Working with Students and External Constituents to Revitalize an Undergraduate Degree Program

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Proposal Submitted By A. Overton

1. **Title of presentation:** Working with Students and External Constituents to Revitalize an Undergraduate Degree Program.
2. **Presenter Information:** Anthony S. Overton Alabama A&M University
3. **Additional presenter information (if applicable):**
4. **Presentation Theme:** Leadership and Management,
5. **Presentation Type:** Best Practice Presentation
6. **Abstract:** Offering undergraduate programs which are relevant and provide students excellent opportunities for employment or graduate work are key for program success and program growth. The session will describe our approach to revitalizing an unpopular undergraduate degree program based on student input and collaboration with industry and a community college.
7. **Keywords:** Degree Program Revitalization, Curriculum Development, Industry Partnership, Student Input. Community College collaboration
8. **Creative Commons License:**
9. **Presentation Documents:** Alabama A&M University (AAMU), an 1890 Land-Grant institution located in the high-tech center of Huntsville in northern Alabama. AAMU offers its 5,500-student population a wide range of course offerings under the schools of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, and Engineering and Technology. In 2010, Alabama A&M University discontinued the undergraduate degree program Plant and Soil Sciences because of low student enrollment. In 2014, a new undergraduate program in Plant Biotechnology was developed as an alternative to the once very popular and vibrant Plant and Soil Science degree program. Despite heavy recruiting efforts, we had only one student enrolled in the Plant Biotechnology program. We had to revitalize the program in effort to develop a program that was not only more attractive to students but offered students good opportunities for employment. We took a unique approach which centered around student input. We sent out google forms survey to 3,000 incoming freshmen (Undeclared and Declared Majors) who had expressed interest in biologically related majors asking them to choose from a list of degree programs; which included Plant Biotechnology and Biotechnology. Out of the 575 responses, none of the respondents chose Plant Biotechnology. In fact, Biotechnology was the second most selected major choice (27%) for students going into STEM fields. Based on the results of the survey we changed the name from Plant Biotechnology to Biotechnology and restructured the curriculum to reflect the new emphasis. We made several meetings with a local community college which offers an associate's degree and biotechnology; and aligned our curriculum with theirs to attract their community college students. Additionally, we relied heavily on the biotechnology industry input here in Huntsville Alabama. We partnered with several local biotechnology companies in developing our curriculum and syllabi. We did this to ensure that our students were receiving the skills and training that was sought after by the biotechnology industry. Many of these Biotechnology Companies agreed to mentor students in out Biotechnology Internship Class. Currently we are in the process of seeking approval to establish the biotechnology program through the Alabama Department of Higher Education. We hope to have this program available to students by January 2017. In this session, I will share details about our approach and offer guidance to other department chairs who are considering program revitalization.