

## Nurturing Success

Corporate Mentor Program pairs first-generation business students with local business leaders.

**T**WENTY-ONE YEAR-OLD TORRELL JACKSON describes Raymond James & Associates President Dennis Zank as a motivator, a “cool” business leader whose down-to-earth style motivates people. Arguably one of the busiest corporate leaders in the area, Zank has added another word to his resume for the last 15 years: mentor.

Zank is part of USF’s College of Business Corporate Mentor Program, which pairs first-generation-in-college business students with area executives. More than 500 students have been mentored by local business leaders since the program began in 1986.

Currently, Zank is matched with Jackson, a junior pursuing a double major in management and accounting. Zank passionately believes that spending a few hours a month with students like Jackson is critical to student success – and is a way for the 1976 graduate to help the business school fulfill its core obligation.

“I view the business school’s role as a simple one,” Zank says. “It comes down to jobs: create a marketable individual who understands business.” He explains that aspiring business leaders who are the first in their family to pursue a degree have great ability and desire – and are gaining knowledge in the classroom – but often lack access to the corporate world. “Frequently, they’ve not been able to see what it’s like in a business meeting. They may not have witnessed first-hand what it means to be a professional and understand why networking is essential,” says Zank. “That’s why I volunteer.”

For Jackson, his relationship with Zank began with a copy of the executive’s calendar and an invitation to enjoy a cup of coffee.

“I typically print my calendar and circle dates where I have meetings or events the student might find interesting and educational,” explains Zank. “I have to attend anyway, so why not bring along someone like Torrell and introduce him to the boardroom or let him sit in on a finance meeting?” Smiling as he recalls leaning over to explain jargon, Zank says he doesn’t limit the relationship to business discussions. “I like getting to know students as individuals,” he says. “I

like being able to offer advice as they consider job offers, ponder marriage, or talk about fishing.”

“At our first meeting we talked about everything” says Jackson. “He allowed me to ask questions about anything. He talked to me about improving and differentiating myself. He was full of wisdom and I left motivated to be the best person I can possibly be.”

One of the first pearls of wisdom Jackson learned was about managing weaknesses. “Mr. Zank told me that being successful is to know your negatives,” he says. “This is important because when executives consider people for a promotion, they look at each candidate’s positives and negatives. My job is to have a shorter list of negatives than others being considered.” Jackson says he has learned it is important to tackle those negatives instead of being overwhelmed by an honest self-evaluation.

Jackson is not the first student to learn such sage advice from Zank. Fifteen students have received copies of Zank’s calendar over the years, several of them now senior-level executives. One such student, Brian Lamb, was paired with Zank when he was an undergraduate student and captain of USF’s basketball team. Now a business banking executive with Fifth Third Bank, Lamb credits Zank with helping him transition from student to professional.

“Dennis offered a wealth of experience and helped me transition from college to the workplace,” Lamb says. “I gained exposure to simple things like executive attire and how to run a board meeting, both of which are part of my daily life now. He taught me the importance of setting and executing goals.

“The relationship we shared helped me appreciate opportunities readily available to well-educated, well-prepared students. I completed the mentorship program full of confidence in my ability to compete successfully in the ‘professional world’ and not just on the basketball court.

“Dennis constantly reminded me to stay connected to the university,” he adds. That clearly was the most memorable advice since Lamb was recently appointed to the USF Board of Trustees.

“Today, I am the mentor,” says Lamb, who also contributes financially to the Corporate Mentor Program and funds a scholarship. “I enjoy playing a very small role in students’ success.”

– Lorie Briggs



Now a senior-level banking executive, Brian Lamb, left, and management major Torrell Jackson, right, are two of 15 USF business students who have shadowed alumnus Dennis Zank, one of the program’s longest-serving mentors.

JOSEPH GAMBLE