Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT

Cynthia Golden, Editor
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Part II: The Individual Perspective
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According to Peter Senge, learning organizations are “organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” An important part of creating a true learning organization, in which we would all feel appreciated and fulfilled, is fostering a culture and environment where our employees are supported and valued and where they see themselves as an integral part of the institution. The authors who contributed to this book have clearly outlined the roles that both our higher education organizations and individual staff can play in creating a culture of continuous learning.

The effectiveness of our organizations ultimately depends on our people. Building an organization that people want to be part of and want to support requires that we place a strong emphasis on individual and staff development. “It is the dedication, motivation, knowledge, and skill sets of individuals that make a tremendous difference in the organization” is what Marilu Goodyear, Kathleen Ames-Oliver, and Keith Russell told us in chapter 3. They stressed the importance of heeding Marcus Buckingham’s proposal that the phrase “Get People Done Through Work” should be our motto. No matter how we state it, we should recognize that our people are fundamental to our organizations’ health and success, and cultivating our people is our responsibility. It also makes good sense.

The Times, They Are A-Changin’ (Again)

Many of the authors in this book began their careers when organizations tended to be paternalistic and hierarchical, and Bob Dylan was singing about a world in transition. Our first ideas of work may have been flavored by our parents and their memories of the Great Depression. Many of their generation believed one should look for a good job near home and cling to it, because workers were
expendable. A stable job with good pay was important. Getting ahead meant working longer hours, “not rocking the boat,” and silently hoping for a raise or a promotion. The GI Bill provided a new avenue to higher education, and a college education became important in order to “get ahead.” On-the-job skills training was available, but professional development in the workplace, as described in this book, was rare.

Things have changed significantly over the past 50 to 60 years. In chapter 1, James Bruce and Brian McDonald led us through our recent history, showing how we have moved from an era when our leaders were technologists placed in leadership roles—people who simply “got technology projects done”—to today’s environment of leaders who are higher education professionals and technology integrators who must understand the business of higher education to focus on complex client services. They wrote, “IT leaders need to evolve as the context continues to change.” We are undeniably in transition to an age where collaboration, flattening organizational structures, recognition of the individual, and appreciation of the value of staff and professional development have become increasingly important as we compete in an ever-widening global marketplace. We need to prepare our organizations for continual change—to move to an undefined future where the only thing we know is that the model will change again, probably more frequently. “We live in a very dynamic higher education ecosystem where adaptation has become the norm,” said Gene Spencer and Jeannie Zappe in chapter 2. A fundamental assumption here is that we will each have several different types of jobs in multiple organizations during our careers.

Change is the byword. Whether we supervise longtime staff or new recruits, it is our job to help them develop the skills and self-confidence they will need not only to be flexible and adaptable but to be change agents themselves as they participate in the ever-evolving world of technology in higher education.

Building the Higher Education IT Workforce
How do we find and develop talented people who will provide transformational leadership at all levels of our organizations? If we identify them, will they want to work for us? We compete directly with other sectors of society for the best and the brightest talent. How marketable are our organizations to the people we want on our teams? What are the unique reasons someone would want to work in higher education? Tracey Leger-Hornby and Ron Bleed suggested in chapter 7 that factors include the collegial atmosphere, built-in services, learning
opportunities, the nonprofit mission, and the opportunity to contribute back to the community, thus making a difference. “Making a difference,” said William Hogue and David Dodd in chapter 4, may be the greatest personal measure of career success for some people.

Once we have the right people, what processes do we need to have in place to help them grow professionally and transfer knowledge within our workforce? How do we retain our intellectual capital within higher education? How do we capture the experience and wisdom of our leaders as they move on to other positions or retirement? As cited in several previous chapters, the 2004 ECAR study *Information Technology Leadership in Higher Education: The Condition of the Community*\(^2\) found that a significant number of our current leaders will retire in the next few years, and we do not have staff in the pipeline interested in replacing them. How do we convey to younger, newer staff the importance of shared leadership for our organizations? How do we structure leadership positions so that new generations will find them of value and interest? If we haven’t been thinking about these issues before, now is the time.

