
Lessons learned from 2017 pilot mentorship program at School of Business Medgar Evers College

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Abstract

The paper will present a summary of the original pilot commissioned by the Medgar Evers College School of Business. The scope of work included selecting and screening industry mentors to match with an identified pool of student candidates. The time period of the pilot was once semester. During the pilot period assigned students and mentors were assigned to engage in activity that would promote the professional and personal growth of the students in a diverse group of industry fields.

While the pilot study results indicated students were sufficiently academically prepared for their chosen fields, it also indicated that they lacked several soft skills necessary for business readiness and success. The final outcome was the recommendation of a hard-to- soft skills bridge to enhance career readiness and improve employment success.

Introduction

The School of Business at Medgar Evers College, an accredited four-year college at the City of New York (CUNY), launched a pilot mentorship program in 2017. The program goals included the following: 1) to offer high-potential business students an opportunity to work individually with mentors from within the business community over a six-month period to accelerate their real-life business education, and 2) to widen the perspective of students who possessing limited prior exposure to the business community. The pilot program revealed potential opportunities for Medgar Evers business students, as well as "business readiness" limitations of these otherwise academically prepared students.

The pilot program

Business school Dean, Dr. Jo-Ann Rolle, engaged Wayne Brown, co-founder of The Walker Group and a veteran within the traditional banking sector and an emerging leader within the FinTech sector, and Kathy Hipple, co-founder of Noosphere Marketing and Finance professor at Bard's MBA in Sustainability, and Wall Street veteran, to launch the program. Dean Rolle identified an initial cohort of ten students from the School of Business to participate in the six-month program.

Hipple and Brown interviewed each member of the initial cohort during two 30-minute interview sessions. They sought to identify core competencies and business goals, including entrepreneurial interests, when applicable. Personal dreams and interests were also explored. Brown and Hipple tapped their networks for potential mentors with a combined network of decades of experience in finance, banking, FinTech, marketing and technology. They discovered a wide audience eager and willing to work with the Medgar Evers students.

They then explored which potential high-powered mentors would be most suitable for each mentee. They interviewed numerous potential mentees, explaining the expectations for the

mentorship program which included the following: Two in-person or virtual meetings per month, over a six-month period.

Ten pairs were formed, and many seemed to provide ideal learning opportunities for the mentees. For example, a student interested in a career in high tech who'd written a business-plan winning app, was paired with a Silicon Valley executive whose client's include Facebook. And a student eager to launch a financial literacy organization aimed at New York City high school students was paired with the Executive Director of a Brooklyn-based non-profit that offers financial literacy programs for adults.

Mentors and mentees were introduced to each other, and asked to follow up with Brown and Hipple with brief emails monthly, and to attend optional monthly sessions held at Medgar Evers. This arrangement was intended to provide the mentees valuable real life experience from industry leaders to form the basis to build the foundation of framework moving forward.

Students Limited by Lack of "Business Readiness"

As the program progressed, it appeared that student-mentees were failing to take full advantage of the mentorship opportunities presented. Their written and oral communication skills hindered their ability and willingness to make continued contact with their mentors. They appeared unable to keep scheduled phone/Skype appointments with their mentors. Their email addresses were not professional, with many using friends' email address or email names that bore little resemblance to their actual names. Their LinkedIn profiles had been neglected.

Business Readiness Needed

The program identified business readiness as a core competency students need. The students were unable to take full advantage of the mentorship opportunity because they lacked basic business skills, which some have called business etiquette. It appears the students are well prepared academically, but their business readiness does not yet match their academic skillset. (Hipple attended a number of classes within the business school, including Finance and Marketing classes, and found the students to be highly engaged and motivated, and performing well academically. Professors were of high caliber, and the teaching was rigorous.)

We recommend launching a program that bridges the gap between academic education and business-specific soft skills, called business readiness in this abstract, to allow Medgar Evers students to succeed in the business community.
