

# Urban Universities and Urban Leadership

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## Abstract

*The University of Massachusetts Boston launched an innovative and inclusive leadership program as a strategy to help develop community leaders who reflect the changing demographics and leadership needs of Boston. Students completing the program are already moving into civic leadership roles. The program offers a model relevant to other urban universities.*

Two new challenges face the city of Boston in the future. They are the changing demography that calls for more inclusive leadership and the need for newer leadership styles. What is the role of the urban university in meeting this leadership challenge? As a major urban university, we currently serve large numbers of urban students, we conduct research on topics related to urban problems, and we have over twenty centers and institutes focusing on urban issues. We saw the need to expand that role as we recognized that U Mass Boston could also assist the city in meeting the leadership challenge. Therefore, we established a new leadership program in the College of Management at UMass Boston in Fall 2001—the Emerging Leaders Program.

## Demography

The recent demographic data send out a call for inclusive leadership. The data indicate that, according to the 2002 census, Boston is now 49.5% white with people of color in the majority.

Yet the leadership profile of the City Council, for example, does not reflect the population trend. Although there now is Latino and African American representation on the Council, the majority of its members are white. If we look to the leadership of our major corporate and non-profit organizations, again we see that the leadership profile has become more inclusive with women and people of color in positions previously occupied by whites, but the overall picture does not reflect the new demographics.

**Racial Makeup of the City of Boston**



Future leaders must reflect the diversity of their populations, and we believe that the best way to bring about the desired change is to look to the “emerging leaders” in the city. There are dedicated young

professionals in our region who have not yet reached leadership positions and who have not received training in leadership skills. They also have limited experience in working across sectors. For example, those in the corporate world have had little interaction with those in the non-profit sector. All cities have developed de facto networks of established leaders who make crucial decisions, and by opening this network to a more inclusive group of individuals, the interests of all citizens would be better served. We see a need for an inclusive group of emerging leaders to adopt the habit of working collaboratively on city and community issues.

## **New Leadership Models**

We believe that Boston and other cities should adopt a collaborative, as well as an inclusive, leadership model for the future. We define collaborative leadership as leadership that resides more in a network than in any one individual and is visionary, service oriented, and inclusive. It stands in contrast to a top-down leadership style in which decisions are made by one person for others to follow. A collaborative approach is particularly useful in cities where large projects involving many constituencies are the norm.

We spent considerable time discussing the validity of these ideas with leaders in our city, including the Mayor, to further refine and develop the idea for a new university-based community leadership program. We were fortunate to receive a substantial corporate gift in order to launch the program. So with funds in hand we began by putting together an advisory board composed of Boston's current leaders. We identified individuals in the community who cared about leadership and whose voices make a difference. We also surveyed Boston leaders from both the corporate and non-profit sectors to ascertain what they saw as the major leadership challenges facing our region. Their responses indicated that there was a need for a new program to help individuals learn how to collaborate and to work in teams, and they also saw the need for more diversity in the workforce. (See "New Leaders for the New Century" in *Building Leadership Bridges*, International Leadership Association, 2002, for an analysis of the survey.)

We also spent time researching other leadership programs in the country. There are several cities which have community based leadership programs that are often sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce or a similar group. We met with individuals from the American Leadership Forum to learn about their program in several US cities. We also visited the James Mac Gregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland and the leadership program at the Kennedy School at Harvard. These meetings and discussions helped to clarify our goals since we wanted to develop a new model that would combine elements of community programs with a university base.

The curriculum and the associated activities that we developed were designed to meet the following four program goals. We would:

1. Select emerging leaders who are diverse by race, gender, and profession and who will enhance their networking skills with other emerging leaders.
2. Expose the emerging leaders to a variety of Boston's current leaders in order that they understand the current leadership profile, experience a variety of leadership styles, and learn about key issues facing the Greater Boston region.
3. Enhance the leadership skills of the emerging leaders in communication, negotiation, teamwork, and project development and completion.
4. Increase the understanding and practice of inclusive and collaborative leadership.

## **Recruitment**

We developed a brochure that described the program and distributed it widely by mail in the Greater Boston area and asked for organizations to nominate individuals for the new program that was to begin in January 2002. We then invited Boston's current leaders to join us for lunch in October 2001 and asked them to bring with them an emerging leader. We followed a similar strategy in Fall 2002. These activities gave us an opportunity to describe the program and to find individuals who would be part of the first cohort. Boston Mayor Menino spoke at the first lunch (which was attended by over 150 individuals) and indicated his excitement in meeting so many emerging leaders, and his desire to return to meet with them after their first year. He did so and met with them on September 16, 2002. In Fall 2002, the lunch was oversubscribed and we had to turn some people away. A third recruiting lunch was scheduled for October 2003. After the lunches the nominees were contacted and asked to complete applications outlining some of their leadership experiences and agreeing to the time commitments of the program.

