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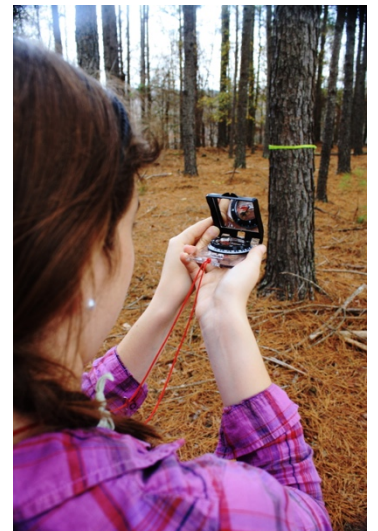
Alumni Compass Project

Overview

The University of Georgia's alumni call to action can be summarized as "Connect, Hire, Give." With that in mind, the Alumni Compass Project was created as a tool to connect our alumni with the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, provide an opportunity to hire our students and graduates, and encourage alumni to give to support the school. Through this program, alumni support students as they journey through their academic program and help them navigate through professional networking opportunities. These volunteers serve as a compass for current students, while engaging with the school in a concrete and meaningful way.

"The Warnell Alumni Compass Project is a program that connects current students with alumni in a similar field of the student's intended major. The alumni (mentor) provides encouragement, guidance, advice, and support as the student (mentee) completes their coursework in the Warnell School. This project benefits both mentees and mentors. Mentors stay connected to the school and it helps improve their leadership and communication skills. I've been involved in this project for several years and connected with quite a few students. I've enjoyed learning their interests and guiding them through their time at Warnell. I've stayed in touch with several of the students through their graduation and even employed a few of them at the nature center."

Jackie Sherry
BSFR '11, MNR '14
Program Manager
Dunwoody Nature Center



Scope | What are we trying to do?

As a professional school, students must apply to enter the program after they have completed their core coursework. Once accepted, students take all upper division courses with Warnell faculty. Though not a true cohort, most entering students have several classes together, and all Warnell students must complete FANR 3000 (Field measurements and orientation).

The Alumni Compass Project was developed to meet several needs within the student and alumni populations of the Warnell School. At its most basic level, the program pairs each incoming professional 3rd year student with a Warnell alumni mentor or volunteer. The participating alumnus gives a monetary gift to support the purchase of a new Silva Ranger compass, (a necessary tool for Field Measurements) and writes a personal welcome letter to give to the student when the compass is delivered.

This program was developed to address three main objectives:

1. Increase alumni engagement
2. Increase annual giving/alumni participation
3. Create a culture of philanthropy

The Process

The student services staff provides the alumni director with the list of applicants to the professional program and each student's corresponding statement of interest. The alumni director would consider each applicant's major, hometown and statement of interest, and then reach out to specific alumni to try and make the most advantageous match. Ideally, the alumni volunteer would be working in a field very similar to the students stated interests. However, even when that is not possible, students still benefit from connecting with professionals, as their advice about various career topics is still relevant to all students. Volunteer recruitment included emails, newsletter campaigns and personal solicitations. Despite having individual relationships with a large number of alumni, after several years of soliciting volunteers and a growing number of entering students, the task of matching ~100 new students each year was getting a bit daunting.



The fall '17 entering class receives their compasses and welcome letters.

After listening to representatives from Auburn, Virginia Tech and Louisiana State University speak to their experiences with mentor programs during the 2017 NAADA conference, it was quickly apparent that most mentor programs are not run by one person! In addition to engaging alumni by pairing them one-on-one with students, their programs provide an opportunity for interested alumni to give feedback and shape the direction of the program.

As a direct result of the 2017 NAADA conference, all past alumni volunteer mentors were emailed and asked for feedback regarding the program. Several one-on-one discussions and a few conference calls took place throughout the summer and early fall, with a final result of developing a new ad-hoc Alumni Compass Project Committee. The group of alumni is made up of six alumni volunteers. These volunteers are operating from three different states, and the chair is currently working abroad in New Zealand! Additional ideas and oversight from a variety of alumni has already lead to a better quality program. Not only that, but engaging a group of alumni in the matching process is alleviating the strain of soliciting the same pool of volunteers for future matches, as the new committee contacts can leverage their own networks and encourage participation among their classmates and colleagues.

The alumni director now shares the list of interest statements and majors with the entire committee. Care is taken to remove identifying information regarding students so that we stay in compliance with all FERPA

laws. Committee members read through the descriptions, make notes of potential alumni mentors, and then reach out to classmates and colleagues personally, or they refer them to the alumni director for more information related to the program. New alumni are often somewhat transient for a few years after graduation, so it's difficult for alumni relations professionals to "keep track" of where they are working. Having recent graduates, representing several recent graduation years, on the committee connects us to a much larger pool of potential mentors.

