



[Current news](#)

[News archives](#)

[Media Guide](#)

[Audio reports](#)

[Achievements](#)

[Perspectives -- Webzine](#)

[K-Statement -- Newsletter](#)

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K-STATE'S MASTER OF AGRIBUSINESS PROGRAM CELEBRATES A DECADE OF PROVIDING AWARD-WINNING DISTANCE EDUCATION

MANHATTAN -- Kansas State University's master of agribusiness program, the nation's first distance education master-level curriculum in agribusiness, is celebrating a decade of growth and success.

Led by K-State's Allen Featherstone, professor of agricultural economics, the first master of agribusiness class in 1998 had 12 students, mainly from the Great Plains region. Students and alumni of the program can now be found in 35 states and more than 18 countries. Average class size has expanded to between 20 and 25 students from every sector of the food and agribusiness industry, with an age range of 25-55.

"The diversity in background, age and experience gives students an enriching educational atmosphere," Featherstone said. "Students come from all different sectors of the food and agriculture industry."

Since its development, the basic structure of the two-and-a-half-year program has remained relatively the same. The program begins each January with a new cohort of students. Students spend two weeks on campus each year to learn the technology, meet faculty and other students, give presentations, and take final exams. Assignments and course work are done by e-mail and through Internet chat rooms, so students can complete a master's degree program from wherever they live without interrupting work schedules and family life. It's an option that for

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many is the only way they could ever consider graduate education, Featherstone said.

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"Additions have been made to the core curriculum that includes finance, international policy, risk management and logistics," Featherstone said.

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Courses in management and marketing were added, as well as an internationally taught course, Comparative Food and Agriculture Systems, which covers sections on Russia and the former Soviet Union, the European Union and East Asia. This elective course is delivered online by professors from France, Russia, Thailand and Uruguay. The master of agribusiness program was awarded a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in spring 2006 which is allowing the course to have its global reach.

New sections will be added featuring Oceania, sub-Saharan Africa and India, with professors in New Zealand, Uganda and India. A module on North America also is being developed by K-State and partners at the University of Florida. Through the grant, each partner university has the opportunity to offer the class for graduate credit, and, for the first time this semester, undergraduate credit as well.

Technology is constantly changing, and the master of agribusiness program has worked hard to stay current, Featherstone said. "The technology has become more interactive and easier to use," he said. "Students can now talk to each other through enhanced communications and classes can be taught from nearly anywhere."

The ability to grow and adapt while offering an innovative curriculum has earned the program and its instructors many awards including the University Continuing Education Association/Peterson's Award in 2001 for most innovative distance education program.

"The success of the master of agribusiness program has been in part to the cooperation and desire among the faculty and the service given to students," Featherstone said. "Other universities have looked into starting a program like ours and many decide it's too much effort; we, however, think it is not."

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