

Universities and PMI Chapters Partner to Grow Membership and Nurture a New Generation of Project Managers

Baltimore and Silver Spring chapters team with the University of Maryland — with benefits for all.

Sometimes proximity breeds competition. But it can also be beneficial, as two Project Management Institute (PMI) chapters found when they teamed up with a local university.

It wasn't hard to see the potential for collaboration.

The PMI Baltimore, MD Chapter and the PMI Silver Spring Chapter operate within close range of each other. Also nearby is the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), which offers project management courses.

By forming an alliance, the chapters and the university helped bridge the gap between classroom education and real-world application.

Chapter members were brought together with students and university staff in a number of collaborative contexts, including:

- Panel discussions about real-world project management challenges
- Speaking events and networking dinners
- Open meetings to discuss ways to strengthen the alliance

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Both the university and the chapters lacked the resources that the partnership ultimately could provide.

UMBC had a strong project management education program, but didn't have a way to give its students a real-world perspective. There were no tools to help students connect with project professionals and learn more about day-to-day life "in the trenches."

"The school offers these great courses in project management from an engineering or business perspective, for example, and the students are interested [in project management], but they take courses and then they're done," says Eric Perlstein, PMI-RMP, PMP, president of the PMI Baltimore Chapter.

The university also recognized the missing link. Across UMBC, departments realized that coursework centered around real-world problems helped better prepare students for the workplace, says Greg Simmons, vice president, institutional advancement, UMBC.

For the chapters, a relationship with the university allowed them to fill a gap in their recruiting efforts. Partnering with the university had the potential to open the door to a prime audience: eager soon-to-be project managers.

Chapter interaction with students with diverse experience levels is just one benefit of this partnering opportunity. "In the graduate programs, you have seasoned professionals and people

management," says John Kos, PMP, vice president of education and former

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who have been out in the workplace. They understand the value of project management. They are the president of the PMI Baltimore Chapter. “Undergrads are just beginning and don’t yet have the career perspective of what project management can do for them.”

And by attracting students as they begin or change their career goals, the chapters can increase interest in the profession—and in joining PMI.

MAKING IT WORK

Rusty Richards, PhD, PMP, president of the PMI Silver Spring Chapter, already had connections to UMBC. That relationship led the chapter presidents to consider co-hosting a seminar with the school.

The first event was a speaking engagement with the UMBC president on the topic of transformational leadership. It drew 180 members from both chapters, as well as some students—a larger crowd than either chapter would have attracted on its own. “There was so much synergy that we wanted to figure out what to do next,” Dr. Richards says.

The two chapters then co-sponsored a campus meeting to brainstorm with UMBC executive staff on how the university faculty and student populations could benefit from interactions with the chapters. They struck the right chord. A meeting that would typically draw 40 people attracted more than 100, including about 25 students, many of them from a graduate engineering course.

“These students are really excited about project management, and UMBC is offering them an opportunity to go to the next level,” Dr. Richards says.

Despite the benefits for the chapters, not

everyone was sold on the idea. Because only 30 miles (48 kilometers) separate the chapters, some chapter board members were concerned about competition for members. To win over the skeptics, the chapter leaders highlighted the first meeting’s attendance levels when discussing future opportunities.

The university has to buy in as well, says Mr. Simmons. He suggests schools interested in connecting with a local PMI chapter approach it like they would any partnership.

“You need champions on campus and in the chapters,” he explains. “There has to be benefit for all sides, and it’s important to listen to what others hope to get out of the relationship.”

THE PAYOFF

Mr. Perlstein says he wishes the chapters had teamed up with UMBC years ago, acknowledging the energy the students bring to the table as well as the opportunity to increase chapter membership. The chapter presidents are also realizing a greater understanding of their membership’s strengths and potential.

“We can both use the partnership to get more Project Management Professional (PMP)[®] credential holders into the profession and, at the same time, [as a chapter] do more financially,” Mr. Kos says.

And for the school, the alliance lets students get a dose of reality to complement their classroom learning.

“The partnership with PMI enriches what the departments are doing in a very valuable way,” says Mr. Simmons.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

UMBC and the two chapters are still building on their partnership. A recent

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networking dinner, for example, hosted an equal mix of more than 100 students and chapter members. Tables were strategically arranged with a mix of students and practitioners to encourage conversation and networking.

