USING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH TO
ASSESS A LEADERSHIP MENTORING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Penn State’s Administrative Fellows Program has provided a prototype for faculty and staff mentoring around the country. In 2014-15, the University conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of that program. Data was collected via survey, focus groups, and interviews. The findings highlights its outcomes and the benefits derived to participants and the University. The findings provide an overview of the typical Fellow’s experience, identifies strengths and weaknesses of the program, and identifies potential ways in which this and similar programs might be improved. Further, this project highlights the benefits and costs of mixed-methods approaches to program evaluation for institutional researchers.

Introduction

In our quest to support the growth and development of faculty, students, and staff, colleges and universities often implement interventions that rely on significant monetary and human resources and benefit relatively small numbers. The long-term impact of such programs can be enormous, but the evaluation of such resource-intensive programs is often neglected because of the difficulties involved in assessing and documenting those impacts. Penn State’s Administrative Fellows Program (AFP) is one such program. The AFP provides faculty and staff
with a one-of-a-kind year-long opportunity to be mentored by Penn State’s leading executives and to observe decision making at the highest level. Women and minorities are particularly recruited and encouraged to apply.

The AFP is unique in that it has had not one, but two, comprehensive mixed-methods evaluations since its inception in 1986. This paper presents the findings from the most recent evaluation of the AFP. In addition, it highlights methodological efficiencies for institutional researchers (IR) and the benefits derived from the use of interviews and focus groups in addition to a standard program evaluation survey.

**Background**

**What is Mentoring and Why Does it Matter?**

There are numerous conceptualizations of mentoring, but this study uses Ragins and Scandura’s (1999, p. 496), which focuses on mentors as “influential individuals with advanced experience and knowledge who are committed to providing upward mobility and support to their protégés’ careers.” Numerous studies have affirmed the importance of mentoring, particularly in the career development of women and minorities (see for example, Claire, Hukai, & McCarty, 2005; Cox & Salsberry, 2012; and Touchton, Musil & Campbell, 2008). While it is worthwhile to note that the mentoring literature has been criticized for focusing exclusively on the benefits of mentoring and ignoring drawbacks (Carr & Heiden, 2011), the well-established benefits appear to outweigh potential obstacles, such as dysfunctional mentor/protégé relationships. In their review of the literature, Blake-Beard, Murrel and Thomas (2006) noted that benefits related to mentoring include higher salaries, career advancement, career satisfaction, and institutional loyalty. In particular, mentoring relationships can play a critical role in facilitating professional
promotion for individuals who face historical and cultural barriers to advancement (Baltodano, Carlson, Jackson, & Mitchel, 2012).

Despite the importance of mentors in professional development, influential mentors can be hard to find and not all have equal access to high-level mentors. While women are more likely than men to say that they’ve had a mentor (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010), women and minorities may have less access to influential mentors than their White, male colleagues (Dreher, & Cox, 1996; Sandberg, 2013). For this reason among others, many organizations have implemented formal mentoring programs focused on developing a diverse leadership pool. Seventy-one percent of Fortune 500 companies offer mentoring programs for their employees (Chronus, 2012) and colleges and universities are increasingly offering formal mentoring programs designed to develop future administrators.

**Administrative Mentoring Programs**

Formal mentoring programs for both students and tenure-track faculty are common in higher education, but mentoring programs geared toward administrative leadership are less so. The most well-known administrative mentoring programs are found in academic hospital settings (e.g., Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Clinic’s Administrative Fellowship Programs). These programs focus on early career development by introducing entering professionals to administrative roles. Formal mentoring programs can be found at other colleges and universities (for example, Iowa State, Ohio State, and Purdue) and in higher education organizations such as the Committee on Institutional Cooperation and the Southeastern Conference.

**Program Structure**

In the AFP, three Mentors are recruited annually from among the University’s provost and the vice presidents. Fellowship applicants must hold a standing, full-time faculty or staff
appointment and may be located at any Penn State location, but must be willing to spend the Fellowship year at the Mentor’s campus (most Mentors are located at the University Park campus). A steering committee reviews applications, conducts preliminary interviews, and provides recommendations to the Mentors. Mentors interview a short-list of prospective Fellows and make the final decision.

