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**Producing Society-Ready Graduates by
Engaging Alumni in the Undergraduate Learning Experience**

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Producing Society-Ready Graduates by Engaging Alumni in the Undergraduate Learning Experience

Abstract

Students benefit from engaging alumni in the undergraduate learning experience. Benefits include improved career exploration, improved writing and speaking skills, improve information about securing the first job, increased self confidence, and changes in attitudes/revisions about required/elective courses and study plans. Benefits accruing to faculty, alumni, and department are also identified.

Key Words

Society-ready graduates, alumni, benefits, students, faculty, agricultural economics students

Producing Society-Ready Graduates by Engaging Alumni in the Undergraduate Learning Experience

One of the goals and objectives for Land Grant Universities (LGU) stated in the 1996 National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges report “From Issues to Action- A Plan for Action on Agriculture and Natural Resources for The Land Grant Universities” is for LGUs to produce society-ready graduates i.e., graduates that are well educated and ready to be productive members of society. Society-ready graduates are defined as graduates who are a product of a strong science-based education who have developed problem solving skills, critical thinking, social literacy, ethics, leadership, written and oral communication skills, international awareness, and an appreciation for lifelong learning. Society-ready graduates are ready to successfully contribute to our society and its agricultural industry. In addition to providing opportunities for students, LGU’s must provide opportunity for faculty to more actively engage industry counterparts to enhance their roles as mentors and guides for students.

The objective of this paper is to describe a process, procedures and outcomes from directly engaging alumni in the undergraduate student’s learning experience in the Agricultural Economics Department at Oklahoma State University to assist in producing society-ready graduates. Three procedures are involved in the process: 1) keeping track of departmental alumni, 2) engaging alumni in the individual student’s learning experience, and 3) obtaining and evaluating feedback from both student and alumni concerning the learning experience.

Tracking Alumni

The initial procedure involves keeping track of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness graduates. This is accomplished by three techniques. First, the OSU Alumni Association is very active and progressive in keeping track of alumni. The department has a very good relationship with Alumni Association personnel. There is a good exchange of address information between the two offices. A second method of tracking Agricultural Economics graduates is through the use of a departmental newsletter. An attempt is made to develop and send a newsletter to each graduate annually. Oklahoma State University, like other LGUs is experiencing tight and reduced budgets. Scarce dollars translate to faculty/staff shortfalls and reduced maintenance money to support items such as department newsletters. Nonetheless, a departmental newsletter is valuable in maintaining contact and tracking alumni.

A third process for tracking Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness Alumni is through the use and development of a “Business Card Collection”(BCC). The BCC concept was conceived and the collection started in 1996 by the author. Business cards were collected from employed Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness graduates. The cards were used to recruit students by illustrating career opportunities for graduates. The collection is comprised of business cards from select individuals who have earned a Bachelor of Science degree from the department. The BCC has expanded from 150 to more than 450 cards in a three year period. The collection is also used to assist in career exploration and placing students in internships and initial jobs. Alums use the Business Card Collection for contact and networking purposes. Alumni Association records, departmental records and the Business Card Collection provide a base or reference for locating and engaging alumni in the students’ learning experience.

Engaging Alumni in the Individual Student's Learning Experience

All Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness students are required to complete a seminar course. Prior to 2001, the seminar course was a senior level course and carried two hours of academic credit. Topics in addition to career exploration were included. Starting in 2001 the seminar course was lowered to a junior level course and carried one hour of academic credit. The focus of the new junior level course was career exploration. In 1999 and 2000 enrolled students were required to contact and interview two alumni. In 2001 enrolled students were required to contact and interview one alum. The interview(s) focus on the alum's academic experiences (including degree option) at Oklahoma State University, career path, academic and training expectations concerning job entry in a similar job in the next five to ten years, and what the interviewee might have done differently to better prepare for his/her career. Students were required to complete a written report and give an oral presentation to class members concerning the interview.

Initially students were ask to identify up to four alumni they would like to interview using their own knowledge of graduates, department or Alumni Association records, or the BBC. The class instructor would identify, in most cases, the one/two alumni the student would interview. This procedure was used to ensure there was a reasonable match in terms of career interests, personality, and acceptability between the student and alum. In addition an effort was made to ensure that no alum was interview by more than two students during a given academic year. In most cases alums were interviewed by only one student. Students, being rational decision makers, have a tendency to minimize time, effort and costs associated with the

interviewing experience (assignment). Local alums were an 'easy and popular selection' for many students. Efforts were made to ensure local alums were not abused or over used by students.

