Sponsorship in Academia: Observations from the Faculty Perspective

By Rhonda M. Gonzales and Valerie Sponsel

We write this article on sponsorship in academia from our perspective as female faculty members at The University of Texas at San Antonio. We are in different fields, and at different stages in our careers (Dr. Gonzales is an Associate Professor of History and Dr. Sponsel is a Professor of Biology). We came together twelve months ago as participants in Leadership UTSA, a nine-month program for a select group of faculty and staff, which was described in the first article in this three part series by our administrative staff colleagues Donna Edmondson and Maggie Floyd (NCURA Magazine, August 2012). Briefly, our cohort of Leadership UTSA, twenty men and women, met monthly under the guidance of the Vice President of Student Affairs (Dr. Gage Paine) and the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs (Dr. John Frederick) to learn about UTSA’s organizational structure and to examine such topics as resource management and strategic planning. The sustained collegial relationships formed between members of the cohort has led to on-going discussions on various issues, including the status of women and minorities in academia, and the sharing of our mutual reactions to The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, with Kerrie Peraino, Laura Sherbin and Karen Sumberg (2010).

Discussions centered on The Sponsor Effect revealed that our experiences as faculty were distinct from those of our administrative staff colleagues. As female faculty this article resonated with us even though the authors are describing the status of women within a corporate setting rather than in academia. It concludes that women occupy a “marzipan” layer immediately below the glass ceiling and have difficulty breaking through because they lack the sponsorship relationships needed to propel them to the highest executive levels, what they term the C-suite (as in CEO, CFO, COO, etc.). In seeking to find what precludes women from establishing effective sponsor-sponsor interactions, the authors examined the attitudes of men and women toward cultivating and capitalizing on business relationships. We believe that many of their findings have relevance not only in business but in academia too.

In making the distinction between mentors and sponsors Hewlett et al. define a mentor as someone who works behind the scenes to support and encourage their mentee, whereas a sponsor puts their own credibility on the line by stepping up and standing out “when they discern talent, [to] anoint it with their attention and support.” Our staff colleagues describe how, as students at this institution, they caught the discerning eyes of sponsors who were on hand “at each evolutionary step” to usher them to their current managerial positions (Edmondson and Floyd, 2012). In contrast to our experiences, we noted that new faculty members typically arrive at an institution within which they have no established relationships with either fellow faculty or administrators. Their first few years of employment are spent cultivating three sets of relationships pertinent to meeting the teaching, research, and service requirements for successful tenure and promotion. But this leads us to ask, from these relationships do all faculty members find the necessary sponsors who will “protect, prepare and push them” to their next level (Hewlett et al., 2010)? We believe not, and while in our experience we perceive this as not solely a problem for female faculty, we do agree with Hewlett et al. that an absence of strong and sustained sponsorship affects in a negative way the careers of women more often than their male colleagues.

In examining the reasons why female faculty tend to garner less sponsorship than their male colleagues we consider one of the first problems that arises at the time of their recruitment. Many women are recruited into departments and colleges in which the majority of their senior-ranking colleagues are men, and this sets up a potential impediment to building sponsor-sponsor relationships. This reality dovetails with the point that Hewlett et al. spells out, that is, that women often find it difficult to set up and maintain a viable and healthy one-on-one relationship with a powerful man. Among the most inhibitive reasons for this is suspicion that there are problematic sexual intentions motivating their collaboration. Even suspicion can poison a work-place environment, and the reality of inappropriate relationships can damage reputations and marriages. The disincentives for women to form strong sponsor-sponsor interactions is especially troubling as Hewlett et al. perceive women to actually be in more need of sponsorship than their male counterparts. Among the many reasons for this is that women “tend to deflect attention from themselves, however accomplished or deserving they may be of that attention.”

In contrast to male-female impediments to sponsorship-building, men have opportunities to establish sponsee-sponsor relationships through normative male bonding experiences on the golf course, over drinks, during sporting events, and so on. Once the relationship is established their male faculty sponsors can be influential in an academic setting by helping to set up research collaborations, sharing resources, being co-Principal Investigators on research grants, co-authors on papers and more. In contrast, women, who are less likely to establish similar relationships, often find themselves isolated. And the reality is that while women are clearly competent and well able to “go it alone,” their performance for tenure and promotion is evaluated and judged relative to their colleagues who have benefited from the fruits of sponsorship. Moreover, male colleagues have powerful advocates since their male sponsors often sit on their tenure and promotion committees.

