

Alumni Mentoring Programme

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Abstract: Alumni mentoring program is one of the best ways of reconnecting alumni with their almmater and engaging them in students' advancement process. However, developing effective alumni mentoring programs can be a challenging process that requires a careful balance of interested students and alumni along with close facilitation of the mentoring relationship. This exciting program is designed to match team of students with alumni in a related field to provide a learning experience for students which connects classroom learning to the 'real world'. The use of alumni to mentor under graduate students to carry out a project, is a new and innovative development in our institute. This article describes the recent initiative carried out in our department where alumni worked as mentors to second year under graduate students. As an outcome of this, all students performed few activities and projects, also gained confidence to carry out a good project.

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1. Introduction

Alumni mentor programs exist in many arenas, mostly to address a particular necessity of a program. "A mentor is one who offers knowledge, insight, perspective and wisdom that is especially useful to the other person" [1]. Mentoring is widely accepted as a win-win-win approach to professional development, giving benefits to both mentors and mentees and to their organisations [2].

The benefits of establishing alumni mentoring programs are immense. Students get an opportunity to interact with professionals who were once students in their shoes. They have a chance to ask questions, visit alumni workplace, and learn about a specific company. The alumni mentors can provide "career guidance, encouragement during the academic program, advice on important course and field work, and opportunities to make professional contacts" [3]. In addition to students, alumni are also benefitted from the mentoring programs. This gives alumni an important opportunity to reconnect with their almmater. Often alumni wish to become involved in activities that further promote and serve the university, and being a mentor allows them to become involved. Mentoring programs also provide alumni who are not able to make substantial financial contributions, a chance to contribute something other than a donation to their almmater. Also these programs give alumni an opportunity to cultivate and recruit promising young people to their place of employment after graduation.

Studies on alumni indicate major contribution by alumni to their alma mater through financial support in the form of building infrastructure, instituting scholarship, imparting technical expertise by talks and conducting workshop. Being an alumni mentor, they can closely see how their involvement and financial support can make a difference in students' lives. This may make few alumni to hire more students to their place of work or contribute more to the betterment of students. Thus institution also reaps rewards from establishing alumni mentoring programs.

In order to make students more employable, it was strongly felt that they must acquire more technical skills and life skills. One good way to acquire skills is through experiential learning by carrying out an activity and/or project, beyond curriculum. It was decided that instead of faculty members, it would be good to use alumni to excite and provide additional support to students to carry out an additional activity and/or a project.

Alumni mentoring programs are not new. It has been tried successfully in various institutes across the globe. An active role of faculty coordinators is essential for the success of this venture. They need to be key players in helping to set up successful matches between students and alumni, further to ensure the progress. Mentors often do not have enough background to make accurate judgements on students' abilities, so they may misperceive a student's potential and set goals too high or low. For this reason, faculty coordinator must stay involved and be an important part of the program. It was envisioned that both mentors and mentees would have distinct opportunities and would mutually be benefitted from mentoring relationship. The use of alumni in these kind of ventures help to forge lifelong partnership between students and alumni. In addition, students not only have better experience of the learning programme, but also develop better contacts with an alumnus which throws more opportunities for networking for both the parties.

2. A Brief Look into Alumni Mentoring Program Elsewhere

Alumni mentoring programme launched in institutes aim to prepare undergraduates for employment by providing an opportunity to have a one-to-one connection with alumni who have established careers in a wide variety of areas.

A mentor is a valuable resource in many respects for an individual and at different stage of their career[4]. Reviews of the goals of mentor programs unfold a wide range from character development, leadership training to skills and career preparation [5]. An approach in Breslow, involved pairing alumni with students for a particular course[6] and they observed improvement in students' performance. The work of John Gardner and Lee Upcraft [7] has provided ample documentation to support the worth of alumni mentoring endeavors. With a reference to it, the alumni mentoring program at Western New England College specifically focused on helping first-year students to develop a sense of purpose, attain a realization of purpose and develop future directions.

It has been shown that alumni can be useful in supporting under graduate students through a formal mentoring scheme [8]. Alumni mentoring can be especially useful in raising confidence level of new entrants [9] and also help students to orient to rigours of academic study [10]. Alumni were used to mentor students for professional growth [11]. Universities are increasingly seeking alternative approaches to education that supplement traditional classroom learning, because that budget have been cut and student populations have raised in many universities [12].

The goals of our alumni mentoring program for second year students were two fold 1. To enable our students to carry out a project beyond their curriculum. 2. The interaction with alumni to enhance students' technical and life skills and help them in establishing good relation with alumni.

3. Our Approach

The complete process that was adopted to implement alumni mentoring program is elicited in this section.

A. Necessity/Inspiration

The real key to the effectiveness of professional students is their ability to put their domain knowledge into effective practice and acquire professional skills. The challenge for professional colleges is to work out a healthy balance between the wholeness of knowledge and skill sets that cater to current technology demands. The biggest challenge facing colleges of engineering is to develop employable skills enhancement, process knowledge, acquire life

skills and thus make students better employable and more responsible citizens.

The students need to be motivated and given additional support to develop both technical and life skills. The reasons for choosing alumni to mentor students are:

- Students would better accept guidance and support from professionals working in industry and who are themselves entrepreneurs. Alumni are the best possible external persons to support students.
- Our institute has a very large alumni base and good number of them is more than willing to extend support to our students.
- Our experiences in other ventures with alumni strengthened the idea of using alumni mentors
- It is practically very difficult for faculty members to provide one-to-one mentoring to a class with large number of students. Hence it was felt that alumni mentoring is a possible way to provide extra support to students.

