

## Leadership Learning Community

### **What we are Learning About Creating Sustainable Fellowship Networks**

March 17, 2002

The LLC has sponsored a number of learning sessions focusing on how to effectively work with the graduates of our programs. The following lessons and approaches were generated by LLC regional circles in New York and Washington DC. Participants were asked to address the following general questions:

- What do the graduates of our programs tell us about how to support their continuing leadership and what role are they playing in organizing themselves?
- What are the goals of efforts to connect and organize leadership program graduates?
- What kinds of activities have graduates participated in and what types of organizations have they formed to support their connections and work?
- What have we learned from the efforts to build networks that will sustain connections among program graduates?

#### **Naming: Sustainable Fellowship Networks or Alumni Organizing?**

One of the first lessons is that naming is important! Most of us agreed that the term “alumni” is often associated with college fundraising and focuses on a past significant relationship instead of the future. Leadership programs are meant to provide skills that prepare participants for current and future roles as leaders. It would certainly change the focus on service if the program participant became a fellow when they graduated from their program.

##### Program Approaches:

- Many programs don't distinguish between fellows and alumni.
- At least one program refers to their graduates as senior fellows.

#### **What Do Programs Hope to Achieve Through Sustainable Networks?**

Leadership development program staff and participants have described their goals, aspirations and the potential benefits of sustainable program networks in several areas:

- **Continuing Leadership Development:** Many participants recognize the need to continually develop their leadership capacities and seek ongoing opportunities through their programs and peer learning among fellows of their program.
- **Access to Resources that Increase Leadership Effectiveness:** By maintaining connections to their programs and other fellows, program graduates hope to be exposed to new ideas, new partnerships that can leverage their work, opportunities to collaborate on issues or initiatives, and new resources to support their work.

- **Rejuvenation and Reflection:** Fellows hope to recreate the ‘shot in the arm’ or deep reflection they experienced during their fellowship by spending time away among colleagues who share a sense of deep commitment to social change issues.
- **Career Advancement:** Some programs assist with career placement of graduates and many program graduates would like to recruit from among their fellowship communities.
- **Support for Sponsoring Programs:** Many program participants feel transformed by the opportunities provided to them through their programs and they want to give back! The fellowship networks can provide vehicles through which graduates can make themselves available to serve their programs in a variety of ways including: recruitment, outreach, training, and mentoring. The contact with graduates can also support the programs by providing sources of feedback about the long term impact of fellowship experiences.

## **What are the Obstacles to Building Sustainable Fellowship Networks?**

There are several major challenges that emerge across many programs:

- **Time:** The participants of most programs are extremely busy with the demands of their current leadership responsibilities. Many express concern that they cannot possibly take on one more thing. It is rare to find a program participant who has the time to maintain a network of fellows on a voluntary basis.
- **Distance:** Many programs recruit nationally. After they graduate many participants are geographically dispersed with little opportunity for contact.
- **Finances:** Without financial support, many leadership program participants are no longer able to travel to seminars and meetings for program graduates.

### Program Approaches, Strategies and Lessons:

- Some programs continue to subsidize the participation of graduates in national meetings, retreats or training opportunities. In many cases support is partial or based on need and equity.
- One national program began to introduce program participants in regions where they could more easily connect.
- Many programs use technology to overcome obstacles of distance and costs in efforts to maintain connection among participants.
- Many programs realize these efforts require paid staffing and that it is important to have skilled facilitators. It is critical to productively engage participants who are concerned about the value of investing their time. In some models the issue of “time” was addressed by having a clear value added, an educational or skills component at all gatherings.

## **How Are Fellowship Networks Initiated?**

All of the programs recognized the importance of program participants in the formation of fellowship networks. Many of these efforts were based on the self-organizing of fellows. These programs played more of a supporting than initiating role. Several interesting issues have emerged from these efforts as to what the relationship of fellows

from a specific program should be to their sponsoring program and to fellows from other leadership programs.

