

# Evaluation of the Pilot Mentoring Program at the Research Foundation for SUNY

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides a description of an 18-month pilot program focused on the leadership development of the next generation of research administrators (RAs) in the State University of New York system (SUNY). The key questions for the evaluators were: 1) can we create a developmental program that effectively prepares the next generation of RAs; 2) what content generates the highest impact for RA leadership development; and 3) is the combination of an assigned mentor with a professional development curriculum series comprised of twelve elements an effective method of delivering the program? A pre-, mid-point and post-questionnaire, plus reflective essays were used in the evaluation of the program. The RA leadership attributes developed were: confidence, risk-taking, growth in multicultural values, and embracing multiple perspectives. Such characteristics are important traits for RAs to have in order to excel in a complex, changing, and interconnected professional work environment. Participants defined attainable career goals, acquired valuable feedback from mentors, established collaborative networks for problem-solving and advanced perceptions of self in acquiring leadership traits. Participants also practiced new leadership behaviors, volunteered more for workplace assignments, and heightened their mastery and sense of purpose at work. Overall, job satisfaction improved. The article incorporates recommendations for future mentoring programming in the SUNY system.

## INTRODUCTION

The focus on leadership in the field of research administration (RA) at SUNY is especially timely. According to the 2013–14 NSF Higher Education Research and Development Survey, SUNY had the fourth highest growth rate in research and development expenditures of the top ten public university systems in the United States. The Research Foundation for SUNY (RF), serving SUNY as one of the largest, most comprehensive university-connected research foundations in the country, employs over 10,000 externally sponsored programs personnel. Two thousand (2,000) of the RF personnel are research administrators (RAs) who perform sponsored programs business functions with 25% (500) eligible to retire within the next three to five years as they turn 55 years of age or older. Research administrators form the nexus among principal investigators, administration, and sponsors. RAs also have an in-depth knowledge of proposal and award requirements with an ability to navigate the cultures within the academy and governments. Perhaps most important, RAs play an integral role in organizational research strategies that impact the future funding success levels of their college or university (Stallinga, 2011).

Although change in leadership ranks is often healthy, rapid change in RA can be counter-productive. For example, knowledge gaps in leadership may

diminish the scope of research within institutions given RAs' ability to identify and facilitate linkages among investigators and university resources. Additionally, leadership transitions might impact the timeliness and effectiveness of administrative decision-making and risk lower external funding amounts given RAs' ability to project staffing and budgetary operating needs. Business acumen skills contribute to making concepts reality. At SUNY, 31 campuses employ RAs who manage over \$1 billion in externally funded grants and contracts. With so many RAs in SUNY near retirement, establishing a plan to maintain SUNY's world-class research infrastructure is vital. Given the state of demographics in the U.S., this situation likely exists at other state systems of higher education as postsecondary educational administration is projected to grow 15% from 2012 to 2022, faster than the average for all employment occupations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014).

At the same time that higher education's workforce is transitioning, the public and private sectors are switching to business systems that are highly results-driven. J. Michael Slocum's "Voice of experience toward a truly 'next' generation" (Slocum, 2012) provides an excellent overview of organizational changes requiring RAs to become more strategic and effective in the management of their jobs. Among these changes are: increased compliance

regulations; expanded collaborative projects in and outside of institutions; more focus societally on the role of science for translational research; and a further stronghold of business principles applied to higher education. Future RA leaders will need advanced efficiency skills matched with personal attributes of curiosity to deal with continual change, integrity, and an ability to manage stress through work-life balance (Willenberg, 2014). The new reality of a technological, results-oriented research environment necessitates a refined focus on how we develop RA staff, as well as what content is relied upon to do so (Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010; Phipps, 2010; Slocum, 2012).

