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Jean M. Haar

Minnesota State Univeristy, Mankato, jean.haar@mnsu.edu

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Voices of Women in the Field— The Midwest Women’s Leadership Institute—Responding to a Call to Lead

Jean Haar

Much like other women I know, I have been more hesitant and cautious in responding to a call to lead than I care to admit. I have, however, been blessed with strong supporters and mentors. And, I have been provided with relevant leadership opportunities. Because of the support and experiences, I have finally arrived at a point in my career where I am not only anxious to lead but am also anxious to encourage other women to lead. I had my first real tangible opportunity to provide encouragement to others through the implementation of the Midwest Women’s Leadership Institute.

The Midwest Women’s Leadership Institute did not occur by chance nor did it happen quickly. Rather, it was the direct result of the work, support, and dedication of a number of people committed to strengthening leadership opportunities for women in higher education. And, for our institution, it began in earnest with the arrival of a new president in 2002.

The Beginning

President Davenport arrived at Minnesota State University Mankato in 2002. One of his first endeavors was to increase support for women. As a part of that endeavor, he instituted the Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission serves a three-fold purpose pertaining to women’s concerns and issues.

- To identify and define issues as they emerge and make recommendations to the University on how these issues should be addressed.
- To review progress on recommendations to improve the status of women within this community.
- To provide advice and guidance to the President as the University implements new policies and programs to improve the status of women at the University.

One of the tasks of the Commission is to select a participant to attend the Higher Education Resources Service (HERS) Mid-America Summer Institute for Women in Higher Education Administration held at Bryn Mawr

About the Author

Jean Haar begins a new leadership experience as chairperson for the Department of Educational Leadership at Minnesota State University Mankato. She has been a faculty member and the Director of the Center for Engaged Leadership for eight years. Prior to entering higher education, she was an English instructor and a high school principal. Email: jean.haar@mnsu.edu.

College. I was selected to attend the summer of 2006. Since then two others from our institution have attended—Jennifer Guyer-Wood, Director of Alumni Relations and Special Events and Deborah Jesseman, Professor of Educational Studies: K–12 and Secondary Programs. Debra Schulz, Assistant Registrar, has been selected to attend this year.

In preparation for the HERS Summer Institute, we were given the task to interview our institution's President and Vice-Presidents. During our interview with President Davenport we were encouraged to think about how Minnesota State University Mankato could establish a regional women's leadership development experience.

The Vision

It was Jennifer Guyer-Wood who took President Davenport's urging to heart. During the summer of 2008, she invited Linda Duckett, Professor of Music and a 2002 Bryn Mawr HERS attendee, and me to meet and discuss possibilities. It was the first of many conversations.

Our vision was to create an immersion experience for women in higher education that would engage them in thoughtful assessment of their strengths and prompt them to actively pursue leadership opportunities.

The Committee

The committee began with the three of us. We had had powerful experiences at the Bryn Mawr Summer Institute and had returned wanting to give back to the institution that had sponsored our professional growth. By fall 2008 Deb Jesseman had returned from her Bryn Mawr experience and provided the freshest reminders of what it was that made such an in-depth experience so impactful. We were then a committee of four whose strongest connector was our Bryn Mawr experience. By fall we had also shared a brief overview of our vision with President Davenport. As a demonstration of his support, he asked Carol Stallkamp, Assistant to the President, to join the committee. We became a committee of five women determined to develop an institute that would invigorate women's commitment to lead.

With no specific person, position or time identified to shepherd the institute into reality, the committee discussed various concerns—where was the most feasible place for the institute to be located, how would it be financially supported, where was there capacity for the institute to grow and be sustained? Ironically, the answers to these and other concerns lay in the makeup of the committee. At the time, my position was as Director of the Center for Engaged Leadership (CEL). The Center is housed in the Department of Educational Leadership and the College of Education. The purpose of CEL is to provide quality leadership development and services. A large portion of our constituents are K–12 schools; however, the intent and mission of the Center involved a much larger scope to include other entities intent on developing effective leadership for their organizations. With strong support from the College of Education Dean, Michael Miller, I was able to offer my time and CEL's services to the development and implementation of a women's leadership institute.

The Planning

During our initial planning meetings, we identified key concepts and experiences we felt were crucial for all women leaders yet honored the uniqueness of each individual. We realize that leadership looks different to every woman.

At times we became challenged with moving ideas into concrete actions. I can still recall a conversation with Dean Miller about the challenges of creating a dynamic experience for women. He commented, "Sometimes you just have to 'launch.' We, at times, in higher education spend so much time planning that we do not realize when it is time to act." We knew we needed to launch.

One of the smarter decisions we made, was to use the resources available on our campus. We have an Integrated Marketing department that developed a marketing plan for us that included their assistance in establishing an image and a message. The integrated marketing team helped shape our vision by first christening the institute with a name (the Midwest Women's Leadership Institute) and then framing a website, a postcard, and other marketing documents for us. They also crafted a couple of concise sentences that articulated the intent of the institute: "With inspiration from nationally recognized experts, through community and shared knowledge with other women, and with continuing support from advisers, attendees will develop solid leadership goals that suit them." We were back on track.