#### Issues:

- As fellowship networks emerge under the name of the programs that sponsored them, there have been some issues related to the connection. Do they have the autonomy to express political opinions? How will activities of fellowship networks reflect on their former program or sponsoring foundation?.
- One fellowship network planning to incorporate as a 501©3 found that they could not receive all of their funds from one source.
- Some fellowship communities have grappled with the danger of becoming a private club. Many are asking whether they should be including in their networks those who have participated in other leadership programs or identify themselves as committed leaders.

#### Approaches to Initiating Fellows' Networks:

- In two programs the program graduates created a governing structure of fellows and hired fellows as staff to run their fellowship network.
- One fellowship network that wanted to incorporate with a grant from the foundation that ran their program found a fiscal partner, set up an advisory committee and hired a fellow as the executive director.
- Several programs hired consultants to support graduates in the process of developing goals and implementing a fellowship network.
- In several programs, the program staff are working with current fellows and graduates to identify their interests in sustainable fellowship networks and possible activities.
- One program formed an institute that is staffed by the national office with volunteer support from program graduates.
- There have been cross program meetings of fellows in specific regions and to work on specific projects.

#### Lessons:

- Graduates have expressed strong interest in having staffing positions for these efforts filled by graduates of their program.
- Programs that have incorporated self-organizing into their delivery design have created more basis for the initiative of fellows in building networks.
- Programs that have grappled with issues of diversity, equity and access to leadership position during the fellowship will be more likely to build inclusive networks of graduates.

## **What are the Types of Fellowship Network Activities?**

**Leadership Change Efforts:** Many of the fellowship networks are organized to provide opportunities for fellows to work collaboratively to effectively support leadership change efforts within a specific community or field.

**Leadership Development:** Many of the networks involve graduates as mentors and trainers for their current program participants. Often those who have benefited from

leadership development want to serve exiting programs and even start their own. Networks also provide ongoing seminars for graduates and opportunities for peer training and continued leadership development.

#### Models of Fellowship Network Activities and Organizing:

- One fellowship network has a number of funds available to groups of fellows who organize around collaborative work projects and skills building seminars.
- Many programs have created a grants fund that will provide small grants or matching grants to fellows who develop collaborative projects.
- Fellows in one network decided on what they called a “barn raising” strategy. They agreed to pick a project and find a way that everyone could contribute despite different areas of work and skill.
- Fellows from 3 leadership programs in the mid-south decided to form a leadership institute for the region. They provide technical assistance and sponsor an annual training conference for non-profits.
- Fellows from many programs continue to serve as volunteers to their programs. They often help with recruitment, training, and mentoring.
- Fellows in one program designed and offered a program for graduates in their network.
- Fellows in several programs have created directories (online and hardcopy) to increase access to each other.
- Fellows from 3 different leadership programs designed a curriculum experience to cultivate the inner work of leadership. They offered the seminar to 30 graduates drawing them from their 3 leadership programs.

#### **How are Fellowship Networks being Supported?**

It is clear across programs that all sustainable efforts require some investment of resources. There have been no successful examples of purely volunteer fellowship networks in our initial round of learning.

#### Types of Financial Support:

- All fellowship networks were supported by either program staff, consultants or program graduates.
- Funds for this support come from a variety of sources: in several programs graduates paid dues or membership fees, in many cases the leadership programs provided some funds or staffing support, and in several cases grants were made to support the networks.
- One foundation has a \$240,000 set aside fund and technical assistance grants.
- One programs has awards of \$75,000 available for program support at the mezzanine level.
- One networked used a foundation grant from one foundation to raise a \$50,000 matching grant from a community foundation to support their work.

#### **How are Fellowship Networks Communicating and Using Technology?**

All of the programs use technology to connect the participants of their programs. It was clear that communication is critical to the success of fellowship networks. Programs

seem to have more success using technology as a tool for keeping fellows connected. There are no strong examples of listservs or directories helping fellows form new relationships and connections.

Examples of technology uses:

- One program reports the use of a listserv to keep the connection between graduates and current leadership program participants. There was a lot of activity after 9/11.
- One program invested in an elaborate database intended to help fellows sort and find each other by region, skill and interest. They had little success getting fellows to the site to register and build its use.
- One program maintains an active database of organizational mentors.
- One program has had success with weekly online chats that fellows organize themselves around topics of their own choosing.