

2009 SACUBO BEST PRACTICES ENTRY:

**DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL FROM WITHIN:
THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA FINANCE & ADMINISTRATION
FELLOWS PROGRAM**

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Abstract

The University of Georgia faces a significant challenge: within the next 10 years, close to half of the senior leaders in its Finance and Administration division (defined as director level or above, encompassing assistant and associate vice presidents) will be eligible for retirement. Rather than view the challenge as a threat to institutional stability, Finance and Administration (F&A) has chosen to regard it as a prime opportunity to diversify the leadership team and improve the overall “bench strength” of the organization.

Toward this end, Finance and Administration has embarked upon an ambitious staff development program, the pinnacle of which is the Finance and Administration Fellows Program. Over the past four years, this program has served to identify 10 potential “rising stars” in the division, testing their aptitude and expanding their horizons through six-month placements in F&A departments other than their own.

The results thus far have been impressive: four of the participants (40 percent) have been minorities and five (50 percent) have been female; seven of the eight in the three preceding classes (the fourth rotation is currently underway) have assumed positions of increased responsibility; and six of the eight have either earned or are pursuing advanced degrees since the conclusion of their Fellows experience.

A commitment to increase the number of minority employees in managerial and senior staff level positions is reflected as a goal in Finance and Administration’s strategic plan. Through its staff development program—and more specifically, through its Fellows Program—that goal is being achieved.

Introduction of the Organization

The University of Georgia (UGA), established in 1785 as the nation's first state-chartered university, is the flagship institution among the 35 colleges and universities in the University System of Georgia. With more than 34,000 students, approximately 9,000 faculty and staff, and an annual budget of \$1.3 billion, UGA is the largest and most comprehensive educational institution in Georgia and a driving force in the state's economic growth.

The University of Georgia's academic reputation is on the rise, and admission is increasingly competitive. More than 17,300 applicants applied for the fall 2008 class of approximately 4,800 freshmen. The University of Georgia has been ranked among the nation's top 20 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report* in 8 of the last 10 years, and the institution is consistently recognized as one of the best values in American higher education.

More than 1,600 employees serve in the University's Finance and Administration units, 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. They are: Auxiliary and Administrative Services, Budget, Controller, Environmental Safety, Human Resources, Physical Plant and University Architects. Employees from all of these units are eligible to participate in the F&A Fellows Program.

Statement/(Restatement) of the Problem/Initiative

The senior leadership of Finance and Administration (F&A) has long recognized 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 F&A's strategic plan. Within the next decade, close to half of the senior leaders within the division (defined as director level or above, encompassing assistant and associate vice presidents) will be eligible for retirement, presenting the opportunity for a new generation of employees to assume leadership roles. In order to capitalize on the forthcoming opportunity, the senior leadership team has embarked upon an ambitious staff development program, with the F&A Fellows Program representing the pinnacle experience. In all of the programs, females and minorities are particularly encouraged to apply.

The Finance and Administration Fellows Program, now in its fourth year, plays an integral role in the division's efforts to address succession planning. It not only builds bench strength but also enhances opportunities for women and minorities to advance within the ranks. The program has been very successful to date, with 100 percent of the graduates either moving to positions of increased responsibility or pursuing/completing advanced degrees. Four of the participants (40 percent) have been minorities and five (50 percent) have been female. This succession planning effort already has been fruitful in identifying a cadre of "high potentials" who have demonstrated that they have the skills, abilities, commitment and potential to rise into management ranks in the future.

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 Office of the Senior Vice President, 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 Human Resources.

From the outset, the senior team determined that the Fellowship should consist of a “residential” experience, with the Fellows being taken from their home departments to spend three months in each of two different divisions, for a total time away of six months. During this time the Fellows learn new skills, enhance their appreciation for the breadth of the division, and forge professional connections for future career growth and advancement. They are mentored by senior leaders in the host divisions and are included in management meetings at the departmental and division levels to learn more about the decision-making process. Their time as a Fellow also includes shadow days in other divisions of Finance and Administration, as well as a day with leaders in Academic Affairs and External Affairs. In addition, the Fellows are paired with two business officers in campus units in order to develop an appreciation for a unit-based view of operations rather than solely a centralized, administrative one.

Of course, the sudden absence or addition of a high-performing employee for half a year can create a burden for the “lending” divisions as well as the “hosting” divisions. It is difficult for a leader to surrender an up-and-coming employee, particularly when they realize that the Fellow might be hired by another unit of Finance and Administration once their talents are seen

by a broader audience (which has happened). Convincing the senior staff that they must think of the benefit to Finance and Administration as a whole and to the professional development of the individual employee first and foremost rather than thinking only of their own department's needs was a challenge at first. In time, however, the senior staff have come to realize the benefit and payoff in the long run.

