Construction Panel Discussion at San Luis Obispo High School

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The senior project idea for conducting a panel discussion presentation at San Luis Obispo (SLO) High School during a tutorial period was completed by Jake Ornellas and Morgan Conway. This paper provides details on the entire process of reserving a tutorial session at SLO High School, contacting and coordinating with trade representatives and university faculty, and executing the group panel discussion. The purpose of the project was to share and inform local high school students with the information regarding what careers in the different construction industry branches look like and what opportunities are there. The goal of this project was to encourage and inspire high school students to pursue and thrive in a career in the various construction industry branches.

Key Words: Panel Discussion, High School, Construction, Skilled Trade, Vocational School

Introduction

The project completed was a group panel discussion. The panel discussion the CM students completed took place on May 22, 2023. This paper will include the information regarding The students who completed this discussion were Jake Ornellas and Morgan Conway and the students brought together three guest speakers from different branches of the construction industry. First the students all guests and allowed the high school students to ask their own questions. The guests who attended were Jonathon Duran of the Southwest Mountain States Regional Council of Carpenters, Jeong Woo, Department Head of Cal Poly Construction Management and the ACE Mentorship Program, and Shari Brunner from the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). The students created and
passed out flyers, figure 3, to high school students in attendance, which provided information on the speakers, a survey for feedback. This project improved the relationship between SLO High School and Cal Poly Construction Management.

**Background**

**Problem**

The problem at hand is a major shortage in the construction labor force. The secondary problem is there is currently a social norm which creates an environment where high school graduates feel immense pressure to attend college. If a graduate decides to pursue a career or future in a different outlet that does not include going to college, it is unfortunately looked down upon. This project aimed to contribute to solving both of these problems simultaneously. First, we would be contributing to solving the first problem by hopefully encouraging some new, young labor into starting apprenticeships in the various construction trade unions. Secondly, we stressed to the students that there are successful and lucrative career opportunities in the trades that they could be proud of.

**Preparation**

The students were prepared to successfully complete this project due to the coursework in the Cal Poly Construction Management program. The Cal Poly Construction Management program stresses the importance of becoming a confident and comfortable public speaker. There were many courses both in the general education and major courses where speaking in front of the class was a large portion of the class workload. The student has also completing two summer internships for a general contractor where the student was required to lead site wide safety meetings and internal meetings between the owner, project team, and subcontractors. This combination of past experiences and courses prepared the students to co-lead a discussion in front of around 70 students and teachers and effectively convey the intended message.

**Planning**

Once Morgan and I decided to tackle the senior project together, we developed a clear idea of what this project will look like, we put a proposal together and got approval from both Joe Cleary and Phil Barlow. The next course of action was to contact the principal of San Luis Obispo High School, Rollin Dickinson, and reserve a tutorial session for us to lead a panel discussion. The tutorial period we were able to secure was the afternoon of Monday, May 22, 2023 from 2:10-2:48. Next, we started reaching out to local trade unions and construction professionals to gauge interest in their participation. The first speaker we secured was Jonathon Duran representing the Southwest Mountain States Regional Council of Carpenters. We first met Mr. Duran when he was on campus at Cal Poly for a Carpenter’s Apprenticeship Speed Dating recruiting event. Next, we reached out to Jeong Woo after hearing that the ACE Mentorship Program is looking to expand their presence in the central coast, as well as to represent Cal Poly Construction Management. Finally, we contacted Shari Brunner to represent the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). We chose these guest speakers because we felt the electrician and carpenter routes were a good way to show a broad scope of the different branches of the construction industry. We feel it worked out really well and they offered lots of great information and background on what is to be expected if a career in construction is pursued. Per the school district’s policy, we were required to have all guest speakers fill out paperwork and
receive a background check. Finally, we created and distributed flyers and electronic surveys for the student attendees to receive and fill out.

**Results**

The presentation began with Morgan introducing himself, myself, and the three construction professional representatives. Morgan then passed the microphone to me and I allowed each individual speaker to have about 10 minutes to talk a bit about themselves and how they found themselves in the construction industry and what opportunities they can offer these soon to be high school graduates. I then had some questions prepared to ask each person. After each speaker had had their time to speak, we took questions from the students in the audience until our allotted time during the tutorial period was over. Morgan and I had some questions prepared in case the audience members were hesitant to ask questions or if they did not have any. Luckily, they had lots of questions and we ended up answering questions until the bell rang. Our first guest speaker was Jeong Woo. He introduced himself, and answered the following questions “What can the ACE mentorship program provide high school students with?” and “What opportunities are available for Cal Poly Construction Management students and graduates?” The next guest speaker was Jonathan Duran, who answered the following “What is the Southwest Mountain States Regional Council of Carpenters?” and “What are the benefits of becoming a union carpenter?” Finally, Shari Brunner, introduced herself and was asked “What is the National Electrical Contractors Association?” and “What does NECA provide for electrical contractors?”

