



# Developing an Organic Grain Mentorship Model

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## Introduction

The Land Connection (TLC) has spent several years exploring how best to support farmers interested in transitioning to organic grain production in Illinois and the broader Midwest. While demand for organic grain continues to grow, farmers face persistent barriers including access to land, markets, capital, technical knowledge, and peer support. At the same time, organic transition is rarely a single-season decision. It is often shaped by long-term financial risk, land tenure issues, identity, family dynamics, community perception, and market uncertainty.

Farmers also enter transition from very different starting points. Some are experienced producers exploring organic certification for land they already manage. Others are early-stage farmers still building foundational production knowledge. Some operate small, artisanal grain systems focused on direct markets and human-consumption supply chains, while others manage larger acreage and commodity-oriented models. These differences shape not only technical needs, but learning styles, readiness for change, and the type of support required.

Working alongside other regions developing mentorship programs, many of them not grain-focused, has created shared learning, collective problem-solving, and cross-regional insight that informed program planning, implementation, and refinement. This peer network proved as valuable as any formal guidance structure, helping TLC adapt its model through lived experience rather than theory alone. We also found a community of practice through collaboration with the Midwest Transition to Organic Partnership Program (Midwest TOPP).

This paper documents that evolution: the original need and assumptions that shaped early program design, the research and consultation that informed development, the realities of implementing an organic grain mentorship program in 2024, and then the restructuring and refinement of the model in 2025. Rather than presenting a finalized or prescriptive model, this document shares lessons about what was attempted, what worked, what did not, and what these experiences suggest for other organizations interested in building similar programs.

## Origins and Early Vision

The initial concept for TLC's organic grain programming emerged from a clear and pressing need. Illinois agriculture is dominated by chemically intensive conventional grain systems that contribute to soil degradation, water pollution, and ecological harm, while offering limited pathways for beginning farmers to enter grain production. And yet, interest in organic and regenerative farming systems was growing, alongside

recognition that organic grain production could improve environmental outcomes, strengthen regional supply chains, and offer economic opportunities for farmers.

In 2020, TLC proposed an Organic Grain Apprenticeship program designed to address these challenges through an immersive, multi-year training model. The original vision was intentionally ambitious. It centered on hands-on apprenticeship, land-based training, business incubation, and farmland access, with the long-term goal of creating a replicable model that could be shared with other regions. This early design assumed access to a permanent land base, long-term funding, and the capacity to integrate labor, education, business development, and land transition into a single, cohesive system.

While this full apprenticeship model was never implemented as designed, the underlying problem statement and vision continue to shape TLC's work. The need for structured support for organic grain transition, the importance of peer networks, and the value of long-term farmer development remain central to the organization's mission.

## **Research, Consultation, and Program Design**

After developing our initial concept in 2020 alongside organic grain farmer Will Glazik of Paxton, Illinois, we began the work of understanding how a program of this scope could be implemented. Our earliest conversations were visionary in scale, including the possibility of purchasing land to host the apprenticeship program. While that did not prove financially feasible in the short term, those conversations led us to pilot the program with Will and a neighboring farmer, referred to as the apprentice going forward.

The goal of this initial pilot was for The Land Connection to develop a framework apprenticeship program that Will and the apprentice would test during the 2021 farming season. At the time, the apprentice was working a full time job off the farm and was ready to leave that career to pursue farming full-time. Will and TLC fundraised enough financial support for the apprentice to receive a transitional salary while he participated in the apprenticeship program.

Throughout that first year, TLC's program staff stayed closely connected with Will and the apprentice through regular check-ins and made several farm visits to hear about their progress firsthand. At the end of the season, program staff met separately with Will and the apprentice to reflect on the opportunities and challenges they had experienced. The concerns that surfaced proved instrumental in shaping our next steps. They fell into three areas: interpersonal dynamics within farm families that

needed attention but were outside the appropriate scope of a mentorship program; business planning needs that went beyond basic plans; and marketing support for transitioning grains, including establishing plans for certified organic grain and other farm enterprises.

Between 2022 and 2023, TLC engaged in extensive research and consultation to inform the design of its organic grain apprenticeship work. This process included conversations with organizations running apprenticeship, mentorship, and hybrid farmer training programs across the country, as well as sustained dialogue with farmers, technical advisors, and agricultural leaders working directly in the field.