Once students and alumni are matched, the alumnus writes a welcome letter to the student. Alumni are asked to give a monetary donation (suggested \$50) to support the purchase of the student's compass. We share a link for them to pay online, and we also offer to spread out their payment with a smaller recurring gift if necessary. Some alumni are hesitant to participate because of the financial obligation. That is not a barrier to participation, as we can usually cover a few extra compasses thanks to the generosity of some alumni donors that give larger gifts to support the program. Often those that are hesitant to give are in graduate school or they are working a lower paying entry-level job, yet we recruited them anyway because of their ideal matching characteristics (for example, one student was very interested in working in Australia and we matched her with an alumnus that is doing graduate research in Australia!). While the gift portion of this project does help our annual giving numbers, the connections made between alumni and students make the biggest impact.

Impact | How is this program making a difference? Is it having the desired effect on participants?

Alumni initiate contact with students with an introductory letter welcoming students to the "Warnell family" and offer personal advice and encouragement to each new student entering the program.

"The Compass Project was one of the first truly Warnell things that I was introduced to as a new professional student. Receiving such a unique gift made the welcome to Warnell all the more special. I used my compass all throughout the next couple of years, and even as a graduating senior, I still carry it around with me. I loved knowing that I had an alumni mentor to reach out too when I was first starting out, and I know that other students have relied heavily on the mentor that they were matched with. I think that this program honestly made the introduction to Warnell so much more welcoming and inviting knowing that I had the support of a community and the tools to succeed".

Khiara Reed
BSFR '18

Students benefit by connecting with someone who recently transitioned from student to successful alumnus. When the new professional students attend orientation they learn about the strong Warnell tradition of giving back (we are #2 on campus in terms alumni participation), and this lesson is strengthened by the fact that they are now a direct beneficiary of their mentor's generosity. The new students are also encouraged to immediately thank their mentors and follow up with questions, and they are instructed on how to write an appropriate thank you note. These important lessons are vital to their understanding of philanthropy, and they are essential to their future success as students and young professionals.

The impact of this program has been profound for both students and alumni. Through these relationships, students have expanded their personal networks and:

- Received resume critiques and advice related to job searching and interviews
- been invited to attend professional conferences with their alumni mentor
- attended networking and career events with their alumni mentor
- participated in job shadowing opportunities
- received internships and job offers from their mentors
- learned about career fields or employers they may not have considered

Alumni mentors benefit from personal relationships with current students. They appreciate reminiscing about their experiences in school, and offering advice to the next generation of professionals, and having access to potential talent. It's also a fun way for them to stay informed about changes within the program, while realizing that experiencing the great outdoors is similar regardless of when you complete your academic program.

The school has benefitted from increased alumni participation (annual giving numbers) and more engaged alumni. Alumni that volunteer for the program often connect with student organizations for various opportunities as well. Other benefits to the school include updated contact information from young alumni. The welcome letters written by alumni often include helpful biographical information and updated career information. These employer relationships and alumni backgrounds are uploaded into our alumni database.

Participation | Who is participating in the program?

Every entering professional student since the fall of 2013 has been matched with an alumni mentor. Between Fall 2013 and Spring 2018, 470 students have been matched with a mentor, including those who have been matched, but cancelled their program admission. That is an average of 94 students per year for the past 5 years applying to the Warnell Professional Program, and therefore needing an alumni mentor. A few additional students have received compasses as part of the project though they were not paired with alumni (graduate students or other program students have audited the course).

Since the program started, we've had 298 alumni mentors and one non-alumni donor, for a total of 299 volunteer mentors. Approximately 68% (204) are graduates of the last decade, which is traditionally a more challenging population to engage, not to mention recruit and retain as donors.

While not all students take full advantage of the opportunity to further develop a relationship with their mentor, each student has directly benefitted from the program by receiving a compass and connection with an alumni donor. Often students realize the value of the program long after they were matched, and thankfully those lessons continue to make an impact on them – sometimes prompting those same students to become mentors in the future!

“Overall I had a great experience with the Alumni Compass Project. I believe it's a wonderful opportunity for alumni to be connected with current students in order to help facilitate the growing of young professionals outside the classroom. Even though I didn't communicate often with my mentor, the conversations we had were even that much more meaningful. Coordinating busy schedules for all parties involved was probably the only thing that I viewed as frustrating, but I think feeling that frustration was beneficial because it has helped me become more patient in both my career and personal relationships. I had such a positive experience with the project that I was very eager and excited when finally asked to become a mentor myself to a professional student. I enjoy sharing some of my most treasured memories that I obtained while at Warnell with my mentee and then finding out that Warnell is still fostering an environment and atmosphere for its students to create such memories.”

