

ACE Mentor Program

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Revised December 2006

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SUMMARY

The ACE Mentor Program is a nine-month curriculum that introduces high school students to the fundamentals of architecture, construction, and engineering. HNTB Architecture joined other firms in forming an ACE chapter in Washington, D.C. The chapter faced a few challenges, including the effort to accommodate the varying levels of student interest in the program. In the end, this chapter produced a number of students that entered university architecture programs and fostered valuable cross-communication between professionals in the architecture, construction, and engineering fields.

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The ACE (Architecture, Construction, Engineering) Mentor Program began in New York City in 1994. Design and construction firms working together teach high school students what it is like to work in each of their disciplines. In 1995 the firm principals who founded ACE also established a scholarship fund to help outstanding graduates of the ACE program with their college tuition in architecture, engineering, and construction degree programs.

Several years ago, Charles H. Thornton, PhD, Hon. AIA, of Thornton-Tomasetti Engineers, one of the cofounders, recruited HNTB Architecture and other firms to form an ACE chapter in Washington, D.C. Thornton has a passion for drawing bright high school students into the building professions. HNTB decided to participate as a team to make the time commitment more manageable, and we recruited young architects on our staff as teachers.

A TAILORED CURRICULUM

We developed a nine-month curriculum of two-hour weekly sessions to correspond with the school year schedule. Each week, a different topic is featured. Our program tries to impart to students the reality of professional life as an architect. In a session, we



Photo by Neil Sandler, National Institute of Building Sciences

might look at six different projects or show a time-lapse design and construction video.

Sessions are held in different offices around the city. Many are held at HNTB's office, which is close to mass transit and convenient for the students. Some sessions are held at structural and mechanical engineers' offices and at construction sites.

THE CHALLENGES

One of the challenges of the program is that only a portion of the students are primarily interested in architecture, as opposed to construction or engineering. We found it important to diversify the agenda to accommodate the range of student interests. We think we are successful in conveying a broad spectrum of information and knowledge that could have been acquired in a classroom.

A significant challenge was figuring out how to instill in the students a desire to learn. This difficulty was compounded by their varying levels of interest and the fact that the same students did not attend each week.

We had expected the scholarships to be a powerful incentive. Scholarships of \$2,000 or \$3,000 are awarded at the end of the year to the worthiest students. For example, in May 2002 five students in the D.C. ACE chapter received scholarships. We

were surprised, though, that the students didn't vie vigorously for the scholarships.

THE REWARDS

ACE mentors in other cities have shared great success stories. Some former students have returned to their firms as summer interns during college, and a few ACE program alumni eventually completed their collegiate studies and returned as full-time employees of their mentor firms.

In the D.C. chapter, a number of ACE students have successfully entered university architecture programs. Two brothers from one family, both ACE scholarship recipients, are now studying architecture at the Catholic University of America and the University of Maryland.

“BONUS” BENEFITS

Participating in the ACE program as a mentor puts architects in contact with other professionals in the industry, including constructors, engineers, and real estate developers. We have formed business relationships with two construction firms we met in the program, and these have evolved into working partnerships on several building projects.

Even after 20-plus years in the business, we continue to learn a few things during these seminars, particularly when we invite our engineers to give conceptual overviews of mechanical systems or structures. The broad-based curriculum, which spans the entire construction industry, fosters cross-communication among architects, engineers, and constructors, from which we all derive fresh insight.

ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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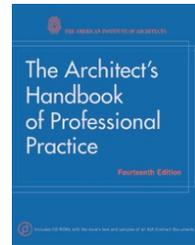
The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 01.05.06 The Architecture in the School Program Helps to Create the Ideal Client
- 01.05.01 The Boyer Report: Building Community Through Education
- 01.05.02 The Boyer Report: Seven Principles for Action

For More Information on This Topic

See also “Public Service and Community Involvement”, by William M. Polk, FAIA in *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 7, page 172.

See also the 14th edition of the *Handbook*, which can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by email at bookstore@aia.org.



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