

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL FROM WITHIN

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Abstract

The senior leadership of the University of Georgia's Office of Finance and Administration (F&A) recognizes the need to improve the administrative and managerial "bench strength" and diversity within the division. A commitment to increase the number of minority employees in managerial and senior staff level positions is reflected as a goal in the office's strategic plan.

In the coming years, a number of mid-level and senior leaders within the division will be reaching retirement age, presenting the opportunity for a new generation of employees to assume leadership roles. In order to capitalize on the forthcoming opportunity, the senior team has embarked upon an ambitious staff development program to enhance the overall "bench strength" of the organization by identifying current employees with the potential to assume higher responsibilities. In one of those programs, F&A Fellows, three employees were selected for an intensive, six-month leadership rotation program.

Introduction of the Organization

The University of Georgia (UGA), established in 1785, is the flagship institution among the 35 colleges and universities in the University System of Georgia. As a federal land-grant/sea-grant institution, it abides by a tripartite mission of teaching, research and service. With some 33,600 students, more than 9,800 faculty and staff, and a \$1.4 billion annual budget, UGA is the oldest, largest and most comprehensive educational institution in Georgia and a driving force in the state's economic growth.

The institution's academic reputation is on the rise, resulting in increasingly selective undergraduate admissions and higher faculty quality. For the past eight years, the University of Georgia has been ranked among the nation's top 22 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report*. In the past 11 years UGA students have won 30 Goldwater Scholarships, four Rhodes Scholarships and three Marshall Scholarships, among many other top national academic honors. UGA ranks 22nd in the country, and third in the South, in total number of doctoral degrees awarded annually and ranks 13th in total number of doctorates awarded to African Americans. In addition, UGA is the nation's leader in total spending for research and development among universities that have neither a medical nor engineering school. Private giving to the University topped \$100 million for the first time in 2005-06, putting the institution's capital campaign goal of \$500 million well within reach for the coming year.

More than 1,600 employees serve in the University's Office of Finance and Administration, striving to provide the essential support required by the University of Georgia to achieve its ambitious academic, research and service mission. Seven divisions are housed under the auspices of Finance and Administration, managing the University's fiscal, human and physical resources.

Statement/(Restatement) of the Problem/Initiative

The senior leadership of Finance and Administration (F&A) recognizes the need to improve the administrative and managerial “bench strength” and diversity within the division. A commitment to increase the number of minority employees in managerial and senior staff level positions is reflected as a goal in the office’s strategic plan.

In the coming years, a number of mid-level and senior leaders within the division will be reaching retirement age, presenting the opportunity for a new generation of employees to assume leadership roles. In order to capitalize on the forthcoming opportunity, the senior team has embarked upon an ambitious staff development program to enhance the overall “bench strength” of the organization by identifying current employees with the potential to assume higher responsibilities and preparing them for potential advancement. In one program, approximately 60 mid-level employees enrolled in two year-long cohorts to improve their managerial and front-line supervisory capacities while also building their network of contacts. In another program, F&A Fellows (the one profiled in this Best Practices entry), three employees were selected for an intensive, six-month leadership rotation program. In all programs, females and minorities were particularly encouraged to apply.

Design

In mid-2004, the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration charged a division-wide committee (comprised of a few mid-level managers but primarily staff members) with the task of presenting recommendations to improve diversity within the division. The group's report, submitted in January 2005 and reviewed by the senior staff, contained many excellent ideas, and the staff development initiatives now underway are based on its recommendations, contributing to "buy-in" from the overall workforce.

In the course of designing the staff development effort, it was determined that the programs should be directed centrally through the Senior Vice President's Office, rather than Human Resources, so that the initiatives would be recognized as bearing the imprimatur of the ranking official in the division. Thus, the Assistant Vice President for Finance and Administration devotes a substantial portion of her time to oversight and coordination of these efforts, in close consultation with the Diversity Committee and the Human Resources Office.

From the outset, the senior team determined that the Fellowship experience should consist of a "residential" experience, with the Fellows being taken from their home departments for a set period of time to learn new skills, enhance their appreciation for the breadth of the division, and forge professional connections for future career growth and advancement. But what was the optimum time for placement? After considerable deliberation, the senior team decided that a six-month rotation would be ideal, allowing the Fellows to spend three months in two Finance and Administration divisions. Their work assignment was to be substantive and representative of the typical sort of project undertaken by the hosting unit.

