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# An Honors Alumni Mentor Program at Butler University

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BUTLER UNIVERSITY

## BACKGROUND: BUTLER UNIVERSITY AND THE BUTLER UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

Butler University is a comprehensive master's university of approximately 4,000 undergraduate students with five colleges: the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; the College of Education; the College of Business; the Jordan College of Fine Arts; and the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. The Butler University Honors Program is an interdisciplinary program open to undergraduates from all five colleges. Incoming students admitted to Butler who meet certain benchmark requirements (1320/30 or higher SAT/ACT or top five percent of graduating class) are invited to apply to our honors program. If students perform well in their first year at the university, the Butler Honors Program may invite them to join at the middle or end of the academic year. In addition, students may petition to join the program at any time provided they are able to complete its requirements prior to graduation.

The requirements of our honors program are: completion of four interdisciplinary honors courses; completion of a departmental honors course, an upper-level research course offered within the student's academic major; completion of a thesis proposal as part of a thesis-preparation course; participation in a designated number of cultural events—plays, readings or lectures by visiting writers, concerts, ethnic festivals, and the like; and completion of an honors thesis, which includes an oral presentation of the thesis project. While we have approximately ten percent of the overall student body participating in the honors program, the past several years have shown that only between five and seven percent of the graduating class is fully completing the program. An analysis of the attrition information from our program indicated that we lost most of our honors students after the four required honors courses, some time during the thesis preparation process. In addition, particular academic programs demonstrated a higher attrition level than others, majors we determined were “at risk” for non-completion of the honors thesis. This information provided us sufficient motivation to find methods to address the attrition rate.

## **BACKGROUND: THE OFFICE OF INTERNSHIP AND CAREER SERVICES**

The Office of Internship and Career Services at Butler University is a developmental support unit designed to help students explore, select, prepare for, and actively pursue satisfying careers. This unit is under the supervision of the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs (as opposed to being housed in Student Affairs) and retains seven full-time employees. Among the office's primary responsibilities are providing access to internship and career oriented information and offering opportunities to connect students with local employers.

Butler University has been awarded grants from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., to address Indiana's "brain drain" by increasing exposure to internship and employment opportunities with emphasis on employer development and student programming. Through these grants, development of partnerships with local employers, community organizations, and area alumni is essential to success and has been strengthened through the Office of Internship and Career Services. A portion of the original grant money was devoted to recruiting mentors for our students, encouraging their commitment to and involvement with Butler undergraduates. Local alumni were tapped as a key resource for this portion of the project.

### **THE GENESIS OF THE IDEA**

The alumni mentor portion of the Lilly grant, a small percentage of the initial funding, was not as successful as the Office of Internship and Career Services had envisioned. Coincidentally, a local alumna approached the grant director at an event and commented that she would like to find a way to give more time back to Butler. In addition, the alumna lamented that she wished she had completed her honors thesis. Why not pair this alumna with a current student to share that insight?

The grant director noted that a number of the area alumni mentor volunteers were honors graduates. Conversations with the honors director and coordinator produced a plan to tap the resources of the Office of Internship and Career Services, the Alumni Office, and the Office of Post-Graduate Studies in order to implement the Honors Alumni Mentor Program. This program was intended to fill the program gap, which emerged midway through the first Lilly grant, and would support honors students through the thesis process in order to complete the honors program. The mentor program has continued through the second Lilly grant with collaboration from the Office of Internship and Career Services.

### **THE PROGRAM**

Alumni mentor programs exist in many arenas, mostly to address a particular program goal. Reviews of the goals of mentor programs reveal a range from character development and leadership training to career preparation and skills

development (Schlee; Stewart & Knowles). In addition, general or specific goals of an alumni mentoring program include: a larger alumni engagement strategy (Jones); building relationships with local alumni (“Alumni Mentor Programs to Start”; King); using local alumni as examples in case studies (Finney & Pyke); providing networking benefits (Alsop); pairing alumni with current students in a course setting (Breslow); using alumni to mentor students in a particular major for professional growth (Vance & Bamford; Sword et al.); and using alumni as a support system for at-risk students (Phillips & Wile; Price & Balogh). The goals of our mentor program were twofold: first, increase the completion rate of student theses by providing a mentor who has “been there” to guide the student through the process as well as an independent sounding board for thesis research and project ideas; and second, connect students to a mentor who will help with professional exploration through networking, internships, or job-shadowing opportunities. Through these two goals, both the Butler Honors Program and the Office of Internship and Career Services could garner benefits from the Honors Alumni Mentor Program.