Leadership development theory, including servant leadership, has grown in recognition as an effective theoretical framework for developing future RA leaders (Atkinson, Gilleland & Barrett, 2007; Atkinson & Pilgreen, 2011; Gabriele & Caines, 2014; Phipps, 2010; Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, & Colwell, 2011; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Servant leadership, as defined by Greenleaf (1970/1991), helped frame the RF's mentoring program. In 1970, Greenleaf published a famous essay that outlined ten leadership attributes that formed principles of service toward others as a way of making work more meaningful. The ten principles were: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualizing, foresight, stewardship, commitment to

human resources and building community. These virtues are closely aligned with how contemporary RA writers describe servant leadership. For example, Gabriel and Caines envisioned future RAs as being self-aware, connected, competent, committed, and courageous in order to lead within an increasingly technological work environment. Moreover, where individual identity (our inner core, creativity, personal expression and motivation to make a difference) clashes with a work environment that measures, counts, documents and accounts for performance, servant leadership offers an orientation that helps balance feeling connected to others within an increasingly depersonalized work environment.

### **THE RESEARCH FOUNDATION FOR SUNY MENTORING PROGRAM**

Recognizing the challenges inherent in developing future leaders, the RF convened a fifteen-member Mentoring Advisory Council (Council) in 2013 to develop a pilot leadership program that combined mentoring with a series of professional development seminars over an eighteen-month period. This pilot program was nonhierarchical, inviting participation from all ranks, and inclusive of diverse learners. Assigned mentors were to support the distinct needs of each protégé, while group seminars would develop leadership attributes and communication skills. Council representatives were drawn from

SUNY's university centers, comprehensive colleges, technical schools, and community colleges, ensuring that the program would encompass the varying needs of campus missions and job classifications. The Council's charge required cost-effective professional development seminars that tapped into existing SUNY and RF talent through virtual technologies. The program's content emerged from the Council members' own servant leadership styles, experiences with their campuses' mentoring and faculty development activities, and deference to SUNY's 2004 executive leadership series for which the system had contracted with Cornell University's School of Industrial Labor Relations (Kamm, 2004). The Council shared a philosophy for caring about the inner quality of others, and agreed the curriculum's conceptual framework would include:

- Mentoring, as broadly defined to include an assigned mentor with a series of seminars designed to help accelerate development and create a community of learners
- A constructivist approach to enable individualized accomplishments and a breakdown of barriers to career advancement and mobility
- Experimental opportunities without repercussions or evaluation
- Opportunities to open traditionally closed door sessions to de-mystify leadership behaviors in action

- Infusing multiculturalism to advance participants' trajectory toward embracing diversity and inclusion
- Engaging protégés as co-learners committed to their own development.

Timed with the implementation of a new centralized business platform connecting RF activity across the SUNY system, the pilot program's twelve curricular components were expected to be part of a broader view of RA succession planning. Such succession planning would identify promotable people through their participation in the pilot program, thereby creating career opportunities for their advancement throughout SUNY. Throughout the program protégés would connect monthly with mentors and participate in regularly scheduled seminars, excluding summer, academic year breaks and intersessions. The Council's key questions for the pilot were: 1) can we create a leadership developmental program that effectively prepares the next generation of RAs; 2) what should the content be to realize the highest impact for RA leadership development; and 3) is the combination of an assigned mentor with a professional development curriculum series comprised of twelve elements an effective method of delivering the program?

### **Design and Implementation**

Mentor and protégé recruitment efforts targeted the thirty-one SUNY campuses that

participate in RF activity. SUNY's Vice Chancellor for Research/President of the RF, along with the RF Human Resources Office showcased the value of the program at forums and in campus communications. Originally, fifty protégés and fifty mentors were expected to participate in the pilot. The Council established this target number based upon what the RF human resources staff could programmatically facilitate at one time. Ten protégés and ten mentors submitted applications to participate in the program and all were accepted, providing even pairings for mentor-protégé assignments. The low participant response is likely due to the advertising process being limited before program launch and unfamiliarity with the benefits of a new system-wide program. Perhaps too, supervisors might have been reluctant to provide release time and mentors could have been dissuaded from the length of the time commitment.

The enrollment criteria for mentors included: employment with SUNY or the RF; between five to ten years of progressive leadership experience in RA; recognition by others in their region as a content expert; a commitment to diversity and the individual growth of others; and a philosophy and practice of giving to and developing others. Mentors' roles were defined as persons interested in providing encouragement and resources to assist protégés. Mentors would agree to advise protégés on areas of growth

by creating professional development plans and help open doors for networking and expanding their protégé's view of research administration. Each mentor selected submitted an application that consisted of a philosophy statement and a vita. The Council served as the selection committee and welcomed all ten mentors who volunteered.