Of course, the sudden absence or addition of a high-performing employee for half a year would create a burden for the "lending" divisions as well as the "hosting" divisions. The

Associate Vice Presidents over each of the divisions were responsible for crafting a meaningful Fellowship experience and for providing coverage of the Fellows' work duties during their extended absences. It was determined that no more than three employees should be selected for this pilot experience, in order to avoid overburdening either the hosts or lenders. Fellows would be evaluated on their performance in assigned tasks, but more importantly, on their attitude and aptitude. How did they react to new situations and new duties? Did they develop creative solutions to problems? Were they team players? Did they demonstrate initiative? Were their interpersonal skills strong? Likewise, the Fellows evaluated their own performances and provided valuable feedback on the fledgling program.

Performance evaluations were to be submitted to the Assistant Vice President for review and then forwarded to the home departments for inclusion in the Fellows' annual evaluation materials. It was determined by the designers of the program that absence from the job due to the Fellows Program could not be held against a participant. The Fellows experience was to be an asset, not a liability, in the annual evaluation process. Sick days and personal leave would continue to be maintained by the home department.

Costs for the program potentially could include salaries for the temporary replacements of the Fellows at their home offices. However, in the first class (and now in the second), no replacements have been hired. The total cost of the program for the first group of Fellows totaled about \$7,000. This included the expense of additional compensation provided to one Fellow to continue essential programming duties for his home office (after hours), as well as the concluding luncheon and awards program (attended by the Fellows, their supervisors at "home" and in the placements, and the Finance and Administration senior staff).

Implementation

The Finance and Administration Fellows Program was launched in June 2005. Information about the new program and instructions on the application process were disseminated via e-mail and through the reporting chains in the various departments (starting with the Associate Vice Presidents). A page on the Finance and Administration Web site was created (www.busfin.uga.edu/fellows.html) to make the information and application form widely available.

The application process required completion of an application form and the submission of three items: a resume, a letter of recommendation from the applicant's supervisor, and a letter from the applicant stating his/her goals and interest in the program. An anonymous screening committee (comprised of two F&A senior leaders and three leaders from outside the division) selected five candidates as worthy of final interviews. The finalists were interviewed by a high-ranking panel, comprised of the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration, the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Associate Provost for Academic Fiscal Affairs. The three inaugural Fellows began their rotations on October 1, completing the process on April 1. The class consisted of two females (one, a minority) and a white male. (The second class also consists of two females and one male, although two are minorities.)

The application form allowed the Fellows to indicate the two divisions which most interested them for placement. However, the final judging panel decided that these placements would not stretch the horizons of the Fellows as much as desired. Therefore, no Fellow received the exact placement he/she requested. In hindsight, no Fellow regretted it, as attested to by a Fellow who was surprised to learn he had been placed in the Physical Plant rather than the Budget Office.

“I believe one of the most valuable facets of the Fellows Program is that I have been removed from the comfort level of my formal position at UGA,” he wrote in his program evaluation. “I have had to develop a completely new set of skills to address the needs of a division with different goals and responsibilities. I feel like this process has made me more flexible and adept at taking on new responsibilities effectively in the future.”

Prior to each rotation, the Fellows met with their new supervising Associate Vice President and received a written explanation of their work assignment as well as the standards by which they would be evaluated. The Fellows also had meetings at the midpoint of each rotation with the Assistant Vice President. At the end of each rotation, the hosting supervisors (and Associate Vice Presidents) evaluated the Fellows, and the Fellows submitted their own self-assessments and program evaluations. These evaluations were discussed during exit interviews with the hosting supervisors and/or Associate Vice Presidents and the Assistant Vice President. In addition, the Assistant Vice President and supervising Associate Vice Presidents mentored the Fellows throughout the program, particularly encouraging those who did not have advanced degrees to further their educations through the University’s Tuition Assistance Program.

In each of the rotations, the Fellows were provided with an overview of the hosting division and assigned discrete tasks of their own. For example, one Fellow, a computer programmer, found a niche for himself helping the Controller’s Office develop IT solutions to streamline their business processes. Another, a police communications officer, was tasked with organizing and developing plans for a proposed consolidation of two units in Auxiliary Services. An accountant assigned to Human Resources was charged with completing a comprehensive review of how some other universities are “incentivizing” faculty pay by awarding bonuses to faculty who acquire extramural funding for their salaries, thus freeing up state salary dollars for

other hires. The Fellow presented her findings to the Vice President for Research and the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.

“I have developed many new skills that I wouldn’t have gained otherwise, met many new friends in other F&A areas, expanded my knowledge of how F&A truly functions, and broadened my personal view of how I can continue to contribute to the F&A division in the future,” wrote one Fellow. “I would recommend this program to my peers and have taken the chance to do so. There are many excellent ‘up and coming’ leaders on campus who are waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate their talents.”

