

Annual Activity Report 2024
Vancouver Island University, Cowichan Agriculture Program

Submitted by:

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Agriculture Professional Development and Training team members: Julia Fisher (Program Coordinator), Dr. Jenny Horn (Agricultural Project Worker/Contractor), Nancy Hamilton (former Manager), Jessie-Magee Chalmers (current Manager)

Submitted to: Cowichan Valley Regional District, Committee of the Whole

Submitted on: December 19, 2024

This Activity Report covers January 2024 to present, and it details the activities of the Agriculture Professional Development & Training (PDT) team at VIU Cowichan as we continue to develop and deliver programs, build relationships within the agricultural community, and strategize for the continued growth of the agriculture portfolio.

In May of 2024, Nancy Hamilton retired from her position as the manager of the PDT Cowichan team. Jessie Magee-Chalmers has stepped into the management position for the agriculture portfolio.

Julia Fisher continued working part-time as the Program Coordinator for Agriculture and Food Systems. She transitioned to (temporary) full-time hours in October to better support the delivery of the micro-credentials (outlined below).

Jenny Horn continued to work on the development of the agriculture portfolio where her primary focus was to ensure the completion of the curriculum of the three micro-credentials. She also provided support to the Program Coordinator and has continued to build and maintain relationships with the agricultural community. Jenny has accepted a role with another organization effective January 2025 and will not be directly connected to the ongoing growth of the agriculture portfolio at VIU.

1) Project Progress:

Micro-Credential Project Update:

- I. Sustainable Soils Management: Surviving to Thriving
 - Funder: Continuing Education and Training Association of BC (CETA BC)
 - Pilot delivered September 10 – October 22, 2024 (28 students enrolled, and 26 students completed the course)
 - Course review underway

II. Agroecology: Perspectives, Principles, and Practices

- Funder: Ministry of Post Secondary and Future Skills
- Pilot delivery in progress – November 5 – December 17, 2024 (17 students enrolled)

III. Seed Security: Organic Vegetable Seed Production

- Funder: Continuing Education and Training Association of BC, Canadian Organic Growers, and SeedChange
- Curriculum complete
- Pilot scheduled for January 7 – March 11, 2025
- 22 students enrolled

Other program delivery:

IV. Agriculture Workshop Series

- Open-enrollment
- Delivered seven workshops at Providence Farm (Introduction to Native Pollinators, Introduction to Meadow Making, Introduction to Beekeeping, Backyard Chickens, Irrigation Design, Xeriscaping, Basic Maintenance and Operation of Farm Equipment)
- New workshops are planned for winter and spring 2025

2) Network and partnership development:

Deliverable: 2 – 4 annual networking/partnership meetings hosted in the CVRD

Community Outreach:

Our team continued to build the relationships that were made in 2023 by engaging with the agricultural community at several events, meetings, and one-on-one consultations. Our hope was to gain an understanding of what specific educational gaps are in the Cowichan Valley, which farms could be interested in practicum placements, possible guest instructors and field day hosts, and to build the general awareness of the reinvigorated agricultural offerings at the VIU Cowichan Campus and in the CVRD region.

To date, we have engaged with the community and agriculture-related groups and organizations in the following ways:

- i. VIU Agriculture Newsletter – Regular updates on course offerings have been sent to students and prospective students (currently 197) who have signed up to our interest list.
- ii. We maintain regular communication with the VIU Horticulture department, VIU t̓i̓w̓ḥemawtxw Campus, and Milner Gardens to strategize on cross-promotional activities, collaborations, and to discuss course offerings.

