

Angelic Organics Learning Center

Strategic Plan

January 2009 – December 2013



ANGELIC ORGANICS
Learning Center

Executive Summary

This planning process for the Angelic Organics Learning Center's five-year strategic plan started prior to and was completed after the US had entered its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. After reviewing the ambitious goals of this plan, a reader might ask -- Why is the Learning Center planning for growth during such a challenging socio-economic period in history? To this, we answer: that now more than ever, the program initiatives offered by the Learning Center are in demand and provide practical, inspiring, and healing ways for diverse people to join hands and build a more sustainable culture, economy, and food system. Each of us involved in the initiatives of the Learning Center are the seeds of a healthy recovery.

We invite you to add your voice, vision, wisdom, resources, and sweat to help realize this strategic vision for 2009-2013:

In order to nurture farmers and eaters as leaders -- who together weave the social fabric of a healthy local food system, economy, and culture ---AOLC will expand its three major social enterprises, lay the foundation for the emergence of a wider association of farming and educational enterprises, and strengthen its organizational infrastructure.

The strategic goals to meet this vision focus on the follow six areas:

1. **AOLC and AO Farm Partnership** - Lay the foundation for the emergence of a wider association of farming and educational enterprises, building on the innovative nonprofit-business partnership with Angelic Organics.
2. **Farmer Training Initiative** – Expand the farmer training initiative, focus program resources on beginning farmers in years 2-5 of startup and assist farmer associations in other regions to replicate AOLC farmer training programs.
3. **Urban Initiatives** – Expand and deepen the urban initiatives in Chicago and Rockford, so that more urban residents and their community associations have skills, resources, and the leadership capacity to grow food and build the local food systems.
4. **On-Farm Initiative** – Expand the on-farm programs so people can directly experience the Angelic Organics farm organism and deepen their relationship with food and farming, and gain the experience, skills, and leadership capabilities to grow food, share in community, and shape agriculture in our region.
5. **Financial Stability** – Increase the financial stability of AOLC by expanding individual giving and growing earned income.
6. **Infrastructure** – Upgrade AOLC infrastructure to be effective, efficient, ecological, and affordable as it supports program growth, delivery, and impact.

How We Arrived at the Vision and Strategic Goals

AOLC initiated strategic planning in April 2008. A Strategic Planning Committee (SPC), made up of five board members, three staff members, the Executive Director and two consultants was convened (see Appendix A for a complete list of SPC members). Board member, Joanne Aggens, chaired the committee.

The SPC mapped out a planning process that would take a little over one year to complete. The process engaged internal and external stakeholders, beginning with the Learning Center's core supporters and our partner farm Angelic Organics, and sought input from peer organizations, community partners, and donors (including foundations, government, and institutional supporters). Information on critical issues and opportunities facing AOLC were gathered from both internal and external stakeholders via individual interviews, written online surveys, and group discussions.

The SPC, at the outset, identified critical issues and questions to be addressed in AOLC strategic planning, including:

- How does the AOLC respond to growing demand for its programs and best manage organizational growth?
- As the regional farmer association CRAFT grows, does the AOLC's role as coordinator change?
- How can the AOLC expand outreach to the broader community around the urban community-based and participatory development projects? How does it best accompany community partners to reach a higher level of self-reliance with their own food systems initiatives?
- How should AOLC's advocacy work be organized from the role of volunteers and staff to partnerships with other organizations and coalitions?
- How can AOLC more intentionally support leaders, inside and outside the organization, to develop their leadership roles?
- How can AOLC best develop its nonprofit-business partnership with Angelic Organics farm and further the missions and success of both?
- How should the AOLC best address land use issues, at Angelic Organics with creative land tenure initiatives and more broadly via land preservation efforts?
- What can AOLC do to help build biodiversity in the farm organism?
- What steps can be taken to nurture and diversify the staff team at AOLC?
- Should AOLC expand its consulting and technical assistance to others outside its region who would like to replicate AOLC's program initiatives?
- How can AOLC be more effective in its communications, whether through media, public presentations or graphic design?
- How can AOLC increase its financial stability – become less dependent on grant income, increase revenues from individual donors, broaden assets and reserves, diversify foundation and government funders, and increase earned income?
- How can AOLC respond quickly to opportunities and have a greater impact among the more than 10 million people in our northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin service area?

