

K-STATE'S MASTER OF AGRIBUSINESS

by Mary Bowen, Kansas State University

As demand for food and agricultural products increase, new skills and technologies must be developed to keep up. Communication and cooperation between grower, processor and retailer is more important than ever. Data and computer technology facilitates this communication that was not available to the agribusiness sector as recently as ten years ago.

To meet the growing demand and adapt to the changing technologies, **Kansas State University** introduced the innovative and award-winning Master of Agribusiness (MAB) distance program in 1998.

FOR PROFESSIONALS

Designed specifically for working professionals, with key input from leaders in the industry, the program offers applied learning in a master's degree that is focused on emerging issues throughout the entire agribusiness sector. Topics covered include logistics, finance, marketing, ethics, risk management, the debate over fuel, food and fiber, and the globalization of the food industry.

"The MAB is not a generic MBA," says **Oussama Alaoui**, co-Owner and Associate Manager of **A&M Intercommodity S.A.R.L.**, Rabat, Morocco, a 2008 MAB graduate. "You don't get bogged down with a log of generic business case studies. Instead the MAB builds business knowledge specific to the global food and agriculture industry."

Led by **Allen Featherstone**, Professor of agriculture economics, the first MAB class was made up of students mostly from the Great Plains, but as the program has grown and diversified, so have the students.

Now the program has students and alumni from 35 states within the U.S. and more than 20 countries. With an average class size of 20-25 students, they range in age from 25 to 55 and work in every sector of the food and agribusiness industry. This diversity in background, age and experience gives students a wealth of

experiences to draw and learn from.

Being part of such a diverse group is important to the students. Students learn from their classmates' experiences, build networking connections and future business opportunities. "The people that I met while I was a student have enriched me in many ways. They have helped me further understand the agricultural economy at a global level," Alaoui says.

The MAB program offers the support and flexibility needed, allowing professionals in the food and agriculture industry to complete the course according to their own personal schedule, taking advantages of technologies such as the Internet and downloadable podcasts.

JANUARY START

The basic structure of the two-and-a-half year program has remained relatively the same since its development. The program begins each January with a new "cohort" of students taking the same courses at the same time. Students spend two weeks on campus each year to learn the technology, meet faculty and other students, attend lectures given by industry executives, give presentations and take finals.

Like any college course, there are homework assignments and exams, but the homework is done via e-mail and chatrooms. The rest of the coursework is done over the Internet with the use of DVDs and multi-audio chat sessions. Building classes by cohorts allows the students to get know each other and develop close relationships. Since students spend time online, most of the classes communicate frequently by e-mail and instant messaging.

"We have developed a program that meets students' educational needs, and we deliver it in a format



Alaoui



Featherstone

that fits their schedules," explains Featherstone. "Students can access the program regardless of where they are allowing many students an option to complete a master's degree without interrupting work schedules and family life — a chance that for many is the only way they could ever consider graduate education."

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.

"Anyone who's ever worked in agribusiness knows that you can't just take time off to sit in a classroom. Being able to earn my graduate degree without having to physically be at the campus full time has allowed me to keep up with my business responsibilities in Morocco and still earn a master's degree," Alaoui said.

The program is now in its 11th year of agribusiness education. The ability to grow and adapt, while offering an innovative curriculum has earned the program and its instructors numerous national awards including the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)/Peterson's Award for most innovative distance education program and the Association of Continuing Higher Education's (ACHE) Distinguished Program Award.

For more information about the program, call 785/532-4495, e-mail mab@agecon.ksu.edu or go to www.mab.ksu.edu. **AM**