We envisioned that the mentors and mentees would each have distinct opportunities and would benefit mutually from their mentoring relationship. The mentors would gain:

- concrete relationships connecting them to the current culture of our campus;
- an opportunity to reflect on the role that honors and thesis research played in preparing them for a career and lifelong learning; and
- a chance to assist a current student or avoid mistakes that the mentor may have made.

The mentees would gain:

- another guide to help explore resources and opportunities at Butler;
- another advocate for post-graduate plans and goals;
- a supporter who has been through the Butler thesis process;
- a local resource for networking in the Indianapolis community; and
- an advisor to help them see “the larger picture.”

We modeled our mentor program on an existing physician mentor program for pre-med students already in existence at our university (Pryor & Samide). Similar to the pre-med mentor program, we felt that the two most critical academic years for honors students are the sophomore and junior year. During this time, students are evaluating their potential majors, weighing possible career paths, selecting probable thesis topics, and addressing many of the “big questions” that arise during the college years, so we felt that this was an optimal time to provide students the additional support of an alumni mentor.

In the early summer of 2007, we worked with our alumni office to access our honors alumni. We had just completed a project to code these alumni in

our database, and we were eager to find an initiative to use this new resource. We selected alumni who were at least ten years beyond graduation as we felt that a decade was enough time past post-graduate education to establish oneself in a career environment and to have developed a professional network in Indianapolis. We also selected alumni who lived in or around the Indianapolis area. We generated a list of two hundred alumni to whom we sent letters of invitation. In addition, we contacted the alumna who had made the comments at the Office of Internship and Career Services event. We also sent letters of invitation to all of the rising sophomores in the Butler Honors Program. From these solicitations, we garnered seven willing alumni (including the key alumna) who would take between two and three mentees each. We also identified seventeen students who wanted to participate in the program. We were very fortunate that the number of student participants and the number of spots the mentors offered exactly matched.

Late in the summer of 2007, the mentors and mentees completed surveys. The mentor surveys asked about education, career/life path, major, thesis subject, thesis advisor, mentor's preference for a male or female mentee (or no preference), hobbies, interests, and expectations for the mentorship. The student surveys asked about current major(s), mentee's preference for a male or female mentor (or no preference), hobbies, interests, and expectations for the mentorship. None of the student participants indicated a gender preference. Pairings of mentors with mentees were based on some common areas of interest (see Table 1). In addition, we deliberately paired students from our identified "at risk" majors with our alumna who wished she had finished her thesis.

In order to facilitate the introductions of mentors to their student mentees, we held two kickoff meetings early in the fall of 2007 to accommodate the schedules of our oversubscribed honors students and our oversubscribed alumni. At these kickoff meetings, we introduced the mentors to the mentees, explained the goals of the program to the participants, provided food and beverages, and provided all participants with a "goodie bag" containing an honors t-shirt and a copy of *Rules of the Red Rubber Ball* by Kevin Carroll. The kickoff meeting had a soft ending time to encourage the start of informal conversations that we hoped would provide a strong foundation for the continued mentor-mentee relationship.

During the academic year, mentors and mentees met in pairs or in groups. The participants also continued communication by email and phone. In order to facilitate face-to-face interactions, we sent reminders of campus events by email and provided tickets to on-campus events for program participants. Mentors and mentees met at least twice in the first two semesters of the program. All participants report that conversations have been substantial and rewarding.

