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### CAREER FOCUS: A STUDENT AND BUSINESS LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how Career Focus is used to provide a valuable learning experience for both university students and high school students in a community. It also demonstrates how educational institutions can interface with businesses and their communities in developing the next generation of workers. Career Focus is a program of the university's Students in Free Enterprise chapter which brings together students and businesses in a way that both solves an important business problem and provides hands-on learning for students.

The activities of Career Focus involve university students and local business leaders in creating programs to encourage high school students, who are not planning to go on with higher education, to prepare themselves for the work place. The program entails working with high school students to develop their job seeking skills.

The greatest learning experience comes to the SIFE students who plan the programs and work with business leaders. They live the role of managers and human resource developers.

#### INTRODUCTION

There are many ways for teachers to provide experiential exercises as students progress through their academic careers. In the future, learning about businesses must go beyond just telling students what they need to know. Students need to become part of an experience in order to learn at a level where growth becomes meaningful. This paper reports on how the university's Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) chapter, working in coordination with area

businesses and high schools, developed activities which turned workplaces into extended classrooms where future workers learned to succeed.

#### CAREER FOCUS

Career Focus is a program designed by SIFE students which encourages area high schools to identify seniors and juniors who will not be going on with higher education. Classes are then presented by SIFE students, faculty and local business leaders which help the students to gain and practice job skills. The high school students have a chance to explore the benefits of starting to work immediately after high school or going on to college. Part of this entails learning about the economy and what options are available. The rest of the time is spent learning about various job search methods, how to apply for a job and evaluate a job offer, and what to expect in the early stages of a career.

#### SIFE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Although this program provides important learning experiences for high school students and valuable input and outreach mechanisms for area businesses, the major benefit is for the SIFE students. Students In Free Enterprise is a national, not-for-profit organization, supported primarily by business corporations, whose mission is to develop collegiate SIFE teams who benefit students and their local communities. As practiced at our university, SIFE provides activities whereby SIFE students plan, develop, implement and evaluate a variety of work and educational programs. In doing this, they have to go out into the community to meet with business

and educational leaders, give presentations to civic organizations and sell their ideas. As a result, they go far beyond traditional learning modalities. Rather than just preparing a classroom project which will receive a grade (which has little "real world" meaning), these students learn the importance of planning for all variables (to include funding, time constraints, and so forth) and the necessity of selling one's ideas in the marketplace. They receive feedback more valuable than any letter grade.

### **CAREER FOCUS AS A STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

Career Focus is a program which allows SIFE students to experience a number of real-world situations. At the beginning of each year they must determine the scope of that year's projects and what they hope to accomplish. Then they go out in ones or twos to contact and survey local businesses in order to determine what staffing problems they can help the businesses resolve. In the case reported here (from the 1996-1997 school year), the SIFE students found that local businesses were having problems with high school students not being prepared to enter the workplace. In order to help with this problem, the SIFE students developed a program where they and their business counterparts would visit local high schools to talk with students who were not planning to go on to college.

The experience gained encompasses far more than just a classroom project. The students must plan for an ongoing program, exhibit a high level of communication skills in meeting with business leaders and school authorities, work through problem-solving skills in helping businesses identify problems and acceptable solutions, and coordinate two or three month's worth of classroom visits by a variety of instructors. This is valuable experience which amplifies their coursework, but which isn't available in a typical management classroom.

### **THE INTERACTIVE SESSION**

Members of the panel included two faculty who have guided this project from its inception, the student leader responsible for carrying out the program, and the Vice President of Students In Free Enterprise who has provided strong support for such programs. They talked about the process of recruiting student volunteers and determining which businesses to survey, how feedback from local business leaders is turned into programs to solve their various problems, and what learning objectives were satisfied as the SIFE students faced a number of different situations. They also discussed the methods of evaluating student learning and how businesses were helped by these programs.

### **SUMMARY**

The ideas and processes taught in our classrooms gain meaning only as students actually experience success or failure in putting them into practice. Career Focus is a program which can be implemented at any university which is committed to students learning beyond the classroom. It is particularly important where the goal is to provide interface between student learning and integration with on-going business activities.