Joseph Vaughn
BSFR '16
Procurement Forester
Interfor

Alumni

We began specifically targeting young alumni as an engagement tool, but the program benefits from all alumni participation. Most alumni are local to the state of Georgia, but we do have alumni participants that live abroad in New Zealand, Australia, and the Caribbean. Each alumni participant is prompted for feedback several times throughout the program: first when they make contact with their student regarding summer plans, and then again at graduation and when recruiting for new mentors for the next class. Finally, alumni are contacted when their students are about to graduate, and some send congratulatory cards and gifts.

Students/Future Alumni

Students probably benefit the most from the program. However, when we consider that these student beneficiaries will soon be alumni with resources, expertise and knowledge to share with the school, it's clear that we have the most to gain from their participation. Every undergraduate Warnell student receives an alumni mentor. Students have the opportunity to give feedback during their exit interviews, and they are also prompted for feedback during their first semester in the program.

Disciplines

The Warnell School has four majors: Forestry, Fisheries & Wildlife, Natural Resources Recreation and Tourism, and Natural Resource Management and Sustainability. A concerted effort has been made to ensure alumni volunteer mentors are from each industry/discipline area. Typically Warnell has had very strong support from our forestry alumni in terms of participation and financial support. This program has encouraged participation among all majors, and we've seen an increase in participation among other disciplines, especially among wildlife. While this program serves undergraduates of the school, the chair of our Alumni Compass Project is a graduate of the Harley Langdale Jr. Center for Forest Business. He completed graduate work at Warnell, and has since encouraged many other alumni from the graduate program to participate in the Alumni Compass Project thereby extending our participation to include an additional discipline.

Employers

Our alumni participants represent many different career fields and employers. Participants include extension agents, veterinarians, foresters, wildlife biologists, engineers, park rangers, teachers and more. Volunteers come from the private sector, government agencies and non-profit organizations. Alumni from some companies have seen this as a recruitment tool and go out of their way to encourage their employees to participate. Several companies have sponsored additional compasses so that a larger number of their employees would participate and expose Warnell students to job opportunities within their organization.

Women & Minorities

Minority recruitment and retention is a very important topic among natural resource programs, and despite multiple efforts, major gains in this area are slow to materialize. This program allows us the opportunity to match current students with alumni who "look like them" and may have experienced the same challenges that they have. We try to keep demographics in mind when making these matches. The opportunity to be paired with similar alumni was requested by current students during a diversity and inclusion workshop held at the Warnell School.

"Receiving my Silva Ranger compass from my mentor when I entered the professional program got me so excited to start my Warnell classes-- especially field measurements! Not only did the compass come in handy, but my mentor also sent me a kind letter with good advice for finishing out my college career. When I began applying for internships, I reached out to her with my questions and anxieties. She responded almost immediately with paragraphs worth of advice from her personal experience. Her tips helped me write an awesome cover letter and feel confident in my interview. Without the Compass

Project, I would have never met someone in the professional field like her at this point in my schooling. Having a woman in the forestry field that I can come to for help has made all the difference.”

Laura Banister
BSFR '19

Engagement of other committees

The school has a very active Young Alumni Committee which encourages participation of alumni in school sponsored events, and raises money to support various programs and scholarships through their planning and execution of an annual golf tournament and sporting clays tournament. The small and very effective committee has endowed multiple scholarships and continues to have an increasing number of nominations each year. Unfortunately, this means they have to turn away numerous alumni that are interested in serving the school. The Alumni Compass Project provides an alternative engagement opportunity for alumni that have self-identified as potential volunteers, and it provides YAC members with additional information they might need when considering the applicants. Several mentors have gone on to serve on the Young Alumni Committee, and a few current nominees have served on the Alumni Compass Project committee this year demonstrating their commitment to the school.

Effectiveness | Has the program achieved the desired result? Have our objectives been met?

The program has been met and exceeded the three major objectives.

1. Increase alumni engagement
2. Increase annual giving
3. Create a culture of philanthropy

Increase alumni engagement

Nearly 100 students are directly connected with alumni each academic year. These alumni remain plugged in to the school through communications with their student mentees, and they are given reasons to further participate in alumni events and programs. Some of the local alumni mentors attend career events, meet with their students at other school events like Homecoming, and many have become interested in other volunteer opportunities. The process of recruiting and soliciting volunteers (often via phone and email) provides an engagement opportunity in itself. We frequently learn of new jobs, marriages, growing families, and promotions – in addition to getting updated contact information.



