

# ESTABLISHING AN E-MENTOR PROGRAM FOR ACCOUNTING MAJORS

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## ABSTRACT

This article describes an e-mentor program used as a co-curricular professional development activity for accounting majors at a university that is located in a small city geographically distant from our major recruiters. We provide information regarding our program's mission and objectives, recruiting professionals and students to participate, and evaluations of the program to date. Results indicate that the program is an overall success, with a high proportion of students and professionals who agree/strongly agree that the program's mission and objectives are met.

## INTRODUCTION

In *Improving the Early Employment Experience of Accountants*, the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) recommends that students should

Seek opportunities to obtain first-hand knowledge of the business world and practice environment.

Obtain information about career opportunities and the job search [1, p. 10].

With the accounting environment currently experiencing arguably the most significant changes in decades due to events such as corporate accounting scandals, Sarbanes-Oxley, and a renewed emphasis on ethics, it is more important than ever to increase the interaction of students with professionals. This will enhance the students' ability to network and increase the students' knowledge of the profession in order to facilitate their transition from college to the "real world." This article describes an e-mentoring program that is a co-curricular professional development activity for accounting majors at a university located in a small city geographically distant from the primary location of major recruiters.

## THE ACCOUNTING E-MENTOR PROGRAM

### Program Mission and Objectives

As a starting point, we used suggestions from "Practitioners as Mentors," which describe a mentoring program to recruit students to the accounting major at a university in a major metropolitan area [2]. We decided to focus our mentoring program on the professional development of already declared accounting majors, rather than as a recruiting tool. Additionally, due to the geographic distance of our university from the primary location of the large public accounting firms and businesses, we decided to emphasize e-mail communications, hence the name, "Accounting e-Mentor Program."

From ideas generated by a subcommittee of faculty and Accounting Advisory Council (AAC) members along with input from first semester accounting majors, we drafted our program's mission and objectives which were presented to the accounting faculty and AAC for feedback. The resulting mission

of our Accounting e-Mentor Program is “to bring accounting majors and professionals together in a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship.” The program’s objectives for students are:

- To provide students with insight, advice, and answers to questions from professionals regarding matters such as curriculum choices, goal-setting, careers, and interviewing.
- To enhance the students’ understanding of the industry they are preparing to enter.
- To enhance and complement faculty advising.
- To help students make informed decisions.
- To help students become more polished and improve their business etiquette.
- To enhance student motivation and improve retention.

The program’s objectives for professionals are:

- To provide professionals with a feeling of satisfaction through helping students.
- To provide professionals a continuing connection with the Accounting Area, the College of Business Administration, and the University.

The accounting faculty and professional on our AAC established the program guidelines, process, and responsibilities. We also included guidance for the professionals for the initial contact and improving communications with students as well as identifying potential topics for discussion.

### **Recruiting Professionals and Students to the Program**

An e-mail invitation to participate in the program was sent to all members of our AAC as well as select alumni. The e-mail was worded in such a way to facilitate forwarding to other professionals. In order for the professionals to have a stronger commitment to the program and provide the possibility of interaction opportunities in addition to e-mail, we prefer our mentors to be located in the state and be a graduate of our university or involved with our accounting program in some way.

To encourage students to participate in the pilot test of the program, the Program Coordinator allowed students to earn a nominal amount of extra credit points in the Financial Reporting I class she was teaching that semester. As a result, approximately two-thirds of the students in the class signed up for the program. After the pilot test semester, all accounting majors who have at least two semesters remaining until graduation are invited to participate. The program is optional, but strongly encouraged.

In order to participate, professionals and students complete a brief profile information form submitted via e-mail. In this form, students may request certain characteristics of the professional, including type of firm (public accounting, industry, or government/nonprofit), scope of firm (local, regional, or international/national), and experience level (young professional or experienced professional). Students have the option to also make other special mentor requests.

In the spring 2005 pilot test, there were 26 pairs of students-mentors, with 88 percent of these pairs having at least one contact. Most pairs had from two to four contacts during the semester. The profile of the professionals in the program indicate even distribution of young versus experienced, with 65 percent from public accounting firms, 23 percent from industry, and 12 percent from government. The type of firm of the professionals reflects the typical proportions of job placements for our graduates.

### **Evaluation of the Program**

At the end of the first semester in the program, we surveyed the students and professionals to assess the

program's success, identify types of questions asked and to solicit comments or suggestions to help us improve the program for future semesters. In the future, we will also survey the professional and student when the student graduates.

The response rate was 92 percent for the students and 77 percent for the professionals. Results from the evaluation of the program's mission indicate that a high proportion of students and professionals agree/strongly agree (86 percent and 89 percent, respectively) that the program brings accounting majors and professionals together in a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship. The proportion of students who agree/strongly agree with statements regarding the program's objectives for students ranged from 65 percent for "the program enhances student motivation and improves retention," to 100 percent for "the program provides students with insight, advice, and answers to questions from professionals regarding matters such as curriculum choices, goal-setting, careers, and interviewing." The proportion of professionals who agree/strongly agree with statements regarding the program's objectives for professionals is 89 percent for providing a feeling of satisfaction through helping students and 84 percent for providing a continuing connection to the program and university. Additionally, 89 percent of professionals agree/strongly agree that the program is a worthwhile use of their time.

Student comments regarding the program include: "The professionals in this mentor program show that they care about you as a student and want to help you;" and "This is an excellent opportunity to not only become acquainted with a professional in our field, but ask questions and seek advice in a manner that is not intimidating." Comments from the professionals include: "I think this program is a great idea and my mentee seemed very appreciative of my time and the answers to his questions I was able to provide. He seemed very interested in learning the details of my experiences as a professional versus a student. Our conversation was very worthwhile;" and "I think the major benefits to the professionals are the connection as alumni with [the] University ...and I enjoy helping students."

Some of the problems identified from the pilot test include the difficulty lining up schedules for the initial phone contact, lack of timely responses by the student or professional, and the desire to actually meet with each other, especially for the initial contact. Accordingly, we revised the student profile form to include a question regarding the best time for the initial phone contact. Additionally, we revised the program guidelines to address the other issues and to encourage other types of contacts such as short meetings and shadowing in addition to the initial phone contact and e-mail.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article describes an e-mentor program used as a co-curricular professional development activity for accounting majors. Results indicate that the program is an overall success with a high proportion of students and professionals who agree/strongly agree that the program's mission and objectives are met. Through participant feedback, we identified some areas in which we have fine-tuned our program to ensure our program's continued success.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Accounting Education Change Commission, Issues Statement No. Four, *Improving the Early Employment Experiences of Accountant*, (Torrance, CA: AECC, 1993).
- [2] Weinstein, G.P and K. Scheule, "Practitioners as Mentors," *Journal of Accountancy*, (June 2003), pp. 39-44.