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K-State's Master of Agribusiness program celebrates a decade of providing award-winning distance education

MANHATTAN, KAN., June 9, 2006 – It has been nine years since Kansas State University developed its Master of Agribusiness (MAB) program. The MAB program was the first graduate agribusiness program in the nation to be offered via distance education. Over the years, the program has grown into an internationally recognized, award-winning program and as we are building our tenth class, the MAB program is celebrating a decade of building agribusiness leaders.

Lead by Allen Featherstone, professor of agriculture economics, the first MAB class in 1998 was made up of 12 students mostly from the Great Plains, but as the program diversified, so have the students. Now the program has students and alumni from 35 states within the U.S. and more than 15 countries abroad. 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. MAB Alum Bret Oelke, Regional Extension Educator at the University of Minn., was a member of the first class. “The people that I met while I was a student have enriched me in many ways, as have the other alumni that I have met at alumni events,” he said.

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 courses at the same time. Students spend two weeks on campus each year to learn the technology, meet faculty and other students, give presentations and take finals. Like any college course, there are homework assignments and exams, but the homework is done via email and chatrooms. The rest of the coursework is done over the Internet, CD-ROM, and chat sessions.

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“We have developed a program that meets students’ educational needs, and we deliver it in a format that fits their schedules,” said Featherstone, director of MAB program. “Students can access the program regardless of where they are.”

This set-up gives many students an option to complete a master’s degree from wherever they are without interrupting work schedules and family life – a chance that for many is the only way they could ever consider graduate education.

“The ability to work full-time while participating in the MAB program is the biggest plus,” said recent graduate Keith Kennedy, manager and owner of Agrimind LLC in Burns, Wyo. “I had taken time from our businesses to finish a bachelor’s degree, and was certain that I could not complete an advanced degree in an on-campus session.”

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 email and instant messaging.

“Instructors and classmates are always just an email or instant message away, so I never feel like I’m at a distance,” Sara Sellers, current MAB student and Assistant Manager at Stoney Point Agri Corp in Melissa, Texas, said. “I know their faces and how they express themselves, how they work, so even though we mainly communicate through the internet, we know each other.”

Additions have been made to the core curriculum that includes finance, international policy, risk management and logistics to ensure a solid educational experience is being offered. Courses in optimization, management and marketing were added, as well an internationally-taught elective, Comparative Food and Agriculture Systems. This elective course is delivered by professors from France, Russia, Uruguay, and Thailand and includes sections on the European Union, Russia and the Former Soviet Union, MERCOSUR and East Asia.

“The international course is very beneficial in understanding agriculture on a global scale. Each instructor brought a different view of agriculture within their region, as well as, their take on global agriculture,” said Matt Craig, MAB alum and Director of Sales – East for MAC Equipment in Kansas City, Miss. He continued, “In agribusiness, we all compete on a global stage, and a strong understanding of your competitor is vital to the success of any profitable business.”

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Since it seems technology changes every five minutes, the MAB program has worked hard to stay current and is always looking for ways to improve accessibility. New methods for recording and delivering lectures and participating in chat sessions are always being explored. “Currently our chat sessions only allow the instructor to have audio and the students have to type their responses and questions. We are currently testing new software that will allow two-way audio, so students will have even more interaction with each other and faculty,” Featherstone said.

The ability to grow and adapt, while offering an innovative curriculum has earned the program and its instructors numerous awards including University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)/Peterson’s Award for most innovative distance education program in 2001; SIDLIT Outstanding Online Class - Comparative Food and Agriculture Systems in 2005; UCEA Credit Program of Excellence in spring 2000; and UCEA National Excellence in Teaching Award - Dr. Allen Featherstone in 2006.

Looking back, Oelke says, “As a member of the ‘original’ MAB class, it sometimes felt as if the plane was being built as we were flying in it. This is not to say that I disapproved of the program, as a matter of fact it was exciting to be a part of something new and ahead of its time in education for working ag professionals.”

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