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Engaging Practitioners in the Education Process

Borrowing from the official description of the special teaching panel, this paper is based on the premise that “the ground has to be paved for communication between academia and non-university experts and practitioners from the state, industry and non-governmental organizations.” My primary argument is that building and using relationships between academics and non-university experts is a critical element for (1) effectively reaching and teaching students (2) strengthening faculty expertise in their own disciplines and in related disciplines and (3) developing an academically solid interdisciplinary educational program.

This first section of this paper will begin with my own experiences as professor for four years in a program centered on the concept of *experiential learning*. In this program, students earn credit for participating in the three-day per week seminar (including guest speakers and off-campus visits to organizations) and for a two-day per week internship at a relevant institution. The course also includes a three-week overseas component (to South Africa or Brazil).

While most university programs are not set up in a way that such a program could be implemented, the second section of the paper presents a number of different methods and approaches that could be used to foster linkages with non-university experts and stakeholders. Such methods include adding off-campus visits to relevant organizations, inviting additional guest speakers to class, using teleconferencing technology for classroom dialogue with organizations internationally, and providing assignments that require students to communicate with or meet with practitioners.

The third and final section of the paper will discuss how these approaches to connecting the academic setting with practitioners and stakeholders enhance teaching effectiveness, strengthen and broaden faculty areas of expertise, and foster a truly interdisciplinary program (without requiring professors to teach outside their own areas of expertise).