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Integrating Behavioral-Based Interviewing Into the Curricula

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Behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. Many interviewers of students in the Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering (ABE) Department at Iowa State University use BBI to gain detailed job-related examples from a candidate, and to assess past performance and competencies. One technique of preparing for BBI experiences is the STAR method - examples of competency demonstrations that include a situation or task, the specific action taken, and the result of the action. ABE students, starting their freshman year, develop a "library" of STARs that encompass the 14 competencies central to the ABE outcomes assessment program. Students develop, reflect upon, and update these STARs throughout their academic careers and include them in their electronic portfolios. They use their STARs to prepare for career interviews that use BBI. Integrating BBI and STAR into the curriculum helps students focus and reflect upon their past experiences and how those experiences contribute to competency development their success as practicing professionals.

Keywords
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Disciplines
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Comments
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Abstract
Behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. Many interviewers of students in the Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering (ABE) Department at Iowa State University use BBI to gain detailed job-related examples from a candidate, and to assess past performance and competencies. One technique of preparing for BBI experiences is the STAR method - examples of competency demonstrations that include a situation or task, the specific action taken, and the result of the action. ABE students, starting their freshman year, develop a “library” of STARs that encompass the 14 competencies central to the ABE outcomes assessment program. Students develop, reflect upon, and update these STARs throughout their academic careers and include them in their electronic portfolios. They use their STARs to prepare for career interviews that use BBI. Integrating BBI and STAR into the curriculum helps students focus and reflect upon their past experiences and how those experiences contribute to competency development their success as practicing professionals.

Introduction
Career interviews for engineering and technology students are evolving from interrogation sessions to structured conversations. This evolution is facilitated by the proliferation of information technology that has automated many of the previously manual tasks such as reviewing resumes and scheduling interviews. This frees recruiters to spend more time networking and building relationships with job candidates (Burton, 2003). The real impetus for this evolution is the realization that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance (Byham and Pickett, 1997). And after all, future performance is what any interviewer is trying to ascertain.

The structured conversation approach to interviewing, commonly referred to as Behavioral Based Interviewing (BBI), aims to discover and examine examples of past behavior through guided questioning. The traditional interview is oriented to revealing personality traits, whereas BBI is oriented to the demonstration of competencies. Competencies are application of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, and behaviors (Elwell, 1984), and are now the focus of many companies’ hiring and employee assessment processes. Typical competencies might include innovation, analysis and judgment, teamwork, and communication. By assessing competencies, the interviewer increases the consistency among interviews to avoid interviewing bias, and allows the interviewer to make decisions based on standard, objective assessment criteria.

Development Dimensions International, Inc., a global provider of competency-based performance management tools and services (DDI, 2004), is a leader in teaching managers how to interview candidates. They call this method Targeted Selection®. While this technique is called by many names, the underlying premise is the same: past behavior is the best predictor of future performance.

Traditional interviews often include such questions as: (1) “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” (2) “Why are you interested in working for us?” and (3) “Tell me about yourself?” While the answers may be interesting, they are opinions (even when answered truthfully) and may not predict future performance.

BBI questions, however, emphasize past performance and behaviors. Typical questions in a BBI setting might include: (1) “Think of an occasion when you had to deal with a difficult team member.” (2) “Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.” and (3) “Give me a specific example of a time when you used good analysis and judgment in solving a problem.”

Figure 1 gives a comparison of the “traditional” interviewing and BBI. In the BBI approach, the
interviewer uses detailed job-related examples from a candidate to assess past experience, performance, and competencies. BBI prompts the candidate to provide more than “canned” responses and focuses the interview on past actions, not perceptions. The interviewer can use follow-up questions to clarify an answer or to probe deeper.

Career specialists suggest that applicants answer BBI-type questions through the use of the STAR method. STAR involves providing an example of a past behavior which includes a situation or task, the specific action taken, and the result of the action (Byham and Pickett, 1997). Table 1 provides an example of a student using STAR to answer the question, “Tell me about a time when you showed initiative.”

