Members of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) Student Chapter at the University of Houston are getting ahead on campus, in their communities and in their careers.

STUDENT-TO-INDUSTRY CAREER CONNECTIONS

ABC STUDENT CHAPTERS PROVIDE NETWORKING AND MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

BY LAUREN PINCH
construction students enrolled at technical colleges and university programs are some of most highly motivated job candidates out there. They’re catching the attention of local contractors looking for fresh talent, and they’re already making a name for themselves in their field—getting paid to work on big projects while balancing full course loads of estimating, programming and management classes.

Not only are construction management (CM) students making connections with leading contractors, but they’re also passing the torch to local high school students by demonstrating the value of pursuing an early career path in the industry.

Jared Nash, a senior CM student at the University of Houston, is a prime example. He grew up with the industry—his father was a technician and his grandfather was an engineer—but it was mentorship from his professors, peers and construction employers that got him locked into his career path. Today, he is a full-time contract administrator for Fluor, working on large-scale oil and gas projects such as the $2.5 billion ethane cracker unit for Chevron Phillips Chemical Company under construction in Baytown, Texas.

In the evenings, Nash attends classes, and he serves as president of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) Student Chapter at the university. Nash had worked part time in residential construction performing quality assurance, and then in civil construction as a field engineer on road projects such as Houston's METRORail project, before coming into contact with leaders at Fluor at an ABC-sponsored event last summer. Impressed by his experience and confidence, he was quickly offered a job.

Nash says he devotes hours of his time to running the student chapter’s career mentorship programs and charity events because without them, he wouldn’t be in the great position he’s in today.

“This is a tremendous growth opportunity for me. Our students look at Fluor as one of the biggest and the best, and to be able to work with them is almost a dream,” he says. “I attribute my position to the mentorship I’ve received through ABC, and I want to provide that construction knowledge to my peers.”

Nash is not the only student to be working for a major construction company before receiving his degree. In many CM programs nationwide, especially those with strong student-to-industry collaboration, undergrads often have a chance to connect with professionals who are eager to hire, whether through site visits or campus recruitment events.

For experienced construction employers, this is an ideal situation: They gain young talent and fill a potential skills and knowledge void, all while extending opportunities they might not have had at a younger age.

David Stayshich, construction engineering department manager at Fluor, hires local students to fill construction engineering positions throughout the company.

“When I began my career with Fluor, we did not have a mentoring program,” he says. “We were basically given an assignment and learned by doing, observing and listening. Over the years, we have found that helping develop future managers early in their careers pays dividends later on. It gives the new grads opportunities to learn from their mentors and be guided by them to help them focus on the important aspects of their jobs.”

“It’s not uncommon for students in construction management and engineering to start in a two- or four-year program, drop out or reduce their course hours, work full time for a few years, and then enroll back in the same school with some project experience under their belts. At the University of Houston, the average CM student is about 27 years old, with approximately 60 percent of students working in their field part time and 40 percent working full time while taking evening classes.

Stephen Roca, currently a CM student at Florida International University’s (FIU) OHL School of Construction in Miami, first enrolled in 2004 as a business management student with a focus on marketing. He took a six-year break from his studies to gain real-world experience, working in the health care industry, as well as serving in marketing and public relations roles. “It was hard for me to manage a full course program, plus working 50 to 60 hours,” he says.

As the effects of the recession started reducing his job opportunities, Roca decided to re-enroll as a CM student in 2011. He took on the role of president of FIU’s ABC Student Chapter in 2012, and he will graduate this fall with a bachelor’s degree. In the meantime, he works for Skanska as an assistant project
engineer, currently learning about erosion control and safety management on the job.

“At Skanska, I do a little of everything; they’re giving me that opportunity. I feel so thankful because it’s such a big company,” Roca says.

PASSING THE TORCH

Gricel Muñoz, a student at Montgomery College in Rockville, Md., and president of its ABC Metro Washington Student Construction Association, has a summer internship lined up with James G. Davis Construction, Rockville, Md., and will graduate in December. She began on her career trajectory early. While attending Thomas Edison High School of Technology in Silver Spring, Md., she applied for a scholarship through a Montgomery County program that allows students to begin taking two semesters of college construction courses during their senior year, giving them a head start on their associate or bachelor’s degree.

