

# MENTORING AND ADMINISTRATIVE OPPORTUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON AN INTERNSHIP

by Barbara Lynn Werner

**M**entors: one way to describe them is as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who provide support to their protégés or junior organizational members. Developing a mentoring relationship has long been considered essential to professional development. Recent research has begun to focus on mentoring among women in academia.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I will describe mentoring and leadership opportunities in the State of Wisconsin, focusing on the collective experience of four women who participated in the Women's Administrative Internship Program in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls (UWRF) — a semester-long program in which interns learned the roles and responsibilities of administrators.

Mentoring and leadership opportunities are evident at three different “levels” in the State of Wisconsin. WWHEL, Wisconsin Women in Higher Education Leadership, is a recently formed state-wide organization that brings together women from both public (UW) and private colleges and universities. WWHEL is committed, in the words of its mission statement, to “increasing the number and effectiveness of women in Wisconsin higher education leadership positions by: 1) creating a network of women in higher education leadership; 2) providing professional development opportunities for the preparation and support of women administrators; 3) increasing the visibility and recognition of

women qualified by education, experience, and personal characteristics for leadership positions; and 4) eliminating barriers to women's achievement in higher education leadership.”

Annually, WWHEL holds a conference that brings together senior administrators, junior administrators, and women aspiring to leadership positions. The conference includes workshops, networking opportunities, key addresses, and discussion/paper sessions.

**A**t another level are the mentoring and administrative internship opportunities in the University of Wisconsin (UW) System. While, in all likelihood, mentoring and internship opportunities exist at the private institutions in Wisconsin, this report focuses on the public institutions that comprise the University of Wisconsin. The UW System oversees the public colleges and universities within the state. At the System level, both mentoring programs and administrative internship programs are available. For example, administrative internship opportunities in the Office of Academic Affairs are open to all UW faculty. The UW Women's Studies Consortium is made up of the Women's Studies program directors/coordinators at all of the universities and colleges, the Women and Science coordinator, the Outreach coordinator, the System librarian, and the System administrator. The Consortium has an active,

though informal, mentoring program. When a new Women's Studies director is appointed, she is assigned a mentor, an experienced director from one of the other institutions.

At the university and college levels, nine of the thirteen universities report having formal mentoring programs in which mentors are assigned to incoming faculty. At two of the universities, mentors are also assigned to academic staff. Three of the other universities report informal mentoring programs within individual departments. Of the three colleges reporting, two have formal mentoring programs.

**O**n the UWRF campus, the formal mentoring program — then called the Women's Mentoring Program — began with grant funding. Once the grant ran out, the university began a mentoring program for all new faculty. This (currently existing) formal program is designed primarily for new faculty who have not previously held faculty positions anywhere. The assigned mentors are from outside the faculty members' home departments. This allows the protégés more freedom to discuss concerns they may have about their departments. In many cases, departments also have more informal mentoring programs where a “sponsor,” or more senior faculty member, assists the new faculty member “learn the ropes” of the home department.

Other informal mentoring programs can be found on the UWRF campus; for example new faculty senators are assigned a senior faculty senator mentor.

Administrative internships offer unique mentoring opportunities for faculty members to learn about and grow into administrative positions. Four of the universities offer administrative internships in the provosts' offices; one of these four also offers administrative internships in the chancellor's office. Until recently, UWRF offered internships specifically for women in the provost's and deans' offices.

In the mid-1990s, the Administrative Internship Program for Women at UWRF was established as a part of a five-year "Reach for the Future" plan, the purpose of which was to increase administrative training opportunities for women, with a goal of providing opportunities for those women to successfully compete for open positions in higher education leadership. As a result of promoting and hiring women into leadership positions, the program ended in the spring of 2001. (Currently, the chancellor, the provost and vice chancellor, three deans, and numerous department chairs and program directors are female.)

I was fortunate to participate in both the Women's Mentoring Program and the university's Administrative Internship Program for Women. Since I had held a faculty position at another

institution before coming to UWRF, I found that more informal mentoring (developed through networking with faculty in my own and other departments, as well as with women in administrative positions) was more beneficial. New faculty, however, have found the formal mentoring program successful in meeting their professional and personal needs.



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As an administrative intern for the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), I was offered opportunities to work closely with the dean and associate deans, learning the reasoning behind many academic and financial decisions, and determining whether or not to pursue a career in administration. I was one of four women who completed the internship in CAS. Part of the internship experience included conducting an independent research project. My choice for this project was to investigate the administrative internship experiences the four of us had.

I began with an informal survey. Each intern completed the survey individually. Once all surveys were returned, they were shared among us so we could get a sense of each other's experiences. Then, three of us met to discuss our experiences in person.

