Abstract - This pilot project integrated the Vanderbilt Engineering Alumni Council mentoring initiative in a technical communication course for all engineering majors. An opportunity for networking with alumni and learning about workforce communication was designed into a two-and-a-half-week report writing assignment. Working individually and in groups, 41 students interviewed 18 alumni and other professionals about workplace communication and reported their findings. Project components included an alumnus guest speaker and a post-project, alumni-sponsored luncheon attended by 27 students. Results showed that graduates spent a large portion of their work time on various written and oral communication tasks. Alumni and student questionnaire responses indicate that the project was beneficial and should be continued. Using an analytical five-point scale, students rated including a mentoring project next semester with a 4.1/5.0 while alumni rated it 4.6.

Index Terms - alumni mentoring, alumni networking, report writing, technical communication, workplace communication.

INTRODUCTION

Engineering educators have increasingly stressed the importance of bringing the "real world" into the classroom. Some have advocated ways to encourage student contact with alumni and other professionals, including mentoring programs [1]-[4]. This work-in-progress description updates a recently reported ongoing pilot project integrating the Vanderbilt Alumni Council (EAC) mentoring initiative with the technical communication course for all engineering majors, ES 210w [5]. Technical communication students interviewed engineering school graduates and others about written and oral communication tasks at work and reported their findings in a written report. The purpose was to increase students' knowledge about the importance of technical communication at work, to teach them report writing skills, and to provide an ongoing networking opportunity with alumni. This update describes the project, including student and alumni responses assessing the project's success.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Forty-one students, mostly juniors and seniors, in two classes participated along with eighteen alumni volunteers. Students in groups of three or four planned their strategy, devised interview questionnaires, wrote individual summary reports, and co-wrote a group report pooling their individually written summaries. Each student contacted by e-mail or telephone at least one assigned alumnus and one other professional of their choice in the student's area of interest. Some groups contacted more; for example, one group posted a Web questionnaire.

The project took place at the beginning of the semester and consisted of these parts: introduction of the project by an alumnus guest speaker; written description of the project and examples given to students; group planning and information gathering from alumni; individual summary report; group-written report; optional re-write; students' assessment; alumni-sponsored luncheon for students, professor, and administrators; and post-course alumni assessment.

PROJECT RESULTS

The project produced positive results. All groups completed the assignment, gathered sufficient information, and wrote acceptable reports. Five of the twelve student groups chose to rewrite their graded reports to earn half their missed points back.

Students' findings agreed with other surveys of engineers: technical communication is important at work, graduates spend a large amount of their work time on written and oral communication, and different types of communication tasks are required for different jobs [6]-[8]. Some groups received samples from alumni, including e-mail messages, specifications, a memo report, a research report, a letter, and presentation visuals. In addition, some alumni commented about resumes, interviews, and other job search issues. The alumni sponsored a post-project luncheon attended by 27 students. At the luncheon, a five-student panel answered the alumni's questions about the project.

EVALUATION BY STUDENTS

Students responded to an anonymous questionnaire using an analytical scale of 1 to 5 to assess the success of the assignment (Table I). They also wrote some comments. Results indicate that students considered the project to be successful, indicating that they learned useful information about the importance of technical communication in the workplace. They were pleased with the responsiveness of alumni, and some plan to contact these alumni again. Students also thought that the time allotted for the project, a little over two weeks, was sufficient. Additionally, they indicated that the pilot project should be continued the following semester.
Conclusions and Plans

Alumni and student ratings indicate that, in general, the project was a success. The most important benefit seems to be the interaction of the two groups and the sharing of information about communication at work and sometimes about the job search. The project is being continued in the subsequent semester.

### References