National consultation included programs affiliated with Rodale Institute, FairShare CSA Coalition, Quivira Coalition, Vilicus Farms, Tufts University New Entry, Practical Farmers of Iowa, National Center for Appropriate Technology, Marbleseed, and others. These conversations provided insight into a wide range of program structures, governance models, mentorship designs, and implementation challenges.

At the same time, TLC's planning process was shaped by ongoing conversations at the local and regional level. These included discussions with organic and transitioning grain farmers, community leaders, regional organizations, and technical advisors to understand what was actually needed on the ground. These local perspectives ensured that program design remained rooted in lived experience rather than abstract frameworks and helped surface practical realities that national models alone could not capture.

TLC also worked alongside a broader community of organizations building and implementing mentorship programs through the Midwest Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP). While many of these programs were not grain-focused, participating in a shared learning community of practitioners proved highly influential. Learning in parallel with other organizations designing mentorship systems allowed for real-time exchange of ideas, collective problem-solving, and adaptive thinking. Being part of a learning community taught us that mentorship programs have to evolve through experience, not be designed once and followed rigidly.

Across these conversations - local and national, formal and informal - several consistent patterns emerged. A mentorship model seemed the most effective structure for this work. Clear expectation-setting early in relationships was essential. Relationship quality mattered as much as technical expertise. Mentor training and support were frequently underestimated. Farmer time constraints consistently limited participation in structured educational programming. Program coordination required significantly more staff capacity than organizations initially anticipated. Curriculum

alone, regardless of quality, was not sufficient to sustain engagement over time.

Despite these insights, early program designs continued to lean toward training-heavy models. This reflected both external expectations for formalized educational structures and an internal desire to provide comprehensive technical knowledge. These assumptions shaped the structure of the 2024 mentorship cycle and provided important understandings for future refinement.

## **2024 Organic Grain Mentorship**

In 2024, TLC implemented an organic grain mentorship program pairing experienced organic grain farmers with producers interested in transitioning to certified organic production. The program launched in February 2024 and included five mentor–mentee pairs. Engagement and completion varied across the cohort; one pair did not complete the program and only one mentee completed the end-of-season survey process, expressing a very positive outcome.

The program was supported through a combination of public and private sources, which covered mentor compensation, coordination, speaker stipends, travel, consultants, and educational programming. No fees were charged to mentors or mentees.

Mentees were primarily small grain farmers preparing for or actively considering organic transition. Mentors were established organic producers in Illinois with existing relationships with TLC, which helped establish early trust and credibility when the program launched.

The program kicked-off with an in-person gathering at TLC's Organic Grain Conference, where mentors and mentees reviewed expectations, signed contracts, and received curriculum materials. The program was designed around a training-forward model supported by a comprehensive overview-style curriculum organized around core competencies in organic grain production and transition. The structure included monthly webinars, regular mentor-mentee communication, in-person farm visits, and a second phase intended to shift focus more heavily toward the individual mentor-mentee relationship.

In practice, engagement varied significantly across pairs. Some participants stayed engaged throughout the season, while others gradually disengaged. In several cases, mentees became unresponsive to mentors and program staff, and relationships stalled. While the program design included goal-setting, check-ins, and surveys, follow-through on these components was inconsistent. It was often unclear whether

goals had been established or revisited, which made it hard to re-engage participants once they had disengaged.

Part of this came down to coordination capacity. The coordinator role was not a position fully dedicated to the mentorship program. It existed alongside other organizational responsibilities. This limited how much consistent follow-up, documentation, and relationship support was possible, particularly during the busiest stretches of the growing season. There was also no centralized program manual documenting processes and workflows, which made it harder to maintain continuity and would later complicate the staff transition that followed.

That said, the coordinator went above and beyond the formal scope of the role in ways that mattered. Farm visits and hands-on assistance were genuinely valued by mentees, and the relational presence of a coordinator who showed up made a real difference for the pairs who stayed engaged.

One mentor–mentee pair successfully transitioned land to certified organic production, demonstrating the meaningful impact that sustained engagement and well-aligned relationships can produce. Participants who remained engaged reported positive mentor connections, and mentors valued the opportunity to support transitioning farmers and contribute to the growth of organic agriculture in their region.

What the 2024 cohort made clear is that uneven engagement and inconsistent follow-through are not signs of a flawed concept. Instead, they are structural realities of running a mentorship program in an agricultural context. Farmers are busy, seasons are demanding, and relationships take time to build. Notably, movement toward organic transition was happening across the cohort even when formal program participation varied, which suggests that mentorship influence often extends beyond what can be measured through program completion alone. These experiences directly shaped how we redesigned the program for 2025.

