



Alumni Spotlight

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From industry to academia: an MAB Alum shares his experience in a Q&A

Keith Harris finished his Master of Agribusiness in 2006 while employed by Farmland Foods. He has since completed a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia and is now teaching in the MAB program. We asked him to tell us about his experience from industry to academia.

Q. Tell readers a little about your background and work experience.

A. I am a city kid that was exposed to opportunities in agribusiness at an early age. My dad worked in the flour mill and grain elevator for ADM in Kansas City, MO. I learned more about hard red winter wheat than most kids my age. Though he never suggested I get into his field of work, I grew to understand the importance of what he did for a living. As I began to think about college and what I wanted to study, I learned about agricultural economics. At the time, a lot of kids my age were studying business administration. I wanted to distinguish myself from the competition, so I learned about all the opportunities in the food industry. I guess that was the first career decision I made to set myself apart from the competition in the labor market. I eventually graduated with a B.S. in Agribusiness; had an internship in banking in agricultural lending during my summer years; and volunteered to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in Honduras, Central America. I was an agribusiness advisor and was exposed to tropical agriculture. Afterwards, I continued my career in the

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assignment with Farmland Foods was the Director of Corporate Procurement where I had supply chain cost and P&L responsibility for segments of pork operations.

Q. Why did you decide to pursue the MAB program?

A. While managing my career, I understood additional skills and insight into managing firm resources were critical to my success. I had started two other graduate programs, but was unable to complete them because of my moving to a different state. The MAB program gave me the comfort of knowing that if I had to relocate I could still benefit from the complete offerings of the program. I also liked the KSU brand. KSU is well respected across the food industry and I expected the MAB to be no different in terms of it providing a quality experience. Remember I worked with some highly branded companies, so I understood the benefits of branding my own career.

Q. How have you benefited from the MAB program?

A. Although I run the risk of sounding "cliche", I will say that the network of people have provided me inroads into opportunities that would have otherwise been difficult to experience. Another

reason I chose the MAB program was its thesis component. Believe it or not, I was eager to delve into a problem that had research and business implications. Also, I wanted to experience the process of academic rigor, so I could decide if the Ph.D. was for me.

Q. Why did you decide to continue your education and earn your Ph.D.?

A. There were three primary reasons and the last point weighed heaviest in my making a decision:



Dr. Keith Harris, MAB Alum and Faculty

1) I had a strong desire to add on to my experiences in the food industry. My career in industry was fantastic. We solved problems to meet our goals and we launched projects that were interesting and exciting to watch grow. However, I wanted to have a profound understanding of the problems to bring about longer lasting solutions. Under this premise, I felt my investment would require more thought, analysis, and collaboration.

2) I believed my perspective in volunteering, industry and academia would add to the student classroom experience. To me the college professor has the best opportunities to help students craft their careers. My undergraduate degree taught me how to function in agribusiness. My master's degree taught me how to manage agribusiness, and the Ph.D. helps me to research agribusiness. In many respects, I view the Ph.D. as my service degree. When I combine it with other life experiences, I felt I would have a lot to offer to students and industry. I really enjoy the classroom experience and look forward to engaging students.

3) The freedom to grow in knowledge and understanding is more than a notion. I felt the academic life provided that opportunity, more so than other occupations. I also really like the pace of change and collaborations taking place in industry. The academic life gives me a great opportunity to experience both.

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I like to say I want to have and maintain relationships with both business and academia in the food industry.

Q. Have you enjoyed teaching in the MAB program? Describe the experience.

A. I enjoy the MAB courses for similar reasons other professors in the department enjoy it. Students bring a more developed sense of their business opportunities and constraints to the class and are eager to learn and be more successful/productive in their environments. But, I just might have a little bit more satisfaction than my esteemed colleagues in our department. For some students, I could represent a living testimony of someone who graduated and extended his role in the food and agribusiness industries.

Describing my experience... hmm.... I taught my first MAB course AGEC 700 Applied Agribusiness Economics this summer. The first time I met with the students was in the same classroom I sat in eight years ago. I have taught other graduate level courses including a competitive analysis course that uses managerial economic concepts, so I was

prepared for the course content, but I must admit I had a little more anxiety during our first meeting than I typically have for other courses. I quickly settled into using the technology as an instructor. The technology is different than when I went through the program as a student, and it requires a lot more involvement from an instructor than it does from the student. The students were patient with me and I appreciate that.

Q. How does academia compare to industry?

A. This is a great question I get asked a lot by my colleagues in industry. Organizationally, they are very similar in terms of the use of incentives, hierarchy, goals and constraints. There are business and social aspects academia and industry with [surprisingly] seemingly similar degrees of importance. I really like the idea of the freedom to choose your own work in academia. This is probably the biggest difference I can see at this point in my career.

Q. What suggestions/advice do you have for anyone considering making the move from industry to teaching?

A. It is kind of funny, but I have had some

ask me why I changed careers. I don't look at it as changing my career, but more so of adding on to my career. The teaching and research are merely an addendum to my career in the food industry.

- 1) Seek the advice of people who love you, who want to see you be successful and have the insight to guide you spiritually, professionally, and financially.
- 2) Be very clear and honest about why you want to pursue this. Your mind can put you into a lot of situations, but it is your heart that gets you through the tough times. Believe me there will be tough times. Earning the Ph.D. was one of the most difficult things I have done regarding my career.
- 3) Have faith. For me this journey was my biggest faith walk yet.
- 4) Be flexible and resilient, things don't always go as planned.
- 5) Develop a model for your success. Lay out the explanatory variables that will influence your goal and then list your assumptions. Continue to re-run that model as new information becomes available or your assumption become true or false. Adjust, Adjust, Adjust.

Students complete thesis projects

To read current or previous thesis projects, go to <http://krex.k-state.edu/dspace/> and search by author, title or keywords (no log-in required). To read a thesis written before 2008 or view thesis defense, log onto K-State On-Line, www.online.ksu.edu, with your eID and password. Go to the MAB Community Page, go to Files & Content and click on Theses.

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