The survey covered eight topics in question form. In response to the first question — "What were the top three reasons you chose to do a CAS administrative internship?" — all four of us stated that we wanted to learn more about administration, and three viewed the internship as an opportunity to decide whether or not to consider administration as a career move. Two wanted to get a sense of the "big picture" — how the colleges of the university work together and how CAS works with higher administration. Two of the interns saw the internship as a break from full-time teaching. Other responses included "viewed [the internship] as an 'on-campus' sabbatical," "wanted to learn more about the processes/procedures in CAS," and "understanding how decisions are made in the College will help in teaching and advising roles."

When asked, "Did the internship meet your expectations? Why or why not?" all four of us agreed that the internship met our expectations, and in a couple of cases it exceeded them. Responses included the following:

- "being able to attend meetings and conferences that allowed me to explore administrative duties"
- "in many ways it exceeded expectations in the kinds of things that I was allowed to examine, such as budgets"

- “I realized that I had a talent for administration and that I even enjoyed it. I was given some interesting projects...[along with] the routine tasks in the dean’s office.”
- “it was a very busy time on campus...many searches taking place...the System Deans’ meeting as well as the Regents’ meeting were held on campus. I was able to attend meetings that ordinarily I would not. I have a much stronger sense of what the Dean and Associate Deans do.”

Three of us commented that learning about what decisions are made, and how and why, is a major advantage, in response to “In general, what are some advantages to doing an administrative internship?” For one intern, the internship opened the door for her to become an assistant dean in CAS. Two felt that the internship helped them be better faculty members: one commented that she saw herself as “more insightful and, therefore, a more valuable faculty member in my department”; the other saw the internship as having had a “positive impact on advising students.” This same intern also defined the internship as “a good experience in wearing a variety of ‘hats.’ Being in meetings as the administrative intern while decisions about my advisees were being made was not always an easy task.” Two of the interns also noted that the internship came with release time; one found that she had a lot more energy in the two classes she did teach. Learning about how the campus operates and meeting new people were also mentioned as advantages.

When asked, “What disadvantages (if any) are there?” we found few — in

fact, one of us found none, saying, “It was a privilege to be part of a limited number of individuals with a rare window of opportunity to learn about administration directly.” Two interns found that colleagues seemed distrustful, that “you sometimes feel like a ‘traitor,’” and that “the real/perceived idea that you want to pursue that administrative avenue when you may or may not want to” was a drawback. One would have liked the internship to extend beyond one semester (“I felt like I was just getting the gist of everything and feeling more comfortable in my decision making and it was over”). This same respondent experienced a problem with the label “intern”: “In a couple of instances,” she said, “students felt they should/could ‘go over my head’ to get the decision they wanted rather than accept it from me and this was frustrating...on the other hand, it taught me how to deal with these types of students and situations.”

The fifth question asked, “How has the internship experience impacted upon your professional development?” As noted earlier, for one of the interns the internship led directly to appointment as assistant dean. “It gave me the chance to demonstrate to the Dean the kind of work that I do,” she said. “It may end up being one of the pivotal moments in my professional development.” For another intern the experience “has been of significant use to me as a new chairperson of my department.” “I think I would like to pursue administration,” one intern commented. She also found the internship experience to have had a positive impact on her research agenda: “it was a luxury, really, to have the time to think through what I want to do in this

area.” Two of the interns also noted that the internship had helped greatly in advising their students.

Many of the responses to Question 6 — “What do you consider to be the top three positive outcomes from the internship?” — mirrored those given to Question 3. Additional comments included “[The internship] gave me confidence that I could do the work of an administrator successfully,” “having a better understanding of the functioning of a college from the ‘top,’ and better appreciation of our deans and their decisions,” “a better understanding of some of the ‘political’ aspects of administration. . . . I think I am more politically astute than I was before,” and “understanding why some of the decisions are made helps, especially when you disagree with a decision.”

All four interns worked closely with the dean of CAS, who met with us weekly to discuss what we were learning and problems we might be having. He was very open with us, and I think everyone felt comfortable talking with him and asking questions. In response to “Describe the mentoring relationship(s) you developed during the internship,” our comments included “the mentor was very clear about expectations and how to meet them,” “I was able to ask...the tough questions, how you keep from losing sleep over the job, how you keep balance in your life,” “he was particularly good at helping me when two of my ‘hats’ were in conflict with one another,” and “he is the kind of person you want to give your all for.” Three of the interns continued their relationship; one was “now being advised on

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the next steps in my career, and this is invaluable.” In addition to the mentoring relationship developed with the dean, two of the interns developed or expanded upon a second mentoring relationship.

In response to the final question — “What can you add about your CAS administrative internship experience? your mentoring experience?” — two of us expressed disappointment that the administrative internship no longer exists. As one observed, “I think it gives everyone a chance to see life from another side, which can only lead to more harmony between faculty and administration. It also gives people a chance to test the waters to see if they want to pursue a career in administration. It’s difficult now to identify who among the faculty would be interested.”