As the 2024 cohort wrapped up, TLC also navigated a staff transition in the coordinator role. This made it harder to maintain relationships, keep documentation current, and ensure follow-through across the full season. It reinforced how much a program like this depends on sustained staffing and institutional memory, which became factors we addressed in 2025.

## Program Refinement and the 2025 Model

*The 2025 mentorship cycle is still underway at the time of this writing. This section reflects program redesign and early implementation experience rather than final outcomes.*

In February 2025, TLC hired a dedicated Organic Grain Mentorship Coordinator. Rather than immediately launching a new cohort, we intentionally paused to evaluate what had and hadn't worked in 2024. The new coordinator spent their first several months reviewing feedback from the previous cohort, participating in Midwest TOPP peer learning spaces, studying mentorship best practices, and drawing on their own experience as both a mentor and mentee in agricultural settings.

What emerged from that process was a clearer picture of what the program needed: stronger expectation-setting upfront, more intentional accountability structures, better documentation, and a program calendar that worked with the agricultural season rather than against it.

Recruitment proved more challenging than anticipated. Despite operating in a region with significant grain production, relatively few farmers expressed immediate interest in transitioning land to organic or participating in formal mentorship. Outreach during peak farming seasons limited engagement, and many farmers were unfamiliar with the program itself. This revealed that recruitment for a program like this is less about marketing and more about long-term relationship-building and education.

One of the most significant changes for 2025 was shifting the program start from late winter to December. This allows mentor-mentee pairs to be matched and onboarded during the off-season, when farmers have more time and bandwidth. Pairing now includes individual conversations with prospective participants to assess readiness, clarify expectations, and evaluate relational fit before commitments are made.

January and February are structured as preparatory months. Mentees complete a shared foundational educational component focused on organic transition, attend the Organic Grain Conference as a formal program kickoff, and go through an onboarding process that establishes goals, communication preferences, and expectations. Mentors complete their own onboarding, which includes documenting their areas of expertise and completing a required training focused on relational skills and how to be an effective mentor.

Rather than delivering a comprehensive standardized curriculum, the program now

uses a layered educational model. A shared baseline of understanding is established through Rodale's Transition to Organic online course and, from there, learning is individualized. Through conversation and relationship-building, the coordinator identifies each mentee's specific gaps in knowledge, skills, or confidence and curates learning opportunities accordingly. This might mean shaping TLC programming to meet expressed needs, connecting participants to field days or conferences, or facilitating introductions to consultants, peer farmers, or other organizations.

For mentors, the coordinator's role functions differently. Rather than asking mentors to carry the operational weight of the program, the coordinator handles structure, documentation, and logistics so that mentors can focus on the relationship itself.

One pattern that has become clearer through this work is how different organic grain farming can look from one operation to the next. Some mentees are small-scale or artisanal grain growers pursuing direct markets and human-consumption supply chains. Others are working toward large-scale commodity systems involving elevators, processors, and brokers. These differences shape mentorship needs from marketing and equipment to storage, variety selection, and infrastructure. The program explicitly accounts for this diversity in how mentors are recruited, how pairs are matched, and how expectations are set.

Active mentorship begins in late winter and spring. As relationships deepen and the growing season picks up, the coordinator conducts regular structured check-in conversations with both mentors and mentees. These are not just surveys, though, they are relational touchpoints designed to surface challenges early, support accountability, and allow for individualized follow-up. The goal is for both mentors and mentees to feel genuinely supported throughout the year, not just at the beginning and end.

The 2025 program continues to operate through public and private grant support, covering mentor compensation, coordination, speaker honoraria, consultants, travel, and educational programming. Participation remains fully subsidized. While the program is not yet self-funding, TLC is actively exploring long-term sustainability strategies, including future funding partnerships and sponsorship opportunities, with a commitment to keeping the program accessible to farmers regardless of financial means.

## **Key Lessons Learned**

Across the design, implementation, and refinement of TLC's organic grain mentorship work, several patterns have emerged that may be useful to other organizations

considering similar efforts.

Mentorship is relational before it is educational. Farmers do not engage primarily because of the curriculum. They engage because of trust, connection, and belonging. Education supports learning, but relationships sustain participation. Strong mentorship creates space for honest dialogue and long-term thinking that no training program alone can generate.