In order to help minimize the disruption inherent in removing a faculty or staff member from their home unit for a year, each sending unit is provided funds to backfill the Fellow’s position. The expectation is that Fellows will separate completely from their home units for the year of the Fellowship and then return to their existing positions at the end of the year with a better understanding of the complexity of higher education, an increased ability to contribute to the work of their home unit, and improved prospects for advancement.

Need for the Program

Developing leaders from within is an important component of succession planning. Internal hires hit the ground running, are less expensive, and more likely to remain than external recruits (Bidwell, 2011). Internal leadership development also increases employee engagement and retention (Lamoureaux, 2013). Outstanding leadership is not homogenous leadership. It is diverse in perspective, background, and thought (Morrison, 1992). Significant attention has been given to the growing diversity of the U.S. population and its significance in terms of student and faculty diversity in higher education. Women make up a growing majority of undergraduate students (Peter & Horn, 2005) and soon, minority students will make up nearly half of all public high-school graduates (Prescott & Bransberger, 2012). Despite the changing face of the student body, diversity lags among university faculty and administrators. In 2011, minority students made up 39% of national higher education enrollments, but only 20% of all full-time
instructional faculty, 15% of senior faculty, and 20% of full- and part-time administrators (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2013). Likewise, women made up 57% of the national student body, but only 29% of senior faculty and 53% of administrators. Administrators, using NCES categories, include all managerial-level staff.

In 1985, the AFP was created in response to a lack of upward mobility and underrepresentation of women and minorities among Penn State’s leadership. Today, despite a strong focus on workforce diversity, cultural inclusiveness, and employment equity across higher education, its leadership remains largely homogenous in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. The university’s senior leadership, as represented together by the President’s Council (president, provost, and vice presidents) and Academic Leadership Council (chancellors, deans, and vice provosts), is 34% female and 10% minority. Looking at the institution’s leadership over the decade since the last evaluation of the AFP, there has been an increase in the diversity of executives, administrators, and academic administrators (Figure 1), but it is still not reflective of the diversity of Pennsylvania, which is 51% female and 17% non-White (Pennsylvania State Data Center, 2015), nor of the student body. In contrast, nearly two-thirds (62%) of Penn State’s
non-administrative staff positions have been and continue to be held by women. Eight percent of these positions are held by minorities.

**Description of the Study**

Formal mentoring programs are increasingly common in higher education, but evaluation of such programs is often cursory or lacking entirely. One of the reasons for this may be the positionality of such programs under provosts or vice presidents whose units are largely focused on academic programs (including their assessment), but not as attuned to professional development as would be, for example, a human resources unit. When such programs are administered at the highest levels of the university, institutional research offices may be called upon to evaluate them. Institutional researchers, particularly those at larger institutions, are heavily reliant on quantitative methods (Ducharme, 2014). One strength of such methods is to provide evaluators with a picture of “what” is happening in a given program. However these methods often leave the “why” question unanswered (Howard & Borland, 2007). Using qualitative approaches in combination with quantitative approaches allows IR professionals to conduct a program evaluation that answer both the “what” and the “why” questions, in order to facilitate program improvement. Several key research questions guided this program evaluation:

1. What is the typical Fellow’s experience?
2. What are the strongest aspects of the program?
3. What aspects could be improved?
4. Is the program meeting its goals?

This project applied a non-experimental, ex post facto mixed-methods case study approach, which utilized interview, focus group, and survey-based data collection (Krathwohl, 1998). Mixed methods research brings quantitative and qualitative approaches to bear on a
research question. Mixed methods approaches have been gaining recognition since the 1980s, but are largely underutilized in institutional research. In his 2007 volume, *Using Mixed Methods in Institutional Research*, Richard Howe emphasized the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative approaches in IR. Nearly a decade later, mixed methods remain an underutilized IR tool. In 2014, only two Association for Institutional Research (AIR) National Forum paper presentations and one *New Directions for Institutional Research* article applied a mixed methods approach (AIR, 2014; Wiley, 2015).

