

Educating for Shared Prosperity

Shaping the Future of Agriculture in SE Minnesota



June 18, 2025 | Hormel Historic Home

Building a stronger future for food and agriculture in Southeast Minnesota

On June 18, Educating for Shared Prosperity brought together nearly 80 local and regional partners from many sectors—education, government, farming, food, workforce, and economic development—with a shared goal of creating next steps in building a more robust educational platform that can support a more resilient, inclusive, and prosperous agricultural and food future.



"Riverland is the community's college."



A Connection Before Content activity provided a chance to arrive fully, warm up our listening muscles, and remember that every meaningful conversation starts with relationship. We asked each other questions using We! Connect Cards.



Setting the Table for Dialogue

To begin the gathering, several speakers provided a big-picture background and framing of the history and present context of agriculture and education in our region.

We were honored to have Dr. Jerry Nelson provide a historical perspective on Riverland College and its agricultural roots. He spoke about major shifts in the industry over the years and emphasized the importance of staying responsive to the social issues that shape our food system. He also noted the current transition from sustainable to regenerative agriculture.

Next, Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Thom Petersen shared an overview of agriculture across the state, along with highlights from the upcoming 2025 legislative session. He outlined key opportunities, including the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program and several grant and cost-share programs that support farmers and food producers.

Nick Novotny, Director of Community Engagement & Enhancement at Impact Austin, introduced the innovative joint Comp 2045 plan created by the City of Austin and Mower County. Infused with community voices, the plan features a dedicated food systems strategy and communities of practice across several sectors designed to integrate perspectives from across the region.

Finally, we heard from several Riverland leaders, including Dr. Okechukwu Ukaga, Dean of Food & Agriculture; Nick Schiltz from the Center for Agriculture and Food Science Technology; and Dr. Randel Hanson, Regenerative Agriculture Consultant. They provided an overview of Riverland College's current agricultural education offerings. Riverland has established itself as a thriving hub for production agriculture, serving the needs of area farmers and the broader agricultural sector. Its programs span bachelor's degree pathways, workforce-ready technical training, short-term certificates, and the first two years of a four-year degree. And with the help of input from this Summit, we look forward to broadening our offering to meet community and regional needs.

We also heard updates on the Future of Advanced Agricultural Research in Minnesota (FAARM), an emerging public-private partnership involving the University of Minnesota, elected officials, and private sector leaders. Riverland College is positioned to serve as the regional hub for this innovative research and workforce development initiative. FAARM takes a one-health approach to agriculture, studying the entire cycle—from the crops grown to feed livestock (cattle, hogs, and poultry) to the resulting impacts on soil health, water quality, and climate.

In addition, we learned about the new RiverLandLab (RLL), a 2.5-acre educational farm taking shape on Riverland's West Campus. RLL will serve as an outdoor classroom offering hands-on learning experiences for both students and community members. It will support new programming in local and urban agriculture, entrepreneurship, and community engagement.



Dialogue Process

We used a World Café format, moving through a series of small-group conversations that built on one another. Everyone was invited to share stories, ask questions, listen deeply, and uncover insights through connection with colleagues.

Dialogue is rooted in curiosity, not certainty. It's about listening to understand rather than to reply. It invites multiple truths instead of rushing toward a single answer. In dialogue, the goal isn't to win or solve. It is to see more clearly and to discover insights together that none of us could reach alone.



Reflecting on Student Learning Priorities

Based on the information shared in the morning, we were invited to share our thoughts about the skills, experiences, and connections students should gain in production and urban/local agriculture to serve our region. Based on responses, several key themes emerged around student learning priorities that hold promise for strengthening regional agriculture. Together, these themes reflect a holistic view of student learning—one that blends practical knowledge, interpersonal fluency, and a strong sense of purpose within the regional agricultural ecosystem.

Themes

Communication and connection skills

Participants emphasized the importance of strong communication abilities, particularly those that include the use of technology. There was also a call for students to develop cultural awareness and engage meaningfully with community and stakeholder perspectives, suggesting a desire for learners who can bridge diverse voices and values in the agricultural landscape.