Our next challenges were making people aware of the Midwest Women's Leadership Institute and garnering participants. We created a mailing list by identifying administrators in regional higher education institutes. We also connected with state and regional organizations such as Minnesota ACE and Wisconsin Women of Higher Education as well as HERS. These organizations as well as others shared information about the institute with

their members and provided resources in support of the institute. We continued to receive support from administration on our campus. The President, Vice-Presidents and Deans sent personalized letters to their colleagues encouraging them to sponsor the attendance of someone from their institution. Some Minnesota State University Mankato administrators reinforced the request by sponsoring someone's attendance from within our institution. What was especially amazing about this support was the timing. The support occurred in the midst of the budget crunches all higher education institutions were experiencing.

By now it was March and the financial outlook of higher education budgets remained dismal. We had a solid program developed, had speakers secured, and had the managerial details of facilities and materials addressed. All we needed were participants. We had posted April as an application deadline; however, postcards had not been mailed until February. Had institutions, organizations, and individuals heard about our institute? Would they be able to support the \$2,000.00 attendance fee?

By mid-April we had four applications. Our hope had been to have 20 participants. What should we do? Continue our preparation and heighten our marketing efforts? Cancel this year's institute and intensify the efforts for next year? It was College of Education Dean, Michael Miller's willingness to financially back the institute and it was the scholarships sponsored by the President, the Provost and select Deans that provided us with the confidence to proceed. By the end of May we had 12 applications. Twelve was enough—the institute was going to happen.

What were the dynamics of the twelve participants? Experiences and backgrounds were significantly different. There were faculty, administrators, and classified staff. There were women from community colleges, technical colleges and four-year institutions; women just beginning their careers and those with years of experience. I remember thinking there were too many differences. I could not have been more wrong. From the first evening through the entire week, I observed the respect and the support each participant offered to others. The interaction that occurred among the participants, as well as with speakers and committee members was phenomenal. I had never observed nor experienced such a comfortable yet invigorating level of learning.

The Experience

On the opening evening, Minnesota State University Mankato President Emerita Margaret Preska welcomed the group. Despite relocating to an inner room due to tornado warnings, the evening went well. Dr. Preska willingly shared her life story and awed us with her confidence and passion. The engaged learning had begun. What followed was a schedule that kept participants involved from early morning through the evening. Each day had as its focus a broad concept that was connected with a word of the day.

Monday focused on the leadership development for the individual and “the potential” each of us has to lead. Tuesday addressed leadership development for women and encouraged participants to answer “the call.” Wednesday’s focus was on leadership development in higher education and prompted participants “to respond” to the need for more women leaders. Thursday emphasized leadership development within the organization and encouraged participants to participate in “the conversation.” Friday focused on career exploration and planning, and the importance of creating and using “the map” to guide the way; and Saturday emphasized the importance of enjoying “the journey.”

Participants heard from keynote speakers, were involved in an extensive assessment report, developed a personal leadership plan, connected with an advisor, participated in group processing experiences, and heard from various leaders through informal venues (e.g., panels, lunch conversations, informal encounters). One of the more memorable moments for the participants occurred at the Friday evening celebration at President Davenport’s home. Dr. Preska graced us with her presence. Many acknowledged her return as a fulfilling way to finish the week.

The closing celebration, however, was not the end of the experience. Built into the institute is an advisor/advisee component. Over the course of the next year, through scheduled follow-up sessions with advisors, participants will continue to fine-tune their goals and develop their leadership plans. Participants will stay in touch online, maintaining the professional relationships and network developed at the institute. All the committee members were adamant about including the ongoing advisor/advisee connection. We had established connections during our HERS experiences and had developed career maps; yet when we returned to work, we found it difficult to maintain the connections and stay focused on our maps. Our hope is that through the use of a social network and with the guidance of an advisor, the Midwest Women’s Leadership Institute participants will continue to experience professional growth, maintain their network and advance their leadership plans.

The Reflection

Powerful, supportive, real . . . those are all words that freely flow as I reflect on the first Midwest Women’s Leadership Institute. They are words I hope resonate each year. Anyone who has been involved in the creation and implementation of an extensive experience such as this knows the amount of time, energy, risk and good faith it takes to make it something that has substance and value. For the committee, it was amazing to watch all that we had hoped the institute could be unfold into reality. We witnessed firsthand the participants’ increased level of confidence and commitment to leadership. We are anxious to see what types of leadership opportunities these women pursue.

Contact Information

We have already begun the planning for next year's institute. Now that we have 'launched' we know we can strengthen the experience for next year's participants. Please view our website (<http://www.mnsu.edu/mwli/>) for an overview of the institute and to apply for the June 20–26, 2010 Midwest Women's Leadership Institute. And feel free to contact me at 507.389.5434 or jean.haar@mnsu.edu for additional information.