In this project, a survey instrument provided an efficient way to reach out to all of the prior Fellows in the population of interest and to collect information about their experiences, perceptions, and outcomes. Interviews and focus groups allowed for more open-ended inquiries, requests for clarification, and follow-up questions that complemented the quantitative information with rich detail and explanation. Integrated, the findings from both methods provide a more holistic picture of the experiences of the Fellows, the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, and the program outcomes. In order to minimize the workload created by such an ambitious project, a staff member from human resources and a higher education doctoral student collaborated on the project. This approach brought together two offices that do not normally work together to pursue a topic of common interest. It not only lightened the IR workload, but also brought multiple disciplinary perspectives to bear on the project.

Researchers conducted individual interviews with past Mentors, Fellows, and the AFP program administrator. Recent members of the steering committee were given the option of participating in an individual interview or in a focus group discussion. Interviews and focus groups were conducted by three researchers following a shared protocol and the format was semi-structured, allowing new issues to emerge as a result of the information shared by the
interviewee. Additional information about the Fellows’ experience was collected through a survey that was distributed to all of the Fellows in the study population. Additional data on the career progress of the past Fellows was collected via web searches.

The study population included Fellows and Mentors from the past decade. Since 2004, 31 Fellows and 13 Mentors have participated in the AFP. The Fellows population is 67% White female, 15% minority\(^1\) female, and 19% minority male. A selection of individuals involved in running the program and selecting and recruiting participants, termed Committee Members, were also included. Subjects were invited to participate in the study by Penn State’s Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Both Mentors and Fellows are strongly invested in the AFP and the participation rate for the study was high (Table 1). Roughly two-thirds of the Fellows and all but one of the Mentors invited to interview did so; all of the Fellows invited to participate in the survey did so.

Table 1. Participation Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Invited</th>
<th>Participated</th>
<th>Rate of Participation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fellows interview</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentors interviews</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellows survey</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee interview or focus group</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>89%</td>
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Descriptive statistics were used to aggregate the quantitative data. The interview and focus group were analyzed using thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Like grounded theory, this approach focuses on themes that emerge from the data and is inherently inductive.

\(^1\) Minority Fellows were Black, Hispanic, and American Indian. Two Fellows were of undeclared race.
Unlike grounded theory, the goal of this approach is on providing data that can be used to inform decision making, rather than on developing or building theory.

Each transcript was read multiple times and coded in an iterative process during which codes were refined (e.g., little-used codes collapsed and new codes identified). The analyst identified themes and triangulated findings using theory and the multiple data sources. The validity of the findings was supported using peer review and member checking with study participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The Program Experience

“It was absolutely a wonderful thing for them to invest in us in that way.” Sandra expressed the overwhelmingly positive perception that past Fellows have of the program. If given the chance, most Fellows would do it again and they would recommend it to their colleagues. Fellows greatly appreciated the University’s commitment to their development and saw it as an investment in the University’s future. Mentors were more tempered in their enthusiasm, but were still positive about its organization and its role in leadership development. Given the positive nature of participants’ experiences and observations, the primary theme that emerged from both Mentor and Fellow interviews was how to make a good program better.

Working with a Mentor.

Before undertaking any endeavor, it is as important to know where you want to go as it is to know how you will get there. Participants in the AFP chose the program because they believed it would help achieve their goals. Some Fellows entered the program with specific goals in mind (e.g., preparing to be a strong candidate for a particular job), but others did not. Regardless of where Fellows begin, “clarifying and articulating learning goals is indispensable to the success of
a mentoring relationship” (Zachary & Fischler, 2011). Each Mentor approached the goal-setting experience in a unique way. Shirley recalled:

<My Mentor] said, ‘Let me create for you the kind of environment that you need to achieve your personal goals, but we know you are going to be a significant contributor to our organization.’ And that was, that was just an incredibly mind-blowing thing for him to say.

The one constant was that the Mentors saw it as the Fellows’ responsibility to make productive use of the year. To maximize their success, Fellows should be independent, motivated learners. Michelle noted, “Your Mentor isn’t going to do this for you. You have to do it yourself.”

The first few weeks of the Fellowship offer an important opportunity for the Mentor and Fellow to work together to establish preliminary goals for the year. Fellows’ experiences suggest that this is not happening in a consistent and structured manner. Most Mentors and Fellows did not engage in formal goal-setting or planning activities; however they did typically begin with a frank conversation about the Fellows’ expectations and the Mentors’ suggestions for achieving them. Formal meetings between the Mentor and Fellow varied from weekly to monthly.