**Table 1: Alumni-Student Pairings, Round 1**

<b>Alumnus</b>	<b>Butler Honors Student</b>
Male, BS 1980, Zoology Current Profession: Physician	Female, Pharmacy/Spanish Male, Biology (transfer student)
Female, BM 1974, MS 1978 Current Profession: Music and Art Elementary Teacher (newly retired)	Female, English Lit. Female, (transferred out)
Female, BA 1975, Speech & English Current Profession: Public Relations Director	Female, Journalism/English Lit. Male, Marketing
Male, BA 1995, Journalism Current Profession: Non-Profit CEO	Female, English Writ. Male, Internat. Studies & Spanish
Female, BA 1992, Computer Sci. Current Profession: Lawyer	Female, Arts Admin Female, Internat. Management Female, English Writ. & Spanish
Male, BS 1990, Zoology Current Profession: Healthcare Administrator	Female, Biology Female, Biology & Chemistry Female, Internat. Stud. & French
Male, BS 1973, Radio Television Speech Communication Current Profession: Media Consulting Entrepreneur	Female, Internat. Stud. Male, English Writ. & Philosophy Female, Theatre & English Writ.

## **OUTCOMES OF FIRST ROUND**

The majority of the seventeen inaugural-round student participants graduated this past May. Of these, nine completed the honors program and graduated. Three of the seventeen have not yet graduated; one is a pharmacy student (a six-year program at Butler) and well on her way to completing the program; and the other two have delayed graduation for health and family reasons. A fourth student transferred for financial reasons two years ago. That leaves four mentees who have graduated from Butler without completing the program.

These four students each had a unique reason for not completing our honors program. One mentee dropped the program at the start of her junior year in order to add a second major and focus on improving her course performance. A second student decided not to complete the honors program after taking a semester off to intern on Broadway. Upon her return, she decided her best professional move would be to continue auditioning and performing in various professional venues beyond Butler while completing her degree in arts administration, which she did very successfully.

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The other two students successfully navigated our thesis-proposal process but decided not to complete the thesis in their final academic year. The first of these students chose to be the president of his fraternity, which he felt was more in line with his long-term goals to be a politician. He has since commented that he has regrets about not completing the undergraduate thesis. His was one of the more successful mentoring relationships from this initial effort. The second student decided to declare a language major after studying abroad the second semester of her junior year and chose to devote her time to coursework in her major rather than a thesis.

Among the nine student mentees who completed an honors thesis, two are College of Business students, two creative thesis writers, and one a transfer student; these are categories in which we typically see a lower completion rate. We can probably attribute some of this success to the alumni mentor program.

Participant interactions were as varied as the participants themselves. Many of the student participants investigated potential thesis project ideas with their mentors. Mentors were key advocates for these students, helping their mentees to seek out on-campus experts and resources with which the students were unfamiliar. Students explored potential career pathways and asked tough questions about options available to them with their alumni mentors. In some cases, mentors shared how the honors program had given them the foundation they needed to meet future challenges.

There were some unanticipated positive outcomes from student participation in the alumni mentor program. First, the student participants were far more active in other honors activities. They attended more social events, took full advantage of honors resources, and were more aware of honors issues on campus. Second, student participants became very visible on campus, in their majors, in campus activities and groups, and in local community organizations. The student participants have become some of the most engaged honors students we have had in some time, embracing the full range of opportunities afforded to them in the honors program, the university as a whole, and the local Indianapolis community.

### CHALLENGES OF THE FIRST ROUND

The first round of our alumni mentor program did not go entirely as planned. Glitches in program design as well as mentor and student participant issues contributed to the program's not reaching its full potential. We believe that careful consideration of these setbacks could lead to greater success in the future.

When we designed the program, we assumed that we would be able to match a new set of alumni with a new set of student participants in the second year. However, we were unable to find a new batch of alumni mentors for 2008–09. We had not pursued the second group of mentors as aggressively as we should have, nor had we thought to hold back some of our alumni for the second year of the program. We have taken steps to address this flaw, as discussed later.

The numerous commitments of our alumni as well as our current honors students meant that scheduling times to meet was a challenge. In addition to the inevitable difficulties of juggling work, family, and extracurricular activities with the commitment mentors made to our honors students, one alumna delivered a child during the first year of the program. Also, some of our mentors did not take the lead in initiating conversations with our mentees.

Scheduling face-to-face meeting times with student participants was challenging as well, and sometimes it was impossible when students had taken the opportunity to study abroad or spend a semester off-campus during the two-year period of the mentor-mentee relationship—the kind of opportunity that many of the alumni had heartily encouraged for their mentees. In another case, a student left the university; we were unable to determine if the alumni mentor program had any impact on the student's departure.