Alumni/mentor pair Tiffany Woods and Sarah Weber met up during Warnell Weekend

Increase annual giving

Before the program started in FY13, we had 325 alumni donors that gave gifts designated to Warnell (7% alumni participation). In FY 17 that number has grown to 502 alumni donors to Warnell and 9% alumni participation (to Warnell). While this is not the only new annual giving initiative we've attempted in the last five years, recruiting and/or retaining 75-90 donors each year for the program has played a significant role in improving our overall alumni participation numbers. While retaining donors was not an initial goal of this program, it has been an asset. Each year, in an effort to recruit new alumni participants, we reach out to past participants and those who's students are graduating. Many alumni choose to renew their gift. Some take on additional mentees and a few just choose to support the program without participating.

Create a culture of philanthropy

The student education piece of this program is vital to sustain the program in the future, but also to continue to provide the school with new supporters. For the program to continue, we needed to see students become mentors. Five years into the program, we are reaping the the rewards of our efforts as several current mentors were mentored students in the early years of the program.

"I have been giving to the Alumni Compass Project since 2015. I was in the first class to receive a compass and mentor through this effort in 2013. The Compass Project provided me with two much-needed tools: the compass, and someone to help and guide me along the way. My mentor was Mallory Wilkins and we are still in contact. When I graduated from Warnell I knew I wanted to find a way to give back but did not have the funds to make the impact I wanted to all at once. This Project allows me to contribute a small amount each year that doesn't break the bank and still makes me feel like I'm giving back to the school that gave me so much during my time there. I also get the opportunity to meet and chat with some of the bright minds who will be my future colleagues. The mentorship part of this project allows me to share my advice and experiences with new students in a less formal and more fun way that helps to build lasting connections."

Kristen Black
BSFR '15
Associate Wildlife Biologist®
Hunter and Trapper Recruitment Scientist
Illinois Natural History Survey

Increased Efficiency

Matching efficiency has increased dramatically this year with the creation of our new Alumni Compass Project committee. The volunteer's time and connections have decreased the amount of time the Alumni Director has to personally solicit and seek new volunteers to match with incoming students. Depending on the size of the incoming class and the number of necessary compasses, we can typically purchase them from Forestry Suppliers for between \$33-\$37. The suggested donation increased from \$40 in 2016, to \$50 in 2017 at the dean's suggestion, and thankfully we haven't noticed any negative response regarding the change. Even with a few alumni not following through on the monetary commitment, we have been able to exceed the cost of the compass order every semester.

Uniqueness of Concept | How is this program different?

Traditional mentor programs offer a variety of benefits to both mentors and mentees, but managing these relationships takes an incredible amount of effort on behalf of the facilitators or program managers.

Successful mentoring programs typically start out very small, and within the academic environment, they rarely touch all students within a program or major. The Alumni Compass Project is different in that EVERY Warnell student has the opportunity to participate in a mentoring relationship. In addition, students receive a direct benefit from an individual donor. By receiving the compass, the students learn how private giving positively impacts their educational experience and they understand about the importance of giving to their alma mater (regardless of the size of gift).



In other programs, students have to sign up to receive a mentor to participate in the program. This is something that the committee has discussed, and we have decided to continue offering the experience to all students. There are many students that would be hesitant to take on "additional work," or they might overlook the opportunity, and then they would miss the chance to learn from an experienced professional in their

field. The committee decided that the risk of students not following up with their alumni mentor (and potentially offending the volunteer) is not as important as the benefits students receive when they may not have chosen to participate on their own. Not only that, but the school receives benefits as well. Students who may not have participated, have gone on to become mentors!

Our alumni help current students navigate through challenges they experience while they attend the University. In addition, we as alumni relations professionals, are also hoping to guide these students on a journey to become engaged alumni donors. By focusing on the impact of these volunteers and their monetary gifts, students and young alumni realize that they are valued for their expertise, experience, and time commitment. So when the inevitable solicitation arrives in the mailbox or their phone rings during dinner with an ask, our alumni do not have to wonder if we are only connecting with them “to get money.” This program brings all of the different advancement pieces together, and the impact will continue to strengthen the Warnell family for years to come.

Additional Information | What other resources are connected to this program?

For prospective alumni participants:

Website: <https://www.warnell.uga.edu/alumni/connect/alumni-compass-project>

- Includes direction on what to write in their welcome letters, what they need to know about FERPA, and other helpful hints.
- A “handbook” containing the same information is also available in a pdf document.

For Students:

- Fact sheet: Students receive instructions on how to make the most of a mentor relationship with tips on what to ask and how to follow up.
- Stationary: Each student is given a piece of stationary to write a thank you note as well as a instruction on what their thank you note should include.