

# A Senior Seminar To Develop Job Hunting Skills

Anne Johnson and T. E. Hartung

## Abstract

*A case study by a land-grant institution in developing student proficiency in job-hunting skills through a senior seminar. Details regarding course objectives, organization, role of faculty, and instruction materials are discussed.*

Does a college have a responsibility to place its graduates? Or does it have a larger responsibility to teach its graduates how to go about the whole job-hunting process efficiently and effectively? According to Richard Bolles (1975), author and career counselor, the average worker under 35 changes jobs every year-and-a-half. If a college could train its students how to job hunt effectively, would those students change jobs less frequently? Based on a study of 251 MBA graduates of Purdue University, Ullman and Gutteridge (1974) report a significant positive relationship between knowledge of companies interviewed and tenure with initial employer. Also, this same knowledge had a positive relationship to current salary and to satisfaction with career progress.

Knowing the company is one of the basic principles of good job interviewing as taught in an employment seminar recently developed at the College of Agriculture in the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This seminar for seniors and graduate students was developed in response to comments from employers that "Nebraska graduates rated high in dependability, ability to get along with people, and in just plain common sense, but they rated low in oral and written communication ability." One employer, responding to the survey questionnaire of Nebraska's curriculum review committee, suggested that colleges "consider a senior seminar devoted to career guidance, interviewing techniques, and job placement" (Frey and Moser 1974). Nebraska's seminar, Agriculture 499, is designed to improve the marketing strategy, including both the written and the oral communications skills, of students preparing to enter the job market.

The high point of the course occurs during the final two evenings when personnel from government and industry conduct mock interviews with the students. Everything preceding these final sessions is aimed at preparing the students for those interviews. At the insistence of the students, who have considerable input as to seminar content, every student enrolled in the course has the opportunity to go through a mock interview and to have his performance critiqued by the professional who conducted the interview.

Mrs. Johnson, an instructor in Agricultural Communications, serves as coordinator for the employment seminar. Dr. Hartung is dean of the College of Agriculture, University of Nebraska.

## Course Objectives

As with any new course, the objectives for Agriculture 499 have been modified from semester to semester, and the specific assignments for the course have shown considerable change. The present behavioral objectives for the seminar state that to complete the course each student shall:

- Assess his own capabilities,
- Demonstrate his ability to research companies or agencies he considers potential employers,
- Show his understanding of the current job market in his field,
- Illustrate his ability to present himself in writing, and
- Demonstrate his ability to present himself in an interview.

Both written and oral assignments correspond closely to these objectives. The written assignments include:

- Comprehensive list of student's own skills, training, experience,
- List of potential employers (Minimum of 10; encourage students to have 100 names on list),
- Detailed survey of two potential employers,
- Letter of inquiry,
- Survey of the job market in student's own field,
- Placement Office form filled out,
- Either a functional or an achievement resume,
- Both a tailored letter of application and a broadcast letter of application,
- One of the following: stall letter, letter declining job offer, letter accepting job offer.
- Critique of one interview student has had during the semester, and
- Evaluation of the seminar.

Each student's oral assignments include:

- Two-minute presentation of one employer he researched.
- Answers to certain difficult interview questions, and
- Mock interview conducted by visiting personnel representative.

It works well to have students hand in a written assignment each week with a final assignment due two weeks after the last session of the seminar. Resumes and letters of application are presented first in rough draft form for critical comments from a faculty member. Two weeks later the final copies of these documents are due. When the student has completed the course, he possesses a rather impressive dossier of employment materials. Also by that time, he usually realizes that his dossier is incomplete and that he must keep adding to it regularly.

## Organization of Course

This five-session seminar, an elective for seniors and graduate students in the College of Agriculture, is offered for one credit. In the beginning the course was offered as a no-credit, two session workshop with only one letter and one resume as prescribed homework. Even though students said the workshop was worthwhile, the attrition was high (50%). One reason for the attrition was that assignments for courses a student is taking for credit take precedence over suggested homework for a no-credit workshop. This led Nebraska to expand the course to five sessions for more intensive training, require considerably more homework, and consequently give one-credit-hour value to the seminar. Nebraska has conducted this one-credit seminar for four semesters and now includes it as a regular offering.