In The Sponsor Effect, Hewlett et al. highlight many additional institutional and social challenges that inhibit attempts to build positive sponsee-sponsor relationships between men and women. The authors conclude that in order for women to reach the C-suite the corporate culture needs to make a conscientious change toward “formalizing the networking process as a way to sow sponsorship where it is unlikely to seed itself—among women and minorities—that is where it would make the most measurable difference in talent outcomes.” It is along these lines that we note that the Leadership UTSA initiative has created a pathway toward doing just that in an academic setting. While doing so may not have been its foremost objective, a positive, additional by-product of the initial Leadership UTSA effort has been to foster and sustain important campus-wide interactions amongst faculty and staff. We are now invested in using our training to shape policy and practice that better serves and ad-
Institutional facilitation of sponsorship for all minority junior faculty should be a clear priority. But establishing a fair gender balance in the “academic C-suite” will require more than this. As Mary Frank Fox (2008) makes clear in *Institutional Transformation and the Advancement of Women Faculty: the Case of Academic Science and Engineering*, this effort cannot be piecemeal. A company—corporate or academic—must commit to and invest in a holistic, transformative shift in the institutional culture. And, just as importantly, its constituents must commit to and be encouraged to actively sponsor their colleagues.

Having been selected in a somewhat opaque process to participate in Leadership UTSA 2011-2012, the two of us benefitted from the confidence that someone had in our abilities to develop our skills as leaders. And although we have mentored and sponsored others to some degree, we are now motivated to play a larger role in developing sponsorship opportunities for new faculty, particularly women and minorities, with senior, well-established faculty and administrative staff. This is something that can happen in many ways. Our University’s Research Division, for example, can assist by introducing new faculty to established principal investigators with successful funding records with a particular funding agency, facilitating and administering the research grants that are so instrumental to faculty gaining recognition, tenure and promotion.

In the next installment of this three-part series, we will elaborate on an inaugural initiative—the Women’s Professional Advancement and Synergy Academy (WPASA), which is a program that encourages sponsoring relationships across traditional faculty and staff divides. Two female participants of Leadership UTSA recognized the need to address the leadership and career advancement issues that are imperative to women’s professional upward mobility, and have made some impactful progress toward that important goal.

**Bibliography**


Dr. Rhonda M. Gonzales is an Associate Professor of History at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She holds three degrees from The University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA): a B.A. in Sociology and an M.A. and Ph.D. in History. Her research centers on early African and African Diaspora women’s economic, medicinal and religious history. She is the recipient of multiple research and postdoctoral awards from The Andrew W. Mellon and Ford Foundations and The American Historical Association. She was a participant in the 2011-2012 Leadership UTSA initiative and currently serves on the planning committee for the upcoming 2012-2013 program. Additionally, she co-authored the proposal for UTSA’s 2012 Inaugural Women’s Professional Advancement and Synergy Academy (WPASA).

Dr. Valerie Sponsel is a Professor of Biology at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Wales and a D.Sc. from Bristol University (UK). Since moving to the USA she has had more than twenty years of funding from the NSF for her research on plant growth and development. She held research positions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Indiana University Bloomington before coming to San Antonio. She was Secretary and Treasurer of the International Plant Growth Substances Association from 2004-2010. In that capacity she helped to organize research conferences on three continents, and received funding from the NSF to support travel for junior scientists in the U.S. to travel to Mexico and Spain.

**MILESTONES**

Michelle Auerbach, formerly Director, Research and Sponsored Programs, Suffolk University is now Director, Research Administration at Steward St. Elizabeth’s Medical Center of Boston.

James Casey has been promoted to Assistant Vice President, Office of Sponsored Project Administration, at The University of Texas at San Antonio.

Jeannie Kim-Han, formerly Director, Office of Research Development, California State University-Fullerton is now Special Assistant to the President at California State University-Dominguez Hills.

David Lynch, previously Director, Office of Sponsored Projects Administration, Mayo Clinic is now Executive Director, Office for Sponsored Research at Northwestern University, Chicago campus.

Myrta Stager, Manager, Volunteer and Regional Relations at NCURA has retired.

Gene Stein, Co-Director, Contracting and Compliance at San Diego State University Research Foundation has retired as of July, 2012.