The Fellows participated in senior-level management meetings within their hosting divisions and also attended a meeting of the Finance and Administration senior staff and the University Cabinet. In addition, several “shadowing opportunities” were provided, although not so many that the placement experience was diluted. The Fellows spent a day meeting with the senior leadership in the Faculty Affairs office, including a private meeting with the Provost, and with the senior leadership in Student Affairs in order to gain a better understanding of the bridge that must exist between the academic and business sides of decision-making on campus. They also attended a day-long session focused on the University’s business processes in the areas of Budget, Human Resources and the Controller’s Office. Finally, they devoted a day to the two areas in Finance and Administration in which none was placed: the Facilities Planning Office (University Architects) and Environmental Safety.

“The most beneficial aspect of the Fellows Program was the networking and establishing of relationships with key people,” wrote one Fellow. “The Fellowship Program

gave me the opportunity to meet people that I would have, most likely, never have been able to meet or come in contact with.”

Benefits

The Fellows Program offers mutual benefits to the participants and Finance and Administration alike. The exposure and feedback the Fellows receive throughout their six-month experience provides constructive guidance to them. They realize that there is more to Finance and Administration – and the University of Georgia – than just the confines of the division in which they work. Their portfolios are enhanced in order to prepare them for future career growth opportunities within Finance and Administration as well as the University.

Likewise, Finance and Administration is enhanced because the capacity of the overall workforce is strengthened. The Fellows apply their knowledge and improved networking to further their home departments upon their return. Instead of wondering why HR requires certain information to process an application, the Fellow placed there can explain it. The Fellow placed in Budgets can assist her department with fiscal documents in the future. In addition, the staff members who were forced to “step up” during the Fellows’ absence from the home departments have improved their knowledge and skills.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the success of the program, however, is the Fellows’ determination to heed mentors’ advice and pursue advanced degrees. No promises were made to the Fellows of a promotion pending the conclusion of the program. Instead, the Fellows were informed that a successful experience would broaden their skills and be an asset in future consideration, but that the best step they could take to improve their prospects for career growth was to continue their educations. At the time the program began, only one of the

Fellows had earned a master's degree. By the end of the six-month program, one had begun her first semester of studies and the other had applied for entry into the MBA program for the fall.

Retrospect

Early reviews of the Fellows Program by the participants and the hosts have been very positive. However, enhancement of the program is an iterative process, and some modifications have already been made for the second rotation (now underway) in response to the feedback provided in the evaluations.

- ***Time Period*** – Six consecutive months is a long time to be without a pivotal employee. Also, the original rotation placed the Fellows in their first assignments from October 1 – December 31. The inaugural Fellows were frustrated that their placements were interrupted by the holiday break, right when they had progressed to doing their most meaningful work. Therefore, the timeframe for the second group of Fellows was adjusted to commence just after Labor Day and conclude at the end of November. The Fellows will return to their home departments for the month of December and will begin their second three-month rotation in January. The spring conclusion of the program remains the same. In the future, the schedule may be tweaked even further to allow the lending/hosting departments more of a voice in determining when the Fellowship period begins for each participant, rather than treating all of the Fellows as members of a single cohort, beginning and ending at the same time.
- ***Transition*** – In hindsight, we should have planned better for a smoother transition back to the regular position. Again, there is no promise of a promotion at the end of the Fellows rotation, and the Fellows are expected to return to their home departments. However, the Fellow's knowledge, skills and networking have expanded during his/her

participation, as have those of the colleagues who stepped up to cover duties during the Fellow's absence. We cannot expect things to be just as they were six months ago. While we did not encounter any major difficulties with the transition, we are working to improve it for the second group of participants.

- ***Additional Shadowing Opportunities*** – The Fellows noted in their program evaluations that the shadowing opportunities were very beneficial. The senior staff also recommended that an opportunity be added to introduce the Fellow to the operations of an academic unit. Therefore, an additional opportunity will be added to the existing shadowing opportunities: a day with the business officer of a college or school.
- ***Publicity*** – The inaugural Fellows were taken “on the road” in Spring 2006 to talk to colleagues across Finance and Administration about their experiences and stimulate interest in next year's program. Brown bag lunches were held in four different locations; however, attendance was disappointing in all but one location. In hindsight, the timing of the brown bags could have been more accommodating. They were offered in May, during one of the most demanding months for financial employees. Next year, the lunch sessions will be held in April, immediately after the rotations end.

Although the Fellows Program is evolving and the program is too young to assess its impact on the future career achievements of participants, the senior leadership team of the University of Georgia's Office of Finance and Administration is committed to its success. We hope that the Fellows Program represents merely the beginning of a comprehensive leadership, management, administrative and professional development effort by the division.