**Knowing Who We Want—Technical Skills and Understanding**

Each organization needs to think carefully about the attributes it seeks in the next-generation workforce and leaders. Many will be hired because they have specific technical skills needed to implement, maintain, and explain both the new and old systems the enterprise relies on each day. They will also need to be able to thrive in new organizational models and be predisposed to leadership roles. The authors in this book have offered a few ideas of the characteristics to look for in individuals as we build our organizations:

- **Continuous learner**—self-motivated, curious, agile, creative, a quick study, and open to new ideas
- **Communicator**—an empathetic listener and communication manager; both hears and conveys important information at all stakeholder levels and with a positive attitude
- **Collaborator**—service-oriented and stakeholder-motivated; also a negotiator, consensus builder, facilitator, and project manager
- **Change agent/manager**—understands the complexity of the enterprise, sees the big picture, is values driven, has character, is adaptable, and is willing to take risks
- **Competent**—organized, adaptable, and accountable people who understand technology and understand people
Centered—serious about self-assessment and reflection, understand themselves and their own skills, and know when to turn to others

Competing for Talent
Where can we find people with these attributes? We don’t have a long line of candidates standing at our doors vying for positions today. Computer and information science school enrollments are down, which means we have fewer recent graduates in the pipeline for our available jobs. And, it’s not just higher education IT that’s facing a shortage of the “right” people to join our profession: We are competing with industry, government, medicine, and other sectors for our next-generation workforce and leadership. They, too, say that they want skilled technology graduates with business acumen and the ability to see and understand the larger view of their increasingly complex environments and missions. Sitting back and waiting for the right people to come to us will not lead to success, especially when we know that other sectors have more resources for the recruitment process than we do. We need to put on our competitive hats and think of new ways to recruit, grow, and retain talented people to higher education. As Bruce and McDonald wrote in chapter 1, “One of the most important jobs any leader has is to develop the next generation of leaders.” We must tackle this responsibility proactively and with vigor.

Campus Efforts
Whether you have long-standing, institutionalized organizational and professional development programs or are just starting to think about possibilities, you can take important steps to make sure your efforts succeed.

- **Start setting expectations before you hire.** Don’t make your programs an afterthought. Spencer and Zappe suggested in chapter 2 that we should focus on organizational and professional development issues in the recruitment and hiring process in order to set the stage for expectations and commitments from both the organization and the individual. Bucknell uses this approach along with conversations and concerted efforts to continually reshape their organization and provide the professional development resources to keep individuals a vital part of the team.

- **Create a diverse workforce.** The value of multiple perspectives and styles in decision making is well known. Many of us have taken Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and other kinds of assessments to help us better understand
ourselves and how we best communicate and work with others. Whatever you believe about the value of the specific category assignments, these exercises show, in a very understandable way, why diversity is important as we develop organizations with shared leadership. Keep in mind that the skills you seek may be found outside the traditional realm of IT, whether in higher education or other environments. IT staff don’t all need to be techies. Many examples show nontechnical people providing exemplary leadership in the field. Whether they began their working lives as a lawyer, ornithologist, MBA, librarian, or women’s studies professor, they may have just the skills you need as you diversify your staff. Hire student interns and grow them to be future employees in your organization. Set aside part of the budget for this purpose.

Imagine new time and work models. We are already faced with providing 24 x 7 services that call for time and work models other than traditional nine-to-five jobs. Flexible scheduling, job sharing, and working remotely are just a few of the ways we can offer options to our staff. We can also look into collaborations with other departments and institutions with opportunities for joint products or services and cross-training as we move into areas not traditionally considered technical.

Market the higher education workplace—and your organization. Some organizations have strong public relations and marketing programs for both the products of the organization and for employment and retention. For our purposes, we should think more broadly about how to market to those who have never considered a career in higher education. We must market higher education mission and benefits routinely—not just on special occasions or when we need to hire a new person. We should think of ourselves as ambassadors for the higher education workplace everywhere we go. Be intentional about speaking up for higher education and IT in higher education. Here are some starter ideas:

- Join your region’s “technology council” and meet your peers in other sectors—this is a great way to get the word out about IT at your institution.
- Work with your public affairs or media relations office and learn how and when to deliver your message.
- Always have the “three-minute elevator speech” ready and use it when appropriate. Be able to talk about your organization, key things happening there, and available or upcoming opportunities.
- Participate in the annual campus community open house and let the community know how you contribute to your institution.
Know your message. What would attract someone to higher education as a place to work? You might mention the collegial environment, adequate benefits, historically valued mission (both institutional and global), clearly articulated expectations, appropriate resources, clear rewards and accountability, partnership in leadership and decision making, opportunities for creativity, opportunities for growth (technical, management, and leadership), a flexible and collaborative workplace, and work that matters. Don’t forget tuition remission, campus recreation center facilities, fine arts center and programs, intellectual growth opportunities with daily seminars and library privileges, and other perks. And finally, stress the cachet of belonging to the higher education enterprise. A good resource is the American Council on Education’s Solutions for Our Future program (http://www.solutionsforourfuture.org/).

The Role of Professional Development in Retention
As Stanley Davis and Christopher Meyer wrote in Blur, “It isn’t a sustainable course to ignore your people’s development needs. You’ll only lose them faster that way—or never attract them in the first place.”