AO Farm-AOLC Partnership Consultations

In April, 2009 the SPC began its outreach to stakeholders with a long-term visioning meeting with Angelic Organics, our partner community-supported-agriculture farm. While the SPC was charged to

develop the five-year strategic plan for the Learning Center, the conversations with Angelic Organics farm were set up to outline a long-term (22 year) partnership vision. Together, we considered a draft document entitled “Vision 2030” that was prepared jointly by Angelic Organics and Angelic Organics Learning Center.

The Vision 2030 document lays out a preliminary vision of a more fully developed Biodynamic farm and learning center linked to new for-profit and non-profit enterprises in a wider association. For the draft document, see Appendix E.

The Vision 2030 meeting launched a multi-year partnership planning process designed for Angelic Organics farm and the learning center. The meeting allowed both partners to engage some of the strategic questions and it also revealed a number of concerns raised by both partners (AOLC and AO Farm). These concerns were determined to be fundamental to the mission and guiding principles of AOLC, requiring additional discussion among the board and staff of the AOLC. After three months of extensive review, the AOLC Board, on July 9, 2008, unanimously affirmed the current AOLC mission, vision, and guiding principles, and its foundational partnership with AO Farm.

External Stakeholder Interviews

Following the Vision 2030 conversations, the SPC brought the AOLC mission, vision, and strategic questions above to a broad group of stakeholders. The SPC sought input via one-on-one interviews with key external stakeholders and via an online survey with a large pool of AOLC supporters and AO Farm shareholders.

For the individual one-on-one interviews, the SPC interviewed 12 people, representing recognized leadership among a diverse group of peer organizations, AOLC private and government funders, former Board members, current and former AO Farm shareholders, and thought leaders in Biodynamic and organic farming and education. All twelve interviewees were familiar with AOLC and have been involved with the organization for at least two years.

Following are the highlights from the individual interviews:

- The individual interviewees encouraged AOLC to expand its existing three major initiatives and rated farmer training to be the most important to expand, with urban programs coming in a close second, and on-farm educational initiatives coming in third. All were rated as important.
- Interviewees were asked their opinion regarding opportunities for new programs for the next five years, and were asked to rank the importance of each of the opportunities. More than half of the respondents ranked an overnight educational facility, urban-area farm, and farmland preservation as important for new program development.
- When asked their opinion on a long-term vision for AOLC in partnership with the AO Farm (looking out to the year 2030), the interviewees ranked urban food enterprises, dairy, a commercial kitchen, and an overnight education center as important.
- Interviewees pointed to AOLC’s track record at inspiring program participants, demonstrating biodynamic organic farming, advancing the agenda of high quality local food, generating interest in sustainable systems, and modeling an education mission. They agreed that AOLC is having a

positive impact on individual program participants, and sustainable farming in Illinois and Wisconsin.

- When asked how AOLC can serve their current stakeholders better, some interviewees responded that AOLC is handling a complicated situation very well and that they should continue along this path. Common AOLC strengths included the people, and their knowledge. Respondents also indicated a desire for increased city/suburban events to help strengthen their connection and workshops/programs in general.

Online Survey with AOLC Supporters and AO Farm Shareholders

To gauge the views of the broader base of AOLC supporters and AO Farm shareholders, the SPC sent an online survey to more than 2,300 individuals – including 1,311 individuals and 124 organizations who are subscribers to the AOLC e-newsletter and 1900 AO Farm shareholders. Fourteen percent completed the survey (328 respondents). Seventyfive percent of the respondents were AO farm shareholders and 50% AOLC supporters (AOLC supporters included: 21% identified as AOLC program participants, 17% donors, 5% volunteers, 4% AOLC board members, and 3% AOLC staff).