“These students not only go to an academic high school, they also go to a technical college during their senior year,” Muñoz explains. “We try to get them involved in our student chapter so they can start seeing if they want to continue their education in CM.”

After taking Methods and Materials and Plan Reading courses while they’re seniors, several scholarship students go on to enroll in the college as CM majors, taking courses such as Computers in Construction, Software for Estimating, and Documentation for Projects, and then culminate their education with a field operations project requiring in-depth analysis, a binder presentation and an oral presentation for fellow students.

Having been through the program herself, Muñoz is the perfect mentor for high schoolers who want to know what a construction career has to offer. “I’m setting the example of the route we want them to take. When I share my experience, I show them all the doors that are open to them. I feel like they connect with me a little more than a faculty member or a professor telling them about a career,” she says.

Fellow student chapter member James Huang will intern with Whiting-Turner this summer. Recently, he helped arrange a high school tour of a Whiting-Turner jobsite, Holy Cross Germantown Hospital, where he knows the project superintendent. Students had a chance to see operating and patient rooms, plus the CEU building and garage foundation under construction.

“The students had a lot of positive things to say and they were very motivated afterward,” Huang says.

At the University of Houston, Nash became involved in mentoring high school students through a relationship with the ACE Mentor Program. He believes it’s essential to clear up false perceptions of the industry while younger people are still impressionable.

“Instead of having students waste their time going into something they might not like later, I try to give them perspective. There are a lot of misconceptions of what construction is and what it means to be a professional in the construction industry,” Nash says. “I tell students there are office as well as field jobs. You’re not necessarily going to be out there in the field with a hammer.”

Plus, he wants to help students understand the difference between an engineering path and a construction path.

“A lot of students that don’t have a strong math and science background are thinking they’ll go into engineering. But it’s really hard for a person with only a pre-calculus understanding to graduate on time with an engineering degree. We want to show them, if you’re interested in engineering, and if you’re also interested in business, then construction management or construction science programs will integrate these two aspects.

“The fact of the matter is, there is a drastic percentage of students who don’t even get employed in the field they studied in. And that’s not the case with CM. If you go into CM, you will land a CM job. I’m a firm believer of that, and it shows in how our students place after finishing the program,” Nash says.

(Continued on page 32)
WHY MENTORING MATTERS

Dr. Jonathan U. Dougherty, director of the Corporate Knowledge Center (CKC) at James G. Davis Construction Corporation, Rockville, Md., has been a college mentor since his days teaching sophomores and seniors in The Pennsylvania State University’s Department of Architectural Engineering (AE). That experience provided the foundation for mentoring young professionals, as students would come to him for advice on anything from class scheduling to career planning.

Currently, Dougherty serves as a guest speaker and advisor for Montgomery College’s Student Construction Association, which was named Associated Builders and Contractors’ 2014 Student Chapter of the Year. He also has worked on committees to create mentoring programs in Penn State’s AE Department and at the Penn State Wilkes-Barre Campus.

Q: How is mentoring college students incorporated into your job at DAVIS?
My experiences in academia were a natural transition to my role in creating and directing the CKC, which is essentially DAVIS’ corporate university. I have made mentoring a priority in my job throughout my eight-year tenure.

During my academic career, I was heavily involved in planning and executing an annual career fair for engineering students, and I found that all too often, companies try to swoop in to find as many qualified candidates as they can, and then leave quickly, not to be seen again until the next career event. When I joined DAVIS, I wanted our firm to be different and started the company’s University Partnership Program to collaborate with universities where we actively recruit. This program has been instrumental in attracting high-quality summer interns and full-time candidates to our firm.

As part of our University Partnership Program and our robust summer internship program, we are mentoring the future of our profession, and it brings a great level of personal satisfaction that we are directly impacting construction students’ lives and careers.

