food and Sustainability Working Group, and its Center for Sustainability and Global Environment (SAGE) brings together faculty and students working on carbon sequestration by farm crops. Within CALS, itself, units such as PATS, the Environmental Resource Center, and the Center for Dairy Profitability have not been part of WISA but their work touches on matters such as organic farming and the development of local food systems. A variety of listening session participants commented that sustainability ought to characterize CALS as a whole rather than being limited to a single unit with that designation. Surely, sustainability programs within CALS and within the university should be operating cooperatively and synergistically. To avoid unproductive turf
wars, we suggest that a principal objective of the Phase 2 process will be to establish effective collaborative links between programs across the entire campus.

Revisit Sustainability. We have already noted this point, but it is so central to the entire enterprise that it bears the reinforcement of repetition. The term sustainability has no precise definition or stable meaning. This indeterminacy is problematic when the word is used to shape the mission and operations of an institution. In the area of agrifood systems, real difficulties arise from the divisive effects that are often manifested in debates over who or what is or is not sustainable. When used, it is often taken to imply that some people, groups, places, or practices are sustainable, which alienates and excludes others from processes and dialogue that should be characterized by inclusive participation. It is important to note, however, that many have worked for decades towards a more sustainable present and future, especially in the food and agricultural realm, and these efforts should not be discounted by completely avoiding use of the term. The Phase 2 committee will need to carefully consider how “sustainability” will be defined and deployed.

Learn From Other Initiatives. Given the relatively short period available to us in Phase 1, our time was spent principally in listening rather than in exploring the literature, or web-based materials, or the experiences of other institutions. A variety of other universities (e.g., Iowa State University, Michigan State University, the University of New Hampshire, the University of California-Santa Cruz) have created units with objectives similar to those for which WISA was established. In our own institution, both the colleges of business and engineering have undertaken the development of sustainability programs. And, as we have pointed out, many units in CALS and UW-Extension are working on sustainability. The experiences of all these initiatives surely constitute a rich and instructive resource for assessing and creatively rethinking WISA. We recommend that the Phase 2 process include systematic inventory of current and existing efforts in this arena.

On Beyond WISA: Three Possible Paths

It was not our task to propose a new mission, administrative structure, or field of operations for WISA. Still, in the process of eliciting attitudes and viewpoints from stakeholders, we did get an emergent sense of the principal paths that might be pursued. We outline three visions here, ordered by increasing resource requirements. These proposals may be regarded as loose models, one or all of which might serve as starting points for the Phase 2 committee’s thinking.

WISA Plus – adding resources to the existing WISA model. In this model, the full range of existing centers and programs that self-identify as having sustainability as a mission would be better connected. Effort would be dedicated to connecting faculty and external clients with centers and programs. In the listening sessions, some participants indicated that central idea around which the original WISA was founded was sound, but that the lack of resources – especially financial – hindered progress in connecting potential participants.

The main problem with this path is that this has already been tried, and it failed. Some participants also suggested that this would simply add a layer of unnecessary administration without changing the role or utility of existing programs. It was widely observed that doing this
without significant resource additions would doom the process to failure, and that scavenging resources from existing programs is not an acceptable alternative.

**Wisconsin Agrifood Resource Network – aligning resources with ideas and opportunities.** From external clients’ point of view, what they wanted from the university might be summarized as “access,” the opportunity to be heard and to connect to university researchers and staff. From a faculty point of view, while financial resources are highly valued, what really motivated them was the opportunity to connect with colleagues on projects that are intellectually exciting and practically useful. From the administration perspective, what is desirable is a structure that generates projects that attract external resources and meet the needs of client groups. It may be possible to achieve all of these objectives with a structure that relies on flexible networking and the generation of “connectivity” rather than on a conventional top-down administrative structure.

WISA might be envisioned as a “Wisconsin Agrifood Resource Network” (WARN) with permeable boundaries rather than as a traditional administrative unit. The constitutive function of the network would be to align ideas and opportunities with people who embrace them. The Network would be a channel of access for client groups and for funding agencies. Network staff would operate as “weavers,” brokering interactions and communication and cooperation between groups of faculty and clients and funders in flexible combinations capable of responding nimbly to needs and opportunities. This model could be deployed in a dynamic, innovative and adaptive place-based program that might incorporate the following elements:

- **Direction from a faculty “weaver” who aligns existing and new resources with stakeholder needs, issues and opportunities.** This director should find efficiencies by improving communication among current centers, stakeholders, faculty and students across campus and beyond who share similar interests and goals. This person should be communicative (including good listening skills), innovative, dynamic and entrepreneurial. The alignment of current resources and interests with stakeholder needs and opportunities can be done with fairly minimal new investment.

- **An advisory committee that draws internally and externally from a broad representation of interests and values.**

- **A stable funding base that would be competitively allocated to place-based learning laboratories.** Competitive funding could be allocated to trans-disciplinary teams that include external client participation and address a current issue or opportunity in food and agricultural systems. Place-based projects would be funded only while the need exists, and therefore would be adaptable and focused on current prospects. The faculty “weaver” would be key in assembling such trans-disciplinary teams and aligning them with stakeholder need. Again, the long-term funding source is necessary for success with this model, and cannot come from cannibalism of current programs.