Agriculture 499 is organized so most of the class work is done in discussion groups of 10 students with one faculty member as discussion leader. Personnel representatives from government and industry join these groups for the final two sessions of the seminar with one representative assigned to each small group to conduct the mock interviews.

The small student discussion groups, which often develop an excellent *esprit de corps*, remain the same throughout the seminar. Faculty members and personnel representatives rotate among the groups because the students gain a great deal from the different points of view. Since this routine discourages the student from leaning too heavily on a single faculty member, it reinforces the principle that finding a job is a do-it-yourself project. Furthermore, it is important that each student see more than one personnel representative conduct mock interviews.

The role of the faculty member as discussion leader calls for him to present certain concepts—"deselectors," the hiring influence, functional resume—and to facilitate the class discussion. After his presentation of unfamiliar concepts, the instructor must ask penetrating questions and prod the students to apply these concepts to their own situations. Since job-hunting is a highly individualized process, there are very few cut-and-dried answers. While some faculty members were apprehensive about teaching in an area outside their specialities, they soon found themselves caught up in a process in which they were learning with the students. This proved mutually beneficial. One of the best fringe benefits for the faculty member is that he now feels far better qualified to counsel his advisees and other students about the job-hunting process.

The dean of the college recruits both personnel representatives and faculty members to help with the employment seminar. Personnel representatives generally come from those recruiters who routinely come to the Nebraska campus. They have been generous in giving two evenings of their time to help with this seminar as a service to the university.

Faculty members who help with the seminar are advisers to seniors and graduate students. Since they are expected to take on this seminar responsibility in addition to their regular teaching load at no extra remuneration, care is taken not to give them this assignment during a heavy semester. Usually faculty members never help with the course two semesters in succession. Through their evaluations of the seminar, faculty members have judged this experience as extremely beneficial to them as advisers, and generally they are willing to repeat as instructors for the course.

A seminar coordinator, who works under the direct supervision of the dean of the college, conducts a training session for the teaching team for the seminar, leads weekly planning and evaluation sessions, and prepares course materials. This coordinator, who has worked with the course since its inception, receives the equivalent of the course load as compensation.

## Materials Used

The basic reading materials for the course have been two booklets used several years ago by the Department of Labor in its seminars for unemployed professionals. These booklets were developed by the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) and Lockheed Aircraft Corporation for engineers and scientists who lost their jobs during the major cutback in the space industry in 1970. In addition, the Nebraska course used an AIAA videotape on job interviewing.

This past summer Nebraska developed its own materials for the course: a job search manual for the new graduate and a videotape on selling yourself in the job interview. While these study aids present many of the same principles given in the AIAA materials, both are geared to the peculiar problems of the new graduate who is job hunting. Students are encouraged to get additional help from Bolles' **What Color Is Your Parachute?** and from Jackson and Mayleas' **The Hidden Job Market**.

## Principles Involved

The student enrolling in Nebraska's employment seminar discovers two important principles regarding the problem of finding the best job available:

- (1) Job-hunting is a do-it-yourself enterprise, and
- (2) It is a marketing problem.

Realizing that finding that best job involves marketing skills, the student-applicant recognizes that he needs to know his product (himself), needs to know his customer's (potential employer's) requirements, and needs to show the customer how his product fulfills those requirements. Probably the most difficult aspect in this whole procedure is getting the student-applicant to the point of really knowing what he has to offer a potential employer. When he finally assembles a fairly complete data bank of his skills, training, and experience, the typical student is amazed to discover he has a quality product to offer employers. This realization alone helps the student gain self-confidence.

At the beginning of the course many students are satisfied with their own limited firsthand knowledge of such companies as John Deere and Ralston Purina. They are surprised, when forced to research potential employers, to discover there is more diversity of opportunity than they had imagined. Furthermore, they did not realize the wealth of information available to them about these potential employers. In time, the student begins to screen out those companies which do not meet his specifications; at the same time, he adds companies he had not considered potential employers before he began his research.

