Diversity and Leadership: Mentoring Builds Leaders of the Future

by Patricia Battin

At the 1996 CAUSE annual conference in San Francisco, CAUSE presented its Award for Exemplary Leadership and Information Technology Excellence to Patricia Battin. The award recognizes outstanding professionals in the field of information technology management in higher education. Battin addressed the following remarks to more than 2,700 information resources professionals attending the general session at which she was honored.

I am deeply honored to accept this award. It is especially meaningful to me because it comes from you—my colleagues in the CAUSE organization. Like many humanistically educated librarians, I have struggled for years to achieve a comfort level with digital technology and its capacity both to enhance and to destroy our system of higher education. Your generous willingness to educate me, share vastly different perspectives, and join with me in our common cause have been crucial to the shaping of my professional philosophy and actions.

You have always answered my call for help. One of my first acts as the President of the Commission on Preservation and Access was to convince seven or eight CIOs to serve as a Technology Assessment Advisory Committee to explore the ways the emerging digital technologies could be used to save the intellectual heritage of the past. They were all astonished to find themselves involved in the process of preserving deteriorating books; their contributions of an extraordinarily useful series of publications laid the foundation for developing local and national collaborative efforts between librarians and technologists in networking and digitizing projects.

I owe much to all of you—your recognition of my career-long efforts to pursue productive collaborative efforts in the service of scholarship and learning across seemingly unbreachable barricades gives me enormous personal and professional satisfaction. Thank you all for your confidence and support.

I also want to thank the host of mentors and supporters who encouraged me to think broadly, to challenge the boundaries of rigidly structured and conservative bureaucracies—universities—and most importantly, who cared enough to provide the tough and uncompromising on-the-job education so that I could successfully walk through the doors they opened for me.

I’m sure that many of you have recognized that I was no ingenue when I entered the library profession in 1967. I came of age in a pre-feminist, pre-affirmative action, pre-civil rights generation, and succumbed to the overwhelming social forces defining the role of women in the ‘50s. I would not be standing here today if it were not for the affirmative action programs of the early ‘70s and the Ivy League’s old-boy network. At first glance, that may seem like a complete and utter contradiction. Just the opposite—the affirmative action programs broke open the formerly exclusive circle of opportunity, and the old-boys’ network rose to the challenge by extending their well-developed mentoring processes to the newcomers. Both were necessary for the development of successful and productive leaders. Affirmative action without mentoring or mentoring without equal opportunity will not create the leadership cadre we so desperately need in a transitional society.

I am therefore particularly grateful to Systems & Computer Technology Corporation (SCT), the sponsor of the ELITE award, for the opportunity to provide similar support to a new generation by a contribution to the United Negro College Fund/Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program. This program is one of UNCF’s mentoring programs to provide students interested in college teaching careers with a mentor support system designed to encourage and facilitate their work toward graduate study in a PhD program. UNCF faculty serve as mentors,© Copyright 1997 by Patricia Battin. All rights reserved.
Throughout her career, Patricia Battin has been a pioneer and a missionary for developments in higher education that she foresaw and for causes she championed. As Vice President for Information Services/University Librarian at Columbia University in the 1980s, Battin broke new ground by initiating the integration of Columbia’s computer center and library activities to more closely link technology services with information content—a model widely admired and emulated.

A charter member of the Research Libraries Group during the early ‘80s, Battin was an ardent and persuasive advocate of institutional collaboration and resource sharing, helping to set standards and procedures and overcome technical problems in the eventual digitization of library resources. She achieved international prominence and recognition as the first President of the Commission on Preservation and Access from 1987 until her retirement in 1994. Internationally recognized by the library community for her impact on the field of library administration, the scholarly communication process, electronic libraries, librarianship in the information age, and preservation and access, Battin is also highly regarded by technologists and administrators in higher education and has served on the Boards of both CAUSE and Educom. Though not a technologist, Battin early on understood and appreciated the revolutionary impacts that networks of computers would bring to institutions of higher education. She was one of the first to use the term “information resources” to encompass information, technology, and services, and to write and talk about the importance of combining and integrating strategies for technology, services, and content.

CAUSE as an organization has demonstrated uncommon leadership in pioneering professional development programs. These programs and participating students engage in supervised research arranged by their mentors.

Affirmative action programs are under serious attack today—because, I think, they are widely viewed as preference and quota programs rather than activities designed to level the playing field by seeking out qualifications and competence beyond our traditional stereotypes and perceptions which tend to reinforce the status quo. Affirmative action does not mean the disenfranchisement of one segment of society, but the extension of the franchise to all. My answer to those of you in younger generations—who have not experienced the widespread denial of opportunity in earlier times and consider affirmative action programs to confer an unwanted stigma—is this: In an imperfect world, better the stigmatized opportunity than no opportunity at all. Each generation gains from the contributions made by previous ones. Some day we may not need social programs to broaden our horizons, but that time has not yet arrived.

