IT Leadership Development: The University of Kansas Mentoring Program

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Many professions encourage the tradition of passing on current knowledge and experience to prepare the next generation of practitioners. A medical residency, an artisan’s apprenticeship, or an executive training program all provide the would-be practitioner with real-world experience under the watchful eye of a seasoned professional. Typically, no formal training exists for aspiring chief information officers (CIOs), but a mentor often clears the path for those who wish to transition into information technology (IT) leadership roles by offering direction and knowledge of the intricacies of managing in an academic setting. Indeed, the ECAR research study, *Information Technology Leadership in Higher Education: The Condition of the Community*,¹ indicates that mentoring may offer subtle but potentially important associations with salary level, industry commitment, and other expressed behaviors and preferences.

Despite the benefits of mentorship, ensuring that all aspiring IT leaders have the same access to this wealth of experience is difficult. Finding a mentor can be a tricky process. If a person is lucky, like Marilu Goodyear, vice provost for Information Services and CIO, University of Kansas, she meets a person who provides this needed guidance. “My first boss was a smart, assertive, and articulate woman who gave me lots of experience and independence, but then grabbed me just before I ran off a cliff and did anything drastically wrong,” recalled Goodyear. To this day, she remains in close contact with her mentor.

For those who are not as fortunate, some institutions offer formal mentoring programs that may yield uneven results. Many programs match a current manager with a potential manager, and they meet to discuss the latter’s issues and concerns. Some pairings succeed, but like many relationships, poor personal chemistry, dissimilar professional backgrounds, or career experiences may impede others from thriving. “My last institution, the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, has a good mentoring program based upon pairing,” stated Donna Liss, associate vice provost. “Yet I was the first person in the program to request a specific mentor. I knew where my career needed to go, and I wanted to model the person I chose as my mentor. If the program had assigned me with somebody, I don’t know how successful that would have been.” In addition, the perceived time burden may discourage some potentially effective mentors from participating. Finally, for various reasons, a structured mentoring program may not resonate with institution staff members.

At the University of Kansas (KU), Goodyear has taken a third approach for the Information Services (IS) organization. She provides a fertile backdrop that fosters a grassroots mentoring program. Individuals participate as little or as much they desire, according to their schedules or needs. At the program’s core is an informal gathering of a small group of mentors and mentees that acts as a springboard for other mentoring activities. This one structured activity, however, impacts the participants, the IS organization, and even the institution. Mentors report that mentees are more confident, more focused, and more effective in their jobs. The group camaraderie facilitates
participants’ day-to-day activities and projects. The program’s success has also encouraged KU to provide institution-wide leadership training opportunities for its aspiring women administrators in 2004.

This research bulletin was undertaken to explore one of the key findings of the Information Technology Leadership in Higher Education: The Condition of the Community study—that mentoring makes a difference. To gain further perspective on this issue, ECAR conducted a case study of Goodyear’s mentoring efforts at the University of Kansas (KU), where she focuses specifically on women managers who work in IS. But it is a framework that is transferable to other institutions and situations. While KU’s history of diversity and mentoring provides an exceptionally supportive environment for her mentoring program, Goodyear notes she has launched similar efforts at other institutions where she has worked. All it takes is a willingness to plant that initial seed and cultivate the resulting activity.

Highlights of Mentoring for IT Leaders

Founded in 1863, the University of Kansas enrolled almost 29,000 students in fall 2002 at its main campus in Lawrence and its medical center. In FY 2003, it employed 2,165 faculty members. KU’s top leadership is particularly diverse; men and women each comprise half of the vice provost and dean positions. David Shulenburger, provost and executive vice chancellor, attributes this to the university’s long history of openness. Women attended KU’s first class, and by the 1870s minorities attended this institution. Shulenburger believes that “You need to focus on the preferences of the institution. I have tried very hard to ensure that everyone understands that. Our philosophy is to go out and find the best person for the job. We have made it very clear, and we are no nonsense about this.”

Shulenburger also notes that mentoring is “part of KU’s fabric. It not unusual or uncomfortable to have mentoring occur for women in administration since it happens all across the institution.” For the past seven years, each new member of the faculty (which is 65 percent male) has been required to have a mentor; department chairs must assign a mentor if none arises naturally. KU also offers a senior administrative fellow for faculty in a program where selected faculty members shadow a handful of administrators over the course of a year, attend chancellor and provost meetings, and participate in a series of seminars.

