

## **Today's Employees, Tomorrow's Leaders: Sustainable Practices for Nurturing and Promoting Higher Education Leaders**

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Using a standard definition of the “misuse” or “misappropriation” of public resources, ethics boards spend much time and money responding to accusations of theft and conflict of interest by employees who use their credit.<sup>1</sup> We argue that a far more prevalent type of waste in our public colleges and universities is the “misuse” of the talent of numerous untapped potential leaders and managers, whose current roles in faculty or staff positions do not give the employee or the college the benefits that could come from developing their strengths – and honoring and respecting the contributions of all.

We begin with a personal story to set the stage. Just one year ago, Alison joined Bradley's college (North Seattle Community College) as a new dean interested in getting to know the talents and aspirations of her division. In initial conversations and at all levels of the institution, Bradley's name surfaced as a key player in the life of the college, though he was still just short of his tenure award and was working on his dissertation at that time. What was clear from the earliest meetings with this English department coordinator was that he was energized and motivated by leadership roles and administrative duties. We had a very early conversation in which we determined that Bradley was a dean and while he held a

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<sup>1</sup>E.G. Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 292-120-030 **Criteria for Determining Sanctions**  
<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=292-120-030>

faculty role, we would work under the assumption that he was destined for leadership in the near term.

What is the essence of mentorship in a situation such as ours? Basically, we have thrown out the typical assumptions about job classifications and the expected order of progression, and worked quickly to develop the needed skills for the position of community college dean. In under one year, several offers of employment at the dean and assistant dean level had already come in, and Bradley is currently serving as Interim Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at North's principal sister college, Seattle Central Community College.

What did it take for Bradley to develop into a dean from a not-yet-tenured faculty position? What did it take for Alison to encourage and nurture such professional acceleration? For Bradley, it was a willingness to find avenues within – and slightly beyond – the constraints of the negotiated union agreements – to gain the skills needed to jump more than one level beyond his current role. For Alison, it was the recognition of how much richer the division and college can be if we simply allowed for Bradley to grow – and continue to recognize the greater good to the community college system as a whole, when we nurture the talents of our best and brightest.

One important feature in nurturing new leaders is creating development opportunities for current employees. For example, North Seattle Community College has instituted a number of openly available and universally offered training programs for potential leaders to excel within the organization. These programs are an excellent way to assure that employees are fulfilled and at the same time, that the

talent and energy of faculty and staff (“state resources”) are not wasted, but rather, engaged as much as possible. Examples of the offerings include North’s *Leadership Development Initiative*, offering employees interested in promotion the chance to explore their leadership capacity, and the *Diversity Training of Facilitators* program, creating a new and inspired cadre of leaders focused on achieving equity at all levels of the institution. In addition, Alison encouraged Bradley to make use of state-level community college leadership trainings like *Lead from the Middle*, *Lead Yourself First*, and *The Association of Washington Community and Technical Colleges*<sup>2</sup> that included leadership development and networking opportunities.

While Bradley’s transition into a dean-level position was smooth overall - and ultimately successful - in the experience of the authors, one barrier to expanding toward a new position can be that current colleagues resist the loss – or the threat – of that individual as they prepare to leave their current role. Indeed, it is a challenge to support a direct report in career expansion in cases where success will mean the loss of a stellar employee, somewhat akin to encouraging talented offspring to develop, knowing that the result will be a personal loss. We propose that our employees, our institutions and our systems require that we plan beyond the immediate circumstances to envision potential, and support employees in stretching to their personal potential. We see this endeavor as a lifelong journey to expand leadership development opportunities wherever the desire and the potential are evident.

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<sup>2</sup> The Association of CTC [http://www.theassociationctc.org/?page\\_id=2](http://www.theassociationctc.org/?page_id=2)

During our conference session, the following activities are used to develop sustainable practices for nurturing and promoting higher education leaders:

- **Brainstorm approaches to leveraging**
- **Gauging employers' openness to leveraging and supporting next step**
- **Salary conversations**
- **Working out of class**
- **Support for diverse employee groups and cultures – make a difference?**

Overall, the authors present the following takeaways or lessons learned for conference participants:

- **Regular, standing one-on-one conversations between administrators and those they supervise.** It's imperative that supervisors develop relationships to their employees and understand their goals for professional and personal development in order to offer appropriate opportunities for growth and development.
- **Importance of vision statements for employment goals:** Before seeking any advanced position, employees should be encouraged to have a clear sense of the nature of function of the next position sought. Writing or talking out a professional vision statement for oneself is a great strategy to accomplish this.
- **Be willing to experiment with applying and interviewing for practice.** Applying and interviewing for positions is a learning opportunity, and it is ok to apply for a position before one feels fully ready for advancement simply to learn from the experience. It is risky –

and possibly too late - to be honing one's application or interviewing skills for the first time when the 'perfect' job actually comes along.

- **Cultivating an attitude to sustainable promotion within divisions.**

Current administrators can intentionally design opportunities for employees to grow within their current units like coordinator positions, division advisory groups, and taskforce and project leads.

By developing employee strengths through these kinds of strategies, administrators can protect and sustainably grow the most valuable state resource there is—the talent of our current employees.