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# The Development of a Mentor Program to Foster Career Management

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**ABSTRACT:** Because of dramatic changes in the employment environment and the increased frequency with which employees change jobs and careers, career management has become increasingly important. This article introduces and evaluates an academic Mentor Program that was developed in response to these changes. The Mentor Program provides students with many benefits including career counseling, practical work experience, employment opportunities, and networking.

Colleges and universities have long played an important role in helping students develop their careers. Indeed, for the majority of students, the college or university has been their primary training ground and has provided the resources through which they have found their first professional job. However, some dramatic changes have occurred over the last decade that affect employers, employees, and educational institutions alike.

One of the most significant factors has been the frequency with which employees change not only their jobs but their careers. Career counselors suggest that today's college graduates will have from three to five careers and eight to ten jobs (Peterson, 1995). Several factors have led to this change. In an era of down-sizing and right-sizing, many employees find themselves forced to seek new employment as their employers eliminate or reorganize positions. A second reason is that today's professionals are more likely than their predecessors to feel that their job or career should be more than financially rewarding (D. T. Hall and Associates, 1996). They are therefore more likely to initiate a change when they do not derive

satisfaction from their job. Finally, the rapid pace of change has also had an impact on many careers. Specifically, advances in information technology have altered the functions employees perform, how they perform those functions, and, in general, increased the importance of keeping current in one's field. Technology has eliminated some career options and opened up new ones. Many managers have returned to school for additional education and found many new and interesting opportunities available to them.

A second type of change, that has had a profound influence on the way people look for and find new jobs, is the dramatic increase in the importance of the personal network. While, most new college graduates still rely primarily on their college's career placement center to provide access to employers and ultimately help find their first professional job, they are unlikely to land subsequent jobs that way. Peterson estimates that 80% of all jobs are obtained through personal contacts.<sup>1</sup>

The above changes have increased the importance of planning and managing one's career. Because job and career changes are more frequent, and because most job changes occur without the support students become accustomed to at colleges and universities, it has become increasingly important to assist students not only in making a good initial career choice and in finding the right first job, but to give them the proper tools to make informed career decisions throughout their careers.

Recently, several articles have been published that focus on internship programs and the contribution an internship can make in rounding out students' education and in preparing them for careers in agribusiness (Harrison and Kennedy, 1996; Baker and Woolverton, 1994). The purpose of this article is to introduce a newly developed Mentor Program that takes a more comprehensive approach to career management than traditional internship programs. In this article I describe the Mentor Program, how it has benefitted students, and provide an assessment of the Program, based largely on my experiences as developer and coordinator of the Program and the results of a survey of both mentors and students that have participated in the Program.

## **1. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MENTOR PROGRAM**

The Mentor Program pairs students pursuing the MBA in Agribusiness degree through the Institute of Agribusiness at Santa Clara University with senior managers in the food and agribusiness industries. The Program was first offered in 1994 as a partnership between industry and academia. It was initially developed by me and a member of the Institute's Board of Advisors. It was proposed by the board member as a way to increase the level of involvement of industry board members with the Institute's MBA program. The mentor program was formalized over a period of several months in which plans were made, objectives defined, and procedures established.

In the first years of the partnership, both founders of the Program were actively involved. The board member had primary responsibility for identifying industry mentors willing to participate in the Program, drawing almost exclusively from the Institute's Board of Advisors. The faculty member's responsibilities were primarily to identify interested students and otherwise administer the Program. Over time, the faculty coordinator has taken on all responsibility for coordinating the Program.

The first year of the Program was considered experimental and the number of students was limited to six. This was done for several reasons. First, putting together the initial cohort of mentors proved to be more difficult than expected. Secondly, most of the initial activities, including identifying mentors, establishing the administrative procedures, identifying prospective student participants, and then matching students' interests to those of individual mentors are inherently labor intensive and require a great deal of time. Lastly, the Program coordinators felt strongly that it was better to start out with a smaller program that was well administered rather than a larger poorly administered program. Starting with a small number of mentors and students allowed us to work closely with the group, identify problems early on and take corrective action. In this way we were able to open up the Program to all interested students in the second year, confident that it would be successful.

## **2. MENTOR PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

At the beginning of each academic year all students who are in the first year of their MBA degree are sent a memorandum describing the Program and inviting them to participate. Students who wish to participate in the Program must submit a letter of application, fill out a student profile and include a current resume. The student profile includes basic information such as educational background, work experience, and the type of agribusiness and functional area in which the student is interested.

Although all students are encouraged to consider participating in the Program, it has been my experience that younger students and students with the least work experience are the most likely to join the Program. Students who are already working full-time in a permanent job are the least likely to participate. This last group is not only constrained by time, but many students in this group feel that they would benefit little from the Program since they are already successfully pursuing their chosen career. On the other hand, several students with substantial work experience have opted to participate in the Program because they wanted to expand their network of personal contacts and learn about new career opportunities.

