

**Fostering Career Mentorship between Alumni and Undergraduate Students: A College of  
Agriculture Student Success Career Coaching Program**

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### **Introduction, Purpose, & Research Questions**

During their undergraduate experience, students must select a career path and solidify career goals. Coaching can provide effective career planning for students by advancing self-esteem, career preparation, goal achievement, and motivation (Lee et al., 2020). Alumni career coaching programs enhance student career success by hosting a broad group of alumni to consult with students by appointment. Through these programs, alumni consider students' skills, knowledge, and experiences and guide them to more opportunities for career pathways (Duke University, 2023). Across undergraduate student experiences, alumni career coaches can provide valuable insight on industries, specific companies, career guidance, and much more to help students solidify and prepare for their post-graduation career (Singer & Hughey, 2003).

Currently, it is not clearly understood the specific outcomes of career coaching, for both students and alumni career coaches, due to lack of effective data from these programs (Pfund et al., 2016; Shojai et al., 2013). The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) Alumni for Student Success (CASS) Career Coaching Program at North Carolina State University fills this gap by ensuring that current and relevant data is collected throughout the process of career coaching. To address this knowledge gap, our program has three check-in emails throughout the academic year, a follow-up survey succeeding training, and an assessment at the conclusion of the program. All of which will mostly consist of essay questions, where alumni coaches and students will have the opportunity to also communicate the effectiveness of the career coaching program anonymously.

It is unclear in literature whether or not mentoring programs are as effective as coaching programs, due to this lack of in-depth data collection (Pfund et al., 2016; Shojai et al., 2013). Literature suggests that mentoring programs are best suited for overall development, while coaching programs are most effective when focused on specific and measurable outcomes. For this reason, it is evident that coaching serves as the best approach for students as they aspire to reach specific career goals (Zust, 2017). Our program addresses this concern by taking the career coaching approach, as coaching relationships are paired for only one academic year and are focused on reaching a specific career goal. Students obtain their goals by using the SMART Goals method, where they coordinate with their alumni coach to establish a key objective. SMART is represented as smart, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound (Weintraub et al., 2021). This project relates to AAEE research value “increasing prosperity through innovation in AFNR systems” through workforce development mentor programs (AAEE, 2023).

### **Methods**

To kickoff the CASS Career Coaching Program, CALs alumni and current CALs students sign up for the program following outreach via email through CALs Career Services. Students are matched with one alumni based on degrees, students' career aspirations, alumni experiences, and several other factors. Subsequently, once both parties are contacted and agree on their match, a follow-up email is sent out with further program information and a sign-up link for the required training. One requirement for training is that each alumni/student pair attend the same training session. Following the training session, it is up to the coach and coachee to meet at least seven times during the duration of the year-long program. In addition, they are required to follow the program expectations and provide feedback during the three check-in emails, sent by the program coordinator three times per academic year.

### **Results to Date/Implications**

CASS Career Coach Training involves communicating program information to both coaches and coachees. Once the program coordinator (or session host) shared program information, each coach/coachee pair went into their own breakout room for 40 minutes for individualized conversation. Topics included introducing themselves, discussing communication preferences, setting future meetings, and examining the coachee's potential career goal using the SMART method. According to training sessions held in the fall of 2023, most pairs were able to meet one another, review communication preferences, and set future meetings, while others also achieved coachee's specific career goal identification.

As of October 26th, 2023, 98% of overall participants attended the required training. The 2% that did not attend illustrated commitment conflicts and continuous communication delays. As a result, the participant was not to continue with the program. Despite this, anecdotal evidence from trainings demonstrated participant pairs had a positive experience through the training, especially when sent into the breakout rooms for one-on-one conversations. This was made evident by the "pop-in" checks done in each breakout room by the host during one-on-one phase of the training. Through this experience, we learned that there are always going to be conflicts with attendance when hosting such a diverse group of alumni and students. Finding more effective ways to communicate the significance of attendance prior to training sessions is planned as a result of pilot data.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

Growing the program will involve more outreach to students broadcasted earlier in the year. Sending out information earlier in the school year will allow students to explore program requirements, details, and expectations prior to signing up. With this in mind, it will be beneficial to set timeframes for follow-up emails after receiving no response. This year, it was discovered that there was too much time wasted waiting on the students/alumni who never responded to their match email. Instead, establishing timeframes for this will supply other opportunities to provide a better match for participants whose match never responded. Despite these necessary changes, the overall program has had successful pilot implementation. The coach/coachee pairs have had positive reactions to trainings and meetings, and those who are actively participating have been very responsive, responsible, and encouraging.

### **Costs & Resources Needed**

For our specific program, a Graduate Assistant (GA) holds an assistantship with CALS Academic Programs (AP) and is funded by the CALS Ag Foundation. The GA commits 20 hours a week to work on this program, but hours tend to fluctuate due to trainings and other aspects of the program that add more time commitments. Additionally, a supervisor is available to support and guide the GA through the program. Currently, our GA is supervised by the Director of Career Services in CALS Academic Programs, and overseen by the Director of Academic Programs. Initially, since the start of the program takes more time, the supervisor aids the GA with going over program structure, recruiting students and alumni, and creating matches, while also providing other necessary support.

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