Q: What makes for a good mentoring relationship?
During the Penn State Wilkes-Barre mentoring program, I was paired with a student majoring in administration of justice (AOJ), not an engineering or construction student. While I think there was some apprehension about the compatibility of pairing a construction alum and an AOJ student, our mentoring relationship was very productive, and thanks to my network, I was able to help the student secure an internship with a local K-9 police unit in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The moral of the story here is that what appears to be a mismatch can actually turn into a great mentoring relationship if both parties go into the experience with an open mind and an understanding that we have more in common than just our college majors.

Mentorship at DAVIS extends beyond college students, and is an integral part of on-the-job learning and the growth of our employees. We have even seen success in reverse mentoring, where our longtime employees mentor young professionals on construction means and methods, while our young professionals mentor on topics related to technology. Mentoring excels when a mutually beneficial relationship is established and appreciated.

Q: What programs do you have planned to fill the industry’s existing knowledge and experience gap?
I joined DAVIS in 2005 to create and lead our CKC with an emphasis on professional development and lifelong learning. This is accomplished in a variety of ways, including instructor-led courses in our onsite classroom, DAVIS eCourses, external seminars and webinars, conference attendance, our intranet-based resource center and our CKC library.

In 2013, the CKC managed 224 educational events for our employees—ranging from an in-house OSHA 30-hour program and two robust programs for teaching virtual construction to sustainability education and professional aptitude development. The vision for the CKC is to maximize the creation, discovery and dissemination of knowledge and experience, under the mantra, “Learning: The DAVIS Way.” The knowledge and experience represented in DAVIS’ history and the loyalty of DAVIS employees are sustainable sources of our company’s competitive advantage.

Q: Why should other companies get involved with groups such as the ABC student chapters?
Theodore Roosevelt said it best: “Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” DAVIS has found great success and hired phenomenal young professionals from our active involvement with student groups and mentoring programs. Working with these groups and construction students, in general, is indeed “work worth doing” and the results of your efforts and mentoring the future of the construction profession will leave a lasting impact on your organization.

—Lauren Pinch
**BRUSH UP THAT RÉSUMÉ**

Construction management (CM) grads are in high demand again as the economy regains momentum. Still, every job candidate needs a way to stand out from the crowd. The tried-and-true résumé remains a key tool for getting hired.

In April, the University of Houston’s CM program hosted a résumé writing workshop and mock interviews with Cajun Constructors, Baton Rouge, La., following the success of its past student-industry partnerships.

“It’s all about paying it forward. As a former two-time intern and recent graduate, class of 2013, I recognize the challenges that many current students are facing,” says Caitlin Schesser, administrative assistant for Cajun, who works one on one with undergrads as a mentor. Cajun Constructors is one of the few industrial construction companies that vigorously hires interns; traditionally, on-the-job opportunities are reserved for residential or commercial contractors.

“Employers want graduates with experience outside of the classroom, and most of those opportunities are presented in the form of internships. But in order to take that first step of acquiring an internship, students need to have the correct tools to market themselves—a well-written résumé and interview techniques,” Schesser says.

Jared Nash, Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) Student Chapter president at the University of Houston, also participated as a workshop mentor.

“I try to give advice about what the companies are looking for in a candidate and get their mind around the high-level aspects. When we brought in Cajun, they provided a much more detailed evaluation of résumés and the things that they’ve seen from students—good and bad,” he says.

Schesser says the majority of Cajun’s full-time employees are former interns who came up through the ranks by way of the company’s mentorship program. “In order to grow and evolve as a company, Cajun must train the up-and-coming generation of employees. The goal is to find a ‘best fit’ for both Cajun and the employee, where he or she can thrive and continue to learn.”

—Lauren Pinch

**PEER-TO-PERSON MOTIVATION**

In addition to mentoring high schoolers, these student chapter leaders dedicate time to inspiring their peers.

For Roca, that means growing the ABC Student Chapter’s profile at FIU, as the group is somewhat new on campus. He took on the leadership role with the encouragement of a professor. Now, the chapter has seven executive board members.

“The whole idea is to transition young students and have the older members mentor them,” Roca says. “It’s still a process. We had to start from scratch, find new members, do branding and marketing around the school, and send out email blasts. At the same time, I didn’t want to bring in people who weren’t committed. It took us a while to get the right people.