Goodyear heads several areas—academic computing, administrative computing, the Libraries, telecommunications, printing, and mail services—that together comprise Information Services at the University of Kansas. She places a high priority on personal development within her own area, driven by her own experiences. “I benefitted so much from my own mentoring,” she explained. “I spend a lot of time mentoring the people who directly report to me…. It is very rewarding when you make a lasting contribution in that area.” For example, Goodyear helps staff members understand the necessary requirements to move up in the IS organization. She outlines required managerial skills in an organizational document. Her “mentor for the day” program offers employees a first-hand look at management while they shadow her throughout a typical work day.
Goodyear also meets regularly with individual managers to review career goals and suggest avenues to meet their goals.

As an organization, Information Services places a high priority on the learning and growth dimensions of its balanced scorecard goals in the strategic plan. In spring 2001, IS formed the Organizational Development Group (ODG) for volunteers interested in improving the way the organization functions. The group explores various topics and tools through meetings and seminars held three times each semester. The group has studied personal productivity skills, facilitation, and project management. The ODG also turns theory into action. Last year, the group provided a valuable communications conduit among IS management, facilitating KU's first institution-wide layoffs. The group is now focusing on organizational learning and the promotion of positive thinking in the workplace.

The Information Services Mentoring Program

Goodyear’s personal and professional experiences foster a strong commitment to public service and to women’s professional development issues, but the IS mentoring program’s origin also stems from a pragmatic source—a lack of qualified candidates for an assistant position opening in the IS organization. As Kathleen Ames-Oliver, professional development manager, University Department of Human Resources, recalled, “Many candidates were real go-getters and skilled in their particular work area, but none of them had the required ‘broad brush’ of skills.” None had a real understanding of the institution at large or of the academic and research enterprises.

Goodyear wanted to find a means for her female middle managers to gain the necessary skills to move up the managerial ladder. With Ames-Oliver’s help, she devised a program that offers the intimacy of a mentoring relationship without the bureaucracy and commitment associated with more formal mentoring programs. They invited a group of 15 IS middle managers (mentees) and senior managers (mentors) to meet informally every four to six weeks for a couple of hours after work to discuss career-related issues. Each meeting began with a general theme or question that lead into a roundtable discussion.

To give mentees a broader exposure to the institution, senior female KU leaders, including senior vice provost Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, attended the first meeting. As an ice breaker, each mentee brought a discussion question, which the mentors drew from a pot and discussed. For several mentees, it was their first chance to personally meet these influential women that they had observed from afar. “I thought about the incredible amount of knowledge sitting in the room and the opportunity to ask them a question anonymously,” stated Julie Loats, university Web administrator and project coordinator for the Portal Project. “It was interesting to hear [the mentors] address my question and to learn about other people’s questions and answers.”

Other meetings focused initially on specific topics. At one, the mentees discussed a recent work-related situation and how they addressed it. At another, mentors discussed lessons learned from past mistakes. Ann Ermey, customer service, ResNet and Personnel Coordinator, noted, “It is nice to learn that mistakes do happen; it’s not perfect
all the time. I enjoy hearing what the mentors gain from their mistakes because I learn quite a bit from mine.”

The meeting’s discussions, however, quickly twisted and turned in new directions. Through these freeform conversations, the mentees began to see their managers’ human side. Mentors discussed how they balanced their careers and families, how they worked their way up the ranks, and how they handled specific situations and mistakes. “They offer us insights into processes that we would not otherwise know about, what is happening behind the scenes,” said Allison Lopez, public relations and marketing manager for Information Services. “They help us to look at things in a different way.” Lopez described how one mentor explained her strategy to advocate for budget priorities: not to accept “no” the first time and how to use diplomatic persistence to present her case. Mentors enjoy the discussion, too, because they are not locked into their teacher roles. “I think the group experience is much more fulfilling,” noted Liss. “I really didn’t feel like a mentor in this situation because we were all learning. I think that is what the group dynamic does.”

Meetings Generate Other Advisory Activities

Everyone likes the program’s formal meeting structure. “I didn’t have any expectations about the program,” stated Gail Schaplowsky, project manager, Networking and Telecommunications Services. “I did not know if it was going to be a formal, lecturing session, but it was really a relaxed atmosphere. I was very pleasantly surprised and pleased to see that the mentors really let their hair down.” As everyone became better acquainted, other interactions germinated outside the meetings.

- **Impromptu communication and “hall plots”:** Follow-up questions or comments provide a natural avenue for mentees to continue their conversations with the senior managers after the meeting adjourns. Even more important is that mentees now have a network of coaches to consult during the course of their work days. Jerree Catlin, associate director, Academic Computing Services, and coordinator of Crisis Communications, described what the group calls “hall plot” meetings where chance encounters now turn into mini-mentoring sessions to bounce off new ideas or to counsel on developing work situations.

