ACE Mentor Program
Mentoring the Next Generation of Construction Professionals, Part of Gilbane’s DNA

MODEL SUMMARY
The Architecture Construction Engineering (ACE) Mentor Program is a free afterschool offering, which over the course of 15 sessions exposes high school students to careers in the design and construction industry through real-world mock design and engineering projects. Students are guided through a project by their volunteer architect, engineer and construction management mentors and gain valuable exposure to businesses and leaders within the industry. Nationwide, approximately 20 percent of students in the ACE Mentor Program participate annually in internships with ACE-affiliated companies. Using Gilbane Building Company’s adoption of the ACE Mentor Program as an example, the utility of the model for many other companies in the design and construction industry is made clear.

BACKGROUND
The current and future success of Gilbane Building Company depends on talented architects and engineers to design buildings, coupled with enough construction managers and skilled crafts workers to build them. According to a 2012 McGraw-Hill Construction report, Construction Industry Workforce Shortages, more than two-thirds of surveyed industry representatives are concerned about workforce shortages. The team at Gilbane recognized that to meet the demand for future skilled workers, workforce recruitment should start at the high school level by exposing young students to careers in the industry.

Fortunately for Gilbane, the integrated construction industry developed a strategy and mechanism to help fulfill this workforce need with the creation of the ACE Mentor Program in 1994. Over the course of a year, students participating in the ACE Mentor Program are guided through a real-world mock design project, exposing them to careers in construction, architecture and engineering.

Scores of Gilbane employees have volunteered countless hours with ACE and have helped to create chapters in several cities across the country, including Providence, Cleveland and Houston. In addition, Gilbane Chairman and CEO Thomas F. Gilbane, Jr., helps lead the national nonprofit organization as its chairman, after previously serving as a board member.

ACE’s tried-and-true formula and its well-established, still-expanding network make leveraging the system easy for any company within the industry.

KEY ELEMENTS OF MODEL
- Pathway to careers in construction architecture, design or engineering
- Mentorship
- Opportunities for paid internships
- Pipeline for design and construction businesses of varying sizes
- Leadership, communication, presentation and critical-thinking skills training
PARTNERSHIP

Today, there are 62 ACE affiliates (chapters) spread across 32 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico that deliver the program in 200 cities and communities. Approximately 2,900 ACE mentors engage 8,000 students from 1,000 schools each year. Major construction and design companies sponsor ACE at the national level, including AECOM, Bechtel, Caterpillar, EMCOR Group, Gilbane Building Company and Turner Construction Company. Hundreds of local and regional firms sponsor ACE chapters.

NUTS AND BOLTS

In the ACE model, a team of architects, engineers, construction managers and other industry professionals mentors a group of high school students over 15 two-hour afterschool sessions. During this free, hands-on program, students experience a realistic simulation of designing and planning a project, culminating in a presentation in a public forum. Students learn about industry careers as they interact and problem solve with active professionals and tour workspaces and construction sites.

Key elements of the program include:

- **Hands-On Training and Career Exploration:** Through real-world mock design projects, students are introduced to the key players in a large-scale design project and learn the role that each performs in the planning, design and construction phases of a project.

- **Exposure to Professional Offices and Construction Sites:** Students tour professional offices and active construction sites, gaining firsthand insight into the day-to-day experiences of workers in the industry.

- **Mentorship:** Students are guided through the project by their volunteer architect, engineer and construction management mentors and gain exposure to leaders within the industry.

- **Presentation and Team-Building Skills:** Students learn valuable professional skills, including communication, teamwork and problem-solving, while working in teams to develop the mock design project. At the culmination of the year, ACE student teams present their designs to fellow ACE students, teachers, mentors and prospective industry employers.

- **Paid Internships:** Each year, almost 20 percent of ACE students nationwide enjoy internship opportunities with ACE-affiliated companies. Gilbane regularly employs many ACE interns.

- **Scholarships:** In 2015 alone, ACE affiliates awarded $1.5 million in scholarships to students headed for college or into trade programs.

“Gilbane’s participation in the ACE Mentor Program is a win-win. We expose young people to our industry. At the same time, our staff who mentor gain valuable work skills and enjoy the personal satisfaction of giving back to the communities where we live and work. Further, they get to network with others in our industry.”
— Thomas F. Gilbane, Jr., Chairman and CEO, Gilbane, Inc.

National, regional and local companies participate in ACE. Participation involves no direct costs, but companies such as Gilbane are encouraged to make tax-deductible donations to support scholarships and the operations of the local and national programs. The companies also have indirect costs associated with staff volunteering to serve as mentors to students in the program.