All Mentors included their Fellows in their senior staff meetings and encouraged them to meet individually with all of the units’ senior staff. Fellows were provided with access to the Mentors’ calendars and were permitted to attend, at their choosing, all but the most confidential discussions. Mentors felt that the most important things they could do for a Fellow was to provide access and to be candid and honest. In return, Mentors wanted their Fellows to be enthusiastic, engaged, and trustworthy. Some best practices included:

- Providing Fellows with context and expectations prior to meetings and/or debriefing with them afterwards (time permitting – no one did this every time)
- Having explicit, periodic conversations about the Fellows’ progress toward their goals
• Including Fellows in various service activities outside of the University, such as attending national meetings where the Mentor was presenting

Travel time emerged as an important, informal meeting time for Mentors and Fellows. Whether it was time spent in cars and airports or simply walking across campus to attend a meeting, these unscheduled moments provided unique opportunities for Fellows to speak candidly with their Mentors. Talking about the importance of this, Shirley recalled, “[My Mentor] and I traveled a lot together . . . He was always asking me questions and it was those questions that helped me to frame and to further fine tune what my goals were.”

Meetings, activities, and events.
A core educational component of the AFP experience is attending meetings –committees, task forces, and leadership. In addition, Fellows are encouraged to schedule one-on-one meetings with a wide variety of University leaders to learn about their units and their roles, and to attend University-wide events and leadership development activities. Survey findings revealed that some activities are engaged in by all Fellows, while others are less universal. For example, 100% of survey respondents indicated that they had attended meetings of the President’s Council, Board of Trustees, and Faculty Senate. Interestingly, although a number of Fellows interviewed for this project expressed a desire for a more formalized “curriculum” including practical workshops, Fellows did not attend the formal programs that were available to them, but not required, at a high rate. For example, only 16% reported attending the Penn State Emerging Leaders Program and none indicated that they took advantage of the Excellence in Management series (a list of recommended activities is available at in the Guidelines for Administrative Fellows and Mentors at http://www.psu.edu/vpaa/pdfs/admin%20fellow/guidelinesfellows.pdf). There are a number of potential reasons for this, including timing, travel requirements, lack of
communication about such opportunities, and perceptions about the utility of such programs, but
this study did not address those questions. Moving forward, this could be an important area for
additional research.

**Engagement with other Fellows.**

A number of Fellows felt that an important aspect of their Fellowship year was their
engagement with other Fellows. Although the current typical cohort of three is small, the
opportunity to learn from other participants was significant for many, and several noted that
sharing office space facilitated that exchange. Brenda recalled, "Sharing on office with the other Fellows] was a wonderful opportunity because. . . . I got the opportunity to see what they went through, but also to participate in the meetings and functions that they were involved in.” Fellows that were not at University Park full-time or who did not share office space had less
cohort interaction, and expressed disappointment at missing this valuable learning opportunity.

**Projects.**

Many Fellows worked on one or more significant projects during their Fellowship year
and perceptions of the utility of these projects varied. While the wide range of meetings attended
by Fellows provides breadth of experience, projects are a mechanism to provide depth in a
specific area. As in discussions of the college curriculum, the optimal balance between breadth
and depth is debatable. For some Fellows, projects provided an important way to feel like active
and contributing members of the Mentor’s staff. Committee Member Ruth noted that projects
gave them something to “sink their teeth into and feel that the things they are learning, they
could apply”. This tangible task helped many Fellows to combat the lack of direction they felt.
Some Mentors also saw projects as a method to give Fellows an opportunity to use their skills and contribute to the unit. In discussing how he approached the possibility of a project with Fellows, one Mentor described the conversation in the following way:

> I say, 'Look, you shouldn't feel guilty about this [being in the Fellowship]. If you want to, after you get to know the organization a little bit, if you want to sink your teeth into a couple of different places so you have some sort of project you are working on... that's fine.' But I think there is a little bit of guilt sometimes, about 'Gee, I don't feel like I am contributing now to Penn State like I was in my old role.'

While some Mentors and Fellows saw projects as critical components of the Fellowship experience, others saw them as a distraction. When asked by her Mentor if she wanted to take on a project, Nancy responded, “You know, for heaven's sake, I have done projects for all my life. No, I want to take this year just to learn from you.” Some Mentors described projects that had made an important impact, while others indicated that they had yet to see anything significant come of these efforts.

