A novel concept

DFO sponsors unique university course to foster dairy product development and marketing

An innovative University of Guelph course is giving a group of students an opportunity to research, plan and develop new, innovative milk products for the dairy industry.

Dairy Farmers of Ontario is one of several industries sponsoring the unique course. It lets student teams address industry-related marketing and consumer issues.

The program is led by College of Management and Economics professor Melanie Lang. The eight-month course brings together representatives from several commodity marketing boards and student teams from food science, nutrition and the CME. Industry sponsors outline a key area they’d like their student team to address, and provide feedback throughout the course. The students combine their experience to design marketing plans and create new products.

“The students are responsible for everything, from conception of the idea to commercialization of the product,” says Lang. “We try to provide them with all the resources they need for this process. Over the seven years the course has run, the collaborations have been very successful and the students have come up with some very impressive ideas.”

Last year, DFO’s student team addressed the Ontario government’s proposal to ban 500-millilitre chocolate milk containers in high schools. They developed a low-sugar, no-salt chocolate milk product. This year, students are developing marketing strategies to increase milk consumption, as well as ethnic milk product offerings. The team is researching how distribution and packaging can be better designed to appeal to consumers.

Other projects include promoting dairy industry awareness and creating new uses for existing products. For example, one team used skim milk powder to create a novel product.

The teams have access to multiple resources to help turn their projects into reality. Students can use the Guelph Food and Technology Centre to develop their prototypes and conduct sensory testing on their products. A professional graphic designer helps them design the look of their brand, including logos. As well, guest speakers from the University’s Business Development Office teach students about trade secrets, patents and intellectual property.

“Whether they’re improving an existing idea or creating a product from scratch, each group has an industry sponsor representative they can consult for advice and guidance throughout the course, and that’s a very important part of the process,” says Lang. “This year the course grew, so we were able to invite more industry sponsors, and we’re excited about what next year’s going to bring.”

Students in the course used skim milk powder to create a novel product.

Natalie Osborne is a student writer with the University of Guelph’s office of research. The course recently became a requirement for the food science major and is a restricted elective for nutrition and the College of Management and Economics.