- **Formal pairings:** Group members report that one-on-one pairings develop from the informal meetings, usually to address specific issues or situations articulated by the mentee. Whenever possible, it is done in a pragmatic context, interweaving the pairing activities with the mentee’s work responsibilities. For example, Jenny Mehmedovic, coordinator of IT Policy and Planning, wanted to improve her budgeting skills, so when Goodyear [Mehmedovic’s manager] reorganized her office, she gave Mehmedovic responsibility for a small budget. The pairings not only help the mentee, but benefit the department as well. “It is relevant to their work, it is real experience, and it is productive,” stated Liss. Mentees may also approach Ames-Oliver for leadership coaching in specific situations, for example, on effective ways to manage older men and women subordinates.
- **Day-to-day job activities:** The relationships formed after hours also come in handy during the regular workday. “We now have a camaraderie that extends when we work on projects, making them work more smoothly,” said Mehmedovic. “It is not an unknown person sitting across the room. We come to the table together, and we can just pick up on what is supposed to happen right away.”

- **Lateral networking:** The mentees also recognize the value of getting to know each other. “We are building a lateral network with all of our fellow mentees outside the bounds of working on projects,” explained Lopez. They now have their own peer network on which to rely.

Because participants attend whenever their schedule allows, “It does not feel like an added burden,” noted Ames-Oliver. “People come as they can come, participate as they can participate.” Mentors estimate that the formal and informal sessions occupy about six hours per month in addition to the meetings.

**What It Means to Higher Education**

Before the inception of the mentor program, most mentees experienced sporadic mentoring and may have received limited validation of their career potential. The mentoring program is designed to address this by “giving positive feedback to the mentees, to reward those who are good job performers and want to continue to improve,” stated Anna Hines, director of IT Fiscal Services and associate director of Networking and Telecommunications.

**Mentors’ Program ROI: Growing Confidence Leads to Improved Job Performance and Department Operations**

The invitation to participate in the mentor program automatically empowered the mentees. “When I saw the list of invited participants and considered their reputations, I felt honored to be part of the group,” explained Mehmedovic. “I interpreted it as a signal that we were the ‘up and comers’; maybe we are moving into leadership. I saw it as an opportunity for exposure, to be seen and also to learn.”

The mentees also perceived the program to be an opportunity for career planning and to rethink aspirations. Several noted to Ames-Oliver that “no one ever asked me where I wanted to be in five years.” It also makes success personally attainable. “What helps me in my day-to-day work is that it puts a real human face on it,” said Schaplowsky. “If these women can succeed, why can’t I? It gives me a different attitude toward work. It becomes realistic and attainable.”

Participation offers the mentees both intangible and tangible benefits. Mehmedovic now puts her job into a more realistic perspective, preventing potential burnout. “I am a very driven person; I could drive myself into the ground,” she admitted. “I know now that my list of projects is never going to get any shorter and it is never going to get completed. I realized in the group that I am not the only one to have this problem. In fact, it is not a problem, but it is the way it is.” Mentors eased Loats’s introduction to the intricacies of
budgeting during a recent portal development project. “It was a very useful learning opportunity for me, but it was also very stressful because I was trying to balance the project’s technical aspects as well as these new budgeting responsibilities,” she recalled. “It was hard for me to determine how to purchase all the required hardware for the project. Different mentors offered advice, and I learned that while I need to watch the budget, I do not need to take every penny to heart. I have those mentoring opportunities to ask questions. It is so useful for me, and there is no way to quantify that.”

In turn, the mentors are now experiencing a return on their time investment in the program. They noted a difference in the mentees’ self-concept, self-confidence, and self-motivation, which in turn has improved overall job performance. For example, Hines described how a mentee in her area has developed into a valued “right hand.” “She has taken a step up, and it has been a real help in moving the department forward,” explained Hines. “She anticipates units’ events and proactively addresses them more quickly. Her language is different. It increases my confidence in her, gives me a real sense of her potential. Now I have a higher-level complement, an additional resource to help run the department.”

Others also noted this mentee’s improved communications skills and more assertive nature. “When she called me in the past, it was just to transmit a request from her boss [Hines],” stated Ames-Oliver. “The last time she called, she outlined her requirements, her desired outcomes, and the programs she needed to accomplish this. She had obviously done her homework. It was a big step in dealing with her.”

Her mentee’s professional growth prompted Hines to reevaluate her own job performance: “I find she is now challenging me,” she explained. “I am trying to do a better job because she is doing a better job. As she improves, I questioned whether I was slacking off in my own job, doing everything I should be doing.”