“We have a lot of students aspiring to work in project management in technology and other areas, but they have limited opportunities to see what project management really means in a workplace environment,” says Mr. Simmons. “Now the university is doing things to help students build those skills, network and find internships.”

An example of this university–chapter collaboration was a PMI–facilitated panel for graduate students in the engineering department that discussed real-world implications of project management. “It was really successful and brought material to life for students,” Mr. Simmons says.

Each semester, the chapters also plan to sponsor an on-site meeting where chapter members and students can network and share experiences. Ultimately, the chapters hope to see a student group develop on the UMBC campus.

“If they see what they can get out of these events, our hope is that students will form their own on-campus group and take over coordinating the speakers and advertisers as well as the logistics,” says Mr. Perlstein. “We hope the majority of participants will be student members of our chapters.”

Events are already scheduled at UMBC through mid-2011 and both chapters are talking with other area schools, but they’re moving forward cautiously.

“We are continuously thinking through

the partnership. And yes, it will take on a life of its own, but it’s important to make sure both sides revisit the relationship regularly to build on the successes and identify new opportunities,” Mr. Simmons says. “It’s the principles of project management that make it work.”

To ensure the relationship keeps working, the chapters maintain a sharp focus on the future.

“We want to see partnership with local universities become part of the fabric of our institutions and be embraced by everyone so the partnership’s success doesn’t depend on individuals,” says Dr. Richards.

Slowly and intelligently expanding the program at UMBC and in other schools will lead to the greatest success, says Mr. Kos, with the early events helping to shape the direction of future relationships. “We want to get through that first site meeting, collect lessons learned and then apply those lessons learned with more educational partners.”

Mr. Perlstein sees great opportunity for PMI chapters around the globe to build partnerships with schools.

“If we can get to a population that hasn’t been reached, the sky is the limit. We’re reaching young individuals who are excited about their careers and looking at the next steps. This is a tremendous opportunity.”

And although the chapters and the school acknowledge the positive developments, they’re also keeping an eye on long-term goals.

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Silver Spring Chapter

“When things happen so fast, they can fall apart,” Dr. Richards says. “These universities have five-year programs and, ideally, we’re going to be part of that student evolution.” With relationships forged, graduates may find that joining a local PMI chapter is the next logical step in their career development.

APPLYING THE LESSONS LEARNED

Chapter and university leaders credit the following factors for building a strong relationship, lessons that can serve others looking to build similar partnerships:

The university offers programs at graduate and undergraduate levels.

If a chapter is interested in educational outreach, Mr. Perlstein suggests working with a four-year university. The school should have established engineering and business schools and a mix of graduates and undergraduates—all of whom immediately see the benefit of real-world experience and connections to the local business community.

Working with graduate students can have a trickle-down effect because they understand the importance of the PMP® credential, Mr. Kos says. Their buy-in then influences undergraduates as they begin to understand how both the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM)® certification and the PMP credential can benefit their careers.

The school and chapter have advocates who solidify the relationship and move it forward.

Support from administrators or key faculty within the school can help the cause by building support and enthusiasm. “You always need a champion,” Mr. Kos says.

One way for chapters to establish a meaningful connection with a university is to volunteer to speak in classes or at events.

“I was on a panel for an advanced engineering project management course for two years,” says Mr. Perlstein, “The professor asked if our chapter wanted to sponsor an event. That opened doors.”

The school values professional development and input from the real world.

For students, interaction with practitioners helps reinforce lessons learned in the classroom and offers insights into how things work in the real world.

“We’re an institution that gets it,” says Mr. Simmons, citing a large, diverse and motivated student body. “If you can get those students together with PMI’s skill sets, you give them a great start. One way for us to measure success is hearing more and more employers saying, ‘UMBC students are exceptionally well-prepared for the workplace.’”

SUMMARY

By teaming with local PMI chapters, schools with project management programs can provide their students with valuable networking opportunities and a chance to learn from project practitioners with a real-world perspective. Chapters, in turn, gain access to a pool of new, eager potential members, and also enhance their reputations as leaders in the project management community.

These partnerships require proper vetting by everyone involved and consistent communication, but if both sides have the necessary buy-in, students, chapters and schools alike will reap the advantages. ■

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PMI Baltimore, MD Chapter
