




Supply Chain University: Part Two


Optimizing educational opportunities in an ever-changing environment

BY DR. BRIAN GIBSON

Key Elements

How can supply chain professionals sharpen their skills and keep pace with industry change? Here are a few options:

-  look into university short courses, webinars, and customized training
-  consider a university or association-sponsored certificate program
-  get a formal graduate degree with a supply chain concentration.

To learn more about each key element, look for the  symbols throughout the article.


Produce professionals must engage in lifelong learning to expand their competencies and keep pace with change.

It's not easy being a supply chain professional in the fresh produce industry. On top of the recurring challenges of protecting product quality, securing transportation capacity, and ensuring inventory availability, supply chain roles are becoming more strategic. You have to collaborate with stakeholders, support traceability initiatives, and drive profitability.

This changing environment calls for a broader set of skills and abilities. Supply chain managers must build expertise in analytics, finance, technology, and leadership. These aptitudes are often not covered in undergraduate education or generated through on-the-job training. Hence, produce professionals must engage in lifelong learning to expand their competencies and keep pace with change.

In the time and resource constrained produce industry, how can busy supply chain professionals pursue continuing education? This article identifies three university-related programs to foster your expertise, your career prospects, and your company's success. You should pursue professional development options, certificate and certification programs, and/or graduate school to maintain your competitive edge. Each offers a significant value proposition.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

 Universities offer a wide range of independent learning opportunities that are not tied to a degree program. These professional development programs range from self-study programs to multiweek executive education programs. Universities offer a variety of educational resources that can accommodate your available time and budget.

Many universities offer complimentary access to their supply chain management (SCM) knowledge base. Periodic webinars provide insight into hot topics, annual studies reveal the latest industry issues and trends, and white papers highlight managerial implications of ongoing academic research. Often, these resources are publicly available via supply chain research center websites. For example, the University of Arkansas SCM Research Center provides case studies, faculty white papers, and project updates. Arkansas is one of more than two dozen SCM research centers that provide high level educational resources.

According to Dr. Terry Esper, executive director of the Arkansas SCM Research Center, "the strategic emphasis of our Center is on retail supply chain management and transportation issues," he explains. "The Center brings together our faculty and corporate

partners to discuss hot topics, investigate emerging trends, and serve as a thought leadership and knowledge resource for the supply chain community. We do this through our published research, conferences, and student development activities.”

Short courses present another professional development opportunity. These two- to five-day courses take a deep dive into specific SCM topics with sessions led by faculty and/or industry experts. Participants engage in case studies, discussion groups, and simulations to strengthen their knowledge base and hone applicable workplace skills.

Georgia Institute of Technology is a leading provider of continuing education courses through the Supply Chain and Logistics Institute. The Institute offers a calendar of multiday courses covering the full spectrum of supply chain topics, from demand planning to lean supply chain operations. The university has also recently established the Integrated Food Chain Center, a joint industry/academic initiative to identify and resolve critical integration issues across the end-to-end food chain.

A third professional development option is customized training. A number of universities will work with your organization to create tailored educational programs ranging from a few days to multiple weeks. Typically, the faculty will help you diagnose your team’s level of supply chain expertise and create industry-specific content to address development needs.

Of course, these programs are more expensive than general management development courses, but the customized content drives the value of the investment. This is particularly true when you can spread the cost across a large number of participants.

Custom learning initiatives are a notable strength of Penn State University’s Executive Programs and the Center for Supply Chain Research. These learning initiatives are designed to meet the supply chain needs of corporate clients ranging from Fortune 500 companies to mid-sized enterprises.

“We develop two- and three-day courses for clients,” notes Chris Norek, a Penn State Executive Program faculty member, who says specific topics most relevant to a company can be incorporated into the

training, ranging “from supply chain strategy formulation to individual topics like procurement and transportation.”

CERTIFICATES & CERTIFICATION

Another opportunity to advance your knowledge is through structured education programs. These certification programs validate supply chain knowledge with required assignments and formal testing.

☞ A certificate program can take many forms. The simplest concept is to register for the program, take a series of courses, and complete the required activities. You receive a certificate of completion for doing the coursework. Often this involves the learner traveling to campus multiple times to participate in a series of three- or four-day courses.

The in-person learning environment allows participants to network and engage in lively discussion, but does involve time away from work and travel expenses on top of registration fees.

An alternative has been developed by the Center for Transportation & Logistics

(CTL) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The CTL’s three-course certificate series leverages massive open online course technology to deliver content to participants around the world. Each course is 10 to 12 weeks in length and combines videos, practices problems, graded assignments, and discussion rooms to promote interaction.

