Opening Doors to Corporate America

WCC’s Workplace Culture Coaching Program teams mentors with students for an introduction to the business world.

By Barbara Moroch

Benjamin Franklin once said: “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” Involving students is just what Westchester Community College seeks to do through its Workplace Culture Coaching Program.

Designed as a complement to the traditional learning experience, the program takes business students outside the classroom for an introduction to the workplace through a mentoring relationship with a corporate professional.

Corporate Mentoring has been part of the fabric of Westchester Community College since 1997, originally made possible by a Gender Equity Grant to help female students, and then expanded three years ago by additional funding to include male students.

In an economic environment where many recent graduates are struggling to find jobs, the Workplace Culture Coaching Program provides students of economically and culturally diverse backgrounds an invaluable introduction to today’s business world, helping them to develop professional behavior and envision realistic goals. In other words, to give them a “leg up.”

Says Adele Shansky, Director of Volunteer Services: “The overwhelming majority of the students have never been exposed to a corporate environment before. Giving them a role model and exposure helps propel them forward and gives them a vision of what they can do. They are so much more confident at the end of the program than they were when we first interviewed them.”

Indeed, confidence building is key in a program such as this. One former student, Marian Chang, now Associate Banker, VP at Citi Private Bank says: “Everything this program introduced to me, from an amazing corporate mentor to the student workshops, helped me grow internally and gain confidence. My mentor was instrumental in pushing me hard at the beginning of my career, with a great supportive attitude, then keeping me grounded over the years as I navigated the banking world on my own.”

Workplace Culture Coaching is structured as a mini-course consisting of two blended parts. Training Seminars that take place on campus address professional skills, including Business Etiquette, Communications Styles, Personal Branding, Career Planning and Goal Setting. Once prepared, the students visit their Corporate Mentors on-site over the spring semester where they have the opportunity to tour the workplace, understand corporate structure, attend a professional meeting, explore career options, and learn how things get done—whether their next step is the business world or a four-year university.

David Ramos, another graduate of the program, says: “I am currently at Cornell University studying in the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management with a Finance Concentration. As soon as I entered into the Ivy League competitive atmosphere, I immediately applied my newly developed skills from the mentoring program. I first applied to the most prestigious Investing Club at Cornell (MICC), nailed the entry interview and got in. I will apply the skills that I’ve obtained from the program to my future corporate interviews and professional business endeavors.”

On the flip side, the program strives to make the corporate mentor’s commitment easily manageable for today’s busy professional, and Westchester’s leading corporations have been steady participants in the program. This year’s volunteer mentors represent managers of Chase Media, Combe Products, Cuddy & Feder LLP, C.W. Brown, Eileen Fisher, Ernst & Young, Heraeus Inc., Hudson Valley Bank, MasterCard, MBIA, M&T Bank, New York Power Authority, Oppenheimer & Co., PepsiCo, Regeneron, and Signworks.

Lisa Thomas, a media executive with Chase Media Group, has been a mentor in the program for 10 years. Over that time, her coaching style has changed to keep up with the dynamics of her industry. “Companies need to understand new products to stay ahead of the times while embracing new technology. In today’s industry the conversations are much broader; to stay competitive companies need to adapt. My job as a mentor is to guide the mentee on how to successfully understand and navigate obstacles in a rapidly changing business environment.”
The year was 1997 and a small group of faculty members, under the guidance of Professor Mary Ellen LeClair and Professor Joyce Belton, decided that it was a good idea to begin a mentoring program for WCC students. They felt that this type of ongoing personal relationship would offer our students continuing guidance and support as well as a “point person” to help them adjust to college life. They named the endeavor The Faculty/Student Mentoring Program. By the early 2000’s there were a constant number of mentor and mentee pairings, approximately 35 to 45 in a given Academic Year.

In 2006, the Faculty/Student Mentoring Program became part of the College’s Volunteer Services Office and Paula Dambroff took its helm. The program’s name was changed to Connections. Qualified staff joined the faculty as mentors. The program began to evolve, grow, and develop. In fact there are now well over 100 faculty and staff mentors who volunteer to work with interested students.

In 2010 another twist took place. There was an interest in setting up significant scholarships that would require a mentoring component. Thus, seven Mary Wallach Scholars were paired with Connections mentors and were required to meet with them at least once a month. The program was an immediate success with the mentees reporting that their mentor support helped them both academically and personally. Some of the students met with their mentors the required once a month, but others met more frequently, finding the experience invaluable. In fact, the endeavor was deemed such a success that additional “mentoring” scholarships have been added including the Phillips and Swope initiatives.

Mentoring has become the buzz word of this generation and it is alive and thriving at WCC.

Thanks to our faculty and staff who are volunteers, we are able to help those students who want the support of a mentor. Our Connections mentors add to the generosity of spirit that drives the entire Volunteer Services Office. We thank them for their time and commitment.