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Abstract: *This paper examines the important issues of establishing partnerships between agribusiness education programs and industry representatives including the benefits to firms, faculty and students. Detailed information is presented on how these partnerships are developed and implemented.*

Keywords and Phrases**:** *Agribusiness education, Agribusiness internship.*

Most agribusiness management education programs have developed educational program objectives that include development of: (1) quantitative analysis skills; (2) professional qualities such as leadership, teamwork and presentation capabilities; and (3) the ability to understand the complex problems facing agribusiness firms, combined with the ability to apply the skills learned in 1) and 2) to solving these problems. An important role of agribusiness educational programs is to prepare students for decision making in their future careers in a dynamic, complex industry (Boehlje, Akridge, and Downey). Harling identifies a number of perspectives on agribusiness management. This applied component is achieved through the design of relevant curricula, the hiring of experienced faculty and interaction with industry. Considerable work has been done to develop curricula by establishing the skills necessary for success in agribusiness firms (Litzenberg and Schneider). Specific skill development, such as computer skills (Litzenberg, 1995) and team building, has been examined and suggestions for incorporation into agribusiness education programs proposed (Beck).

Meaningful, ongoing interaction with industry is important in agribusiness education because these programs are applied programs and their graduates need a good appreciation of the dynamic business environment. Interaction between agribusiness firms and educational institutions is based on mutual benefits — a symbiotic partnership must exist. This paper explains the framework for the development of these partnerships in teaching by first examining the benefits of such partnerships to the stakeholders — students, industry and faculty — and then examines how the partnerships are developed and implemented. A thorough investigation of the entering and exiting skills of agribusiness students has been proposed by Walker and Wood.

Benefits to Students

The prime benefit for students from a close educational partnership with industry is that it allows students to develop understanding of the complex decision models within various agribusiness firms. A partnership relationship allows the students to put their current studies within a meaningful context and work on projects that have real life applications.

A close association with industry provides students with distinct advantages when competing for jobs. It provides an understanding of real-world agribusiness problems and an opportunity to develop the practical decision-making skills that industry rewards with higher starting salaries.

Benefits to Industry

Through strong partnerships, businesses have the ability to demonstrate their commitment to the education of the future employees and leaders of their industry. Their involvement demonstrates good corporate citizenship while providing an opportunity to influence the design of agribusiness graduates through participation in program development and course content.

Direct involvement in agribusiness programs enables agribusiness firms to refine recruitment processes. Direct contact with employees provides greater opportunities to evaluate potential employees' abilities and compatibility with a firm's corporate culture. Conversely, students are better able to evaluate firms as potential employers and the industry's ability to provide the careers they are seeking. This process can potentially reduce the emphasis placed on interviews as the principal method of selecting new employees, making the recruiting process more cost effective and more efficient in selecting graduates motivated to work in a particular firm and industry.

Effective partnerships also facilitate communication between agribusiness firms and universities and allow agribusiness firms to maintain contact with faculty and their research projects. This provides industry with an opportunity to participate in, and influence, the direction of agribusiness research and individual faculty programs. Much research is tied directly to graduate education and, hence, serves both areas of opportunity.

Benefits to Faculty

The principle benefit to faculty is the opportunity to remain current with what is occurring in the agribusiness industry. This familiarity facilitates the identification of meaningful research projects with high potential payoffs to industry and hence encourages future funding. Faculty working on real industry problems bring experience back to the classroom, important in maintaining credibility with both student and industry with respect to course and program content.

This credibility is further enhanced by the involvement of agribusiness executives in curriculum design and course development. Many educational programs now make use of agribusiness industry advisory committees and executive-in-residence programs. Firms' feedback on student performance acts as a further evaluation of the relevance of agribusiness programs.

The end result of this interaction is that agribusiness graduates are more commercially aware and better prepared to enter the workforce, agribusiness firms have easy access to the expertise of students and faculty, and faculty remain in touch with developments in the commercial arena.

Forming and Implementing Partnerships

A successful partnership is a win-win situation. Partnerships are established by selling their benefits to stakeholders and implemented by ensuring that the benefits are realized. The most common forms of industry-university partnerships are 1) internships, 2) guest speakers from industry participating in individual courses, and 3) industry advisory panels. Partnerships between industry in engineering applications and in education through student teaching have been in practice for quite some time.

Experiential learning can take place in a number of ways (Koontz, Peel, Trapp and Ward), but for this discussion we will focus on internships. Internships require students to work (usually full-time) in an agribusiness firm for an extended period, usually eight to ten weeks. The major

challenge associated with the acceptance of internships is convincing firms that undergraduate students are an asset. The success of the internship will depend on the success of matching students with an appropriate firm, making sure the student understands the internship objectives and negotiating with the firm a meaningful internship plan. The latter may involve giving the student intern responsibility for a specific project. A firm's willingness to provide paid employment during an internship confirms its recognition of the program's benefits.