Once all of the student applications are received, the process of identifying potential mentors begins. Most mentor candidates come from two pools: members of the Institute's Board of Advisors and alumni of the Institute. Several criteria are used in selecting mentor candidates, including years of business experience, posi-

tion in their organization, functional area and industry expertise, and level of commitment to working with students. Every effort is made to find suitable mentors whose interest and expertise matches those of the students. The selection process is facilitated because of the good alumni records maintained by the Institute. Alumni records are maintained in a database which includes information on the former student's company, location, industry, and job function.

Mentor candidates are contacted personally by telephone to solicit their participation in the Program. Very few candidates have declined the opportunity to participate in the Program. Indeed, many mentors have offered to serve as a mentor to more than one student at a time, or have agreed to participate in the Program year after year. The most common reason for declining to participate in the Program is lack of time. Mentors who agree to participate are asked to provide information similar to what the students provide, including a profile, a resume, and information on their organization.

After the mentor/student pairings are complete, all participants in the Program are sent a letter welcoming them into the Program and describing the Program's activities. They also receive a list of all of the mentor/student pairings and copies of the profile and resume of the person with which they have been paired. Participants in the Program are specifically encouraged to pursue the following activities:

- A visit by the student to the mentor's organization, possibly including a tour of the company's operations or attendance at a board or staff meeting;
- Frequent contact with their counterpart, preferably once a month;
- An internship with the mentor's company or assistance in finding an internship;
- Career counseling; and
- Assistance or advice in obtaining full-time employment upon completion of their degree.

Participants are encouraged to contact their mentor or student as soon as possible. Students are especially encouraged to take the initiative in contacting their mentor. It has been my experience that those students who most actively pursue the development of the relationship get the most out of the Mentor Program.

In the four years in which the Mentor Program has been offered, the participation rate by students has ranged from approximately one-third of the first year class in the first two years to approximately one-half of the class in the last two years. The higher participation rate in the later years has probably resulted from the positive student reaction to the Program.

### **3. PROGRAM EVALUATION**

In early 1998, an evaluation form was sent by the Institute of Agribusiness to all students who had participated in the Mentor Program and who had completed their

MBA in Agribusiness degrees, as well as the students' mentors. Respondents were asked to check the activities in which they had worked with their counterpart, to describe benefits and shortcomings of the Program, and to make recommendations for improving the Program. The survey was sent to 16 former students and 14 mentors. Eleven students and eight mentors returned the survey for a response rate of 69% and 57%, respectively.

### **3.1. Benefits to Students**

The survey results indicated that by most measures the Mentor Program has been successful. Of the 11 former students and eight mentors, only one student and one mentor indicated that they had failed to develop a relationship with their counterpart.<sup>1</sup> The students were also asked to indicate whether their experience with the program was positive, neutral, or negative. Seventy percent of the students responded that they had a positive experience with the program, while only 10% indicated that their experience was negative. The remaining 20% reported a neutral response to the program.

Two survey questions were directed at determining the level of involvement students had with their mentors. The first question asked whether the respondent felt there had been frequent contact with their counterpart. Fifty percent of the students and 71% of the mentors responded positively to this question. A second question asked whether the student had visited the mentor's company. Ninety percent of the students and 71% of the mentors indicated that this was the case. One student indicated that he or she had attended both industry and professional meetings with his or her mentor. Another student wrote that his or her mentor provided access to company information for use in the student's class project that focused on the mentor's company.

The remainder of this section is devoted to describing and discussing the major ways in which students have benefitted from their relationship with their mentor, including gaining practical experience, career counseling and developing employment opportunities.

#### **3.1.1. Career Counseling and Choice**

One of the most difficult tasks students face is answering the age old question "What am I going to do when I grow up?" While graduate students presumably have a better idea of their general career focus than undergraduates, they often have many unanswered questions concerning career opportunities, career paths, and industry or functional area emphasis. This is an area in which mentors are uniquely suited to counsel students because of their industry experience and perspective. One-half of the students and 71% of the mentors indicated that the mentor had counseled the student on career matters.

Although mentors are primarily encouraged to counsel their students regarding their careers, it is also the case that mentors have frequently helped students with

their academic choices by providing feedback on the kind of courses which will best serve them on the job.

### **3.1.2. Practical Experience**

Mentors participating in the Program are strongly encouraged to offer an internship to their students. While some mentors have been unable to offer their students an internship due to a company policy prohibiting internships, inadequate funds, or a lack of time to supervise students, most mentors have offered their student an internship in their company. When the mentor is unable to offer an internship, the expectation is that he or she will assist the student in finding a paid internship with another organization.