We admitted 32 individuals in 2001 and 39 in 2002. We looked for individuals with an expressed interest in and commitment to a more inclusive style of leadership, with five to ten years of professional experience, who also were recognized as potential leaders by their organizations. We wanted diversity by race, gender, and ethnicity and a mix of individuals from business and government and the non-profit sector. We were successful in both 2001 and 2002 in achieving a diverse class of fellows. In both groups, over half were people of color and over half were from the corporate sector, with the others from the governmental and non-profit sectors. The participants continue to be employed by their organizations while in the program but receive release time to attend the meetings. Organizations represented have included the Greater Boston Chamber, The Boston Globe, Fleet, Sovereign, Citizens Banks, The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Verizon New England, AT&T, Keyspan Energy, NStar, Trigen, Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., State Street Corporation, United Way of Massachusetts, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Urban Edge, Corcoran Jennison, Partners HealthCare, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Freedom House, Boston Housing Authority, Lehman Brothers, Brown Brothers Harriman, Fidelity, The Boston Foundation, and others.

## Curriculum

The curriculum was designed to be practical and hands-on. It consists of discussions with current leaders, readings on leadership, group activities and team projects. We cover leadership styles, provide skill development, and focus on learning how to work in teams because we want these leaders to practice collaborative leadership. We focus on the model described by James E. Austin in his book *The Collaborative Challenge* in which he states that twenty-first century will be the age of alliances. In our study of Boston's leaders cited above, we found that encouraging teamwork was a high priority for current leaders. The need to foster collaborative leadership must be high on the list of any leadership program that focuses on the future. Urban problems and issues are much too complex for any one individual to solve.

There are three main components to our ten-month program. It begins with a weeklong intensive seminar in January, followed by monthly forums February through September, and team projects that run concurrently through September. These sessions (approximately 90 hours) provide opportunities to learn about various leadership styles as the fellows meet with many of Boston's current leaders who join us as guest speakers. The speakers have included the Mayor of Boston, the Presidents and CEOs of the major banks and other leading corporations in the city, the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, individuals from the media, from the leading health care agencies, as well as from non-profit organizations. The leaders they met in 2002 and 2003 are diverse by race, gender, and profession and represent a variety of leadership styles. Each has also achieved his/her leadership position in a different way so the "fellows" had an opportunity to learn about the various approaches to a leadership position as well as some of the major challenges faced by leaders.

Another major feature of the program is that the fellows form into teams during the first week seminar and select issues for study and action for the next several months. In the team project phase of the program the participants receive experience in selecting issues for action, in creating and working in effective teams, and in communicating their findings to stakeholders. In 2002 they selected the following issues: access to economic opportunity, affordability of/access to health care, affordable housing, corporate citizenship, improving financial literacy, and life after the (completion of the) central artery. The topics for 2003 are related to workforce development.

This teamwork exercise was essential to learning about collaborative leadership, but working in real teams on real issues was more difficult than we had anticipated. Selecting the topics from the many, many issues of concern to our city was a challenge, as was deciding how to focus on a broad topic like affordable housing. Moreover, most of the individuals had not worked in leaderless teams before and needed to develop skills in setting agendas, in identifying stakeholders, and in deciding on a plan of action. We provided extensive coaching to the teams throughout the process as the teams worked on their city issues from February through September 2002. We found that teamwork does improve with practice and that it was important to

have a coach to work with the groups. A former faculty member in the College of Management with extensive experience in creating successful teams was that coach. In September 2002 and 2003, the teams presented their findings to Boston's Mayor. Two of the 2002 teams continued to meet after the program had concluded in order to finish their projects.

In addition to the speakers and the team projects, we also scheduled monthly forums for the fellows. At these sessions, they continued to meet current leaders and focused on specific skills. For example, in February we stressed the political process and how to "sell your point of view." In March 2002, we had a forum on the media. Later sessions covered negotiation skills, leading from the middle, work/life decisions, as well as managing a diverse workforce. The forums in 2003 are similar with more emphasis on specific skills such as stakeholder analysis and communication. This combination of interpersonal, technical, and political skills is important to leaders for the future.

In addition to the monthly forums, we also take groups of the fellows to community events such as breakfasts dealing with current issues sponsored by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. Moreover, we added a special session dealing with how to get on a board and then how to be an effective board member, a session on work/family issues, and one on how to take back to your organization the team work skills.

The program is supported by fees paid by the sponsoring organizations and by grants from corporations and foundations. The non-profit organizations cannot pay the full fee, so these grants have been crucial. The core program faculty come primarily from the College of Management with some others from the College of Liberal Arts and from the College of Public and Community Service at UMass Boston.

## **Evaluation**

We have done extensive evaluations of the program from day one. We generated feedback in many ways: questionnaires from the fellows, as well as frequent conversations with them and questionnaires and conversations with their nominators. In addition, the first year of the program was evaluated by a doctoral student at UMass Boston and is the topic of her dissertation. Currently another doctoral student is developing a template for annual evaluations. We are particularly interested to see what changes occur over the next three to five years, and these evaluations are an essential part of our process. One of the most significant findings from the first year cohort was that the participants did improve their leadership skills, as evidenced by the Leadership Practices Inventory.