The university demonstrates its commitment to the internship program by assigning to each student a faculty member responsible for ongoing monitoring of the internship through regular communication with the student and the firm. Many universities award academic credit for internships. International internships provide special administrative challenges for faculty. Assessment of experiential learning has been documented by Fanwick and Gartin.

Guest speakers provide an invaluable resource in the classroom, adding an experiential dimension to the more formal presentation provided by faculty. As benefits, students are exposed to aspects of commercial reality and industry representatives have aspects of their operations examined from a fresh perspective. Maximum benefit is obtained by all parties when students and guest speakers are well briefed about the purpose of the session, how it will be conducted and what outcomes are expected.

Faculty should communicate with industry speakers at least seven to ten days in advance of the classroom presentation. It is best if the industry representative knows the objectives of the course, theory, and cases used in the class. The faculty members should have clear objectives for the industry representative's presentation. Faculty have a distinct advantage in presenting theory to the class, whereas industry representatives can show how this decision-making theory applies to problems in their firm or industry. These industry presentations may fit the concept of modular course work quite well (Cotter, Mexal and Buchanan).

Other recent innovations in industry partnerships:

- Executives-in-residence — externships.
- Mentorships.
- Collaborative research projects.
- Student-industry research projects.
- Advisory committees.

Executive-in-Residence. This program benefits industry by allowing executives to concentrate on specific projects without the disruptions associated with day-to-day business operations. Through interaction with faculty and postgraduate students they are able to use this time to become familiar with what is happening in agribusiness education programs in the areas of curriculum, research and international trade. The residence period is a trade-off between the perceived benefits of the program to the firm and the opportunity cost of the executive's absence from the firm.

Agribusiness industry representatives from agribusiness industry should be carefully chosen with departmental objectives and mission statement carefully considered. Most agribusiness programs target several niche markets (such as chemical, feed, financial, food processing) for their students. Executives-in-residence would then logically be chosen from these industries.

Mentorship. This concept provides students with an agribusiness firm contact who can act as an advisor. The advantage to the student is evident — access to a person in a commercial firm who can advise on professional development. The benefit to the firm is not as direct, but can be seen in the assimilation of students into careers in agribusiness.

Collaborative Research. Collaborative research between firms and faculty has mutual benefits, including:

- Firms gain access to the resources and skills of agribusiness faculty.
- Firms obtain research results oriented toward agribusiness industry problems.
- Firms obtain research results more readily.
- Industry personnel have the opportunity to upgrade their research skills.

Student-Industry Research. This collaborative research can be extended to industry-student partnerships. These can be particularly beneficial if used as the focus of capstone courses. Such an approach is used in the capstone associated with the agribusiness program at the University of Queensland. In this program, agribusiness firms contract small groups of senior students to undertake market research for the firm in an Asian country (Collins and Dunne). The benefit to the firm is that they are able to gain access to market research at cost, which represents excellent value for money, as clients have acknowledged over the past three years. The students benefit from being exposed to: 1) the commercial pressures of a consultation assignment, 2) the discipline of working in groups and 3) stresses involved in working in a foreign culture. A clear indication from this program is that students have an innate ability to rise to the levels required by industry if they are given the proper support and responsibility.

Advisory Committees. The advisory committees provide the key to effective partnerships. The concept is to have a small group of agribusiness CEOs who facilitate the linkages between industry, students and faculty. These CEOs are chosen carefully to match the general mission statement of the agribusiness department and specific placement goals of students in the program. Once the agribusiness representatives are selected, they are asked to serve on an industry round table. The key to success is to ensure that the activities of the industry round table are meaningful and suggestions of the committees are taken seriously by the university and implemented. The university has an obligation to report back to the committees on the progress of implementing their recommendations. The committees need only to meet once a semester to review student and staff interactions with industry. The members of an effective advisory committee can facilitate linkages with industry through the prestige of their individual positions and through their professional networks.

Conclusion

Industry partnerships with universities are an essential ingredient in preparing graduates for effective agribusiness careers. The benefits of such partnerships accrue to all stakeholders — students, agribusiness firms and university faculty. Students benefit from a better understanding of the various agribusiness sectors and their commercial expectations. Firms gain from better-prepared and better-oriented employees, better-focused research and the ability to upgrade their own personal research skills. Agribusiness industry representatives regularly report that they enjoy the opportunity to be a part of the educational process in agribusiness. Faculty gain by keeping abreast of current trends in the commercial scene, better-designed agribusiness programs and access to research funding.

The end result is a food and fiber sector made more efficient by improved education outcomes, research focus and industry decision making.

Notes

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