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Using Alumni Networking to Teach Technical Communication

Engineering educators have long been concerned with bridging the gap between the classroom and working world. Recently in a technical communication class in the Vanderbilt School of Engineering, alumni offered networking opportunities to students to help them in their coursework and in their future use of communication skills. This paper reports on a pilot project integrating the Vanderbilt Engineering Alumni Council (EAC) mentoring initiative with the ES 210w Technical Communication course, a technical communication class for all engineering majors. Students interviewed practicing engineers about communication tasks at work and reported their findings in a written report. The purpose was twofold:

- (1) The instructor's purpose was to teach students report writing skills and the importance of technical communication in the engineering profession.
- (2) The EAC's purpose was to provide a framework for networking and alumni assistance to bridge the gap between school and work and to encourage students to continue the mentoring relationship beyond the ES 210w requirement. They suggested providing continuing help in such areas as interviewing techniques, resumes, and job search communication in general.

Eighteen alumni volunteered to be contacted by two to three students each. Students worked in groups of three or four to develop questionnaires designed to gather their desired information. This paper describes the components of this three-week project: background and rationale; the writing assignment; the alumnus guest speaker introducing the project; the students' information-gathering process; the final reports; student post-assessment of the project; and a final alumni-sponsored luncheon meeting with alumni, students, the professor, and administrators. Students and alumni both considered this project to be successful and recommended keeping this module in the course. Students rated that recommendation a 4.0 on a 5-point scale in their assessment questionnaire. The key to students' successful interaction with alumni was that the course required them to make contact initially and provided a comfortable environment for them to extend that contact.

Key words: technical communication, alumni, networking, industry in the classroom

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