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7-2008

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Jan Deeds

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jdeedsl@unl.edu

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Deeds, Jan, "Voices of Women in the Field: Creating a Women's Leadership Coalition" (2008). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 41.

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Voices of Women in the Field: Creating a Women's Leadership Coalition

Jan Deeds

Directing the Women's Center for the last ten years at an institution with 22,000 students, 3,000 faculty and staff members, and 9 colleges, I have collaborated with many individuals and programs with a shared interest in women and leadership. I have been appointed to institutional groups charged with monitoring gender equity, such as the Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women. My student staff and I have collaborated with different departments each March to create programs highlighting women's leadership for Women's History Month. I have learned through my role as the gender specialist in Student Involvement within the Student Affairs division that I have a "big picture" institutional view not often experienced by my colleagues in their academic departments.

A colleague in Student Involvement is the leadership specialist and holds adjunct faculty appointments in two departments. During the Student Involvement strategic planning retreat in the spring of 2007, we discussed gaps in program development, communication and collaboration related to women and leadership. We knew leadership courses were offered in several colleges, students were afforded many different leadership opportunities through curricular and co-curricular experiences, and important leadership research was conducted, which was unrecognized outside of individual departments. We also knew that despite the institution's goal to hire and retain more female professors, progress was slow. Each year the institution lost a few female colleagues to other institutions. How could we use our roles in Student Affairs to address the issues?

My colleague and I decided to meet weekly during the summer and throughout the academic year to identify solutions to these challenges. We began by discussing the programs and people who were doing something related to women and leadership. We reviewed the Women's Center programming for the year and identified topics and speakers to create a more intentional leadership focus. Because we share the belief that true change always begins with the individual, we discussed our own experiences as college women, as young professionals, and as women who have been in our careers for 25 plus years. Then we reviewed our list of people and programs and began inviting other women on campus to our weekly meetings to talk about their experiences and their work.

About the Author

Jan Deeds has been the assistant director for gender programs for Student Involvement and director of the Women's Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 1998. She is a doctoral student in educational administration at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializing in educational leadership in higher education. Email: jdeeds1@unl.edu.

The weekly meetings generated numerous valuable results. We identified some key needs of women students, staff, faculty and administrators. We developed and presented a workshop called "Take Me Seriously: Image Control for Women Professionals" in response to concerns expressed by younger colleagues. The workshop was a success with 50 women at all career stages in attendance. Newly established collaborative partnerships sponsored four leadership luncheon speakers during Women's History Month. A graduate student developed a proposal for a women's leadership learning community because of the networking with other women she experienced through this process.

The most exciting and potentially powerful outcome has been the development of the Women's Leadership Coalition (WLC), a multi-disciplinary collaboration that creates opportunities for the intentional exploration of gender differences in leading. Participation is open to anyone with an interest in women and leadership. The WLC does not replace other programs or direct the work that others are currently doing, but improves communication and collaborative opportunities.

The WLC has five key purposes:

- To identify leadership development needs for women at the institution;
- To enhance communication across the campus about existing educational leadership programming opportunities;
- To develop and implement leadership development programs and services that meet identified needs;
- To provide opportunities for multi-disciplinary collaborative programming that explores gender differences in leading; and
- To create an institutional mentoring environment.

WLC sponsored brown-bag lunches monthly throughout the summer. It is also planning a series of events for the 2008–09 academic year. Some events will focus on specific groups such as students, staff or faculty, but many events will be useful to women across the career-life continuum. We are excited about a lunch series entitled "Labyrinth Lunches." Alice Eagly's new paradigm replacing the "glass ceiling" concept with an image of a series of obstacles inspired the series title. Each month we will feature a

coalition member who will talk about her career path, the obstacles she encountered, the support she received, and the strategies she employed to reach her current position. Women at various career stages will be invited to speak rather than only those who have already achieved an aspired administrative position because not everyone seeks that type of role. Hearing the stories of other women who continue to strive and are closer to shared life stages can be a powerful role model.

My colleague and I had several important confirmations implementing this initiative. First, it is a great idea to host weekly meetings at the coffee shop in the student union. It is easy to pull someone into the conversation who may also want to collaborate. Second, even though faculty and staff members care deeply about empowering students and providing educational leadership opportunities, we also need empowerment and opportunities. When we provided opportunities to reflect on personal needs and to listen to others, we created the necessary relationships to carry us through the hard work. Finally, even though women are involved at all levels of higher education, many are isolated from other women colleagues. Course loads, administrative duties, only-one-woman departments, and social messages that state since gender equity is the law we create our own problems, all separate us from each other and discourage sharing personal experiences with those most likely to understand. By creating the WLC, we opened the door to these conversations and reminded our colleagues that we do not have to accept the isolation.