Mentor reasons for participating included prior positive experiences with mentors toward advancing their own careers and a passion to give back to the next generation. Their RA professional fields varied from among pre- and post-award, human resources, technology systems, and central RF administration. The Council defined a successful mentoring relationship as follows: a) protégés would be open to change and transitions, helping and learning from others; b) both parties would be inspired by the relationship; c) protégés would take personal responsibility for meeting their own needs in the relationship; d) mentors would reveal new aspects of protégé potential and in turn help them learn more about themselves; e) protégés would have increased self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-confidence to expand responsibilities and contribute more meaningfully within their institutions; f) longer term, protégés would be promoted among SUNY institutions; and g) by program conclusion, a meaningful relationship would develop for both the

protégé and mentor and each would regard the other as a trusted colleague from whom to seek advice.

Enrollment criteria for protégés included a minimum of three years of RA experience, supervisory approval to participate (since release from work was required for attendance at programming events), and a demonstrated commitment to personal growth as evidenced in a reflective essay. Although small in number, the highly motivated group of protégés agreed to take part in twelve curricular components that included the following:

1. Be assigned a personal mentor and have monthly contact, including an orientation outlining roles and responsibilities, generational differences and strategies to develop a successful mentoring/protégé relationship;
2. Complete a *Professional Development Plan* tool (see Appendix A) designed to outline career aspirations. This planning tool helped build a rapport between mentor and protégé and established initial steps toward career goal attainment;
3. Engage in networking opportunities, including a kick-off session that focused on personal leadership development exercises outlining the differences between leaders and managers. An exercise helped protégés identify leadership virtues

that they wanted to work on to increase their credibility and confidence levels at work;

4. Visit their mentors' campus and participate in "open chair" invitations of traditionally closed door meetings and conference calls to expose protégés to observing leadership behaviors;
5. Participate in a diversity and inclusion workshop to study implicit bias and how it furthers group stereotypes and impacts attitudes towards others. Protégés examined case studies and developed strategies to practice altering their own behaviors and communications to breakdown personal biases;
6. Participate in a servant leadership workshop based on Greenleaf's principles of service. Protégés were challenged to place others before themselves and practice Greenleaf's ten leadership attributes;
7. Participate in a crucial conversations workshop to acquire effective strategies to confront difficult dialogue, stay focused, speak persuasively, read behaviors in others, and improve work environments through *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when the stakes are high* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler, 2012);

8. Participate in a book discussion on *Now, discover your strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) to help protégés broaden their understanding of life goals, present models of change, alter views about themselves and their capabilities, and reinforce their responsibility for their own development. Participants identified their top five strength areas to align them with career aspirations;
9. Participate in a four-month series developed to overcome fears of speaking publicly. Program elements included an extemporaneous speech, a verbatim speech, and an interview with the RF vice president for strategy and planning in which participants described research activities happening on their campus. Sessions were evaluated by peers, with the last speech recorded for protégé review;
10. Participate in an emotional intelligence workshop to develop strategies to increase self-awareness, self-management of emotions, social awareness and relationship management. Protégés read Bradberry and Greaves' *Emotional intelligence 2.0* (2009) prior to the webinar;
11. Participate in a *LinkedIn* training session to learn how to use the tool effectively. As a pre-requisite, protégés created and/or updated a *LinkedIn* profile and outlined their goals online to familiarize them with a present-day applicant screening processes; and
12. Maintain a journal to record questions/thoughts/issues for case study analysis, problem-solving, reflective questioning with mentors to elicit deeper thoughts and conversations, and capture *ah-ha* moments for future referral.

