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Bridging the Distance: Linking Current Students with Alumni via the Internet

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Abstract

Agricultural students are often extraordinarily interested in career opportunities, how to interview and acquire a good job, and what life in the "real world" will be like after graduation. To better meet this informational need, several strategies of linking current students with former students will be described and evaluated. The development of an "Alumni Career Bank" on the Internet provides current students with the names, job titles and descriptions, addresses, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses of former students. The Career Bank offers numerous opportunities for both teachers and students, including: (1) teachers remain in close contact with Alumni, (2) current students can contact and learn from former students, (3) Alumni remain in close contact with their classmates, and (4) recruiters and employers can look for qualified individuals to fill potential employment opportunities.

Introduction

"Current Agricultural and Natural Resource Policy Issues," AGE 610, is a capstone, senior-level class offered in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University (KSU). The course curriculum was developed to integrate and synthesize four years of higher education into a meaningful and rewarding experience for graduating seniors (Barkley, 1995). Similar to other capstone courses, the course not only strives to pull together major themes from previous courses, but also builds a bridge between a college education and the students' soon-to-begin careers. Since the course is taken in the Spring semester of the senior year, enrolled students are often keenly interested in life after graduation,

¹ Associate Professor. This paper was presented as a selected paper at the 1997 NACTA annual meetings, Ames, Iowa, June 24, 1997

and frequently ask questions such as: What will the working world be like? Am I prepared? What strategies can I follow to be successful? How do I know that the job offer I recently accepted is a good "fit" for me?

The urgency and persistence of these questions over several years led to the development of the "AGEC 610 Alumni Career Bank," which is simply a listing of names, job descriptions, and phone numbers of all previous students of the course. Following the lead of instructors who have incorporated computer technology into the classroom (Herr and Parsons, 1995; McCaslin and Torres, 1992), and World Wide Web pioneers (Green, 1996; O'Kane and Armstrong, 1997), the Career Bank was made available on the Internet for seniors enrolled in AGE 610 (<http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~barkley/alumni610>). Students are now able to contact former students for timely, relevant answers to career questions that faculty may not be fully knowledgeable about, such as life in the rapidly changing world of Agribusiness, or simpler, more applied questions such as concerns about internal office politics, or how to get along with a father unwilling to share decision making authority of a family farm.

Placing of graduating seniors into jobs that are best suited for them is one of the most important missions of higher education. A previous analysis of an extensive survey of agricultural graduates of Kansas State University concluded that placement of graduates into jobs that match their personal characteristics, abilities, and career goals is a critical element of successful degree programs. Job satisfaction dominated all other determinants of alumni perceptions regarding satisfaction with college experiences (Barkley, 1993). The development and use of the Alumni Career Bank has provided many benefits to the students and teacher of the course. Some of these benefits were anticipated; others were not.

Materials and Methods

To create the AGECE 610 Alumni Career Bank, telephone numbers and mailing addresses of all former students who had taken the class were acquired from the Kansas State University Alumni Association. Former students were contacted by the instructor and asked to participate in the project. Since the Career Bank places personal information on the internet, permission was necessary from each former student prior to participation. With one exception, all former students were willing to provide required information (one individual requested that work address and telephone number remain available to students through the instructor, but not on the internet). A current job description and list of student activities (while at KSU) were included to provide information that might be useful in the identification of commonalities between users of the Alumni Career Bank.

It was hoped that currently enrolled students would independently use the Career Bank to pursue information relevant to their careers. Graduating seniors are busy with classes, work, job interviews, and socializing. Seeking additional career information, while valuable, may not occur unless an incentive is provided. To encourage students to use the Alumni Career Bank, this assignment was distributed late in the semester:

The following assignment should be both fun and useful to you. Select one person from the AGECE 610 Alumni Career Bank who is in a job closest to the one that you will have after graduation. Contact the individual, and conduct a phone interview with him or her. Find out as much as you can about their experience at K-State and their experience on the job. The assignment will be graded based on the creativity of the questions that you ask and the content of the report that you turn in.

In addition to being the resource for the alumni interview assignment, the Alumni Career Bank should facilitate Alumni gatherings and the development of an Alumni Advisory Board. To the extent that the Alumni Career Bank helps build stronger ties with our former students, it is an effective method of attracting support and building rapport.

Results and Discussion

A major objective of AGECE 610 is the development of critical thinking skills and a love of lifelong learning. Thus, AGECE 610 is composed of weekly "Critical Thinking Assignments," or essays (Barkley, 1995). Bowman and Whittington (1994) summarized four "Principles of Teaching" present in the classrooms of five University of Idaho professors noted for consistently reaching higher cognitive levels in their courses. These four principles are used to organize the results and experiences of the development and use of the Alumni Career Bank.

Students Think, Reason, and Contemplate When They Inquire Into a Subject

The experience with the Alumni Career Bank at KSU strongly supports the idea that experiential learning which brings college students into contact with professionals can strengthen interpersonal communication skills and career preparation. The Alumni Career Bank interview assignment resulted in a positive, productive experience for students mainly because the level of interest in agribusiness opportunities was immense. This high degree of curiosity was also apparent among graduating seniors at Iowa State University. Gamon and Chestnut (1995) conducted focus groups with all graduating seniors, and discovered that students expected classes to be more related to industry. They felt that classes should not only be taught for students aspiring to graduate school, but also for the majority of students who finish with a bachelors and enter the work world. By formalizing the connection between college and industry, an outlet for student inquiry into their career has been provided.