Implementation

The Associate Vice Presidents over each of the divisions are responsible for crafting a meaningful Fellowship experience and for providing coverage of the Fellows' work duties during their extended absences. This, too, can sometimes be a challenge, and managing expectations of the Fellow and those left behind in the unit is absolutely essential. The end result is that the Fellow's colleagues in the home department improve their skills in the Fellow's absence because they are cross-training and assuming new duties. Thus, the entire workforce becomes stronger.

The Fellows' work assignments are more than mere "busy work": they are value-added initiatives for the host divisions. A few examples will illustrate this point: an assessment of wireless communications efficiencies in the Physical Plant accompanied by a recommendation for improvements; participation in the development of a bicycle master plan for campus (an idea pitched to the senior administration by the Fellow and the chief University architect); a Human Resources study of incentive-based pay for faculty researchers; and a process improvement plan for parking (in Auxiliary Services). These are projects that have inured to the benefit of the hosting divisions.

An added benefit of the program is that it costs very little to implement. Lending departments are allowed to hire temporary staff to help cover the workload in the Fellow's absence, but this option has not been utilized. On one occasion, a Fellow was paid to perform 10 extra hours of work per week to keep some critical initiatives in his home department underway. In all other cases, the work has been covered by cross-training and spreading the workload among existing employees. Fellows do not receive any additional salary upon their selection, but rather retain their current salaries. Sick and annual leave is reported to the lending division (the home department).

The very nature of the Fellows Program necessitates that participation be small. No more than three Fellows are to be selected each year, ensuring that their time away will not be overly burdensome on the lending division and that the Fellows' personal experiences will be well planned and meaningful. Fellows are evaluated on their performance in assigned tasks, but most importantly, on their attitude and aptitude. How do they react to new situations and new duties? Do they develop creative solutions to problems? Are they team players? Do they demonstrate initiative? Are their interpersonal skills strong? Likewise, the Fellows evaluate their own performances and provide valuable feedback to the program administrator. These evaluations are shared with the home departments for inclusion in the Fellows' annual evaluation materials. Each year the program has been enhanced and modified in response to their suggestions.

Selection for the F&A Fellows Program is a highly competitive process. F&A employees are informed via email when the application period opens and are directed to the F&A website for more information (www.busfin.uga.edu/fellows.html). Posters also are placed throughout the various departments in the division, and the current Fellows join the Assistant Vice President in a series of brown bag lunches to answer questions about the program from potential applicants.

The application process requires 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 a diverse group of F&A senior leaders and leaders from outside the division) selects a short list of candidates for final interviews. The finalists are then interviewed by a high-ranking panel, comprised of the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration and two other members of the University's senior administration. In the past, the judging panel has included the Vice President for Student Affairs, the Vice President for Public Service and Outreach, the Associate Provost for Institutional Diversity, the Chief Information Officer and the Chief of Staff to the President, among others. Their participation helps to convey the status of the program to the entire University community.

Once selected, the Fellows' placements are assigned by the Senior Vice President. Rarely does a Fellow receive the first choice he/she has indicated, as this is often viewed as being too close to the "comfort zone" of the Fellow. Remember that a primary goal of the program is to stretch the Fellow and broaden his/her horizons. Therefore, an accountant may find herself in the Architects Office or a police officer in the Physical Plant.

The Fellows generally begin their rotations after Labor Day, returning to the home department for the month of December; the second rotation runs from January until the end of March. The Fellows' achievements are celebrated at an awards luncheon in April with the senior leadership of the division. In addition, the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration has lunch with alumni once a year to catch up on their progress and achievements. Thus, the Fellows Program has introduced him to a small group of outstanding individuals whom he might not otherwise have met; after all, there are more than 1,600 employees in the division.

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 department 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 Human Resources requires certain information to process an application, the Fellow placed there can explain it. The Fellow placed in Budgets can cut through red tape via her new network of contacts and assist her department with fiscal documents in the future. The coworkers who stepped up during the Fellows' absence from the home departments have improved their knowledge and skills. In addition, the hosting departments reap the benefit of value-added projects performed during the Fellows' tenure.