## EVALUATION

The writers of this article volunteered to evaluate the pilot program and share its results with Council members, participating campuses, and more broadly with the RA professional community. The evaluation consisted of formative feedback that Council members, mentors and protégés provided during and after webinars and group seminars. The assessment information provided feedback on the effectiveness of the materials and instruction. In addition, the evaluators created and administered three questionnaires and short essay questions. The questionnaires were administered as pre-, mid-point and post-surveys, and were submitted to and approved by SUNY Cortland's institutional review board (IRB) as a study protocol. The Council members

and mentors were not part of the IRB study protocol since it was designed to measure changes in the personal leadership behaviors of protégés.

The study protocol's three questionnaires were linked using confidential identifiers provided by protégés. The questions were developed to: a) help interpret the needs and interests of protégés; b) measure pilot program satisfaction levels; c) identify which professional development opportunities were most successful and delivered the strongest impact on protégé development; d) identify further educational needs; and e) assess the effectiveness of technology being used as a mode of communicating content. In addition, the final evaluation included reflective essays to identify changes in personal leadership development attributes to which protégés aspired early on. All ten protégés agreed to participate in the evaluation and consent was obtained at each interval of questionnaire administration. At the end of the pilot, a total of eight respondents completed the pre-and post-questionnaires. A total of six protégés responded to the mid-point survey.

Given the small number of those participating in the pilot, broad conclusions were not possible. Rather, the authors offered their interpretations of the pilot's effectiveness based on the evidence provided primarily from the eight

participants' final questionnaires and essays that indicated which aspects of the program were most meaningful to them. However, the evaluators did conduct independent reviews of the evaluations before making their interpretations in order to affirm claims.

## RESULTS

The pilot program led to greater collaboration among individuals and colleagues (Council members, mentors, protégés, speakers, and logistical staff) and increased job satisfaction for protégés. The dedicated efforts toward a common goal (engaging mentors and protégés) built a strong community devoted to teaching and learning. Given the program's emphasis on personal identity development, the protégés leadership attributes that "were developed quite a bit" were becoming more: 1) cooperative; 2) straight-forward; 3) self-controlled; 4) independent; 5) dependable; and 6) forward-thinking. Attributes moderately developed included being more: 1) fair-minded; 2) supportive; 3) determined; and 4) loyal.

Protégés also became more adept at looking at issues from different perspectives which helped to improve their understanding of the RA profession (i.e., the interrelatedness of the pre-, post- and administrative functions). Campus compartmentalization was reduced due to an increased awareness of how the various RA roles contribute to SUNY's mission in



facilitating research. Protégés' confidence levels and self-worth increased due to a stronger sense of purpose. Protégés used their newly established networks to solve work-related problems and valued feedback that helped them practice leadership behaviors. Mentors had the strongest influence on goal-setting and identity-building. Mentors motivated protégés to engage in opportunities that stretched comfort levels and helped establish realistic career goals. Additionally, mentors played a key role in prompting protégés to communicate with their supervisors about career aspirations. Protégés developed trusting relationships and relied on their mentors for advice and problem-solving.

The RF human resources staff conducted a mid-point check-in to evaluate protégé comfort levels and progress. Where protégés felt mismatched with mentors, reassignments to other mentors recruited from the Council occurred. Two reassigned protégés reported back to the RF human resources staff an improved satisfaction with the program once the reassignments occurred. Mismatching was described as being assigned a mentor who was overly committed elsewhere and unable to keep to a reserved schedule of contact. Interestingly, where protégés associated their work environments to be unsupportive of the mentoring program, they did not respond favorably to mentoring. This finding may suggest that

ground-level support may be more important to effective mentoring and leadership development programming than top level support. Moreover, where protégés associated their work environment as unsupportive of their overall *leaderbeing*, they remained feeling undervalued at work and reported that their participation in the seminars was ineffective.

All participants found the program too long with too much content. Protégés recommended that future programs focus on a handful of key topics with more in-depth coverage. Of the twelve curriculum items, the top four having the most impact on their perspectives, sense of self, and behaviors were: 1) *Now Discover Your Strengths* individual strengths assessment and book discussion; 2) group trainings and webinars about personal leadership behaviors, diversity and inclusion, crucial conversations, and emotional intelligence; 3) the public speaking series; and 4) personal mentoring. These four curricular items, combined with active participation in the RF's professional development *Learning Tuesdays* webinars series that focuses on skill-building and topical RA issues (e.g., Uniform Guidance, compliance issues, technology transfer, etc.), would make for a strong and effective program for developing future leaders.