The practical experience students obtain as a direct result of working with their mentors has been one of the most frequently mentioned benefits of the program. While students value the career advice they receive from their mentor, they also have a strong desire to acquire the more tangible benefit of practical training while completing their studies. Such job experience complements their education and makes them more attractive to employers. This is particularly important for students who have little or no work experience or whose experience is in another industry. Internships also allow students to experiment with different career options without making the kind of commitment that a permanent job entails. Some additional benefits of conducting an internship, mentioned by both students and mentors participating in the survey, included exposure to corporate culture and the opportunity to earn needed money.

The survey results revealed that 40% of the students and 71% of the mentors indicated that the mentor had helped the student by providing either an internship or assistance in finding one. Because students enter the Mentor Program with different needs and expectations, it would be difficult to determine what the "ideal" response would be. For example, some students entering the Mentor Program have no desire to conduct an internship, often because they are fully employed, or have sufficient industry experience. Therefore, it would typically be expected that something less than 100% of the students would want to conduct an internship. Nonetheless, the disparity between the student and mentor responses was notable in this category. While it is possible that this disparity is due to response bias, I think it is more likely that it is due to a difference in expectations. Most students enter the Program with the expectation that their mentor will provide them with an internship should they want to pursue one. On the other hand, some mentors may feel that they may fulfill their obligation to their students simply by providing advice on developing an internship opportunity. There may be an opportunity to improve student satisfaction by more closely aligning student and mentor expectations.

### **3.1.3. *Employment Opportunities and Networking***

Fifty percent of students and 57% of mentors indicated that the mentor either assisted or advised the student in his or her job search. While this activity has not been emphasized with either students or mentors to the extent that career counseling and internships has, it is clear that this activity is a significant benefit of the Program. Two people indicated that their relationship with their mentor resulted in full-time employment with their mentor's company upon completion of their MBA degree. More frequently, the mentor will provide assistance and advice to the student searching for full-time employment. Mentors have been extremely helpful in providing industry and company specific information, such as which companies might be hiring, personal introductions to employment decision makers, and an industry perspective on key tasks such as resume preparation and interviewing.

It is also notable that the students' relationship with their mentors often marks the development of their professional networks. As a matter of fact, most students have probably started developing their professional network even before they become familiar with the terminology. It begins with their first contact with their mentor and is built through internships, professional meetings, and other industry contacts. The Mentor Program is an ideal place for students to start their professional network because it occurs in a setting which is not intimidating. This is important because many students find it difficult to make cold calls. Once they have the beginnings of a network, it is easier to expand it since their mentor can provide personal introductions to managers in other organizations.

Numerous conversations with former students and specific examples provided in the survey responses confirm that the networks students formed with their mentors continue to benefit them. Several students and mentors indicated that they had maintained the professional relationship with their counterpart in the Mentor Program. Industry contacts developed either directly or indirectly as a result of students' participation in the Program helped them acquire trade leads, identify key sources of industry information, and find new job and career opportunities.

## **3.2. *Interrelationship with Other Programs***

The Mentor Program has provided collateral benefits to many other academic programs. The efforts tend to be complementary, in that they work to support and reinforce a common set of goals. This section describes how the Mentor Program has enhanced other educational areas including, the internship program, advising, career services, and instruction.

### **3.2.1. *Internships***

One of the most common means of providing experiential learning by academic institutions is through internship programs. In recent years, internship programs have received greater emphasis as evidenced by the development of ventures such



as the International Agribusiness Internship Center (International Agribusiness Internship Center web page). The Mentor Program has supported the Institute of Agribusiness' Internship Program in several ways. While most students understand the value of an internship and would like to pursue one, they often either do not know how to proceed, or are unwilling to take the steps necessary to find an internship suited to their needs. Students in the Mentor Program have an industry partner who will work to develop or find an internship to meet the student's unique needs. Because the mentor takes a personal interest in the student, the great majority of these internships turn out to be very rewarding. As coordinator of both the Mentor Program and Internship Program, I have observed that the addition of the Mentor Program has meant that more students conduct internships while pursuing their degree and that they have a greater level of satisfaction with the internship experience.

### **3.2.2. *Advising***

Student participation in the Mentor Program has generally meant that participating students are better prepared to make a career choice. Students benefit because they are being advised on career matters by managers working in industry and because they have been able to directly observe and experience the career alternatives available to them. This has allowed faculty members to focus on what they do best, which is helping students make the right academic choices, based on the career preferences they express.

