Sponsor Profile
Pioneer Natural Resources Company

Pioneer thrives on mentoring interns

Once upon a time, an extremely busy MIT alum was persuaded to abandon the warmth of Texas in January in exchange for a week in a large drafty hall in the middle of a Boston winter.

That alum was Tim Dove ’79, president and chief operating officer of Pioneer Natural Resources, a $24 billion oil and gas company based in Irving, Texas, the hall was in MIT's Walker Memorial, and that week in 2010 was one of UPOP’s famously intense professional development workshops held each January during MIT’s Independent Activities Period (IAP).

Dove was mentor-instructor to a team of nine sophomores, who were among the 100+ attending that week, all of them eager to learn from a remarkable group of mentor-instructors, who, like Tim Dove, were eager to share their considerable “real world” experience with the students.

From this beginning, a flourishing relationship has evolved: Tim Dove cheerfully returns to the drafty hall almost every January, Pioneer has contributed generously to UPOP’s endowment and is also an annual corporate sponsor—and, so far, 21 UPOP students have interned at Pioneer, with five of them now working there full time.

Eye-opening internship

One of those 21 students was Andrew Sommer ’13, who was on Tim Dove’s team during IAP January 2011, interned at Pioneer as a sophomore, again as a junior, and then joined full time as soon as he graduated. His enthusiasm knows no bounds;

“It was eye-opening,” said Sommer of his sophomore internship at Pioneer. “Even as an intern, you had the ability to contribute and make a significant impact on the bottom line of multi-million-dollar projects.”

Sommer is now an Engineer I, Sustainable Development, and, as part of Pioneer’s university ambassador program, he makes frequent recruiting visits back to campus.

“I always like coming back—I remember what it was like to be a UPOP student, figuring out what you want to do.”

In seeking the ideal interns, says Sommer, “the big thing is not just their technical skills. They are from MIT and we can assume technical skills. We want students who are able to interface with all the different groups—the engineers, the nontechnical staff, the field personnel. Can they get buy-in from all levels? Are they able to really fit in with the family culture of Pioneer?”

He says UPOP’s curriculum provides many of the skills “that make you much more effective as an engineer: how to go about a project, how to get off the ground a little bit faster, think a couple of steps ahead, consider back-up plans. We see this a lot in our UPOP interns.”

A company of mentors

After two internships and two years at Pioneer, Sommer is still impressed with the family culture, and the willingness of everyone to offer help. “Coming out of school, you hear about competitive cultures, but, at Pioneer, any time I’ve needed help, whether it was from other engineers, technical folk, or field personnel, everyone has been willing to sit down and talk things out.” It’s like having a whole company of coaches and mentors, he says.

Once the students get to Pioneer, says Sommer, “it’s really fun and challenging, and they’ll be pushing the boundaries of what they have learned in school. My sophomore internship was my first experience with the professional world. There was a lot of growth, going from a school environment of classes, due dates and schedules, to the professional world of deliverables and working with many different people within the company, each with their own roles and responsibilities.”

Pioneer assigns a mentor manager to their interns, but, says Sommer, this mentoring role is more about guidance and project advice than hand-holding. “The idea is to give interns a goal and then set them free.”

Future interns, he says, are in for a very pleasant surprise.