

# ELLER

PROGRESS MAGAZINE

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA.

Eller College of Management

Special Annual Report • Fall 2010



## BALANCING THE TUITION EQUATION:

ELLER COLLEGE STUDENTS FIND WAYS TO SOLVE THEIR RISING COST OF EDUCATION

*Startup +  
Savings +  
Scholarship*

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*= MBA*



Micky Thompson (MBA '10) grew up on a tobacco and cattle farm in Tennessee, and expected to operate it himself one day. Instead, he became a technology entrepreneur.

After completing high school, he was making extra cash working at The Farm Store in Franklin, Tennessee, when a coworker pointed out that he'd been using standard deviation to measure feed production and recommended he consider studying agriculture at a local community college. "I didn't know what I'd been doing," Thompson confessed, but it got him thinking about higher education: "I never thought I could actually afford to go."

He discovered that he could complete an associate's degree at Columbia State Community College's agriculture program for \$500 a semester. "That was one week of pay," he said. "And The Farm Store's management told me I could return after graduation and possibly manage the store." During that period, he started a successful lawn care company and then an asphalt company while still managing the family farm, all of which gave him flexible working hours that allowed him to attend his college courses.

As he was nearing the end of the associate's program, one of

*Micky Thompson*

Thompson's professors took him aside. "He wanted me to go on to finish my bachelor's degree, and he even offered to pay for it," Thompson said. "Now, there was no way I was going to let him pay for it, but I went home that night and debated—if he was offering, I figured he must see some potential in me."

Thompson enrolled at Middle Tennessee State University, where he completed his degree in three semesters. He then returned to The Farm Store as general manager. From there he connected with an executive at AgriBioTech, Inc. (ABT), the largest forage and turf grass seed supplier in the United States and a supplier to The Farm Store. "After seeing the success I'd experienced managing The Farm Store, AgriBioTech offered me a management position overseeing the expansion of its mid-south sales region, which included Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia," Thompson said.

At ABT, Thompson connected with KPMG consultants who'd been brought in to offer expertise on a Y2K bug and to deploy their Oracle ERP system. They encouraged him to think about consulting, and Thompson began exploring ACT!, a software application that was popular with the sales team. "I called the vice president of sales at ACT! and found out from him that they didn't have a consulting division," Thompson said. "So I told him I'd like to start a consulting company." The vice president suggested that they have breakfast the next day, so Thompson hopped on a red eye to Phoenix and his company ACT! Certified was born.

Under his leadership, ACT! Certified grew into one of the nation's largest value-added resellers for the customer management system, but that was just the beginning. In 2004, he launched Think Outsource, Inc., a company that provides outsourced technology services. In 2006,

he raised \$1.2 million in startup funding for Jennex, LLC, a firm that provides online automation tools to non-profit organizations.

By this time, he'd determined that he needed an MBA, and the top-ranked McGuire Center for Entrepreneurship drew him to the UA. He was still running two companies, but his investors loved the idea of his getting an MBA, and the pieces started falling into place. The Eller MBA program helped him offset the cost of out-of-state tuition by steering him toward a Brown Family Foundation scholarship and a graduate assistantship. "We sold our house in Tennessee which helped add to our savings," he said. "My dream of attending an MBA program was going to become a reality."

The first semester of the program was grueling, but Thompson hired an intern—one of his MBA classmates—to help manage his businesses. In the second year of his MBA, he began the McGuire Entrepreneurship Program. It was there that he connected with fellow MBA Jarret Hamstreet, whose experience with his family's trucking business inspired a new solution to an ongoing issue in the commercial trucking industry: shippers need to reduce transportation costs while carriers need to increase volume and load efficiency. The pair is launching TruckItNow.com in Tucson, and plans to begin beta testing of their prototype website in the fall.

Looking back over his career to date, Thompson says, "My background in agriculture molded me into the person I've become and I am proud of that heritage. What I thought I loved was agriculture, but I now realize I loved the business of agriculture. I have since come to love starting and growing successful technology companies. I feel my Eller MBA and entrepreneurship experience will allow me to do that now more effectively."