- **Focus on current issues, ideas or crises that change with time.** The dynamic portion would adapt with time and stakeholder and advisory input, without the need to add or dissolve current centers and programs. In other words, the dynamic portion would draw the best of what we have to offer from across campus and in collaboration with other interest groups in
response to a specific focus area. This removes barriers and limitations surrounding
delineated charges and funding lines that constrain the adaptability of current programs
(previously referred to as “disciplinary silos”).

- Dynamic systems research and outreach would be strongly tied to stakeholders by focusing
  on place-based laboratories. This place-based strategy would allow for study and
  implementation of food and agricultural resource management by trans-disciplinary teams
  assembled from across campus and beyond in “real-life” conditions, and would strengthen
  our connection to the stakeholder need, opportunity or crisis. Place-based study would also
  address participant comments that the university and extension have somewhat lost
  connection and applicability or are unresponsive to Wisconsin food and agricultural
  communities. Such labs could also involve interactive, experiential learning opportunities
  for undergraduate and graduate students that would be integrated into existing curricula.
  Examples of current issues that could be addressed with place-based laboratories include
  water quality management in the Yahara watershed, alternative energy sources for rural
  Wisconsin (using the Ashland/Bayfield efforts as the laboratory), organic systems research
  on a working organic farm, local food sourcing to urban school districts, and fuel and energy
  consumption in food processing. This model respects the diversity and goals of Wisconsin
  food and agricultural systems by opening the opportunity to all, without the constraint of ties
to a specific special interest.

This model puts the burden for success and meeting the needs for many diverse interest
groups on the faculty “weaver,” and it could likely be difficult to please all. Additionally,
resource allocation to the place-based learning laboratories could be scrutinized by groups with
varying interests and values. Trans-disciplinary teams will require buy-in from a wide range of
internal and external groups, although this may be alleviated with the carrot of available funding.

**Wisconsin Institute for Food and Agricultural Discovery.** A third possible path involves an
aggressive response to the possibilities offered by government and private funding agencies’
growing interest in supporting research into “sustainability.” This model proceeds via a
commitment to a packaging and marketing of CALS research capacities along the lines
pioneered by the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. This is a resource intensive approach that
requires a high level of financial and administrative investment in anticipation of large returns of
grants from competitive and foundation sources. Components of this model include:

- A focal “green building” that includes a residential center for students and visiting experts,
cooking and dining facilities, community gardens, alternative energy sources (such as a dry
digester for food waste), and classroom/meeting space.

- Project administration personnel that would assist with proposal writing and submission, as
  well as grants and gift management.

- Place-based learning centers as outlined in the model above. The proposed place-based
  learning centers would not replace agricultural research stations, but would provide
  opportunities for holistic systems investigation and implementation.
• Internal funding opportunities, on a competitive basis, that would attract trans-disciplinary teams of faculty, students and external stakeholders.

• Professional development opportunities focused on food and agricultural systems, such as food safety, marketing and economics, and dairy waste management. These training sessions would combine classroom “basics” with interactive, hands-on learning opportunities in the place-based laboratories. This may be somewhat analogous to the Business School relationship with the Fluno Center, a combined living and learning space.

• Curriculum development for a degree in food and agricultural resource management at the undergraduate and graduate level. This effort would require a realignment of existing curricula.

This grand vision would require a large infusion of new resources, and corporate source of funding for such a vision could conflict with the ideals and values of some Wisconsin stakeholders. Without significant, stable, and long-term funding streams, this vision would dry up quickly. It may also be difficult to be as flexible in addressing the needs and ideas of multiple interests through time, as the majority of resources would be dedicated to specific items, such as infrastructure and personnel. Critics might indicate that this was an inefficient use of new resources and existing expertise – i.e. we should harness our current strengths without creating another large and cumbersome institute.

The Next Steps

In the near term, we recommend the following action items to initiate and stimulate Phase 2:

1. The CALS administration should appoint leadership for Phase 2 of this revisioning process. We suggest that a faculty member be selected to chair a Phase 2 Steering Committee. The next phase will be even more time consuming and it must be recognized that it will not be successful if done on an ad-hoc basis.

2. The CALS administration should appoint a Phase 2 Steering Committee, membership to include representatives of faculty, staff, students, extension, external stakeholders, and public agencies. The Steering Committee should be selected from a group of nominees requested in an open solicitation. Steering Committee members should value and respect a diversity of opinions and interests, and be able to represent food and agricultural production “from the ground up.” The Steering Committee should be large enough to represent a broad range of interests, but small enough to permit effective and efficient operation. It is anticipated that the Steering Committee would in turn recruit and appoint members of sub-committees to undertake the tasks and analyses pursuant to Phase 2. It would be ideal if some of the faculty involved in Phase 1 could be incorporated in some fashion into Phase 2 in leadership or advisory capacities.

3. The Phase 2 Steering Committee should be charged with developing, refining and delivering a revised structure of WISA for implementation.

4. The CALS administration should work closely with the Steering Committee to ensure that the college is prepared to acquire or provide resources such that the model proposed
and expectations set in Phase 2 are realistic and feasible. An initial base funding should be stable, but not tied to a specific existing center, program or department so that it can be nimbly allocated based on need and opportunity.