Following are the highlights from the online survey of AOLC supporters and AO Farm shareholders:

- More than 80% of survey respondents said that the AOLC mission inspired them to be connected to AOLC.
- A majority ranked continued expansion of AOLC's three existing initiatives as very important (the highest ranking). Expanding the farmer training initiative was considered most important, followed by the urban initiative and the on-farm initiative.
- When asked which new program opportunities are most important for AOLC to focus on in the next five years, survey respondents ranked the following as very or somewhat important: a farmland preservation initiative (91%), a local food system advocacy initiative (88%), and an urban area farm (82%).
- When asked which program initiatives are most important for AOLC to focus on in the next 20 years in partnership with AO Farm, respondents rated the following as very or somewhat important: a dairy (87%), urban food enterprises (82%), rotational grazing for livestock (72%), a commercial kitchen (67%), and an overnight educational facility (66%).
- 100 respondents answered the open-ended question regarding their perception of the strengths of AOLC -- 37 respondents stated the people, 28 said programs, and 25 said the mission/commitment.

Finalizing the Strategic Vision and Goals

On November 2, 2008, AOLC Board members participated in a retreat to: 1. assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges facing the organization; 2. review the full range of inputs from the internal and external stakeholder meetings, interviews, and surveys; and 3. set the strategic priorities for the 2009-2013 AOLC Strategic Plan.

At the retreat AOLC Board and SPC members completed a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). AOLC strengths are many, though first and foremost were the staff's passion, competence, talent, and commitment as well as the AO Farm / AOLC partnership. The partnership with Angelic Organics provides the connection to the land, and it grounds the AOLC in a specific farm and in organic and Biodynamic principles and practices. Other AOLC strengths included a strong mission and vision; positive multi-year partnerships with peer organizations, supporters, and funders; strong programs; a way of working that is diverse, adaptable, and offers opportunities for people from all walks of life; and a commitment to and practice of community building.

Organizational weaknesses were noted. The staff is currently overtaxed due to rapid program growth that outpaced administrative capacity and AOLC physical infrastructure. The organization seeks to have diversified revenue streams to support its work (a mix of individual giving, earned income, foundation support, and government support) yet there is too much reliance on foundation and government grants (these represent more than 65% of total revenue). The organization has strong and loyal donors, but the overall list of donors is relatively small. The AOLC Board committees are not fully staffed by volunteers, and the Board and staff desire to increase diversity and recruitment so that organization reflects the communities where it works (rural and urban).

Some major challenges are the on the horizon for AOLC. The most difficult of these is the current economic downturn that degrades both the social and ecological environments, both of which are already experiencing stress and rapid change. The organization continues to grapple with how best to integrate its work across diverse geographic areas (urban and rural) and demographics (socio-economic diversity).

In spite of, or in some cases, due to these challenges, AOLC sees major opportunities for greater impact. We are in a period of broad social change that includes a growing public interest in local economies, increased food self-reliance, and sustainable farming. Biodynamic agriculture is growing rapidly in the US, fueled by a rapid growth of vineyards adopting Biodynamic practices. At the state and federal level there are major changes taking place, including a Farm Bill that includes first-time funding for beginning farmer training and a statewide Task Force constituted by the Illinois General Assembly that seeks to promote local and organic food and farming in the state.

AOLC's partner farm, Angelic Organics, has ambitious plans for its growth over the next 20 years and millions worldwide have viewed the film "The Real Dirt on Farmer John". Farmer John is returning from the international film tour in 2009 and is already working on the next phase of growth of the farm organism. AOLC sees opportunities via the nonprofit organization to emphasize leadership development, building leaders and providing growth opportunities to people from AOLC's diverse constituencies. AOLC has a great opportunity to build a community of shared practice across these diverse constituencies by building linkages between its network of partners as well as internally by linking its program initiatives and building communication across board and staff members.

The AOLC Board and SPC compared results of the SWOT analysis with the inputs from internal and external stakeholders and as a group used the retreat to outline the strategic goals and objectives for the next five years. The SPC and staff followed up the retreat with several additional consultations with key stakeholders, including with its foundation partner, Angelic Organics Farm. A final draft was completed at the end of March, 2009, and presented to the AOLC board for final approval at its annual meeting in April, 2009.