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 are made to the Fellows of a promotion pending the conclusion of the program. Instead, the Fellows are informed that a successful experience will broaden their skills and be an asset in future consideration, but that the best step they can take to improve their prospects for career growth is to continue their educations. Since the introduction of the Fellows Program in 2005, six of the

eight Fellows in previous classes have earned or entered advance degree programs. Seven have assumed positions of greater responsibility, either within their home departments or other areas.

This investment in employee development is making a positive impression. Said one Fellow: “The Fellows Program demonstrates that the people here are open to new ideas, open to people taking the next step, showing initiative and trying something new. There’s definitely a feeling that you want employees to succeed here.”

Perhaps best of all, the Fellows Program is helping Finance and Administration to achieve its goal to increase the number of females and minorities in managerial positions. Of the participants in the four Fellows classes thus far, four (40 percent) have been minorities and five (50 percent) have been female.

Retrospect

The Fellows Program is but one component of a multifaceted staff development program aimed at improving opportunities for advancement within the organization. Unfortunately, the budget maladies that plague all public institutions of higher learning have negatively affected Finance and Administration’s ability to implement its staff development programs as fully as desired, except in the case of the Fellows Program. This program, which requires nominal monetary investment, has continued unimpeded. Thus, it is particularly advantageous in that it can flourish in good economic times or in downturns.

Lessons learned include the following:

- **Iterative Process** – Development of the program has been an iterative progress, with enhancements introduced along the way. For example, at the request of the Fellows, the original shadowing opportunity with Academic Affairs was enhanced to include External

Affairs and interaction with business officers in the individual colleges and units. In 2008-09, the Fellows for the first time will visit two of the University's extended campuses. Thus, their experience continues to expand.

- **Flexible Schedules** – At first, it was envisioned that the Fellows would function as a cohort, all starting and stopping at the same time. Since that time, however, the need for more customized treatment has become apparent. At the initial planning session, special needs of the lending department are now explored, and if the Fellow needs to be in the home office at a particular time to finish a project, that request is honored. For example, one Fellow did not begin her second rotation in January with her colleagues but instead waited until February to commence the second rotation. This allowed her to remain in her home department, which was charged with processing W-2s, during the most hectic time of the year. She simply finished her rotation a month after her colleagues.
- **Manage Expectations** – Since the earliest days of the program, Finance and Administration has learned how better to manage expectations, both of the Fellows and of colleagues in the home department who “step up” while the Fellows are gone. This has largely been achieved through the commitment of the unit leaders to talk with their staffs and make sure that their responsibilities as hosts or lenders are well understood. They emphasize that the coworkers will be improving their own skills and advancing their own career preparation in the Fellows' absence and that the program is available to anyone who wishes to apply. Upon the return of the Fellows, job duties do not revert back to the “old way,” but rather reflect the enhanced skills and training of all involved. The program coordinator (the Assistant Vice President) and the hosting supervisors/mentors also impress upon the Fellow that there is no guarantee of advancement upon completion. The

best action the Fellows can take is to assume personal responsibility for their own career development and pursue advanced degrees and certifications.

- **Maintaining Support in a Budget Crunch** – It can be a challenge to maintain the support of the division leaders, particularly in the case of the smaller divisions, who sacrifice a great deal when a Fellow is selected from their departments. This is particularly the case when budget constraints are tight and there is little money to hire replacement help to cover the workload. However, the support of the senior leadership of the division has been steadfast, and this has enabled the program to persevere. The Senior Vice President has impressed upon the unit leaders that they must think unselfishly and put the greater good of the institution ahead of their own needs. He has not wavered in his commitment to support these up-and-coming professionals in their career development and prepare them for positions of greater responsibility in the future. Support from the top of the organization is absolutely essential to maintain the health of the program.

In conclusion, the Fellows Program has proven to be an extremely effective tool for the University of Georgia's Finance and Administration division to identify staff members with high potential for advancement. The program provides an opportunity for the Fellows to demonstrate their talents, improve their abilities and enhance their professional contacts, while also building the skills and abilities of the coworkers who are called upon to manage the Fellows' workloads for the six months they are participating in the program. The result is a stronger division as a whole, with better connectivity between the seven units that comprise Finance and Administration.

As previously mentioned, the commitment of the division's senior leadership is vital to the continuing success of the program. "As the senior leader for Finance and Administration, I've always felt like one of the key indicators of a healthy organization is one that has people in place who are prepared, ready, willing and able to move into ranks of further responsibility and leadership once those become available," said Senior Vice President Tim Burgess. "That's why I think it is incumbent upon the leadership team to be very focused on this whole notion of succession planning. The Fellows Program is a key piece of our efforts to do just that."