Accountability must be designed rather than assumed. Without intentional structures for follow-up and support, disengagement happens quietly and predictably. Accountability systems work best when they feel like support rather than oversight, and when they are embedded in relationships rather than imposed through paperwork.

Coordination is infrastructure, not administration. Sustainable mentorship requires dedicated staff capacity. A coordinator holds relationships, learning, documentation, and accountability together. Without that, programs fragment and fall apart.

A farmer's time is not flexible. Seasonality, workload, and mental load of running a farm must be treated as fixed realities when designing a program, not inconveniences. Programs that fail to align with agricultural rhythms struggle to maintain participation.

Readiness for transition is not the same as readiness for mentorship. Outreach must differentiate between education, exploration, and relational support. Not every interested farmer is ready for mentorship, and not every farmer who needs mentorship is ready to transition.

Organic grain systems are not monolithic. Scale, experience, market orientation, and production models create fundamentally different needs so flexibility is essential.

Mentor quality matters more than mentor quantity. An uninterested or disengaged person with experience is not enough. Effective mentors are motivated to support others, seek to understand rather than impose agendas, communicate clearly, respect boundaries, remain responsive, and engage with humility and curiosity. They are able to meet mentees where they are, adapt to different learning styles, and support growth without control. Quality mentoring requires intentional vetting, clear expectations, ongoing support, and long-term relationship investment. Protecting mentor quality is essential to program integrity and long-term sustainability.

No mentorship program can meet every need. Organic transition involves financial

planning, marketing, legal questions, certification, and business development that often require outside expertise. Strong programs normalize the use of multiple resources and relationships, and help mentees build a broader network rather than relying solely on their mentor.

Funding structures shape programs in ways that aren't always visible. Grant requirements can unintentionally push programs toward models that serve funder logic more than farmer reality. Building flexibility into program design helps protect against this.

Organic transition is long-term work. It unfolds over years and is shaped by financial risk, land access/tenure, identity, community relationships, and market access. Yet, despite these challenges, many farmers pursue and sustain organic systems because of the potential for improved soil health, reduced input dependence, stronger market opportunities, and alignment with long-term stewardship goals. Mentorship must therefore be framed as long-term relationship-building rather than short-term program participation.

Replicable models must be principle-based, not prescriptive. What transfers across contexts are not templates, but values: relationship-centered design, accountability with compassion, dedicated coordination, flexibility, long-term trust-building, and respect for farmer realities.

## **Conclusion**

The development of TLC's organic grain mentorship model reflects a broader truth about agricultural transition work: meaningful change is rarely linear, tidy, or fast. Programs evolve through experimentation, honest evaluation, and a willingness to stay flexible and open to change.

What this work has made clear is that mentorship is not a program add-on, but instead an ecosystem. It depends on trust, time, coordination, and care. It requires infrastructure that supports relationships, not just content delivery. It demands flexibility to meet farmers where they are, and sustained investment of funding and staff capacity if it is to function with integrity and effectiveness. That kind of long-term commitment can be a hard sell in a funding landscape that often expects complex problems to be solved quickly.

This model does not attempt to standardize organic transition. Instead, it seeks to support it relationally, combining a shared educational foundation with individualized learning, intentional pairing, structured accountability, and dedicated coordination. The

goal is to meet farmers where they are rather than forcing them into predetermined templates.

The most important thing we have learned is that resilience comes from relationships. Programs succeed when farmers feel seen, supported, and connected, not simply enrolled. Mentorship systems that prioritize relational quality and long-term capacity-building over scale and speed are more likely to create lasting impact.

This paper is not offered as a finished model, but as a documented learning process. It reflects one organization's attempt to respond to a real need in a complex landscape, shaped by constraints, partnerships, and continuous refinement. The lessons here are offered to help other organizations build mentorship systems that are locally grounded and structurally sustainable.

In a field where technical knowledge is abundant but trust-based systems are fragile, the future of organic transition will depend not only on what farmers know, but on who walks alongside them as they learn.

## **Supporting Materials**

To support replication and adaptation, the program maintains structured onboarding and coordination tools, including communication agreements, goal-setting frameworks, mentor experience and skills inventories, onboarding guides, training resources, and documentation templates. These materials are designed to support relational infrastructure, accountability systems, and coordinator-supported program management. They are maintained as living documents and may be requested at any time by contacting [info@thelandconnection.org](mailto:info@thelandconnection.org) or 217-840-2128.