- iii. VIU has a position on North Cowichan's Agriculture Advisory committee. This committee is refreshing the North Cowichan Strategic Agriculture Plan and developing an agriculture education and training strategy.
- iv. We continue our discussions with OUR Ecovillage regarding future practicum placement opportunities, coordination of potential field days, and the possibility of OUR Ecovillage as a training facility for livestock husbandry.
- v. We have continued producer consultations in the CVRD region regarding the Livestock Husbandry micro-credential. This includes one-on-one discussions with several local livestock producers and with the Small-Scale Meat Producers Association.
- vi. VIU has run information booths at several events (see below) to promote upcoming courses, solicit contact information, and conduct rapid market assessments to inform program development.
- vii. The Program Coordinator is also responsible for the Advanced Gardening course in partnership with the Vancouver Island Master Gardener Association. VIU successfully delivered a program from January – April 2024. We have leveraged these relationships to increase the awareness of our other agriculture/horticulture offerings.
- viii. We continue to have a positive relationship with the Cowichan Agricultural Society and have co-hosted a workshop in 2024. We have expressed our interest in collaborating in 2025.

Participation in community forums/events:

- i. Alberni Clayoquot Regional District Systems Change Project Agriculture Extension - January 27
- ii. Booth at the Islands Agriculture Show – February 2-3
- iii. Booth at the Cobble Hill Seedy Saturday – March 16
- iv. Food Mixer event – Sunshine Coast April 12
- v. Booth at the Climate Solutions Expo – May 25
- vi. Attended CETABC Forum in Courtenay, June 5-7; provided presentation on development of the micro-credentials
- vii. Economic Development Cowichan Strategic Plan Focus Group on Agriculture and Food Processing – June 12
- viii. Young Agrarians Farm Tour and Potluck - July 7
- ix. Seeds Library Discussion (Seeds of Diversity Canada) – August 19
- x. CETABC Conference online - October 24-25; provided presentation on livestock micro-credential development, and delivery of the micro-credentials
- xi. Co-hosted free Agricultural Recycling Workshop in collaboration with Cow-op and the Cowichan Agricultural Society and Farmers' Institute – November 13.

- xii. Hosted free film screening of Six Inches of Soil – December 12

3) Lead of Agriculture Special Interest Group (SIG) for CETA BC

Deliverable: Continue to participate in the Agriculture Special Interest Group with the Continuing Education and Training Association of BC (CETABC).

- Attended regular CETABC Agriculture SIG meetings to guide the development and implementation of the agriculture micro-credential suite
- VIU is currently supporting other members of the SIG to plan their delivery of the micro-credentials

4) Number of Grant Applications submitted

Deliverable: Number of grant applications submitted to support the development and implementation of the suite of regenerative agriculture curriculum: 2 – 4 applications

Achieved: 2 grant submissions; 1 under development

- I. StrongerBC Future Skills Grant 2024
 - Funder: WorkBC
 - Provide funding to fully cover tuition for students enrolled in the three micro-credential pilots
 - Successful – 67/90 seats available have tuition fully covered
- II. Resubmission of application for Small-Scale Livestock Husbandry micro-credential. Results
 - Funder: Ministry of Post-Secondary and Future Skills Micro-Credential fund
 - Initial application was unsuccessful due to training facility requirements for hands-on animal activities
 - Resubmission of application included skill development for raising livestock that did not require animal handling, and also included the use of simulations
 - Resubmission unsuccessful
- III. Small-Scale Livestock Husbandry micro-credential
 - Redevelopment of application in progress with phased approach
 - Phase 1: focus on developing hands-on skills that do not require handling animals, and demonstrations and simulations of handling animals (e.g. birthing simulators) – this will allow other institutions who do not have animal facilities to use this curriculum
 - Phase 2 – field days to include hands-on animal activities – curriculum will be suitable for institutions with access to appropriate training facilities
 - Expression of Interest to be submitted by December 23 for the [Recruitment, Retention and Innovative Skills Training Program – Investment Agriculture Foundation of BC](#).

Other Anticipated Program Delivery 2025:

Community Food Systems Micro-Credential

- North Island College has developed a new micro-credential “to prepare individuals for careers in the development and maintenance of sustainable and resilient food systems”
- We anticipate that we will partner with NIC to pilot this new offering in 2025, which will include coordination of local practicum placements

Craft Brewing Micro-Credential

- Funder: BC Employee Training Grant
- North Island College has invited us to be training partners for the 2025 delivery, scheduled for January 26 – May 7, 2025
- Delivery is online with in-community practicums in home community