Anecdotal evidence suggests that over 80% of the companies interviewing Iowa State students for engineering and technology positions use BBI to some degree. Therefore, faculty in the Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering (ABE) at Iowa State University have been proactive in integrating BBI and STAR into the Agricultural Engineering (AE) and Agricultural Systems Technology (AST) undergraduate programs. This process has been enhanced by the new ABE outcomes assessment process (ABE, 2005a) initiated by the department. This process involves the evaluation of fourteen competencies (Table 2) through electronic portfolios (Brumm et al., 2003), cooperative education and internship evaluations (Mickelson et al., 2004), and evaluations of ABE graduates two years post-graduation. The fourteen competencies were developed through dialogue with stakeholders -- employers, alumni, parents, faculty, and students (Hanneman et al., 2002).

### Integrating BBI and STAR into the Curriculum

BBI and STAR are integrated into the ABE undergraduate curriculum during the first semester. Both the AE and AST programs have a first semester orientation course (ENGR 101 and AST 110) as part of the ABE Learning Community. The courses meet for one hour each week for 15 weeks. BBI and STAR have been integrated into two class sessions of each course.

During the first of these class sessions, students are introduced to the 14 competencies listed in Table 2. Students are first asked to generate a list of skills, motivations and behaviors characteristic of a successful practicing professional in their field. Their list often encompasses the 14 competencies. Next, they are asked to read and reflect on the descriptions of seven of these competencies, those that are mentioned by a majority of the employers of our graduates: Engineering/Technical Knowledge, General Knowledge, Analysis and Judgment, Communication, Continuous Learning, Initiative, and Teamwork. Then students are asked to write a STAR for three of the seven with the requirement that they describe their STAR completely enough to demonstrate the competency.

During the second class session, students are asked to analyze a company job description in order to determine the workplace...
Integrating Behavioral

Students' portfolio artifacts (including STARs) are examined during the process of development, as they progress from freshman to senior. They receive feedback on their artifacts from the instructors in second-semester “experiencing” courses, as well as from the instructors of required sophomore and junior seminar classes in which they work on their portfolios. This feedback helps students understand how well their STARs encompass the Key Actions of the competency, and thus how well it demonstrates the competency.

Student Use of STAR

Based on course activities completed during the first year in the program, students are well prepared for BBI. Upper-level students in both programs can refer to their STAR and BBI assignments to help prepare for co-op, internship, or summer employment interviews. In a student focus group about interviewing, one student remarked: “They asked me a question just like one we did in mock interviews. I used the STAR I used then.” This response is typical of AE and AST students’ experience with BBI they are much more comfortable during employment interviews than other students that have not been introduced to STAR and BBI.

Students are also asked to reference their STARs to update or replace them as they gain new work or life experiences that better demonstrate a certain competency. Another important benefit of having students complete STARs is that these encourage students to reflect on their past experiences to help chart their future academic and life direction. Since the students store these in electronic portfolios, they are easily accessible for making additions and updates.
Summary

Behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. Many interviewers use BBI to gain detailed job-related examples from a candidate, and to assess past performance and competencies. One technique of preparing for BBI experiences is to use the STAR method - examples of competency demonstrations that include a situation or task, the specific action taken, and the result of the action.

Students in our department, starting their freshman year, develop a “library” of STARs that encompass the 14 competencies central to our outcomes assessment program. Students develop, reflect upon, and update these STARs through their academic careers. They use their STARs to prepare for career interviews that use BBI. It supplements their demonstration of competency development in their electronic portfolios, a key component of the ABE outcomes assessment process.

Integrating BBI and STAR into the curriculum helps students focus and reflect upon their past experiences, and how those experiences contribute to competency development and their success as practicing professionals. Such reflection promotes higher order thinking and is a crucial component of learning.

Literature Cited


