

**Launching A College of Agriculture Student Success Career Coaching Program: Student Insights from Pilot Year**

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### **Introduction and Need for Innovation**

University alumni mentoring programs benefit students by providing a diverse and resourceful wealth of knowledge (Skrzyneck et al., 2022). Alumni mentoring programs foster student learning experiences through development, while also bridging their success to future careers (Viereggar & Bryant, 2020). Student participation in alumni mentoring programs can enhance job security, pre-graduation contentment, and higher job satisfaction compared to non-participants (Dollinger et al., 2019). Similarly, career coaching encompasses professional development as students take initiative towards their future, where a collaborative relationship is formed between a coach and coachee (Grant et al., 2010; Lai, 2015; Skrzyneck et al., 2022). There is a gap in literature highlighting the benefits of career coaching programs for university students. While some studies indicate college student career coaching involves workforce preparation (Baan et al., 2023), few studies detail career coaching programs for students. This study aims to fill the gap between understanding perceptions of student participants and their involvement in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Alumni for Student Success (CASS) Career Coaching Program (CPP), utilizing goal setting theory combined with student involvement.

The main objective of this program was to allow alumni career coaches to work cooperatively with their student coachees to help them develop a specific career goal they want to achieve by the end of the program. The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time bound) Goals Method allowed coaches to help coachees establish goals and action plans for goal-striving and goal-achievement (Green et al., 2006; Weintraub et al., 2021). The coach facilitated this process through active listening, inquiry, challenging the coachee, and supplying necessary support (Devine et al., 2006). Goal attainment involved identifying desirable outcomes, creating specific goals, advancing motivation and building self-efficacy, identifying resources, establishing an action plan, evaluating progress, and considering feedback on behalf of the coachee (Grant et al., 2010).

### **How It Works**

At the start of the CASS CCP, CALS students were recruited through email, social media, and departmental outreach and matched with a CALS alum based on degrees, students' career aspirations, and alumni experiences. Additional recruitment occurred through LinkedIn and personal connections to ensure participating coaches aligned with student needs. One required training was provided to participants, which included CASS overview, expectations, and goal setting, while also allowing each pair to work in break out rooms. Additionally, three check-in emails were sent via email throughout the duration of the program. Important comments of the program were collected by participants voluntarily through the check-in opportunities. In addition, participants could take part in an exit interview, where the researcher asked questions regarding mentorship, coaching, and participation motivations. Following NC State Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were asked questions about their participation and CASS, in efforts to evaluate and improve the program for the future.

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

Preliminary data from this study encompassed personal statements and reflections collected through check-in surveys and exit interviews and showed that students have benefitted from their coach-coachee pairing. One student said, “My coach helped me to recognize skills I have as a person and how to apply those in the industry in the future.” Another student stated, “I believe [this program] has made a positive impact on my future as I have made countless industry connections.” Overall, responses from coachees indicated positive outcomes with the help of their alumni coach.

Based on responses in exit interviews, students reached their goals with the help of their alumni coach. Several students had the concept of long-term and short-term goals in mind when going through the SMART Goals Method. One student said, “We achieved our goal. I would say it’s half completed since last semester was fairly positive. So I think it’s going on a good trajectory.” Another student stated, “At the beginning of the program, my goal was to get a summer [...] 2024 internship, which I was able to achieve. Then my other more long-term goal was there's this thing in manufacturing called Lean six Sigma [to help optimize operations]. So working on that goal is a long-term goal as well.” Preliminary data from exit interviews confirmed the overarching goals of the CASS CCP, as coaches were able to effectively help students reach specific career goals.

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

Increased communication with departments is necessary for meeting the high demand of the number of students signing up for the program. Some NC State CALS’ departments have in-house mentor programs that start during students’ freshman year, followed by matching students with professionals in the industry for the remainder of college. The CASS CCP can partner with these departments to recruit upperclassmen from their departmental mentoring programs, where in return, the departments could offer alumni partners to participate as career coaches. Additionally, once students and alumni have signed up for the program, it would be beneficial to pursue outreach through email thanking them for their participation, reviewing expectations, and providing them with the opportunity to back out of the program in advance. Giving both students and alumni the opportunity to remove their participation early can prevent email “ghosting,” student/alumni communication conflicts, and ensure that everyone in the program is committed from the start.

#### **Costs & Resources Needed**

For CASS, a graduate assistant (GA) is needed to facilitate recruitment, matching, training, check-ins, and an end of year celebration, committing an average of 20 hours a week to this program. Additionally, a supervisor is available to coordinate the program during the summer months to successfully prepare the GA for each cohort. This supervisor can help run training sessions and match alumni and students for the program year. Currently, our GA is supervised by the Assistant Director of Alumni Engagement in CALS Academic Programs (AP), and is overseen by the Director of AP. Additionally, further support is needed in searching for space to hold one in-person training session at the beginning of the program. Specifically, it will be necessary for the supervisor to spearhead initial outreach and recruitment to ensure that participation numbers are adequate, as the GA holds a nine month contract. For summer support from the GA, a part-time position can be explored by the Director to address funding and time allocation.

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