Mentoring programs in higher education seem to have lost their popularity, as well, as the struggle for individual and institutional survival apparently leaves no energy for developing future leaders. Unfortunately, the concept of mentorship, rather than the manner in which it was practiced, has been viewed with suspicion and largely abandoned.

We talk endlessly about the crucial need for “leadership” and “diversity,” not only in higher education but in society at large. A recent article in the New York Times described a similar concern in the corporate sector. For example, Paul Allaire, chairman of the Xerox Corporation, recently sent a memo to every manager, stressing that he held each one of them accountable for promoting minorities and women into management positions. We should do no less.

But as I look across our joint professions—academic libraries and information technology organizations—I do not see a population representative of American society, particularly in leadership positions. Talking alone will not produce the breadth of diversity nor nurture the leadership talent we need. We need bold and active programs to identify and search out new talent combined with patient, time-consuming mentoring efforts, the benefits of which may not be apparent for years.

I think we face two important professional obligations today, obligations which are critical to the financial and intellectual survival of our institutions of higher education. And those two obligations are diversity and leadership: diversity because it is not only morally right, but also demographically smart as the traditional talent pool continues to shrink; and the assurance of leadership succession to guide our institutions through a confusing transformational period in which there is no longer a stable, bureaucratic structure to compensate for lack of leadership. The two best methods to achieve these goals, I believe, are affirmative action programs—defined as actively seeking out talent wherever it may reside—and formal mentoring programs.
are important and necessary, but it is time to raise our efforts to another level.

It is relatively easy for the individual manager to recognize the need for continuing education and training for one’s colleagues to enable them to develop new skill sets and a broader understanding of management techniques. In many instances, it is a question of finding the funds to provide opportunities to one’s staff to attend seminars, workshops, and institutes.

But mentorship is something quite different, much more demanding, and without an immediate payoff—and possibly without a future payoff to one’s own institution. Mentorship represents an individual commitment to seeking out, identifying, and developing in a variety of ways the leaders of the future—people who have the creativity, the intellect, the conceptual skills, and the personal qualities necessary to provide true transformational leadership in the challenging, ever-changing, and fluid environment of contemporary higher education.

- It means surrounding oneself with the best and the brightest despite the covert—and often overt—threat to one’s own sense of security.
- It means urging others to develop their true potential, even when that potential surpasses one’s own.
- It means delegation rather than abdication. Being available to work through problems together, to advise, to support, and to accept ultimate responsibility. To be a coach rather than a commander.
- It means conscious tailoring of opportunities for individuals that require them to stretch—and then helping them do it.
- It means recognizing strengths and weaknesses; building on the strengths and strengthening weaknesses through appropriate actions and opportunities.
- And particularly in today’s world, where we know the future will be discontinuous, it means not espousing “do as I have done” but recognizing that preparing for an uncertain future will require completely different leadership abilities and having the courage to support and encourage the younger generation to develop those styles with no assurance of validity or legitimacy.

Leading a transformational process and managing the fluid and chaotic transition period of indefinite length will require skills vastly different from those needed for ensuring “administrative law and order” in a stable, predictable environment. Rules no longer apply, and our vision of the future is fraught with uncertainty. Where our spheres of responsibilities used to have well-defined borders, the only boundary is the new frontier. Effective leadership will require an extraordinary ability to maintain a delicate and continually changing balance in the management of technical, financial, and human resources to serve the academic mission of the institution.

This model—diversity and leadership—applies also on a less global scale to our current impasse in working together as managers of information resources. We need to break down the traditional barriers on both sides; widen our exclusive circles to include all kinds of necessary, non-traditional talent; and develop internal mentoring programs between libraries and information technology divisions. We can develop internships in each other’s operations, make temporary “acting” cross-appointments to enable on-the-job learning of new skills and new perspectives, and begin to nurture a generation of leaders who view their responsibilities in a totally different frame of reference. We are not producing future leaders by keeping the younger generation bottled up in the organizations we have known and loved.

I would like to close with a tribute to my long-time colleague and dear friend, Paul Peters, whose tragically foreshortened career exemplifies the leadership model for the 21st century. I first met Paul eighteen years ago when he joined the Columbia University libraries to guide the transformation of a 230-year-old card catalog into a networked Columbia Libraries Information Online (CLIO). Although I was twenty years his senior, Paul and I educated and mentored each other through the ensuing nine years. I particularly remember a conversation in which he confided to me that his career goal was to be an ARL [Association of Research Libraries] director. I said to him, “Paul, with your talents, vision, and warmth of personality, don’t confine yourself to a job description of the ’80s. There will be many more opportunities in the ’90s and beyond.” Advice is easily given—making it happen is the difficult part. Paul took up the challenge, and we are all familiar with his enormous contributions to our joint endeavors. He cast his net wide and mentored a huge number of people by his example, by individual interaction, by CNI [Coalition for Networked Information] conferences, and by his speaking and writing. It is against nature for the older generation to bury the younger. We have sustained a great loss. We can best honor his memory by following his example of diversity and leadership in action.

It is with heartfelt gratitude and a deep sense of humility that I accept this award. Thank you all very much.