"When we leverage our community and education we paint a full picture for our students to engage with where their food comes from... sharing the story of foods across cultures."

"Understanding community/stakeholder needs, preferences"

Reflecting on Student Learning Priorities continued

Themes

Navigating systems and locating resources

Several responses highlighted the value of teaching students how to identify and access relevant agricultural resources. This points to a broader learning priority: equipping students with the skills to navigate complex systems, whether that means finding funding, connecting with organizations, or understanding the infrastructure that supports regional food systems.

“Understand the systems that go into food production/industry.”

“How to navigate regulations for turning your operations into a business.”

Curiosity, discovery, and relevance

A sense of curiosity and connection to real-world food systems was a clear priority. Respondents emphasized the importance of hands-on learning, nutritional awareness, and exposure to food systems in relevant and inspiring ways.

“Educate children on food sourcing and its impact on nutrition and health.”

“Increase student connections to whole foods, producers, farms, and markets.”

“Student education about nutrition and how to interpret food labels.”

Partnerships

When asked which people or partners they consider most important to involve in strengthening agricultural education, participants named a diverse mix of individuals and groups across roles and sectors.

- **Students** were named most frequently, emphasizing the importance of centering their voices and needs in this work.
- **Farmers** and those directly involved in food production were identified as critical partners with practical knowledge and lived experience.
- **Policy makers, public officials**, and others involved in the regulatory process were highlighted for their influence on the systems students must navigate.
- Participants also pointed to **distributors, small processors**, and **locations with food-growing resources** (like seed banks or community gardens) as essential collaborators to connect learning with real-world systems and opportunities.



This range of voices—from classrooms to fields to policy tables—reflects a shared belief that agricultural learning is strengthened through collaboration across the full landscape of people who grow, distribute, regulate, and imagine the future of food.



Actions with Riverland

What actions could we take with Riverland College to begin turning ideas into reality?

Participants shared a diverse range of ideas—from concrete steps to big-picture thinking. Their responses reveal a shared desire to co-create an educational ecosystem that is accessible, experiential, and deeply connected to local communities and industries.

Start early and build continuity

Participants encouraged engaging students well before college, beginning in elementary school and continuing through K–12. The goal is to offer consistent, age-appropriate experiences that build awareness, skills, and excitement about food, farming, and community health.

“Focus on excelling in a specific program.”

“Students learn and see the supply chain for food from farm to fork.”

Make learning hands-on and connected to community

Immersive, real-world learning was a consistent theme. Ideas included internships, experiential field trips, community-based projects, and museum-style learning spaces that bring agriculture to life. These experiences help students build both technical and relational skills.

“Food hub – similar to the Good Acre in Falcon Heights.”

“Workshops and events.”

Break down barriers and build inclusion

Participants named the need to reduce stigma, expand access, and reflect the full cultural and economic diversity of the region. This includes creating welcoming programs, addressing systemic barriers, and valuing the knowledge of all communities.

“Focus on holistic health/nutrition and its connection to food/agriculture.”

“Integrate 51 different nationalities to share their food knowledge and traditions rather than expecting them to conform to dominant food preferences.”

Visualize and coordinate the big picture

To move forward effectively, participants called for a clearer, shared vision. Ideas included mapping out what a regional ag education hub could look like, improving collaboration, and building on existing resources with intention.

“Collaboration between departments on food and agriculture topics.”

“Consolidate, promote, and utilize existing resources.”



Gratitudes

With deep gratitude, we thank every person who shared time, ideas, questions, and reflections during this conversation. The richness of what you offered—and the spirit in which it was shared—made this gathering meaningful.

You showed up with more than your expertise. You brought stories, possibilities, and a genuine commitment to the future of food and agriculture in this region. You listened with care, spoke with honesty, and extended thoughtfulness to one another throughout the day.

This summary is not a conclusion but a way to honor what emerged and carry it forward. Your voices are helping to shape what comes next, and that matters deeply. Thank you for helping lay the groundwork for a more connected, inclusive, and resilient agricultural education ecosystem in southeastern Minnesota.



We are grateful for the hospitality and delicious food provided by the staff at the Hormel History Home. Thank you!