Gilbane’s mission is to build more than buildings; it aspires to build communities as well. In the spirit of community service, Gilbane Chairman and CEO Thomas F. Gilbane, Jr., currently chairs ACE’s national board, and other leaders from the company chair seven affiliate boards. Gilbane is involved with ACE programs and affiliates whenever possible, whether through a company office or major project site. More than 125 Gilbane employees actively mentor with 25 ACE affiliates.
The ACE Mentor Program is building a pipeline of future talent for the design and construction industry. More than 45,000 students have participated in the program since its establishment in 1994. Student and business participation, as well as survey results, prove ACE’s model is successful in exposing young students to careers within these fields. Moreover, 70 percent of program alumni in college report that participating in the ACE program gave them an advantage over their freshman college classmates.

The ACE program has received national recognition for its commitment to building a talented future pipeline of design and construction professionals. At a 2010 White House ceremony, the ACE program received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics and Engineering Mentoring. More recently, in 2014, the American Institute of Architects presented its Collaborative Achievement Award to ACE.

ACE student benefits and outcomes include:

- **Strong Participation and Program Interest:** Across the nation, almost 8,000 high school students participate in the program annually. In fact, the demand from schools and students to join the program exceeds the availability of mentors.

- **Pathway to Future Training:** Of the 1,975 high school seniors who completed the program in 2015, 70 percent entered college declaring majors in architecture, engineering or construction. Historically, a remarkably high 75 percent of alumni have stuck to these majors during college.

- **Success for a More Diverse Workforce:** ACE alumni are significantly more diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity than their national counterparts studying architecture, engineering and construction. The ACE program is helping the industry become more inclusive to reflect the demographics of the nation’s future workforce.

- **Scholarships for Future Training:** ACE students are eligible to receive more than $1.5 million in scholarships that local affiliates raise annually. During the past two decades, ACE has awarded student scholarships worth $12.5 million.

ACE benefits to Gilbane Building Company include:

- **Building of Relationships Across the Industry:** Gilbane is one of the top educational builders in the United States. The company’s involvement in ACE helps establish valuable relationships with educators, school administrators and guidance counselors and therefore can be viewed as an advantage when the company bids on jobs.

- **Mentoring and Training of the Future Workforce:** Gilbane mentors spend between 30 and 75 hours per year working with ACE students during work hours — and frequently on their own time as well. The company does not view this time as lost productivity because employee mentors value participation in the program so highly that they readily make up any time out of office. Further, the mentoring opportunity increases their long-term loyalty to the company.

- **Alignment with Gilbane’s Corporate Social Responsibility Efforts:** Since 2007, Gilbane has donated more than $700,000 to the national ACE program and its local affiliates. It considers this “investment” an act of corporate social responsibility, a down payment on a future stream of employees and a training opportunity for current employees.

- **Leadership Opportunities, Particularly for Young Staff:** Gilbane strongly encourages employees at all levels to get involved with ACE. For young professionals in particular, volunteering for ACE is looked upon favorably for performance reviews and promotions. Chairman and CEO Thomas F. Gilbane, Jr., conducts an informal annual review of all business units’ participation in ACE and each summer grants Gilbane’s annual ACE Mentoring Award to one or more employees during a companywide town hall meeting. Winners receive $1,000 to give to their local ACE chapter.
Training for Emerging Professionals: While Gilbane does not measure the return on investment of its involvement with the ACE program, the company considers ACE an excellent training experience for its emerging professionals. Depending on the office, management candidates are encouraged or even required to become ACE mentors. Gilbane ACE mentors sharpen leadership, communication and teamwork skills and also expand their networks through contact with mentors from other firms.

SUSTAINABILITY AND OVERCOMING IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Comparatively little expense on Gilbane’s part is required to sustain its involvement in the ACE program. The most important ingredient for success is the CEO’s promotion of the program.

WORDS OF WISDOM

For design and construction industry companies of any size interested in growing the industry’s workforce, the ACE Mentor Program offers a “plug-and-play” model. Interested companies simply need to connect with a local ACE affiliate. A committed company where no affiliate exists can also take the lead in establishing an affiliate. ACE staff will assist in this process.

The ACE model also offers industries and large companies in fields outside of design and construction a readily adaptable framework. The key steps involve: (1) devising hands-on activities linked to the industry or company line of work; (2) recruiting mentors who are passionate about their work and eager to nurture the next generation of professionals; and (3) establishing a relationship with a school or school system. ACE is willing to share its experience, as well as organizational and programmatic materials, with other industries.

For businesses considering developing a similar program, ACE recommends that program organizers follow strong risk management practices such as carrying liability insurance and conducting background checks on mentors.

INFORMATION, TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- ACE Mentor Program www.acementor.org
- Gilbane Building Company www.gilbaneco.com

VIDEOS

- ACE Sponsor Companies Explain Benefits of Their Sponsorship http://bit.ly/1Lq6yPM

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