It was the student's responsibility to contact the alum(s) and arrange for a personal interview. Students were encouraged to contact the alum in their work environment. A mock in class interview was presented to assist the student in the interview experience. Students were given 'sample' questions as a guideline but then were expected to expand the list of questions.

Students were required to conduct a personal interview, write a paper and give an eight to ten minute class presentation concerning the interview experience. A thank you note to the alum was due at the time the paper was submitted. The class instructor read and graded all papers. Concurrent class sessions were held during the last three weeks of the semester to allow all students to present their papers. Students were required to attend class even though they may not be presenting on a given day. Department faculty served as facilitators in the concurrent sessions. An attempt was made to have a presenter's academic advisor serve as facilitator if possible. Up to four concurrent sessions were held on a given lecture day. Facilitators were given a copy of each presenter's paper for information but ask only to evaluate presentations.

Obtaining and Evaluating Student and Alumni Feedback

The final step in the process is to obtain written feedback from both student and interviewee concerning the interview. In the paper students were required to describe what, if any, benefits were gained from the alumni/student experience. Students also had the opportunity to identify benefits gained and/or regrets from the alumni experience on a final class evaluation. A personalized questionnaire was also mailed to alumni requesting feedback concerning the interview experience. Alumni were given the opportunity to provide feedback to the student. The instructor also requested feedback concerning the exercise from the alum.

Results

Developing society-ready graduates involves several aspects of a student's education. Society readiness is not only impacted by courses taken but also college and university experiences that occur inside and outside the classroom setting. Engaging alumni in the undergraduate learning experience was an out-of-class experience. During the three year period, 184 Agricultural Economic and Agribusiness majors interviewed 313 department alums. Students wrote papers and gave oral presentations concerning their interview experiences and knowledge learned. Additional feedback was obtained from students concerning the assignment on class evaluations forms. Two hundred sixty alums (83.1 percent) completed and returned a post-interview survey that provided feedback to the course instructor.

Student Perceptions

Student feedback was very positive. The students were pleased with the opportunity to interview alumni. All students believed the alumni interview experience was excellent. The students generally appreciated the assignment and opportunity to interview alumni. Society-ready graduates are defined as graduates who are a product of a strong science-based education who have developed problem solving skills, critical thinking, social literacy, ethics, leadership, written and oral communication skills, international awareness, and an appreciation for lifelong learning.

It is the authors opinion that this assignment contributed to the society readiness of the participants by providing an opportunity for each student to improve their written and oral communication skills. Students also had the opportunity to improve and demonstrate organizational skills through assuming responsibility for contacting, establishing appointments with alums, and conducting interview(s). These characteristics are important to society-ready graduates.

Tables 1 contains paraphrased statements taken from student course evaluations. The comments were obtained from open ended questions. It is apparent from Table 1 that the importance of leadership skills and lifelong learning was discussed in several interviews and deemed important by the student(s). The author was disappointed not to see the society-ready concepts of ethics, social literacy, and critical thinking surface during the interviews. However, the author realizes the interviews were not designed to focus on the traditional society-ready

concepts or components.

Additional responses on the class evaluations that contribute to graduate's society readiness were improved job knowledge and information concerning specific careers. Several students indicated they learned about jobs/careers they had not previously considered, reinforced desire to enter certain jobs, and or discovered a particular job is not for them. Worker productivity is not enhanced when an individual is employed in a job or starts a career in an area that is 'second best' to the individual. Increased knowledge about jobs and careers improves the likelihood of job performance and success, hence society-readiness.

Alumni Feedback

When the concept of engaging alumni in the undergraduate experience was conceived, the author thought it would be a difficult task to get alumni to be involved and even more difficult to keep their involvement during following years. To the contrary, alumni involvement and willingness to be involved was very positive. Of the 260 alums that returned the survey, only one indicated they did not want to be involved in future interviews. To the contrary, many expressed appreciation for the interview opportunity. Several alums expressed strong support for the student-alumni interview concept and expressed a desire to be involved in future years.

