



Purdue News

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Ag MBA professor wins national distance-learning award

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. – A Purdue University professor had to overcome a number of obstacles to win this year's national Distance Learning Award, announced today (Wednesday, 4/10).

Allan W. Gray, assistant professor of agricultural economics, who won the honor from the Distance Learning Association, teaches quantitative methods in Purdue's mostly online [executive MBA in Food and Agricultural Business](#).



Allan W. Gray

Gray's award is officially the United States Distance Learning Association's 2002 Award for Excellence in Distance Teaching in Higher Education. The award presentation took place at the USDLA's 11th annual e-Learning Conference and Expo in Washington, D.C.

"Quantitative methods is a difficult subject and is practically impossible to make into a popular course anywhere," he says. "And the first time I taught the class online, I learned as much about distance education as my students learned about quant methods."

Gray says he's learned a great deal in the three years he's been teaching online.

"What I learned was that to bring as much of the traditional classroom experience to an online class, I had to emphasize personalization and one-on-one contact. I'm not just putting out information. My students are part of what I do. I focus on helping my students feel they're part of the class, part of the Purdue student body."

It helps that the thirty-something working professionals spend two weeks on campus together studying the most challenging material in each "module," or 22-week educational unit. They then go

back to their jobs and families and to their wired coursework. They take with them the friendships they've made in their time on campus and a good degree of class camaraderie.

Then, Gray goes to work.

"I re-record my lectures each semester so I can address students in the class by name and deal with questions that have come up," he says.

And while he's recording his lectures, he's looking at photos of his students on the wall.



Photo caption below

The class also includes an online discussion forum so students can help each other.

Another key, Gray says, is making himself available to his students. He holds early morning and evening office hours for phone and e-mail contact with his students. He also has a virtual open door, urging students to "access me any time you can get to me." Gray's policy is to respond to his students within 12 hours.

Purdue's agribusiness MBA program is the only distance-delivered MBA in the nation with a focus on the food and agribusiness industry. The MBA underlines the new skill set needed to compete in the increasingly complex business of food production, marketing and delivery in the global marketplace.

Jay Akridge, the agribusiness economics professor who directs the program, says Purdue's combination of in-person, on-campus and Internet-based study has proved itself a stronger educational model than completely online programs.

"Our courses focus on the study of food and agribusiness through a foundation in management, industry-specific topics and the networking that occurs among our students who come from across the food and agribusiness industries," Akridge says.

Because the students come from a variety of agribusiness companies, they learn online not only from the professor but also from each others' experience and ideas.

"The EMBA in agribusiness attracts people who are eager to learn," says Luanna DeMay, program manager for the executive MBA in food and agribusiness.

The program's distance learning emphasis needn't be a detriment, Gray says.

"Distance learning can be as effective as in-person learning," he says. "But you have to have the resources, the technical and educational support staff to help you develop material, deliver it effectively and do troubleshooting."

After a total of seven weeks on the Purdue campus and untold hours in front of the computer, participants in the two-year executive MBA program finish up with a two-week international trip to the Wageningen Agricultural University and Research Centre in the Netherlands.

Employees of the following companies have graduated from, or are currently enrolled in, the agribusiness MBA program at Purdue: John Deere Co., Pioneer Hi-Bred, Arthur Guinness Son & Co., Syngenta Seeds, Schering-Plough Corp., Cargill, Central Soya and Merial Ltd.

The [United States Distance Learning Association](#) is a non-profit organization promoting the development and application of distance learning from pre-kindergarten to K-12, higher education, continuing education, home schooling, corporate training, telemedicine, and military and government. There are 2,500 members of the association.

For information and entrance requirements, prospective executive MBA students may contact DeMay at 1145 Krannert Building, West Lafayette, IN 47907; (765) 494-4270; or via e-mail at luanna@purdue.edu.

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PHOTO CAPTION:

Brian Foster and Karen Wieman, students in Purdue University's executive MBA program in agribusiness, take classes on the West Lafayette campus as well as complete assignments online while continuing their employment. (Purdue University photo by Vickie Maris).

*A publication-quality photograph is available at
<ftp://ftp.purdue.edu/pub/uns/demay.agbiz2002.jpeg>.*

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