For the future, we will look at several broad indicators: Have their networks expanded and continued to be diverse? Have they been asked to join community and/or business related boards? Have individuals from the cohorts advanced their own career goals? Have they stayed in contact with some of the current leaders whom they met? We will have answers to these questions over the next three to five years. In the meantime, we

also use the immediate feedback to make program changes where appropriate. For example, based on data from the questionnaires and other related feedback, we did modify the program for 2003 to include more skill development throughout and to assist the fellows early on in selecting doable topics for their teamwork. In year two, we collaborated with an established statewide non-partisan think-tank that researches and develops policy papers on a variety of current topics related to our region. We used its research as the basis for the projects. This strategy of working with one organization and deciding on the overall theme of workforce development improved the functioning of the teams and led to more focused results.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Overall the evaluations have been very positive and can be summarized as follows:

1. The fellows benefited a great deal from meeting many of Boston's current leaders—one of our initial goals. They consistently ranked this activity very high on their surveys and commented that they had great exposure to the city's leaders and the issues faced by the city and region. The chance to learn different styles was invaluable. In order to enhance their understanding of leadership, however, we now spend more time on an analysis of what kinds of leadership styles they are observing and how variable is the path to leadership. We discuss the various styles after each speaker finishes and analyze what we learned about leadership.
2. The fellows benefited from working in and getting to know a diverse group of their peers—another of our goals. Many of them had not had such contacts and networks prior to the program. We increased the opportunities for the 2003 fellows to get to know each other by using the lunch breaks in a more structured way for this purpose. We also added some events so that the 2002 fellows could meet the 2003 fellows. We will continue to take groups of fellows to community events such as Chamber of Commerce breakfasts where they meet other leaders in the community and enhance their networks. Their comments have been particularly helpful to us. One reported: "The diversity and networking opportunities are excellent." Our networking goal also has been strengthened with the formation of an active alumni group. We scheduled six alumni events for 2002–2003 starting with a group of 15 who met with us to review the program changes we plan to make for next year and to provide feedback. Other events will include special dinners and speakers and the special session with the 2003 cohort on how to get on a board and how to be an effective board member.
3. The teams and teamwork proved to be beneficial and very effective as a way to learn about collaborative leadership, but the teamwork component was more time consuming than we had anticipated. As mentioned above, in 2003 we modified the process for the selection of topics by collaborating with the think tank MassINC. The fellows continue to have a choice of topics, but they do not need to do the initial research. They work primarily on implementation strategies. They will continue to present their findings to interested individuals such as the Mayor and

our Board of Advisors. The coaching with the teams begins immediately and helps them develop basic skills—setting agendas, defining stakeholders, and developing an action plan. The fellows did learn about Boston city issues and are now better equipped to obtain information pertaining to such issues in the future. The final product consists of a set of recommendations or implementation strategies. So we met our goals on teamwork and learning about city issues. We added additional work on skill development in the second year. One particular area of focus is communication, especially oral presentations since the fellows make oral presentations to the Mayor and other interested parties. These presentations and the conversation with the Mayor were a very important part of the learning process.

4. We stressed collaborative and inclusive leadership throughout, and we learned, as did they, that collaborative leadership and teamwork improve when you practice in real situations on real issues. Reading about these issues as background is useful but is no substitute for practice.

The overall conclusion from a variety of evaluation techniques is that the program has worked well and that the basic structure of formal sessions and speakers combined with practice and ongoing teamwork is the right model. Again the comments from participants are informative: “The best part was getting to meet and network with other people in my position and learn from them.” Another wrote: “I like to think that I am more sensitive to diversity issues than I was before.” A helpful comment was: “I’m very happy to have been chosen—and I believe my organization is satisfied with my participation.”

Our success can also be measured by support from the philanthropic community which has been generous in funding us for year two and by the number of repeat nominations. We have corporate support from State Street Corporation, The Boston Globe Foundation, The Boston Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Mellon New England, and AT&T. These funds provide program support and also allow us to offer scholarships to those in the non-profit sector whose attendance is essential to the success of the program.

So, in conclusion, we were able to find emerging leaders who are diverse and to develop their leadership and networking skills. And our active alumni group already shows that many of these leaders are poised to take on greater civic responsibilities in our region. Two of the first cohort have already been asked to join significant non-profit boards, and another has been appointed to the internal advisory board of her company which offers assistance to the company foundation. For several others, such appointments are a strong possibility. The emerging leaders themselves are a diverse and new and involved pool of talent for the city and one that will work hard to made civic leadership in Greater Boston even stronger.

If we are to have new leadership models in our cities, universities have a significant role to play. We are the places where such programs can develop and flourish and, as we sponsor them, we expand the role of the urban university to help meet the

leadership challenges that all our cities face. Our urban universities have always been serious about diversity and inclusiveness, and our experience here is invaluable because organizations to be successful in the future must be inclusive and stress collaboration and teamwork. Our urban universities can develop new leadership models and thereby prepare our cities for a better future.

Author's Note: A condensed version of this paper was presented at the Academy of Business & Administrative Science International Conference in Vancouver (June 2003). It also appears on their website.

### **Author Information**

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