Students Learn What They Practice

Refinements will occur as more experience is gained with the assignment and the students' reaction to it. One lesson learned from the assigned Alumni interview was that one interaction may not be enough. One student suggested that the assignment be given earlier in the class and repeated throughout the semester. Assessment of this assignment and its relationship to the course objectives (Barkley, 1996) will help to determine how the assignment could be improved. For example, next year the assignment will be made early in the semester, and repeated if the outcome of the initial assignment is positive and productive.

Present a Major Concept 3-5 Different Ways

Another major objective of AGECE 610 is to provide knowledge about how four years of college will be put to use in a career. College professors can become frustrated when trying to communicate this idea, for two reasons. First, the notions of lifelong learning and critical thinking are abstract, and hence, difficult to explain. Second, faculty members typically have not been employed in jobs similar to those in which their students will be employed, and therefore, know little about how the college curriculum and experiences are related to employment after graduation for many students. While it is often difficult to admit lack of knowledge, the sooner that denial is conquered, the more productive the instructor can be in filling this void of information.

One good solution to this problem is guest speakers from industry. Each year, at least one former student has been invited back to AGECE 610 to speak about their experience since graduation. Recent graduates can

contribute enormously in answering questions about the real world, and the relationship between college and career. While a teacher can explain nearly identical ideas, students will not typically believe the "ivory tower" faculty member to the same degree that they believe "one of their own." Henneberry (1990) and Henneberry and Beshear (1995) corroborated this through their experience with guest lectures in agricultural marketing courses at Oklahoma State University. A similar finding was identified by Baker and McLaughlin (1996), who surveyed members of the California Association of Nurserymen to build a stronger relationship between on-the-job skills preferred by nursery industry employees and the college curriculum. The authors stated that this linkage has become increasingly important as the nursery industry shifts to a market orientation.

The importance of direct communication between students and currently employed graduates has been further emphasized in several recent studies. Hoiberg and Ahmed (1992) found a disparity between students' "ideal" and "realistic" career choices at Iowa State University, given current economic conditions in the agricultural industry. Radhakrishna and Bruening (1994) surveyed agribusiness employees and students in Pennsylvania, and found a gap between students' and employees' perceived ability to perform skills in agribusiness professions. The major objective of providing students with information concerning life after college can be usefully met in a number of ways, including the use of the Alumni Career Bank for either informal, independent contacts or a formalized assignment requiring students to interview a former student of the class. These interactions provide a unique forum for students to learn directly from those most knowledgeable: recent graduates who share common major fields of study, college activities, and career interests.

Fresh, Novel and Stimulating Experience is Rewarding

One of the largest rewards of the development of the Alumni Career Bank was unanticipated: the experience of the instructor getting in touch with former students. Conversations with former students were fun and productive, and nearly all of the students contacted were excited to hear from their Alma Mater, glad to be able to share their life experiences, and very willing to participate in the Alumni Career Bank listing on the internet. The telephone conversations provided valuable information about what former students are doing in their careers, how our courses and curricula are related to their jobs, and what types of skills and knowledge could be usefully incorporated into the curricula to benefit current and future students. Much useful information was gleaned that enhances the teacher's ability to provide a truly useful and meaningful senior-level capstone course.

The contact with former students yields an unexpected reward for teachers: one of our profession's unique pleasures is to interact with and learn from former students who are successful and happy. Gamon and Rowe (1997) reported a similar unanticipated outcome of the Ag-Link Program at Iowa State University. Continuous updating of the Career Bank will allow for future contact and conversation with former students, a source of updating knowledge of agricultural graduates' careers, as well as maintaining good alumni relations. As higher education shifts from public sector support to an increasing reliance on private funding, alumni relations should become increasingly important.

Communication among the instructor and former students has increased markedly since the development of the Career Bank, for three reasons. First, the initial phone conversation with former students resulted in a renewed interest in the Department of Agricultural Economics. Second, availability of the instructor was enhanced through the use of the internet, for those alumni with access to the World Wide Web. Third, the use of E-mail has increased considerably between former students and teachers, as the electronic mail system has become more widely available. Conversations with former students provided an unexpected result: contrary to current students, who needed an "incentive" to use the Alumni Career Bank, many former students have independently and frequently used the Career Bank as a means of catching up with college friends and making business contacts. This unanticipated outcome, together with the increased level of communication between former students and the instructor are the delightful and meaningful rewards of the "fresh, novel and stimulating experience" of producing an Alumni Career Bank.

Summary

The development and use of an Alumni Career Bank has provided large rewards to students, former students, and the instructor. Interpersonal relationships, business contacts, and friendship among these three groups have all increased due to enhanced communication made possible by the Career Bank. Students showed an increased desire for information about careers, which was the major desired outcome driving the creation of an Alumni Career Bank to "bridge the distance" between current students and alumni over the Internet.

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