“I found a vice president who is an extraordinary leader. He thanked me for giving him the opportunity, and I said, ‘I’m just passing on the torch from the opportunity given to me,’” Roca says.

Nash finds the same is true at the University of Houston: Peer-to-peer mentorship is just as important as cross-generational mentorship.

“A lot of people are born into this job, and get into the business because they joined their father's company,” Nash says. “But for as many students who have had that opportunity, there are just as many students who haven’t.”

Nash goes out of his way to approach undergraduate students who may be more comfortable talking with him than a busy department chair. “It’s a little easier as an upperclassman to engage with a new student who looks uncomfortable. A casual conversation can be a chance to mention a mentorship opportunity or to help them get a job,” he says.

At Montgomery College, the Student Construction Association has nearly doubled in size in the past year, with six officers and nearly 40 members. Recently, it was awarded the designation of ABC’s Student Chapter of the Year.

“We’ve become a very well-organized student chapter, and that is because of our team efforts and the fact that we all work together,” Muñoz says. “We’ve gotten really good feedback from our peers about our leadership and about our ability to perform as an organization, and I think now we’ve set an example for all of our classmates.

**ADVICE FROM INDUSTRY VETERANS**

Huang says he got involved in the Montgomery College student chapter program as a way to take advantage of his professors’ years of construction industry experience.

“To see how passionate and motivated they are, and
seeing the students be motivated too, really brings attention to the rewards I’m pursuing in my career,” he says.

Vincent Villavicencio, project manager for PCC Construction Components, Inc., Gaithersburg, Md., graduated from Montgomery College in 2010. For the past two years, he has served as chairman of the ABC Metro Washington Chapter’s Student Chapter Committee, mentoring students like Muñoz and Huang.

“I have been able to guide our local college students through their educational careers and help them bridge from the classrooms to the construction industry,” Villavicencio says.

Through the committee, he has participated in guest speaking events, arranged site visits, provided scholarships and opportunities to attend ABC networking events, and made himself available to answer any questions from students. In addition to Montgomery College, the ABC Metro Washington Chapter works with students at Prince George’s Community College, University of Maryland College Park, University of Maryland Eastern Shore (Shady Grove Satellite Campus), Howard University and Catholic University.

“I highly recommend all other companies to get involved with student groups,” Villavicencio says. “Our students are eager to learn and make the connection with the construction industry. We have so many great talents within our local student chapters, many of whom will be our future leaders and who are searching for opportunities.

“We want to make sure that our students receive as much exposure to the construction industry before they graduate, and we can achieve that by providing knowledge and experience,” he says.

Stayshich of Fluor also has served as a guest speaker for the student chapter program, and it has allowed him to make genuine connections with potential employees, whether he hires them himself or they go to work for another firm.

“Students are eager to hear about real-life experiences from construction professionals. They don’t necessarily want to hear ‘war stories,’ but want to know what people in the industry go through in developing their careers,” he says.

“Students today are inundated with tons of information. They need to know how to separate the wheat from the chaff and value the information that is worth keeping.”

Lauren Pinch is a writer for Construction Executive. For more information, email pinch@abc.org.

Opportunities to Get Involved

This fall, construction management students have two chances to show contractors what they’re made of.

ABC Construction Management Competition: This annual event, sponsored by the Trimmer Construction Education Foundation, features teams of four college students testing their project management, estimating, safety, quality control and presentation skills. All teams must be from an ABC Student Chapter in good standing. Intent to compete forms are due Aug. 29 and the competition will be held Nov. 7-11 during the ABC Institute for Leadership and Professional Development in Miami.

ABC Construction Management Career Fair: On Nov. 11, during the ABC Institute for Leadership and Professional Development in Miami, qualified construction management students interested in internships and full-time employment will be on hand to interview exclusively with ABC member companies. Participating companies can maximize their recruiting dollars by receiving access to résumés from students from leading schools across the country, as well as recognition on www.abc.org and in the conference program.

For more information, email Kirsten Krauer at krauer@abc.org or visit www.abc.org/educationtraining/abcstudentchapters.