

Veterans in agriculture: Development of an integrated educational program for new farmers and ranchers.

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According to the Department of Veteran Affairs, there are about 2 million veterans younger than 35 years of age in the country, with the largest concentration of them living in the Southern region. Studies have shown that a large fraction of enlisted personnel come from rural America, and that at the end of their military service they would like to return to their place of origin and reincorporate to traditional local activities. Unfortunately, young veterans have a more difficult time finding work than do civilians in the same age group. Small farming offers these veterans an opportunity for a satisfying and prosperous self-employment in their hometown rural communities. In the last few years, several groups have developed programs to support the transition of returning veterans into farming life by offering internship opportunities for them (such as the Farmer Veteran Coalition, Farms not Arms and Swords to Plowshares). However, there are few educational programs specifically tailored to the particular needs and abilities of veterans. Our team has developed a unique program that can provide veterans with customized learning and training opportunities to initiate a small farming business. The program consists of a series of 35 modules on topics ranging from poultry production, livestock production, agroforestry, business development, farm safety and sustainable agriculture which are available free of cost at: <https://attra.ncat.org/uofa/>. Also, we have hosted/participated in workshops and conferences on various agricultural production systems with particular emphasis on the needs of military veterans. Finally, we created internship opportunities for military veterans at different farms in the state of Arkansas to help them learn the agricultural enterprise of their choice and create a network of likeminded military veterans starting a new mission in agriculture. This program has generated specific training and learning opportunities and networking systems for military veterans new to sustainable farm production. This program is funded by the USDA-NIFA-BFRDP 2010-03143.