The discussion portion of this group panel discussion was the open question and answer portion at the end of the allotted time. Morgan and I were initially concerned that the students may be hesitant to ask questions so we prepared some questions to get the conversation going. Luckily, after one or two questions the students really opened up and there were 3-6 hands raised at all times. The questions they asked ranged from general questions about construction work, what construction management graduates typically do, how long an apprenticeship would be, and what is the expected workload for a project engineer. We also received questions about how the curriculum’s difficulty was at Cal Poly and how young college students can get internships.

**Construction Panel Discussion**

![Construction Panel Discussion](image)

Figure 1. Slideshow
The unique format and setting of the San Luis Obispo High School Monday tutorial period provided us with the perfect opportunity to reach a large group of soon to be high school graduates. We were able to execute this group panel discussion in the theatre which had a capacity of 150 audience members. We estimate that around 70 students were in attendance for our group panel discussion and we received lots of interaction and well intentioned questions at the end of our discussion in the open question/answer portion. The discussion style was very casual which allowed the students to loosen up and feel comfortable with us and take in more information than if it were to feel very formal and similar to a class lecture. We aimed to reach an audience of students who have an interest in the trades and the construction industry and to provide them with the information that it is not mandatory to attend college and seeking a career in the trades is a respectable and lucrative option. We also wanted
to reach those students who may not have been exposed to what a career in the trade looks like as well as what it can offer.

We provided a survey available for the audience members to scan both on the flyers and on the presentation slides we have displayed behind us, see figure 2. Out of the estimated 70 students in attendance we had 14 survey responses. We were pleased to see that the results showed that there was an even mix of ages of students present. We found that most students planned on attending college after high school graduation, see figure 4. The results also showed that pursuing a degree in Construction Management was selected more than any other option, see figure 5. It is clear from the responses to the survey as well as the interactions and questions from the students that there is a definite interest in Cal Poly Construction Management. This data could help tailor a future presentation by focusing on certain aspects such as more information on the Cal Poly Construction Management program such as course work and work load.

We learned lots of lessons during this group panel discussion process. First of all, it is always better to start earlier than later. We felt we were generally on top of everything and with the nature of the Spring term being the last term for both Cal Poly and San Luis Obispo High School it gave an extra sense of urgency for all aspects. We learned that having a well prepared phone call can efficiently accomplish what would potentially days and several emails in a matter of minutes. It also became very evident that there is great potential here for future senior projects and future meetings and collaborations between Cal Poly Construction Management and San Luis Obispo High School. The principal, Rollin Dickinson, was extremely enthusiastic to host us and helped us every step of the way and hopes to see a similar event happen in the future. The actual discussion provided a sense of pride for Morgan and myself that we were actually impacting soon to be young professionals.
Figure 4. Survey Results
Figure 5. Survey Results Continued
The project that was completed consisted of gathering a collection of trade professionals and representatives and executing a group panel discussion. The panel discussion the CM students completed took place on May 22, 2023. This paper includes the information regarding the process of gathering three guest speakers from different branches of the construction industry. The guests who attended were Jonathon Duran of the Southwest Mountain States Regional Council of Carpenters, Jeong Woo, Department Head of Cal Poly Construction Management and the ACE Mentorship Program, and Shari Brunner from the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). The group panel discussion was a successful process of encouraging students about the construction industry and improving the relationship between the Cal Poly Construction Management program and San Luis Obispo High School.

Figure 6. Survey Results Continued

**Conclusion**

The project that was completed consisted of gathering a collection of trade professionals and representatives and executing a group panel discussion. The panel discussion the CM students completed took place on May 22, 2023. This paper includes the information regarding the process of gathering three guest speakers from different branches of the construction industry. The guests who attended were Jonathon Duran of the Southwest Mountain States Regional Council of Carpenters, Jeong Woo, Department Head of Cal Poly Construction Management and the ACE Mentorship Program, and Shari Brunner from the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). The group panel discussion was a successful process of encouraging students about the construction industry and improving the relationship between the Cal Poly Construction Management program and San Luis Obispo High School.