After everyone had completed the survey and responses had been distributed among all four of us, three of us got together to discuss our experiences further. We all agreed that the internship was an incredible opportunity and that it was a privilege to have been chosen to participate. Time was spent discussing “backlash,” resentment, and distrust from colleagues who see the intern as becoming one of “them” (i.e., an administrator). Sometimes this backlash had been verbal, but much was nonverbal. One of the interns said that a colleague had quit speaking to

her. Although these types of responses from colleagues had been infrequent, they had caused some discomfort.

Much of the conversation centered on our mentor, “G,” the dean. As we were talking about our mentoring relationships, it became quite evident that we shared a common vision about him: he holds strong feminist beliefs. Schwiebert and colleagues have described the roles and responsibilities of women as mentors.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that what they are describing are positive mentoring characteristics that reflect feminist leadership regardless of the sex of the mentor. One of the responsibilities of the mentor is an investment of quality time. We were all fortunate to have quality time with G. We commented throughout our discussion on how, during our weekly meetings, he took the time to see how we were doing. Most important, that was *our* time. Very seldom was the meeting interrupted; his focus was on us, our questions, and our concerns. He clearly displayed another of the responsibilities discussed by Schwiebert et al., active listening, during our meetings. We also spoke of G as nurturing, which ties to a third role, the ability to be inclusive and accepting. I think we were willing to try new things because he allowed us the opportunity to explore choices and decisions. We all were new at making administrative decisions, particularly as they were related to students. While he helped guide us through these decisions, he was open to independent growth and development and had respect for our decision-making abilities. G clearly had a sincere interest in us and our

professional goals. As one of the interns commented, “he has [provided] and continues to provide personal and professional direction.”

One final mentor responsibility that Schwiebert et al. posit is sharing resources — linking mentees with networks and support systems. The networks we were connected to through the internship experience were extensive. New networks and relationships were established on campus. A single example of this is the network the four CAS interns have developed among ourselves. Interns attended the state deans’ meeting and made new connections or, in some cases, re-established connections with college administrators. Additionally, each intern had the opportunity to attend the WWHEL conference. “G” also linked the interns with networks and support systems to help them with the projects they were completing as a requirement for the internship.

At the end of the discussion we all agreed that it had been a privilege to participate in the Women’s Administrative Internship Program at UWRE. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to explore the roles and responsibilities connected with administration. Above all, though, we were very fortunate to have had the privilege of being mentored by the dean.

The Administrative Internship Program for Women no longer exists on our campus. During this semester-long program I not only learned about the functioning of the dean’s office of the College of Arts and Sciences at UWRE, but also established a very positive mentoring relationship. I would strongly urge women to seize

opportunities such as this internship experience. By participating in these types of programs, women are privy to what used to be, and sometimes still is, information available primarily to their male colleagues.

#### Notes

1. For example, all of the female presidents interviewed in I. Artze, "Room at the Top for Improvement," *Hispanic Outlook*, Feb. 26, 2001, pp.10–13, stressed the importance of being mentored. Ebbers, Gallisath, and Rockel, in "The Leadership Institute for a New Century: LINCing Women and Minorities into Tomorrow's Community College Leadership Roles,"

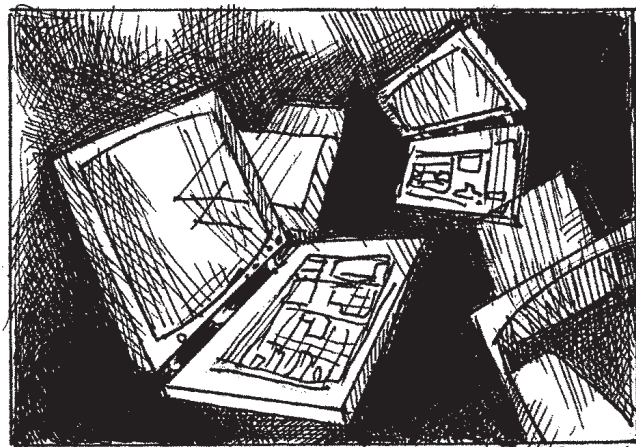
*Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, v.24, no.5 (2000), pp.375–82, described a program in Iowa specifically for developing women and minorities for leadership roles in community colleges. Cullen and Luna, in "Women Mentoring in Academe: Addressing the Gender Gap in Higher Education," *Gender and Education*, v.5, no.2 (1993), pp.125–27, pointed out the importance of women in higher-education leadership positions assisting in the career and personal development of junior women. They went further and discussed the central role the institution plays in developing mentoring programs, noting that that mentoring relationships are not only advantageous to

the individuals involved, but also vital to organizational growth, stability, and leadership.

2. V. L. Schwiebert, Mary D. Deck, M. L. Bradshaw, P. Scott, & M. Harper, "Women as Mentors," *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development*, v.37, no.4 (1999), 241–53.

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