Many students resist accepting the two principles mentioned above. However, once they become involved in doing the homework required for the course, they begin to see the rewards that accrue from researching potential employers and from conducting a detailed assessment of their own talents and experiences. Generally, students make a transition in their thinking during the seminar, from considering their backgrounds in terms of experiences only to a recognition of their skills, abilities, and achievements resulting from these experiences. This transition enables them to write and to speak more convincingly about what they can do for the potential employer.

One student learned how to translate his skills as a member of an award-winning meats-judging team to talents useful to a meat processing firm. A college recruiter for such a firm was so impressed when he interviewed the student that he invited the student-applicant to Chicago for in-depth interviews with other company personnel. While in Chicago, the student was offered the kind of job he wanted at a good salary and was given one week to make up his mind about either accepting or rejecting the offer. He phoned various Ag 499 faculty members for advice. His dilemma, as he stated it, was: "If I can do this well on my first interview, maybe I can do even better on later interviews with other companies." He chose to take the position, and he has received several promotions since joining the firm in January 1975.

### Evaluation

Agriculture 499 receives excellent word-of-mouth recommendations from students who have taken the course. A post evaluation survey indicates 92 percent will recommend the course to friends. Students recommend the course because they feel it is excellent training in preparation for job interviews; moreover, they are enthusiastic about the confidence they gain as a result of this training. During the third semester that the course was offered for credit, enrollment was 175 percent of what it had been the corresponding semester of the previous year.

Many students judge the mock interviews as the most important part of the course; others say that being forced to assess themselves is the most valuable feature. Ninety-four percent of the class rate the seminar as either a "positive" or a "very positive" experience.

Success stories of individual students support the above evaluations. At one point in the course students

are encouraged to send out broadcast letters of application, particularly when they face a tight job market. Because the job market in ag-related fields is fairly open, relatively few students feel the urgency to try this approach. One student was delighted and surprised that the job offer he accepted came from a company with which his original contact had been a broadcast letter of application. He had decided he did not want to limit himself to those companies which come to the UN-L campus to recruit. Therefore, he sent letters to a dozen companies selling agricultural chemicals. Someone in a head office in California liked the letter well enough to send it to the regional office. The regional office asked the local Lincoln sales representative to interview this student. That interview was followed by interviews in the regional office, a trip to one of the company plants, more interviews, and finally a job offer.

### REFERENCES

- Bolles, Richard N. 1975. *What color is your parachute?* Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Ca.
- Frey, Thomas L. and Lowell E. Moser. 1974. What employers think about Ag College graduates. *Farm, Ranch and Home Quarterly* 20(4): 15-16.
- Jackson, Tom and Davidyne Mayleas. 1976. *The hidden job market*. Quad-rangle/The New York Times Book Co., New York.
- Ullman, Joseph C. and Thomas G. Gutteridge. 1974. Job search in the labor market for college graduates: a case study of MBAs. *Academy of Management Journal* 17 (2):381-386.

## An Approach To Curriculum Development

Phillip Zurbrick

### Abstract

*This interesting case report should cause readers to consider possible curriculum changes and to look at their entire institutional program of studies and its relevance to student needs.*

Criticism of the instructional program or curriculum is a common occurrence at most, if not all, educational institutions. Such criticism is commonly leveled by students, teachers, alumni, industry representatives, and employers of the institution's graduates. Much of this criticism is based upon prejudicial opinions or narrow sightedness which tends to focus upon the needs of a single individual, a particular industry, or a specific employer. Reacting to such criticism by altering the curriculum or instructional program often leads to even greater problems. This is not to say that instructional programs are above criticism or could not be improved. However, change for the sake of change based upon minority consensus could be disastrous. Many complaints about relevance, lack of articulation, and lack of

Phillip Zurbrick is associate professor in the Department of Agricultural Education at the University of Arizona, Tucson.