The mentoring program also facilitates IS operations. “Things really work at a much higher level when people understand how the others work,” explained Liss. “There is a lot of change in IS. We need to know what resources we have and our staff’s interests. [A program like this] gives you a better sense of what skill sets you have, where you need to morph [to meet your area’s objectives]. That is how the program benefits me. We start to know more about everyone’s interests, and we can match them more appropriately to department goals.”

Longer term, the mentees also feel more optimistic about their career prospects as they leverage their skill sets and gain exposure around the IS organization and the university at large. As Schaplowsky noted, it has opened new doors. “I definitely feel there are opportunities to participate in new activities and committees where there weren’t before,” she stated. “I don’t know where it is taking me, but I definitely already feel the motion forward.” The program also provides a sounding board to evaluate future options. “I think that opportunities have [been] and continue to be there, but this group helps me to determine the best way to pursue those opportunities,” said Ermey. “It will help me in whatever I decide to do in my career.”
From Mentee to Mentor: Passing on the Knowledge

Much like Goodyear and the other senior managers have passed along their experiences and knowledge, the mentees are beginning to do the same with their employees, further infusing the mentoring culture into the IS organization. “I think about the mentoring group’s opportunities and lessons, and I try to make sure that I do the same with my staff,” said Ermey. “I try to make mentoring part of my job, to give some of my knowledge to them. For example, I try to ask about my staff’s interests instead of just giving orders.” Mehmedovic recalled helping a student worker with her career goals and interests. “I did not think of myself as a mentor in that role, but perhaps I used some of the lessons I learned,” she noted. “For example, I helped the student realize the broader opportunity of working in the vice provost’s office. It gives her exposure to many situations and skills that will help her move forward; it’s not just office work.”

Formal Mentoring Session Complements Meetings

To balance the meetings, Goodyear also encourages each mentee to meet one-on-one with her supervisor and with Goodyear for a customized session to discuss career goals and individual skill sets. It provides an opportunity for reflection and customized planning. “You get so wrapped up in your daily work, you lose sight of your requirements to move into a leadership role,” admitted Loats. “This is an opportunity to explore the additional experiences that I need.” Goodyear offers career guidance and suggestions on books to read, training, and courses during the session. They meet again in six months to discuss the mentee’s career progress.

For several mentees, this is the first time a manager has taken a formal interest in their career goals and areas of interest, as well as potential opportunities. It reinforces the mentees’ growing sense of empowerment. “I have a more adult role in my career development,” explained Schaplowsky. “I can play a part. It’s great to have someone who literally listens to me and then we can take action on [my career development].” It also provides focus on how they can succeed. “I can always improve, but in some areas my skill level is adequate for my current position,” stated Mehmedovic. “It is reassuring to know that I do not have to focus on everything at once.”

Lessons Learned

Participants outlined several lessons to promote similar programs at other institutions.

- **Build a foundation of trust first:** Ames-Oliver noted that the IS mentoring program is an outgrowth of a solid relationship Goodyear and Liss had already built with their staff. If a manager introduces a similar program unexpectedly, it could create a sense of suspicion among senior managers, who might perceive this as a means to groom their successors. The program’s success also relies on an element of trust and comfort among the participants to encourage frank and spontaneous discussion.

- **Build a core set of supporters:** As vice provost, Goodyear has used her leadership role to drive the IS mentoring program, but she has also cultivated
other senior managers as active program drivers, participants, and supporters. As a result, the program is embraced by the organization, not just driven by a single personality, which helps ensure its continuity. As Goodyear herself noted, “At some places where I worked, similar programs sometimes were not maintained when I left because they had not become part of the organizational structure.”

- **Let it grow organically:** When starting a similar program at a new institution, Goodyear frequently opts for a low-key approach. “You informally change the organization from the ground up,” stated Goodyear. “You don’t broadcast it; you don’t brag about it, you just start doing it. Eventually someone will notice. Then you point out the difference it makes, the skills the mentees gained, and how they have been promoted. Just start small, let the program grow on its own accord, and let it speak for itself. It has to be recognized and adopted as opposed to marketed.”

- **Keep it simple:** All the participants like the program’s grassroots nature, operating with few of the procedures and policies that a formal HR-sponsored program may require. This lowers the participation burden. Ames-Oliver is a member of KU’s human resources staff, but she participates in the program as a mentor and advisor on HR issues; she does not administer the program.

