Sponsorship in Academia:
Observations from the Staff Perspective

By Donna D. Edmondson and Maggie Floyd

Have you ever thought about the word sponsorship? What does it mean? Have you ever thought about how you have been able to advance in the field of research management? As staff and faculty in academia, the perspective of this article and the two subsequent articles in NCURA Magazine will address how several women have had leadership opportunities because of sponsors, what that meant to each, and how it has helped them advance in a university setting. We seek to stimulate conversation in the field of research administration; a field once dominated by men but is now predominantly women. This article is from our perspectives as university staff. The second article is from the faculty perspective and the last article will be a combined effort from the authors of the first two articles.

In our careers sponsorship has been a part of our leadership path. But we note, however, that it has not always been obvious. After reading The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Kerrie Peraino, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg (Harvard Business Review Research Report 2010), we had the proverbial “a-ha moment.” Maggie Floyd and I began thinking about our life in academia; life as a student, a work study, a staff member and finally as a manager. We thought about how our careers have evolved and that a lot of it was hard work and perseverance, but an undeniable part of the equation was that we have had a sponsor at each evolutionary step. Someone who took notice of our abilities and helped us develop as leaders.

After several conversations, we came to realize that as staff, our career paths unfolded in very similar ways. Our experiences were virtually identical. We each had support from a male role model, both of whom happened to be faculty at our University. We were thrust into leadership roles for which neither of us had a lot of experience, yet afforded opportunities outside the normal job duties to develop our leadership skills. Our sponsors invested their time in our abilities and we invested time to make it happen. The authors (of The Sponsor Effect) define this type of sponsorship as “relationship capital.” They describe a sponsor as someone who “doesn’t just believe in you; a sponsor believes in you more than you believe in yourself. He’ll toss your hat in the ring before you would. Sponsors take calculated risks...
on you (Hewlett et al. 2010, p. 5).” Our sponsors decided we had the potential to move up in the University and they were willing to provide us the opportunities.

Currently, we both hold managerial positions within our organization yet neither of our educational backgrounds included a focused development of leadership, mentoring or sponsorship skills. We believe that it is a much more common experience in our field for leaders to find themselves propelled into positions of responsibility without receiving formal training on how to lead. In many ways, leadership was the ultimate “trial by fire” experience for us and many of our colleagues. We know that if hard work and a good sponsor put you in a position of leadership, then structured leadership development can serve as the catalyst for continued advancement and higher levels of professional effectiveness.

Another common experience shared by the authors was participation in the Leadership UTSA Program (at The University of Texas at San Antonio) as part of the 2011-2012 cohort. This leadership development program was the result of close collaboration between the UTSA Division of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. Our Provost and the Vice President of Student Affairs invested time, energy and resources to sponsor this impactful program. Leadership UTSA was designed to bring a cross-section of staff and faculty together (nominated by their Vice President) for monthly meetings to examine various leadership topics such as organizational culture, people, change management, resources, strategic planning, and decision-making. Participants also engaged in various self-reflection activities and completed a comprehensive 360° assessment. We had the opportunity to observe our organization through in-depth divisional presentations designed to give us a broad institutional perspective. Finally, Leadership UTSA participants were paired with an experienced executive level leader from one of the divisions within our university for a structured mentorship experience.

Structured leadership development programs such as Leadership UTSA coupled with broader acceptance and practice of sponsorship holds great potential for professional advancement of women in academia. Participation in this type of structured leadership development cultivates knowledge, skill and confidence necessary to take purposeful action toward advancing in a career path that empowers staff and faculty to have a greater positive impact on the mission of your organization. Most of the participants experienced a profound level of growth and significantly broadened perspective about their role in the organization’s mission. Maggie’s mentorship experience with UTSA Vice President for Student Affairs, Dr. Gage Paine, provides a powerful example of this growth. Through the mentorship process, Maggie witnessed an experienced executive build bridges as she educated others about her division’s mission. She learned how effective listening and questioning skills were as critical to sound leadership as solid decision-making. Maggie also experienced a particularly intense moment of inspiration upon observing how woman-to-woman mentoring engenders change, empowers, nurtures, challenges, validates and uplifts talents that might otherwise remain ensnared within male-centric professional structures.

Donna’s mentor for Leadership UTSA was Dr. Marianne Woods, Senior Associate Vice President for Research Administration. Through her experience, Donna observed a top-level administrator promote participation from junior management by inquiring about divisional operations and projects. It was the thoughtful discussions and the cultivating of team members to develop problem-solving skills that were most poignant. Dr. Woods offered solutions, but also listened, which is crucial for anyone in any leadership position. Hewlett et. al states that “sponsorship can’t be forced…but it can be fostered by setting up the playing field (The Sponsor Effect, 2010).” As a sponsor and a mentor, Dr. Woods very vividly set up the playing field through directed engagement and the open exchange of ideas.

As a result of the Leadership UTSA experience, participants described having a better understanding of various leadership concepts, improved leadership skills, broader institutional perspectives and a much wider network of supportive colleagues. Toward achieving these outcomes, we feel that the following components of the Leadership UTSA experience should be part of any structured leadership development program: (1) There should be ample opportunities for collaboration with colleagues; (2) Education about the organization, its values and mission is critical for cultivating what Dr. Gage Paine called “an insatiable curiosity about your organization (LUTSA, 2011);” (3) Sponsors should make every effort to create a supportive and confidential environment where authenticity is encouraged and the free and open exchange of ideas applauded; and (4) Effective interpersonal connections are much more likely to develop in a relaxed atmosphere where fun is highly valued.

From our perspective, we found sponsorship critical to acquiring positions of leadership within our institution. However, we also found that professional success within each new role required more than simply building technical knowledge or subject-matter expertise. According to Hewlett et al., sponsorship does work by taking root, growing and seeding “itself anew to spread a culture of advocacy (The Sponsor Effect, 2010).” Our professional success relies heavily upon developing solid leadership skills. Professional growth cannot happen without hard work, purposeful development of leadership skills, cultivating synergistic relationships and contributing to supportive professional networks that transcend divisional boundaries.

**References**


**Donna D. Edmondson** (left) is currently the Associate Director of Academic Publications and Graduation Coordination in the Office of the Registrar (OR) at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She is a member of the Student Affairs Education Team, a certified True Colors facilitator, and a recent graduate of Leadership UTSA. Prior to joining the OR in 2004, Donna served as a Legacy: Hands on the Past Program Coordinator at the UTSA Center for Archaeological Research, as well as a Staff Archaeologist. She received her Master’s degree in History in 2007 and currently teaches as an Adjunct Instructor at Texas A&M-San Antonio.

**Maggie Floyd** (right) is the Director of Supplemental Instruction at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She has served in progressively responsible positions with the SI program for the past twelve years. During this time, Maggie developed expertise with collaborative learning, student development, program administration, personnel management, recruiting, training, and program assessment. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice and Master of Public Administration degree from UTSA. She completed the Leadership UTSA program in April 2012 and along with Donna currently serves on the planning committee for the 2012-2013 cohort.