Some of the interpersonal dynamics of the mentor-mentee relationships required very little help from us in order to move to meaningful conversations. However, the enthusiasm of the participants was not equal across all pairings, and we had a few less exuberant program members. In one case, the relationship simply did not work.

Comments we received after the first year of the program included:

"X's been thought-provoking and accessible beyond the scope of what I expected from the program. He's a great listener, sounding board, and provocateur of ideas. He's been accommodating, and I look forward to other meetings with him."

"We talked about taking classes that may or may not fit into our major and how that may benefit us in the future. We also talked about what information we learn in classes as opposed to what skills we actually used. For example, he talked with us about an English literature class that he took as a senior as a time-filler that really helped him research and write in his job. Also we talked about the biology dept. spring break research in Panama. I think I might try to go on it next year."

"Thank you for this opportunity! I've really had a great time hearing how the Honors program has been such a positive experience . . . made me excited for what is to come!"

"My mentor has really just been a great person to talk to—he's an adult, he survived college, he's survived the working world, and there's just something about hearing somebody say, 'I felt exactly the same way' or 'All your hard work really is worth it' that makes your day just ten million times brighter."

"I would say my conversations with my mentor have made me a little more confident when it comes to the whole idea of writing

for pay. In fact, last time I think he suggested that I do my best to right now start finding professional writing jobs of whatever level of meagerness just so that I'd be out there doing it already, getting that experience. The fact that his ability to write is basically the crux of what he does for a living was encouraging, because even though other advisor-type figures here at Butler have been telling me for awhile now that the ability to write well and persistently is an at least somewhat significant asset in terms of making money, it simply feels truer, more real when someone you are conversing with as if chums says so."

"I went through a stage sophomore year where I suddenly found it very important to take an active interest in the things I'm fascinated by, which for someone who grew up swaddled in the less engaging and basically stupefying aspects of television, videogames, and the internet, was of course pure revelation. X himself was very kind and engaging in response to my kind of ridiculous ramblings. His encouragement was important."

"We talk more about life than the honors program, but it's good discussion for both of us. I'm still planning on writing a thesis, even as a Y major. That's not his area of expertise, but as it turns out his wife was a Butler Y honors student, so I'll be getting together with her, too."

"I was really worried about continuing on with the honors program, and actually considered dropping it after my sophomore year. However, after I talked to my mentor and she told me about how much she regretted not writing her thesis and completing the honors program, I felt motivated to give it a try. My mentor inspired me and gave me the extra push I needed in order to find the necessary inner-confidence to stay in the program. I currently am enrolled in my departmental honors course and am very excited about the research topics I have been exploring."

Before this first group of participants graduated, we again gathered their feedback. Overall, most students had not had contact with their mentor in a year. However, five of the students believed their participation in the Alumni Mentoring Program was a significant factor in their completion of the honors program. Several explained that they simply did not have time to be in contact with their mentors given the intensity of finishing their undergraduate coursework, completing their thesis, and developing life plans for after graduation. Two noted that they did not feel the need to continue the relationship beyond successful submission of an honors thesis proposal since that was the purpose of the program as they understood it. Several students indicated that interest in pursuing the relationship waned once the student had made educational and

career decisions that were no longer in line with that of their mentor; this was especially the case for two of the students writing creative thesis, one of whom commented, "X was very friendly and offered to help if we needed anything, but I'm not sure he really knew how to help me. And, to be fair, I didn't really know what kind of help I needed." Finally, some students shared that they did not think they needed an alumni mentor in the final phase of thesis preparation given the availability of their faculty mentors. One such student wrote, "I feel like we have enough faculty members to use as mentors, and having an honors alumni mentor really wasn't that helpful." The students making these comments were all from academic programs in which students routinely complete undergraduate theses.

Two students responded that their mentoring relationship continued until graduation and that they planned to maintain contact in the future. One of these was a student who completed her thesis in a major where the completion rate for the undergraduate thesis has typically been low. She shared that she chose her thesis topic (the effect of caregiver status on career advancement among area lawyers) largely due to her relationship with her mentor (the female lawyer who regretted not completing her thesis and who also had her second child in 2008). One student participant who chose not to complete his thesis in order to become president of his fraternity had continued contact with his mentor beyond the duration of the program. He commented that he "appreciated having X's feedback when figuring out whether to take on the fraternity" leadership role. He added that he was fortunate to have stayed in touch with his mentor until graduation in order to talk about his choice, what he had learned, and how he might pursue research in the future.