- **Keep it flexible:** The program’s flexible nature also minimizes the participation commitment; no long-term obligation is required. If participants miss a meeting or two, they are not ostracized; there is no material or session to make up. Also, the flexibility encourages a unique mixture of participants at each meeting to drive the discussion.

- **Keep it pragmatic:** Designing mentoring activities in conjunction with the mentees’ work doubles the program’s benefits, assisting both mentees and the overall operations of IS. As the IS organization reaps the program’s benefits, it facilitates the program’s acceptance.

- **Demonstrate a long-term commitment to the program:** A program of this nature takes time to gel as participants become acquainted. Potential participants may not be inclined to join if the program is transitory, especially if the organization has a history of managerial musical chairs. “I feel this undercurrent of ‘Will this last?’ because several participants have worked for numerous managers,” explained Liss. “The mentees are enjoying it, but sometimes I think they are wondering how long the program will last.” Ermey noted the importance of the mentors’ actions: “With a program like this, one of the hardest things for me would be to get started and then have the program discontinued. Seeing the commitment has been tremendous. Despite crises and full schedules, she [Goodyear] and the others attend the meetings.”

- **Keep the group number small:** As program interest grows, it is better to create another group rather than risk losing the personal connection among the current group members. The group needs to remain small in number to focus on
intimate, mentoring relationships, not to evolve into a networking function. Mentoring requires personal conversation that cannot occur in a room filled with people.

- **Look institution-wide for mentors**: The mentoring group emphasizes, but does not limit, mentor participation to the IS area. Indeed, all the mentees thoroughly enjoyed the participation of KU’s senior women administrators at the initial meeting. It enables the mentees to build relationships across the university and to gain an institutional perspective. As IS increasingly becomes a cross-institutional function, this broader exposure only enhances the mentees’ leadership potential.

### Plans for Institution-Wide Leadership Training for Women

In the wake of the IS mentoring program’s success, plans are afoot to offer more campus-wide leadership training activities for women administrative staff. Several senior KU administrators began to think about the needs of their female staff members after attending the initial IS mentoring group meeting. In addition, KU women comprised about half of the attendees at the statewide meeting of the Office of Women in Higher Education Kansas in 2003. “It struck me then that we have a real leadership training vacuum on this campus or we have a lot of women who want to move up and don’t know how,” stated McCluskey-Fawcett. “They have to balance both professional and personal goals. Another issue is how to build a career in a single place, as many women have local family obligations and are not inclined to move for personal reasons. We want to make sure that women who are talented and interested have the opportunity to go to the next level or to become better at their current positions.”

McCluskey-Fawcett and other senior KU administrators plan to launch an institution-wide leadership training program for women in 2004. The current plan is to invite women in specific job titles/codes to a series of two-hour sessions shaped by the 2003 Office of Women in Higher Education Kansas program needs assessment. McCluskey-Fawcett also wants to focus on skill levels, outlining the specific skills and training that managers need to succeed at various levels.

Institutionally, the IS mentoring program reinforces KU’s message of Shulenburger’s commitment to professional development, encouraging employee satisfaction and retention. “I think Goodyear’s training activities send a signal on how she values development activities on both a personal and professional level,” said Deb Teeter, director of Institutional Research and Planning. “This additional effort [the IS mentoring program] is what this institution is all about. These activities all blend together to develop the ground so the seeds [of professional development] can really take root.”

Individually, the mentees have taken note. “The program has sent a broadly reinforced message that we work in an environment where we can ask for what we need,” stated Lopez. “I feel really great about working here. This must be one of the most emotionally healthy places that I’ve ever worked.”
Both parties benefit. “I think when people care about their positions and their job performance, they look for ways to do a better job and to expand their horizons,” explained Catlin. “[So a program like this] really feeds back positively to the organization. When you provide that [opportunity] for the people who report to you, it not only benefits the organization, but also the individual.”

With a minimal investment, other institutions can implement similar mentoring programs. “I would say this is one program that can be tailored to other organizations and their own individual personalities,” noted Catlin. “It [does not require] a huge amount of time, yet it is one of those simple things that produces a disproportionately greater impact than the time invested in the program.”

Key Questions to Ask

- How can we identify employees or middle managers with IT leadership potential?
- What skills or competencies must they develop within the next five years in order to succeed in a higher education IT organization?
- What strategies or activities can we implement to “grow” the next generation of IT leaders?
- How can current managers and directors assist with the career development of potential IT leaders?
- How can we fold/embed career development into day-to-day IT department activities?
- How do we track potential leaders’ progress?

Where to Learn More

- University of Kansas Information Services Women’s Mentoring Program Website, <http://www.informationservices.ku.edu/mentoring/>.


**Endnotes**


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