Preventing Students for the World of Agribusiness

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Farmers and ranchers are usually the people known for behind-the-scenes work in our food system. The people who grow our food have many responsibilities, including navigating complex commodities markets and investments.

The College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences at Utah State University is educating agribusiness and economics students to help farms and ranches compete in today’s economy. Students with an interest in business or agriculture can qualify for the farm credit fellowship program and gain professional experience.

“My goal is to always provide experiential opportunities for students,” said Ryan Larsen, assistant professor of applied economics. “This program is one of the best ways to mix a classroom with real-world applications.”

USU is partnering with Western Ag Credit and Northwest Farm Credit Services to help students understand agricultural lending, the farm credit system, and other issues that impact the bottom line in the agriculture industry.

Larsen said the program isn’t exclusively for applied economics or business students. Any student planning to work in agriculture can use this information on their own farm or ranch.

“I think in today’s world it’s vital,” Larsen said. “My dad would always say that driving the tractor is the easy part of farming. The business side is key and I agree with that 100 percent. In today’s world, if you don’t understand the business aspect of what you are doing whether you’re a crop marketing specialists, agronomist, or you run your own ranch or farm – you’ve got to understand the financial side.”

Students who participate in the program agree. Jaycie Crockett moved from Missouri to Logan, Utah to pursue a degree in agribusiness. She said the fellowship was a way for her to see if she really wanted to pursue a career in agriculture and business.

“It gave me a starting point for where I need to start preparing for a career and where I need to interview for jobs,” Crockett said. “If I would have just applied to a loan officer job, I wouldn’t have known what it entailed, I wouldn’t have had the confidence I needed.”

Students in the program use real numbers and scenarios faced by farmers and ranchers to decide whether or not they should be approved for a loan. Students’ final case studies are even graded by the chief credit officer of the Farm Credit Association.

Chase Westwood graduated from USU’s agribusiness program this year, runs his own operation and is considering working for Farm Bureau.

“We went through the entire ag lending process from getting a client’s financial statement and we learned how to analyze those and what things the lenders look for,” Westwood said. “The whole idea behind it is as operators or producers,
we should know what the bank is looking for so that we can be prepared for it. It gave us the experience that a lot of employers are looking for these days."

Whether students decide to either run their own farm or work for a lender, Westwood said understanding finance and economics is critical in today’s agriculture.

“The fellowship experience was a great opportunity to see where the rubber hits the road as far as ag lending goes,” Westwood said. “A lot of classes make you book smart, but they don’t always teach you what happens in the real world.”