Different students offered similar suggestions to make the program more efficient and a better match for their busy schedules. The students whose interests diverged from the paths that had served as the basis for their mentoring match preferred group event-based mentoring opportunities to one-on-one interactions left to the pair's initiative. Students suggested inviting all sophomores to one of several dinners with alumni mentors who share somewhat similar educational and career paths. The students could then pursue a one-on-one relationship if they felt it was a good match while the rest wouldn't feel guilty about not having time to meet with their mentor. One student wrote, "I think the key is to make it a one-time deal...I felt bad kind of neglecting some of X's emails, and though I appreciated the offer, it was hard to make time to meet multiple times, especially during the very-busy junior/senior years."

## **SECOND ROUND OF THE ALUMNI MENTOR PROGRAM**

In the fall of 2009, we paired a new group of alumni with students. In this round, we only have seven student participants paired with seven alumni mentors (see Table 2). We are a little concerned that the student interest in the alumni mentor program seems to have dropped off. However, with this group we

**Table 2: Alumni-Student Pairings, Round Two**

<b>Alumnus</b>	<b>Butler Honors Student</b>
Female, BS Speech, 1973, MBA/CBA; 2 years Law School Current Profession: Director Learning and Performance Support Services, Corporate Director/Business Owner	Female, International Studies/Spanish
Female, BA English 1977, JD 1980 Current Profession: Assistant General Council at Eli Lilly and Company	Female, Political Science, International Studies, pre-law Female, Political Science, English, pre-law
Male, BS Chemistry 1997, Dual MS degrees Discovery and Process Chemistry, Clinical Trial Management Current Profession: Clinical Project Manager Eli Lilly and Company	Male, Biology, pre-med
Female, BA Music Education 1999 Current Profession: Band Director and General Music Teacher	Male, Actuarial Science, but passionate about music
Male, BS Philosophy 1968, JD 1972 Current Profession: Lawyer	Male, Marketing, pre-law
Female, BS Chemistry 1995, MS Organic Chemistry Current Profession: Research Scientist Eli Lilly and Company	Male, Science, Technology and Society and LAS Economics

were able to pair individuals, which should make for the ideal mentor-to-mentee ratio.

We were unable to arrange a suitable kickoff meeting, so we were forced to make the pairings and hold the reception later in the semester. We offered several sets of tickets to on-campus events to the participants, and we sponsored a coffee reception prior to Madeline Albright's lecture on campus. We have continued to use email as the primary source of communication from the honors office to participants. Feedback that we have received from this round of students has also been positive overall. While some students have had monthly contact with their mentors and others have met once a semester, most note that their mentoring relationship provides insight into the bigger picture of making a life and a living beyond the daily grind of their undergraduate work; this is true even if the mentee does not plan to follow in his or her mentor's career footsteps. The students have appreciated learning more about what it was like to be a Butler undergraduate when their mentors were students, how

graduate studies intertwined with their careers, and how they overcame particular hurdles in their personal and professional paths.

## CONCLUSIONS

Having completed our third year of the program, we feel that the honors alumni mentor experiment is working. Even though the student participants completed the honors program at about the same rate as honors students who did not have mentors, students from our at-risk professional programs (business and pharmacy) had a higher completion rate. In addition, the students who did not complete their thesis were well aware that they were making a difficult decision and wrestled with it. Our alumni participants have valued their experience in the program and have all noted that they enjoyed connecting with current Butler students. Many of them serve on our alumni advisory board, and they have generated several ideas for continued alumni involvement with the Butler University Honors Program.

The current Lilly grant runs through 2012. The results are compelling enough for us to supplement the existing budget to support this program fully once the grant is complete. The cost of the program is modest (tickets to events, small gifts for the alumni, beverages for receptions) and well worth the small portion of our budget required to support it. In the event that interest grows, we will seek new funds to sustain this valuable program in permanently.

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