Courses include “Supply Chain and Logistics Fundamentals,” “Supply Chain Design,” and “Supply Chain Strategy.” There is a nominal program registration fee and a \$100 charge for each course.

“We’ve designed each of the three courses to cover the breadth of supply chain management rather than focus on just one function at a time. This is a more integrated approach, and stresses the connections and interactions between the players and functions within a supply chain,” explains Chris Caplice, CTL’s executive director.

Another option is to pursue a graduate supply chain certificate through a university. In this option, participants take the same courses as a student pursuing a formal degree but focus their efforts on the supply

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chain content. At the University of Missouri, St. Louis (UMSL), participants complete six semester-long courses for the certificate. This allows qualified professionals to obtain graduate school knowledge without committing to a 15 or 20-course Master of Business Administration (MBA) program.

“The program allows you to focus on the supply chain issues that are important to your employer,” notes Ray Mundy, Barringer Professor for Transportation Studies at UMSL. “You can complete the supply chain graduate certificate in a year versus three years in a part-time MBA program. If you later decide to pursue the MBA degree, the SCM courses count toward it.”

The final alternative is to participate in formal certification programs offered by professional associations. Often, university faculty assist with SCM certification program design, training material development, test content creation, and prep course delivery.

Supply chain professionals can pursue discipline-centric certification through the Institute of Supply Management, the American Society of Transportation & Logistics, and the American Production and Inventory Control Society.

The newest offering in certification is “SCPro,” a three-level certification program offered by the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals Association (cscmpcertification.org). The SCPro program was developed by leading faculty from Auburn University, the University of Tennessee, Ohio University, and Miami University of Ohio. Certification includes case study exams and a company project to ensure supply chain professionals develop a broad array of essential skills and demonstrate mastery of the complete range of end-to-end global supply chain functions.

“Supply chain certification plays an important role in ensuring that you’re attuned to new supply chain trends, techniques, and technologies,” explains Chris Moberg, Professor of Marketing at Ohio University and SCPro Steering Committee chairman. “Running a supply chain is getting more difficult. Certification is a great way to demonstrate you have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to make a difference for your organization.”

GRADUATE EDUCATION

The traditional approach to advanced supply chain education remains a valuable option for produce industry professionals. Graduate degree programs help individuals develop a mastery of the supply chain strategies, analytical skills, and cross-enterprise tradeoffs that drive customer retention and profitable growth—though these formal degree programs can be expensive and time intensive. Thus, they are best suited to an individual who wishes to shift his/her career trajectory towards a more strategic role within an organization.

☞ Supply chain professionals must evaluate a number of graduate education options when choosing a university, including program type and structure. The first decision is whether to pursue an MBA degree with a concentration in SCM or a Master of Science in SCM degree. The MBA degree covers a broad array of business functions in addition to four or five SCM specific courses. The MS degree takes a deeper analytical dive into SCM.

“Both degrees focus on collaborative relationships between firms—graduate students look beyond the four walls of the organization and study the end-to-end supply chain,” says Wesley Randall, Associate Professor of Logistics at the University of North Texas. “Master of Science degree programs focus more on the development of quantitative skills, modeling tools, and analytics; MBA programs produce graduates with a broad business background and a strategic management focus.”

Potential graduate students must also choose a program structure. While becoming a traditional, full-time student is possible, it is not often practical for most produce or other industry professionals.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the full-time route. If you live close to a university or one of its satellite campuses, part-time programs are an option. If you’re geographically challenged, an online MBA program with a SCM concentration is a logical choice.

Lastly, another option is a hybrid program combining online courses with occasional residency periods. This model is frequently used for Executive MBA programs.

An example is Auburn University’s program, which covers fifteen courses in

twenty one months. The program includes video content, five weeklong campus residencies, and an international experience.

Given the personal sacrifices involved, the graduate school decision must not be taken lightly. Career goals, optimal learning style, and commitment level must all be factored into the decision. And, Mundy cautions, it is valuable to analyze the potential return on investment for graduate school. The analysis may reveal that other professional development methods are more cost-effective for you and your company.

SUMMARY

With the supply chain field becoming indispensable to the mission and strategy of fresh produce companies, it is imperative for skill levels to keep pace with this ever-changing environment. An effective way to broaden your capabilities is to return to campus, physically or virtually.

Universities offer a strong mix of SCM professional development and graduate education resources. Likewise, they have removed many of the scheduling and distance barriers that previously made continuing education difficult.

As a result, the list of excuses for not engaging in career development is dissipating. Employing Nike’s “just do it” mantra may be good for your career, your company, and your fresh produce supply chain partners. **BP**

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ONLINE

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