### **3.2.3. *Career Services***

It has been my experience that industry knowledge is a positive factor in determining the benefits students derive from programs offered through the career services department. Participation in the Mentor Program enables students to take better advantage of career services' programs because they understand the relevance of the programs to developing their careers. Students in the Mentor Program also benefit from having an easy access to a practicing manager to provide them with an industry perspective. As a result of their participation in the Program, students typically have a more well-rounded resume, and are generally better prepared to enter the workforce. Moreover, as networking has become more important as a career planning tool, students who have already started to develop their personal network have a head start on those students who are trying to develop their network without a willing industry partner.

### **3.2.4. *Instruction***

An unexpected benefit of the Mentor Program has been that it has raised the quality of classroom instruction. This is particularly important in a professional degree program, in which the practical applications of theory are emphasized in the classroom. It is directly attributable to the additional industry experience that

many of the students acquire through working with their mentors. It has been particularly evident in the questions students ask and in their contributions to class discussions and case analyses. The result has been an improved learning environment for all students.

### **3.2.5. Institutional Benefits**

While the primary beneficiaries of the Mentor Program have clearly been the students, the institutional sponsor, that is the department offering the program, has also benefitted. While the Institute of Agribusiness' ties to industry have helped facilitate the Mentor Program, the Program likewise has helped strengthen the Institute's ties and enhanced its reputation with the food and agribusiness industries. Many mentors have not only become more familiar with the MBA in Agribusiness program, but have become more connected to the Institute through working with its students. This facilitates many activities including intern placement, job placement, research activities, and fund raising.

The Mentor Program has also provided an additional mechanism for alumni to become involved with the Institute. In addition to their education, many alumni have benefitted from scholarships, internships, or jobs they received through their association with the Institute. Participation in the Mentor Program has allowed them to "give something back" to their alma mater.

## **3.3. Why Mentors Participate**

Up to this point, the discussion has focused primarily on ways in which students benefit from the Mentor Program. However, one of the surprising results of the survey was the satisfaction many of the mentors expressed with the program. First-time mentors have sometimes expressed some reluctance to participate in the Program. In some cases it has seemed that new mentors have agreed to participate out of a sense of duty or responsibility. On the other hand, most mentors who have prior experience with the program have been eager to continue as mentors for other students.

Mentors' responses concerning the benefits they received from their participation in the Mentor Program generally fell into three categories. Several mentors indicated that they received a great deal of personal satisfaction from working with and providing guidance to students at a critical time in their careers. Several people also commented that they enjoyed meeting, working with, and developing a long-term relationship with the students. A third category of responses indicated that mentors also received more tangible benefits from the Program. Mentors mentioned projects completed by interns, students they later hired as full-time employees, and the relationship they developed with the sponsoring department as specific benefits of the program. Understanding the benefits to the mentors has been particularly helpful in reminding current mentors of the value they receive from the program as well as a useful recruiting tool.

### **3.4. Shortcomings of the Program**

Former students and mentors were both asked to identify shortcomings of the program. The most frequent weakness mentioned by both groups was that it was difficult to make the initial contact with their counterpart. Suggestions made in conjunction with this problem included an orientation program or kick-off event, more formal programs throughout the year, and more frequent communications from the program coordinator.

Two additional shortcomings were identified by a small number of participants. Two students indicated that their mentors were often too busy to give them the amount of attention they desired. One student suggested that it might be more beneficial to recruit mid-level managers, as opposed to senior-level managers, so that the mentor might have more time to spend with the students. Two students and one mentor also indicated that they would like to select their counterpart.

## **4. OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There were many indications that the Mentor Program has been successful. Seventy percent of the students who had developed a relationship with their mentor felt that they had a positive experience with the program as compared to 10 percent with a negative experience. Furthermore, only one in eleven students and one in eight mentors failed to develop a relationship with their counterpart. While there is some room for improvement, it is probably unreasonable to expect a 100 percent success rate. Students and mentors both reported that students received many benefits from the Program, including career counseling, internships, and employment advice. For many students, their participation in the Program provided the basis for beginning their professional network.

The major shortcoming of the Program, identified by both students and mentors, was the difficulty in initiating the relationship with their counterpart. This problem could be addressed by providing more structure both at the beginning and throughout the program. For example, an initial orientation event would make it much easier for students and mentors to get to know each other. Likewise, other, regularly scheduled events, such as conferences and alumni get-togethers, would be natural occasions for student-mentor events. Additional structure could also be provided by more frequent communication by the faculty coordinator with participants in the Program. Specifically, reminders concerning expectations of the program and requests for regular reports from students and mentors might provide the motivation to increase the frequency of contact between students and their mentors and lead to more rewarding and beneficial relationships. Increased structure and more frequent communication might also help bring student and mentor expectations into closer alignment.

## NOTE

1. The statistical results reported in the remainder of this article are based on those respondents who were active participants in the Program (10 students and 7 mentors) and therefore able to provide meaningful feedback on the program.

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