The author received phone calls and e-mails from some alums indicating appreciation for the opportunity to assist and be involved in the student assignment.. One alum included a small check to support the departmental scholarship fund with the survey. This was the donor's first

contribution to the department and university. Table 2 shows quotes from some alum surveys.

The author was concerned about changing the seminar to a junior level course. It is the authors belief that first semester juniors may not be as concerned about career orientation as seniors. Granted, more time remains for juniors to make academic changes to facilitate career goals if those goals are identified. The author's concerns are supported by feedback from one alum who was in an earlier seminar class his senior year. The alum stated:

“I believe this assignment was one of my most useful assignments throughout my college courses. I can honestly say I got a lot out of it, however; I was also a senior and was concerned about finding a job, so I was very motivated. I know in my previous evaluations, I stated that the program should be moved to a lower class, in order to allow the students the opportunity to view what is available. After being on this end of the spectrum, I have to wonder whether or not it was a good idea. I hope the students really took this assignment seriously and saw the true benefit of it. “

Another alum responded with suggestions to increase curriculum rigor. The student suggested that more management science courses be required for students desiring a business career. The student's comments were forwarded to the department curriculum committee for consideration.

Alumni feedback supports faculty efforts to more actively engage industry counterparts to enhance faculty roles as mentors and guides for students, thus producing society-ready graduates. Feedback gleaned from alumni survey information and student term papers

summarizing alumni interviews is not equivalent to direct faculty involvement with industry counterparts but it is certainly better than no industry contact and/or feedback. It is the authors belief that this exercise created a tremendous level of alumni support for the department and goodwill for Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness students.

Conclusions

Feedback from both class members and alumni showed very positive support for engaging alumni in the undergraduate learning experience. Engaging alumni in the undergraduate learning experience complements the objectives set forth in the 1996 National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges report for LGUs to produce society-ready graduates. A three year period may not be sufficient to adequately measure the extent to which the career development course contributes to the society-ready level or preparedness of graduates.

References

From Issues to Action - A Plan for Action on Agriculture and Natural Resources for The land Grant Universities. National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, Board on Agriculture Report, December 1996.

Table 1. Student Responses to Engaging Alumni in the Undergraduate Experience.

	Students Responses	Number
1.	Learned the importance of how to present myself professionally.	34
2.	Learned the diverse careers that my degree can have.	28
3.	Learned the importance of networking.	28
4.	Received advice on what additional classes to take.	26
5.	Learned to pursue a career that I enjoy not one only for financial gain.	25
6.	Improved my communication and interviewing skills.	23
7.	Learned a new job option that I had not considered previously.	17
8.	Learned the importance of leadership skills in the workplace.	15
9.	Learned the importance of family and community.	14
10.	Realized that getting a job is not the end of a learning process.	12
11.	Discovered that this particular job is not for me.	9
12.	Reaffirmed career interest.	4

Table 2. Alumni Responses to Engaging Students in the Undergraduate Experience.

Alumni Responses

...Excellent assignment. This allows students to interact with alumni in their chosen field ... For the second interview, have them meet an alumni that is in a field that may not be of the student's particular interest. This may create an interest in a different area...----

...He was great. Very efficient at not only conducting the interview, but setting it up as well. I would be more than happy to interview with any of the students at any time.----

...If any way possible, have the student spend 1-3 hours with the person while actually working in their business. Enjoyed this student. Feel he will be successful.----

...Great assignment! A mutual learning experience. I just wish I could have participated when I was at O-State. The student did a nice job with his interview! ----

...My interview was short and he took no notes and didn't ask a single follow-up question... You might tell them ... that we, as alums, are willing to spend more than five minutes with them... their best information may be just behind the question they had come up with before the interview.----

...great idea. Visiting with the student made me realize how much my advisor helped me through the years and how valuable my education from Oklahoma State University has been to me...----

...While this was a fun activity, clearer learning objectives might be helpful. If you do this again, do it where the results can be summarized, written up, and made available to others.----

...It was a pleasure to visit with the student and learn of the challenges facing students today. I would encourage personal interviews where possible. It was a treat for me.----

...Probably one of the most important things new pre-graduates can do is to "shadow" a few careers they are interested in. I think this could change a few minds.----

...How about a pre-interview questionnaire to gather all the basic info they need so more time could be spent on issues...