Spencer and Zappe affirmed that a strong learning and growth environment is a key factor in staff retention. Deliberate, formal professional development, as covered in this book, with coaching, mentoring, cross-training, and assignments that stretch individuals’ abilities, organizational support for individual and organizational assessment, on-the-job opportunities for active learning and distributed leadership, and more, show that you care about individuals and their contributions to the organization.

Bruce and McDonald suggested in chapter 1 that creating career ladders for those who don’t aspire to senior leadership positions can be an important way to provide opportunities for non-CIO-track staff to share in leadership roles. It’s also a way to increase the likelihood that an individual will want to stay on staff. Most of us know of people who moved into management or leadership roles in order to get a promotion and raise and in so doing left behind a position in which they were superbly competent and happy. Once unhappily established in the new position, it’s easier to move outside the organization than to return to the original job.

Creating work environments that are “friendly” for families, women, part-time students, or other groups like new hires from the Net Generation can be critical in retaining staff. We all know competent, experienced people who have resigned
from positions because the work environment was not flexible enough to permit them to care for family members, be it a new baby, an aging parent, or a spouse with a long-term illness. Many people who want to be an integral part of our staff can balance family or school issues quite well if given options for flexible scheduling. Leger-Hornby and Bleed addressed a number of these issues in chapter 7, and Joanne Kossuth and Leger-Hornby wrote a good resource for attracting and retaining women to organizations.\(^4\)

While it is important for the organization to do all it can to create an environment that fosters personal and professional growth, it is also important for the individual to take responsibility for his or her own professional development and future. In chapter 6 Golden and Updegrove discuss why professional activity is important to one’s career and offer suggestions to the employee about strategies for getting involved at all levels.

Finally, it is important to understand that allowing good staff to move on to other opportunities not only benefits the person, it strengthens the profession. Balancing institutional interests with individual career paths is a well-accepted practice in higher education. Each new role in our careers, and each new institution we work for, contributes to our broader perspectives and helps us become more valuable as employees. Each job should prepare us for the next one.

**The Next Generation of Leaders**

This book has paid special attention to cultivating the next generation of leaders in the IT and information resource arena. The anticipated retirement of large numbers of those in senior leadership positions is cause for concern and requires proactive measures to ensure continuity and avoid the loss of institutional knowledge during the transition. At some institutions, formal programs address this problem by identifying emerging leaders, providing them with opportunities to observe leaders in action and allowing them to participate in leadership experiences. Georgia Tech’s Master’s Series program was created “to identify and develop the leadership skills of selected candidates to build ‘bench strength’ for senior leaders on the Georgia Tech campus as well as meet the institute’s need to grow, develop, and retain future leaders,”\(^5\) and the university’s Office of Information Technology’s Professional Leaders program builds on that experience for IT professionals. In chapter 5, Metros and Yang discussed the role mentoring can play in preparing the next generation. In chapter 8, Brian Hawkins recommended developing skills early in one’s career that will become habits of the successful IT professional.
Having plans in place before some of the more seasoned executives move onward is critical. New leaders may not come from our current IT workforce, however. Examining other potential sources of leadership talent, including faculty, administrators, and others on campus who have a solid understanding of IT, as well as recruiting from the corporate world may be useful strategies toward building the leadership pool.

**Current IT Staff: Are They Ready?**

Campus IT staff possess significant talent that should be poised for leadership at many different levels. While a few potential leaders will rise to the top, the ECAR study indicates that most do not aspire to formal leadership roles. Some may have begun their careers with us as part-time student employees and simply found it a comfortable place to stay. Some may find their energy in having their hands on the technology, not in working with people. Some may see leadership and management roles as stressful and demanding time they are unwilling to give. Some do not possess the confidence that they can do the job when indeed they can. It behooves us to model appropriate time management and shared responsibility in such a way that these are not concerns for potential leaders. We can plant the seeds for shared leadership in all of our people, but we cannot force it. In chapter 2, Spencer and Zappe suggested that when we see good candidates for leadership roles, we take advantage of “opportunistic evolution,” moving forward when people are ready and steering them toward leadership positions in an evolutionary, nonthreatening way. For others, we need to make sure they still have opportunities for professional development and growth on a nonmanagement career ladder that recognizes technical achievement.

