Students experience real-world situations in the classroom

## Bridging the Gap

Students in Aleksan Shanoyan's agribusiness management strategies class conducted strategic analysis and presented their findings directly to company representatives, gaining real-world experience and making industry contacts.

Shanoyan, assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics, collaborated with Brian Briggeman (BS '00 agribusiness) associate professor and director of the Arthur Capper Cooperative Center, to teach a portion of the spring semester class.

"We divided the 35 students into teams," Shanoyan said. "Two of the groups worked directly with a Kansas agribusiness, and other teams used ConAgra, Bunge, Starbucks, or Monsanto case studies to develop strategic analyses and plans."

Briggeman recruited Team Marketing Alliance (TMA) to work with the class. TMA is an LLC wholly owned by four central Kansas cooperatives in Halstead, Hillsboro, Moundridge, and Nickerson that own 48 country elevator facilities. "Educating the leaders of tomorrow about the structure and vision of the cooperative system is of the utmost importance to Team Marketing Alliance, LLC," said Devin Schierling (BS '03 agricultural education), TMA's grain marketing manager. "Brian and his staff are vitally important to leading and organizing the cooperative message."

Early in the spring semester, TMA management met with students to introduce the company, its current issues, and goals for the future. The two teams then prepared a strategic analysis and strategic plan and presented it to TMA representatives and the full class.

Schierling and Danny Flynn, TMA crop insurance specialist, attended the class presentations on May 7 and provided instant feedback for the students.



"The combination of hands-on industry experience and the innovation of the classroom created an invaluable experience for TMA as well as myself," said Schierling. "In a short amount of time the students were able to capture the major strategic issues affecting TMA and provide valuable insight on a course of action to lead us into the future."

The teams who worked with TMA shared what they learned from the assignment.

"The project was a valuable learning experience largely because TMA leaders were willing to answer our questions and provide meaningful feedback throughout the process," said Alisa Wendelburg, senior in agribusiness from Stafford. "We were able to draw from their experience in the grain marketing



industry to perform an accurate strategic analysis and create a realistic strategic plan."

"K-State offers great opportunities for students to collaborate with agribusinesses for networking purposes and projects," said Cassie Kniebel, senior in animal sciences and industry from White City. "We appreciated Team Marketing Alliance working with us on the live case-study project and bridging the gap between students and professionals in the industry.

"The experience was beneficial in many ways and challenged us to find the correct information, ask questions, and determine potentially useful results for TMA. Our team took away valuable knowledge for future projects and enjoyed networking with the representatives from the company."

After the presentations, the students prepared 10-page reports using their plans and TMA feedback. Shanoyan and Briggeman, who both joined the faculty in 2011, will develop a case study based on final reports and submit it to a peer-reviewed journal with the students listed as co-authors. They also presented the case study at a national conference.

"TMA provided the perfect partner for our students," Briggeman said. "The project exemplifies how the university land-grant system of teaching, research, and extension benefits Kansas agriculture."

Assistant Professor Keith Harris joined the department in August 2012 and teaches the class in the fall semester.

He points out that in addition to the group project, each student is assigned to interview a food and agribusiness leader in a field similar to the student's career interests.

"Afterward, we spend time discussing their interviews regarding strategy and career insight," said Harris. "Students are urged to use strategy not only to analyze firm competitiveness, but to analyze their own careers.

"This course offers an added opportunity for students to develop some valuable interpersonal skills, while working collaboratively in 'gray areas' of decision-making.

"The case studies present real-life issues faced by firms and the one-on-one discussions provide an opportunity for students to hear firsthand business issues and dilemmas."

Arthur Capper Cooperative Center <a href="http://accc.k-state.edu">http://accc.k-state.edu</a>; Team Marketing Alliance <a href="www.tmagrain.com">www.tmagrain.com</a>.