

# TEACHER BECOMES STUDENT

by Jennifer Stewart-Burton, Purdue University

**W**hen Dr. Mike Gunderson picks up his dry-erase marker and heads to the whiteboard, he's anticipating more than just sharing quantitative methods with 30 professionals seeking advanced degrees. He knows the students have plenty to teach him too.

Gunderson, Associate Director for Purdue University's Center for Food and Agricultural Business and an Associate Professor of agricultural economics, leads a quantitative methods course in the center's MS-MBA in Food and Agribusiness Management dual-degree program. The program is designed for working food and agribusiness professionals from around the world to earn an MS in agricultural economics from Purdue and an MBA from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business in 27 months.

The high caliber of students and their professional experiences make teaching in the program a unique opportunity for Gunderson and his fellow instructors.

"Dr. Mike Boehlje and I share with new students that if we don't learn as much from them as they do from us, we will have failed them as instructors," he says. "I have never been comfortable as the 'sage on stage.' I've never been satisfied with lecturing for an hour. I don't see it as my responsibility to cover material, but rather to help students uncover insights."

## STAYING RELEVANT

Part of helping students uncover insights means taking advantage of the five week long in-person residencies the program offers — two at Purdue, two at IU and one international. They give students opportunities to challenge the instructors to keep classroom concepts relevant to what's happening in the business world. They also give students time to visit with their classmates and delve into deep discussions about the business challenges they face on a daily basis.

Those discussions allow all 30 cohort members to develop a network of colleagues they can call when they are trying to solve problems for their companies. They also have the opportunity to network with students in the cohort one year ahead and one year behind them during residencies, expanding their networks by as many as 90 new contacts.

"What some might typically consider a 'rabbit hole' in a normal class, we use as an opportunity to apply concepts to challenges students are currently facing," Gunderson says. "We consider how a modeling technique from a case study can be adapted to a student's real business dilemma."

## APPLYING CLASSROOM CONCEPTS

Another element that makes teaching in the MS-MBA program unique is that outside of the remainder of the program is distance-delivered. Instructors are careful to make themselves available to students when they have questions. They also make it a point to help students apply classroom concepts to their individual work environments.

One way the program fosters this is through capstone projects, which students complete in lieu of a master's thesis. Students frame capstone projects around challenges their individual companies need to solve. The projects not only serve to help students apply structured problem solving, but also offer valuable and impactful solutions to their companies.

"I have had students complete a unit in the quantitative analysis



Associate Professor Mike Gunderson says he learns as much from MS-MBA students as he teaches them.

course, and then call me with questions regarding how to use those concepts on their own data sets," Gunderson says. "I have seen students instantly become more effective communicators using data. They improve on the concepts that they learn to drive change in their organizations through improved data analysis and visual communication."

In the process, the students help faculty by giving academic concepts life. By sharing their own experiences and illustrating material application, students keep the instructors in touch with industry.

"In theory, theory and practice are the same," Gunderson says. "In practice, they are not. Students use their own challenges to note times when this adage holds true. It is the instructors' job to leverage those conversations and prepare students to apply the concepts again."

## LEARN MORE

Learn more about the MS-MBA in Food and Agribusiness Management at <http://agribusiness.purdue.edu/ms-mba-degree> and by contacting Program Manager Taryn Nance at 765-496-2447 or [tnance@purdue.edu](mailto:tnance@purdue.edu). **AM**

Jennifer Stewart-Burton is the content marketing and social media manager for the Center for Food and Agricultural Business. You can reach her at [jsstewar@purdue.edu](mailto:jsstewar@purdue.edu).