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Rutgers Program Helps Ph.D. Students Learn the Ropes of Academic Leadership

By Audrey Williams June

Sean E. Rogers is a third-year graduate student at Rutgers University, a few years yet from entering the academic job market. Still, he's already thinking about how to make the transition from faculty member to administrator.

"Eventually, I see myself as getting on the higher-education management track," said Mr. Rogers, a Ph.D. student in industrial relations and human resources who once held managerial positions in private industry.

Many deans, department chairs, provosts, and other senior-level administrators can recall one key thing about their entry into the administrative ranks: It was marked by long stints of learning the gritty details of their new roles on the job. But as a fellow of Rutgers's new Pre-Doctoral Leadership Development Institute, Mr. Rogers is ahead of the curve.

The first semester of the two-year program, which is open to any Ph.D. student at the university, provides participants with a behind-the-scenes view of what academic administrators do, information on the intricacies of university budgets, and discussions about the skills effective higher-education leaders must have, among other things.

In addition, participants learn what it takes to run a public research institution like Rutgers and the challenges facing higher education in general. The slate of speakers during the program's inaugural semester this year included the institution's president, provost, chief financial officer, and various deans and department chairs.

"I was really blown away by the level of speaker we had," said Alexis Merdjanoff, a Ph.D. student in sociology, also a fellow of the program. "I got a totally different perspective of the university and how it functions. Hearing in detail about having to plan for the future while facing budget constraints at the same time was really eye-opening for me."

Such a reaction is common for graduate students whose training focuses on equipping them to be researchers, scholars, and teachers, says Brent Ruben, the program's director. But a consequence of allowing graduate students to shut out the world of higher education beyond their discipline until after tenure—and sometimes beyond—is that, by then, "people don't have much motivation to assume a leadership position," Mr. Ruben said. "In fact, being a leader is the last thing somebody might want to do."

Rutgers officials said the leadership program was developed to help counteract that trend.

"The idea is to give graduate students in the early part of their career a taste for academic administration," said Philip Furmanski, executive vice president for academic affairs. "It's also to give them the opportunity to see if this is something they'd like to pursue."

Students who want to be fellows of the noncredit program (they receive a \$1,000 stipend each year) must be nominated by an academic administrator. Fifteen were accepted this year.

The initial course, which gives students access to senior-level officials for 90 minutes each week, will be followed by a class with a similar format that will focus on external relations and conflict management in the academy, said Mr. Ruben, who is also executive director of the university Center for Organizational Development and Leadership.

Fellows will shadow two academic leaders during the program's third semester. Then they'll wrap up their foray into academic leadership by preparing to lead the next class of fellows. Mr. Ruben says the plan is to take students on a one-day trip to Washington

after the program's first year to allow them to meet with higher-education policy leaders and lawmakers.

A dozen or so other Ph.D. students have also taken the leadership program's first course as one step toward earning a certificate in leadership from the university. Together the two groups represent a variety of academic disciplines, including the biological and physical sciences, the humanities, the social sciences, and professional schools.

An Unintended Path

Carolyn B. Dumore, managing editor of *The Department Chair: A Resource for Academic Administrators*, said the number of programs that expose graduate students to the "art of academic leadership" are few, if any. But providing such training for future faculty members makes sense.

"Although most academics don't intend to become administrators, many often end up in a leadership position but then find they're in uncharted territory," Ms. Dumore said. "Most chairs will tell you this kind of instruction in graduate school is greatly needed."

Mac Wilson, a doctoral student in Spanish literature, said he thought the leadership course "would be a way to find out more about what I was getting myself into beyond research and writing" in a future role as professor. He said he was intrigued by what various administrators and faculty leaders shared about their day-to-day activities.

"My faculty adviser is also the head of a department, and now I have a better feel for everything he has to do," Mr. Wilson said.

Indeed, program faculty urged the graduate students to think broadly about how their newfound knowledge could be helpful in leadership roles of all kinds, such as running a laboratory or serving as the head of a committee.

"Even a faculty member who never goes into administration

beyond chairing the curriculum committee can benefit from knowing more about the university's assets and resources and why things are done a certain way," said Mr. Furmanski, whose lecture during the leadership course included a big-picture view of how public research institutions are organized, the responsibilities of various senior-level administrators, and their major sources of financial support.

Indeed, faculty members stressed that the program's goal wasn't solely to refurbish the administrative ranks. "It's not that we're training people to become administrators and not faculty members," said Susan E. Lawrence, dean for educational initiatives and the core curriculum for the School of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers. "We're doing this to make them more effective in their roles as faculty."

Ms. Merdjanoff, who would one day like to serve as a dean of arts and sciences or a similar high-level position, said what she's learned so far has been so valuable that, "in a lot of ways, it's almost a course that I wish people *had to take*."

Mr. Rogers agrees. "We have high-level people telling us what's necessary to get to where they are, and how to succeed once you get there," he said. "For people who really want to go to that next level, this preparation and insight at this stage really gives us the upper hand."