It was decided that the role of alumni mentor is to guide and support students to perform any activities of their choice, which is beyond the syllabus. The activities may be – social service, small projects, case study, improving aptitude and life skills, developing prototype, etc. Team work makes students to think bigger, harder and deeper. It also increases confidence and morale of individual. Hence students were encouraged to work in teams, by forming team of their choice.

B. Initialising the Process

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, is a key factor in the success of students at all stages of their education. Students learn and work only when they are motivated. Hence any successful effort to improve learning will therefore be fundamentally about improving students' motivation. Thus an alumnus who is a motivational speaker was invited to excite and ignite second year students. The second year students were selected for this venture with the rationale "if students are motivated to perform any activity beyond their curriculum in the beginning of their graduation program, the chances that they carry out good projects/activities/learning in remaining semesters will be high".

As the first step, all students were asked to fill up a form "Let us Know You", which had questions like –'write your dream', 'where do you want to see yourself in next 2-3 years', 'what support do you expect from department' and 'what are your weaknesses'. The alumni read all filled forms to understand students' mindset and then held a session with students to excite them. She tried to convince them the need to perform some activity/project beyond the curriculum to realise their dreams. Later all faculty members were asked to join the session and each student was asked to speak about themselves. Each student was let to speak for 5 to 10 minutes about their achievements in school and their plans. Despite their nervousness and language problem, every student spoke. This was a great surprise to all faculty members. Thus, an alumnus was successful in making students to open up. Then a faculty explained the Alumni mentoring program where an alumni would be associated with each team of students, as mentors. Few student responses for this were:

"I would love to have a mentor. Perhaps just someone i could turn up for advice when preparing for exams and doing a small project"

"Yes, i am interested. I will have some experienced person to guide me in understanding and carrying out industry related projects"

Students were given few days to form a team and propose the activity they wish to perform by the next semester.

It was felt that it would be good to involve all stake holders in this venture. So, the big picture we envisioned at the end of this venture was to have a meet of "students, faculty members, alumni, college administration and parents", where each team of students would explain the activity they performed and their learning. This was informed to students to make them more excited to take up the activity.

In the meantime, this idea of "alumni mentoring" was shared with several alumni and received very good responses. Alumni were invited to volunteer to participate in this venture as mentors. Good number of alumni exhibited great interest and their willingness to support students as mentors. A faculty was chosen to operate as coordinator to bring together both students and alumni mentors, further to steer the complete program. Best efforts were put to match volunteered alumni mentor and student teams.

C. Scheme Implementation

The students and their alumni mentor started discussion mostly over phone calls, email and other communication channels. The kind of activities that students decided along with alumni mentor were:

- Small project using Python,
- Android Application development
- Teaching computer basics/English to school children
- Conducting science quiz to government school children

The faculty coordinator frequently talked to both alumni mentor and students to know their progress, and also acted as a moderator between the two parties. They also had a bigger role to play, to ensure that some learning and working is happening in the process.

Within one month, 80% of students visited nearby government schools to conduct quiz and teach English and basics of Computers. This strengthened binding among team members, boosted their confidence to take up a technical project. All teams finalized the project they would carry out with alumni. It was expected that ground work for the project must be completed before semester end examination begins, so that students would be able to complete the project during vacations.

Alumni mentors spent enough time to motivate and guide students to decide the problem to work. Few teams had decided to work on “web portal” development. One alumni was invited to the department to conduct one day workshop on “Technologies to develop Web Portal” and this helped good number of students to start their learning towards building the project. Alumni mentors were in constant interaction with students to guide them through the process. Faculty coordinator also had intermittent discussion with student teams to check the progress.

D. Outcome

There were 6 student teams. Five teams visited school and conducted quiz and other activities. All 6 teams decided a small project to be carried out, but finally 3 teams completed successfully and 2 teams

are still working, as it is a big project. The learning for students from this venture was significant. They gained the experience of carrying out a project with a touch of proficiency, as corporate alumni mentors made students to follow documentation and few industry standards in software development. The students' confidence to pursue self learning and perform software development was enhanced.

4. Responses from Mentees and Mentors

The feedback about this venture was collected from both students and alumni. Most of the students have indicated that guidance and support got from the alumni mentors was significant and useful. The mentors expressed their happiness for the interest shown by students in learning from them. The faculty opined that the attempt was a successful one.

Few selected responses and recommendations from mentees:

The mentoring program is a very different way of learning than before. It greatly helped us.

Mentors helped us to choose a problem and work on it, gave technical guidance which otherwise would have been difficult

Mentors advised and assisted us on academic questions, career options, life beyond college, and more

Expected their mentors to be more flexible, caring, supportive and informative

Few selected responses and expectations from mentors:

It is so refreshing to meet prospective engineers who are excited about their future and wanting to find a career

It is very rewarding. I got to know all students in my team and learn about their welfares and passions and discuss possible career opportunities.

The overall time of the mentorship relationships should be increased, say around a year

It would have been better for both mentors and students to come more prepared for the first “meeting.”, as it is essential to create good impression of each other

5. Conclusion

Alumni mentoring program started with an intension of benefitting students turned out to be very productive, interesting and inspiring. A little motivation from the mentor made the students to do activities beyond the curriculum. Through one-on-one interactions, participants developed individually and professionally. Mentors also observed growth in students and found satisfaction in the opportunity to “work for the alma-mater”. The experiment exemplified a formal process for mentoring between professional students and alumni, for the purpose of enhancing career skills and career development preparation. Additionally, the mentoring relationship developed between students and alumni expands the reach, form and value of the learning community and enhances the placement training activities.

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