**Looking to Your Campus Colleagues**

You don’t need to convince people on your campus that your institution is a great place to work. Most people are there because they believe strongly in the mission of higher education. They already consider themselves higher education professionals. People who could contribute substantially to the IT group may not be IT professionals, however. Faculty, administrators, and others may have great insight into technology use. We might already be working with these people on collaborative projects. They may be contributing as leaders on our IT advisory committees. Or, they might be ignoring us—moving ahead with innovative ideas on their own. Whatever their current positions, they may be strong candidates to join our teams. Some may be interested in a full shift to IT leadership, while others
might be interested in a program that allows them to join the IT staff on a temporary basis, for six months or a year, or on a part-time basis. These approaches may be valuable experiences for both the non-IT person and the IT staff.

**Reaching Outside the Gates**

We need to discover new and creative ways to find, reach, and connect with candidates from outside higher education. As the ECAR study indicates, new campus IT staff hired from industry probably will need help acclimating to the culture and politics of a higher education organization. This seems a small concession in obtaining valuable talent. We lose people to the corporate world and other sectors generally for more salary and financial benefits—and because they might not have realized that a position in higher education was viable for them. But who is to say that there aren’t people in industry who’d like to move in the other direction and are willing to take a smaller salary in exchange for the collegial environment? How do we find them? Imagine new places to search, and search continuously. Develop professional relationships outside higher education, and don’t hesitate to circulate key position openings within these communities.

While many institutions have set guidelines for searches and job ad placement, their ultimate goal is to help you find the people you need. Make human resources staff your partners in designing streamlined job searches that reach a wider, yet targeted, audience.

Knowing the right person at the right time might well help you fill a position. This is where keeping in touch with others professionally and involving them in the life of your enterprise can provide a huge benefit. A few examples of ways you might do this follow.

- Pay attention to your contacts and collaborators from the outside. Vendors sometimes find higher education attractive, and colleagues at other institutions may be looking for a change of pace.
- Routinely bring outside people in via seminars and similar professional events and let them experience, though briefly, what it’s like to be on a campus.
- The Intergovernmental Personnel Act ([http://www.opm.gov/programs/ipa/](http://www.opm.gov/programs/ipa/)) is a government program for loaning employees to other institutions for a year. It can provide a good introduction to the higher education environment for them, and vice versa.
- Reread the marketing section above.
Harvesting Institutional Knowledge

While it seems clear that we must concentrate on bringing new talent and perspectives into our organizations, it also seems clear that we have a great opportunity to continue productive relationships with those who may soon be looking to step down from their current management and leadership roles. Models exist for continuing these relationships and making effective transfers of knowledge that can work well for us in higher education.

We can “borrow back” expertise and leadership by finding part-time or job-sharing roles for those who do not wish to fully retire but would prefer to cut back their hours while continuing to work and contribute to the enterprise. Pairing these individuals with newer staff provides an opportunity for mentoring and for transfer of knowledge and perspective. Formal programs for knowledge transfer can begin long before actual retirement. One Southwestern institution paired an aspiring CIO with the retiring CIO for a full year of collaboration. It was a successful partnership, and the CIO job was awarded to the apprentice.

The American Association of Retired People (AARP) reported that a strong majority of seniors want flexible work arrangements over daily, weekly, and even seasonal timeframes. CVS/pharmacy lets their snowbirds (people who travel south in the winter) work seasonally in different locations and for flexible hours. That might seem a bit of a stretch for the higher education environment, but with the ability to work from remote locations and similar situations, it could be a win-win option for some. Imagine a college in the North arranging a shared position with a university in the South, for example.

Whether through phased retirement, buying consulting time from retirees, or other creative transition techniques, it is important that we recognize that not only history but real institutional knowledge leaves along with our colleagues. It should be harvested and disseminated throughout the organization whenever possible.

Looking Ahead

In his address to the Seminars on Academic Computing in 2005, George O. Strawn, CIO at the National Science Foundation, spoke about change being the “constant of modern times.” Those of us in higher education have been actively engaged in developing, managing, and applying more technological change during our careers than previous generations have seen in their lifetimes. Many of the authors of this book were themselves part of creating the IT culture in which
we work today. What we can draw from their writings is the primacy of people to the development of solutions for our future. If we don’t care for ourselves and our colleagues, develop skills and career paths, or mentor future leaders, our institutions will not thrive, we will not fulfill our responsibilities to society, and we won’t be very happy.

Rather than conclude this chapter, and this book, we prefer to look toward the future we are helping to build. Margaret J. Wheatley captured our imagination in the introduction to the second edition of her *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*:

I believe the fundamental work of this time—work that requires the participation of all of us—is to discover new ways of being together. Our old ways of relating to each other don’t support us any longer, whether it’s at home, in community, at work, or as nation states… We are all pioneers and discoverers of a new world, and we all need one another. It is up to us to journey forth in search of new practices and new ideas that will enable us to create lives and organizations worthy of human habitation.¹⁰

### Endnotes


7. Ibid.


About the Authors

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