The pilot enrollment was lower than anticipated and none of the protégés were pre-award personnel, the reason for which

was undetermined. The absence of pre-award participants may be due to their professional work environments which involve frequently unannounced deadlines making enrichment commitments difficult. Additionally, nine of the ten protégés were women and their group was ethnically homogeneous as non-Hispanic Whites. The mentor composition too was composed of more women than men (eight out of ten were women). The Council membership began with fifteen members of which thirteen were female and two were male. The demographic composition of the program mirrors what Shambrook and Roberts found in their “2010 profile of a research administrator” (2011) where 80% of U.S. RAs were female and 83% were non-Hispanic White. Moreover the design of a supportive and personal relationship-building program may have resonated more closely to female learning preferences. Three of the 34 persons engaged in the program were persons of color.

#### **a) Identified Needs and Interests of Protégés**

The self-selection process of protégé enrollment coincided with Gould and Penley’s (1984) finding that employees who participate in self-development activities are reported to be more productive, along with being more motivated and confident at work (Boyce, Zaccaro & Wisecarver, 2010). Protégés indicated that their own determination was most important in

developing personal leadership behavior. The top three behaviors they wanted to work on were becoming more: 1) forward-thinking; 2) imaginative; and 3) supportive toward others. They were highly interested in networking among colleagues and being challenged intellectually through the networks to see things differently. Participation in the RF’s *Learning Tuesdays* was most sought out early on for professional skill-building in specific content areas. The top four program features most important to protégés at the start of the pilot were: 1) *Professional Development Planning* tool; 2) networking among colleagues; 3) personal mentor; and 4) access to professional speakers.

#### **b) Satisfaction Levels**

Most protégés reported having developed great relationships with mentors. Together, they discussed pros and cons of specific goals and learned to prioritize them with timelines. Mentors helped increase protégé confidence and gave them courage to take risks. They particularly appreciated constructive criticism that was defined as honest feedback. Those protégés who thought that their mentors were too busy to participate fully in monthly meetings were dissatisfied and recommended more focus in the future on mentor/protégé pairings. Protégés further recommended regional mentor pairings to facilitate campus visitations, “open chair” access to meetings

and other programs, and facilitating potential for more career mobility.

### **c) Most Influential Programs on Protégé Development**

The diversity and inclusion and crucial conversations workshops ranked highest in impacting protégés' perspectives. Protégés were "much more willing" to see multiple sides of situations and consider others' perspectives. They had increased multicultural values for embracing diversity and inclusion of individuals from all abilities. These two workshops combined reading materials with lecture, incorporated participatory learning exercises, and used case study analysis.

The four-part RF public speaking series was highly successful in developing confidence and risk-taking. Their new abilities to speak extemporaneously in front of top executives at the RF, receive peer feedback, and evaluate themselves through video changed their perceptions of self. Protégés also learned from visiting mentor campuses and participating in "open chair" sessions. These program aspects raised awareness of what other campus RAs do, and resulted in increasing confidence levels of protégé's capabilities.

### **d) Recommendations For Future Content**

Meeting protégé needs can occur quickly if matched with the right mentor and presented with materials that are intellectually challenging to create changes

in perspective. Importantly, once a person has reached a balance of meeting their own needs, they can move toward mutual goals of others with a broader view of leader as servant (Phipps, 2010). As such, future RF Mentoring Programs will focus heavily on the mentor and protégé connections first with professional development content reduced to cover significant topics identified as most influential in changing perspectives. Servant leadership attributes will also be reinforced in each program and reaffirmed working with personal mentors.

In addition, a strong emphasis on mentor-protégé pairing is essential for a successful program. Protégés recommended a greater focus on pairings for their career mobility and alignment with professional interests. In the second RF mentoring program cohort 45 mentors and 45 protégés applied to the program and were accepted in the fall of 2015. Mentor biographies were published beforehand, along with their philosophy statements. Protégés were able to select their top three candidates for preferred pairings. The RF is also more clearly defining expectations of mentors and offering additional trainings on how to develop effective and rewarding relationships with protégés.

