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Ahead of the Supply Chain Curve

By Suzi Morales

The Blue Star case study in Associate Professor Chris Boone's International Transportation course is the kind of final project students talk about long after graduation. They are given a dataset with information like shipping rates and freight costs that they apply to a fictitious logistics company. They spend hours analyzing the data and preparing recommendations. At the end of the semester, they give a board-style presentation to a panel of industry professionals.

In the past, if there was a downside to the Blue Star project, it was the data. Without access to the real-time information many companies use, Boone had been using the same dataset for years.

That has now changed, thanks to alumnus Ken Ezelle, a 1985 MSU graduate and the Vice President and owner of Universal Logistics Services. Boone recalls – perhaps with some paraphrasing – Ezelle's comment to him after serving as a panelist for the Blue Star final presentations one semester: "This is great, but your data sucks."

But Ezelle didn't just offer a critique, he proposed a solution. His company uses McLeod Software, which provides one of the industry's top trucking management systems, or TMS. Both are headquartered in Birmingham, AL, and have a strong business relationship. So when Ezelle approached McLeod about providing their TMS to Boone's students, the company was quick to take him up on it. With support from Ezelle and an in-kind gift from McLeod, Boone's class now uses McLeod's TMS.

Ahmed Ebrahim, McLeod's Senior Vice President of Partner Alliances, says the company has partnerships with MSU and two other universities, with more in the works. Ebrahim considers himself a "lifelong learner" and holds multiple degrees. He tells students what they are learning in school is "gold" and notes that current supply chain students are being taught techniques and science-based approaches with clear business applications that their future employers might not even use yet. Ebrahim bases this on exposure to participating universities' curricula and on taking supply chain courses himself.

In addition to the software, McLeod invites university partners to its annual user conference. During the 2024 conference, Boone, who served in the U.S. Air Force for 22 years in logistics roles, moderated a panel.

"The partnership with McLeod is bigger than the technology," says Boone. "It's creating opportunities for our students to travel and to experience the industry. Ken's been a big part of that as well, helping offset some of the cost of that travel."

Because of McLeod Software, International Transportation students had real industry data to inform their final presentations.

Photo by Addy-Parker Loveless



Ken Ezelle (fourth from left) and Chris Boone (far right) with students at McLeod Software's annual user conference

Photo courtesy of Chris Boone

Ebrahim sees the university collaborations as an opportunity for workforce development.

"They might go work for a logistics company that is not using our software, but they have had hands-on exposure with what a trucking and logistics TMS does," he observes.

"It's been a win-win," says Ezelle. "[Students] get exposure to McLeod Software, which helps McLeod because it's good marketing and advertisement for them. These students have one of the leading software systems in the transportation industry."

He adds, "It also helps us, being that when I recruit Mississippi State students, they already have experience with our software."

In the spring of 2024, the Blue Star case study used real-time data from McLeod for the first time.

"The data is real; the rates are real," says Boone. "It's providing a whole new enhanced experience for our students."



Students enjoyed the panels, activities and exhibition at the McLeod users conference, which took place in NASCAR mecca Charlotte, NC.

Photo courtesy of Chris Boone