

Archived from October 2010

News

Preparing the Next Generation of Academic Leaders

New Rutgers institute trains pre-docs for transition from faculty to administration

By Fredda Sacharow



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Brent Ruben, the driving force behind the new Rutgers Pre-Doc Leadership Institute, speaks with Stephanie Jones-Rogers, a PhD candidate, and a member of the institute's first class of fellows.

Joan Bennett had long mastered the skills that make for a topnotch bench scientist: a keen eye for research, deep knowledge of her field of fungal genetics, and the ability to navigate her way around a laboratory.

But these are not necessarily skills that make for a successful university administrator, Bennett points out.

After Hurricane Katrina knocked out electricity at her lab at Tulane University's New Orleans campus, obliterating years of research materials, Bennett headed to Rutgers to continue her work, ultimately being named associate vice president for promoting women in science, engineering, and mathematics.

As she prepared for her new role, Bennett sought out colleagues in New Brunswick to help make the leap from faculty member to administrator.

Providing crucial support was Brent Ruben, executive director of the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers and a professor in the Department of Communication in the School of Communication and Information.

Ruben is the driving force behind the new Rutgers Pre-Doc Leadership Institute, an initiative designed to equip future administrators with exactly the skills Bennett and others traditionally have had to learn on the job.

“I’m talking about concepts like how to negotiate in a professionally optimal way, how to motivate a staff, how to maximize communications, and how to deal with stakeholders at many different levels, from fellow academics to government workers

to potential funders,” said Bennett.

The transition from faculty member to administrator is an abrupt one for most academics, one to which all too many of her colleagues can relate, Ruben said.

“Much has been said about the need for enhanced leadership skills at all levels of higher education – for heads of committees, programs, laboratories, and departments, as well as for provosts, deans and directors, and vice presidents,” Ruben said.

Preparing leaders in academia is largely a matter of trial and error compared with other sectors, where systematic programs routinely help individuals develop critical competencies, he added.

The leadership institute fills that vacuum.

It is based on the premise that doctoral students get a strong grounding in their fields, but comparatively little insight about how to function day-to-day in an administrative post, Ruben said.

“Preparation for academic leadership roles has traditionally been an informal learning experience, but given the many challenges that confront higher education institutions, it is critical that we identify a more structured approach,” said Philip Furmanski, executive vice president for academic affairs.

Open to doctoral students across all disciplines, the program offers lectures and briefings from department chairs, deans, and administrators, including Rutgers President Richard L. McCormick.

Ruben believes that the Rutgers program, with its focus on pre-doctoral education as a complement to disciplinary preparation, is among a select few in the country.

Fifteen fellows, nominated by their department chairs or deans, are participating in the first course this semester along with 15 other students taking part in the university’s Leadership Certificate program. The class offers an overview of what makes an effective higher education leader, with emphasis on such topics such as formal versus informal leadership roles, communication, and guiding organizational change.

Among the speakers are Furmanski; Bruce Fehn, senior vice president of finance and administration; Douglass Greenberg, executive dean of the School of Arts and Sciences; Jerry Kukor, acting dean of the Graduate School; Barbara Bender, associate dean of the Graduate School; and Richard De Lisi, dean of the Graduate School of Education.

“I myself had no formal leadership training,” said De Lisi, who came to Rutgers in 1976 and was named department chair the day he became tenured and is now in his eighth year as dean. One of the biggest adjustments from faculty member to administrator was learning to envision a broader picture.

“Universities have a high-level mission and objective, and certainly as a faculty member you have to move toward those goals,” De Lisi said. “Usually, though, you do that alone, or through team teaching or joint research. But as an administrator, you have to adopt and embrace goals beyond your discipline – direct more faculty, deal with larger constituencies. There’s a lot more managing up to advance your school.”

Christopher Molloy followed a non-academy trajectory to become dean of the Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy. His career included stints at the National Cancer Institute and in the private sector at pharmaceutical companies, including several years at Johnson and Johnson.

“I evolved in industry from a basic scientist to a research-and-development manager in a variety of positions,” said Molloy, crediting the experiences he picked up along the way for easing his transition at Rutgers, where he oversees a faculty of 85.

From the world of business he came to appreciate the value of strong listening skills, objectivity, consensus-building, and concise communication – the type of competencies the institute emphasizes.

Stephanie Jones-Rogers, a doctoral candidate in the Department of History and among the institute’s first class of fellows, lauds the program’s emphasis on leadership and on traditionally underserved populations.

“The fellowship is not only allowing me to learn about the university’s structure and organization [of higher education], but also is helping me understand the methods by which Rutgers has produced one of the most diverse college campuses in the world,” the graduate student said.

RUTGERS TODAY Your Source for University News