Optimistically, a one-year program (as opposed to 18-month) can also result in furthering leadership development behaviors. For example, six months into the pilot program, protégés maintained a high

degree of enthusiasm to participate. The *Professional Development Planning* tool was an important activity for helping to identify and strengthen personal leadership qualities. Protégés were already actively networking and changing their perspectives from education and interactions with professional speakers. They practiced new leadership behaviors under the helpful guidance of mentors shortly after forming relationships.

**e) Effectiveness of technology as a mode of instruction**

Protégés indicated early on a preference for convenience of instruction using Webex or virtual technology. That was not the case by the end of the pilot. Rather, protégés preferred personal interaction and more in-depth time to discuss the topics that drew them to participate in the program. Those programs rated most influential were the ones that involved small-group discussion (either in person or virtually) with time built in between the next seminar to practice newly acquired leadership behaviors.

**f) Changes in personal leadership development behaviors**

Moving protégés from one developmental stage to another can change perspectives, affect decision making and influence values (Mullen, 2009). The examples of new leadership behaviors practiced as a result of the pilot included: 1) listening to all sides before responding or coming to a conclusion; 2) asking others if

they need assistance; 3) engaging in department decision-making to improve processes and programs that impact others; 4) leading with confidence; 5) taking on new roles and responsibilities at work, including volunteering for campus and community service; 6) caring about others by understanding the big picture; 7) having a comprehensive view of RF goals; 8) knowing when to speak and when to listen, keeping emotions in check; 9) being proactive in educating others; 10) diffusing tense situations among colleagues; 11) trusting instincts more in order to lead; 12) understanding and valuing diversity; and 13) acting more professional. These behaviors helped inform the evaluators' understanding of whether the program is effectively preparing the next generation of RAs. They further demonstrate virtues highly regarded in a collegial, respectful, thoughtful and informed work environment.

**SUMMARY**

This pilot program reinforces the idea that leadership is something that can be taught and that individual participants and organizations benefit from these opportunities. The pilot's focus on servant leadership enabled all participating members to learn, grow, and give to one another. The program design fostered positive feedback at all levels which was crucial to promoting a collaborative approach to effective leadership

development. The program actively supported the RF Human Resources Office's succession planning objectives regarding mentoring by engaging the senior specialists willing to give back to their profession, in part because they were at a stage of their own development that enabled them to focus on others and find doing so rewarding. Similarly, those protégés who benefited the most from the program did so because they were at a developmental stage of being open to education, role models and induction philosophies.

Uniting SUNY mentors and protégés to create future leaders is an inherently worthwhile, productive, and necessary endeavor due to the significant organizational changes occurring demographically in the RA workforce throughout SUNY. As emerging leaders, protégés discovered that they were not only serving their own campus and principal investigators, but they were serving one another through knowledge-sharing acquired by newly formed networks. Significantly, there is a micro and macro impact in developing servant leaders. Developing a professional consciousness with leadership capabilities can make a difference in influencing tomorrow's principles and ethical conduct at work. Such capabilities matter greatly in a profession whose mission includes the oversight and management of the public trust in research.

In addition, the multicultural values necessary to embrace diversity and inclusion, consciousness-raising about what other campus RAs do, providing the confidence to act independently, while being respectful and insightful, all increased due to the pilot program.

Perhaps most importantly, on the final survey the protégés reported increased job satisfaction and an interest in helping to mentor the next cohort of protégés. This commitment indicates that the protégés found the program worthwhile and willing to help others. For example, many of the Council members, protégés, and mentors have welcomed additional professional responsibilities since the program's inception. In a recent response to the RF Human Resources Office, four protégés reported having been promoted into other positions on their campus or another campus; two have become mentors in the new cohort; one has received an MBA; and two others are engaged in certifications for professional credentialing. In addition, forty-five mentors and protégés have enrolled in the RF's second emerging leaders series so more RAs may be prepared for leadership roles in SUNY.

These evaluation results demonstrate that a program design focused on interpersonal connections and development helped protégés flourish in their work environment.

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