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Higher education key to continuing success of growing cooperatives

MANHATTAN, KAN, February 20, 2007 – Growth and change are necessary in any successful business and agricultural cooperatives are no different. As a student in K-State’s Master of Agribusiness (MAB) distance program, Barry Brant, Ag Inputs Vice President of Garden City Co-op, Inc., in Garden City, Kans., is learning the business and management skills he needs to make his employer more profitable in a rapidly changing environment.

Brant chose the MAB program because of its agribusiness focus, the direct application of coursework to current work situations and the ability to complete a master’s degree without being on campus full time. The program has met those expectations and more.

“I have applied class assignments to work situations, especially in forecasting, but the relationships I have made with other students have been a bonus,” Brant said. “It is good to have connections with others in similar businesses to bounce ideas off of and be exposed to other aspects of the global agriculture industry.”

Brant’s decision to begin the MAB program was encouraged by co-op board members and General Manager John McClelland for several reasons. One key reason is because the growth in size and scope of co-ops has lead to a demand for employees with more skills and higher education. In the last year alone, the 87-year-old co-op has significantly increased the number of grain elevators and started seed and cash-and-carry chemical businesses.

“If we split out Barry’s division from the rest of the co-op, his division would be the third biggest co-op in Kansas; his responsibility is now more than the entire co-op was three years ago,” said McClelland. “There used to be lots of opportunities for training, but now we need individuals with high-level training in management, finance and economics. A short-course session is just not acceptable anymore.”

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Both agree the thesis project Brant is currently working on will be the biggest bonus of the program. Working with the K-State Arthur Capper Cooperative Center, Brant is looking to see where the co-op's money can best be spent. Having this knowledge will ensure continued success of the Garden City Co-op.

“Having access to the Capper Center is a big advantage to the MAB program,” Brant said. “Dr. David Barton, director of the center, and his staff are very knowledgeable. They have provided expert input in helping us determine which parts of the business are profitable.”

Overall the MAB program has been a good fit for both Brant and his employer. Allowing Brant to continue his education and complete a thesis project is an investment that will pay off.

“The thesis work is worth more than the cost of the program. Everything else learned is a bonus,” McClelland said. “It is very easy to justify as an out-of-pocket cost. Having Barry in the program has increased our creativity, productivity and profitability.”

The MAB program, launched in 1998, was the first graduate agribusiness program in the nation to be offered through distance education. Currently in its 10th year, the executive style, distance education delivery breaks down barriers associated with earning a master's degree, such as access to a university campus, job changes, relocations and job-related travel.

“We have developed a program that meets students' educational needs, and we deliver it in a format that meets their schedules,” said Allen Featherstone, director of graduate studies for K-State's department of agricultural economics. “Students can access the program regardless of where they are.”

The ability to grow and adapt, while offering an innovative curriculum has earned the program and its instructors numerous awards including the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)/Peterson's Award for most innovative distance education program.

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