**Importance of Mentors’ Staff.**

Fellows’ experiences are influenced by a variety of people. In particular, the Mentor’s direct reports and administrative staff play important roles in the Fellowship experience and can serve as informal mentors. Anna suggested, “Mentors should set an expectation with their organization that the Administrative Fellow is a Fellow to the organization, not just a Fellow to the vice president.” In reflecting on what he could do better as a Mentor, George said:

> I have some [staff] who are far less enamored with the program than others, and they’re a little resistant and I need to both prepare them and lay out some expectations about this. Why we're doing this, this is what I expect of you in terms of your contribution to make
sure this is a good experience for this person, and in fact if we do it the right way we should benefit as an organization.

The Mentoring Relationship

When mentoring relationships are assigned the “fit” between a mentor and protégé is uncertain. Mentors felt themselves able to work with a wide variety of potential Fellows, but emphasized the importance of selecting Fellows with the right attitude. This attitude was variously described as positive, assertive, curious, collaborative, and trustworthy. Fellows acknowledged the importance of fit – 84% considered it somewhat or very important – and felt that the Selection Committee did a good job of pairing Mentors and Fellows and that their relationship with their Mentor was generally a positive one. Ninety-five percent of Fellows reported having a good or very good fit with their Mentors.

Not every person is prepared to mentor. Mentors should have an appropriate skill set, be engaged in the process, and be invested in the protégé. Fellows were generally very positive about the level of commitment their Mentors had to the program and to Fellows’ professional development. A small proportion, however, felt that their Mentor was not fully engaged. This deficiency was often put in the context of there not being explicit or well-communicated expectations for Mentors. Fellow Sandra said, “[I would recommend] making sure that the administrator at that level is really, really interested in taking someone on and understands what that word mentor means.” The importance of having a program administrator that they could talk to about difficulties in the mentoring relationship was noted by Fellows, Mentors, and Committee Members.
Program Design

Recruitment and Selection of Fellows.

The selection of Fellows is a competitive process and the AFP represents a significant University investment in the development of a relatively small group of individuals. Selecting Fellows that will take full advantage of the experience is critically important. Mentors wanted Fellows who were self-directed, open-minded, energetic, and collaborative. The importance of seeking people who saw the program as an opportunity rather than as an escape route was particularly noted by several Mentors. Fellows focused on the importance of curiosity, of going into the program as a learner, and of being open to new experiences.

The importance of identifying Fellows at the right point in their career to best benefit from the program and the difficulty of recruiting them was an issue that emerged primarily in discussions with Mentors. Finding the appropriate balance between experience and potential for growth was a balancing point noted by more than one study participant. Some felt that Fellows who already held advanced administrative positions did not gain much from the program. In counterpoint, such Fellows felt that they were uniquely prepared to make the most of the experience because they already had an understanding that less-experienced Fellows lacked.

The majority of Mentors were satisfied with the quality of the Fellows they had worked with and felt that the selection process worked well. However, there were some concerns that the pool of potential candidates was not as deep as it should be and that the quality of Fellows was uneven. Some Mentors expressed uncertainty about the program’s record of identifying the best candidates and acknowledged that they and other University leaders should take more responsibility for identifying and encouraging potential applicants.
Mentor Selection and Preparation.

In discussing the selection of Mentors, both Mentors and Fellows were interested in the possibility of expanding the pool of Mentors. Specifically mentioned was the possibility of including individuals based on their mentoring qualities rather than basing it solely on position. Good Mentors were described as having “demonstrated leadership,” and “the ability to coach.” They were also “change agents,” “well-respected,” and “known for giving very development, deliberate, intentional feedback”. Another theme related to Mentor selection was the limitations of the single-mentor model. Both Fellows and Mentors indicated that exposure to multiple mentors and multiple units could enrich the overall experience. Jessica indicated, “I would love to have had multiple Mentors. I would like to have spent . . . three months with X and three months with Y and three months with Z.”

Sixty-three percent of Fellows reported that their Mentor was well or extremely well prepared to help them make the most of their experience; 32% indicated that their Mentor was somewhat prepared and 5% felt that their Mentor was not at all prepared. Fellows were very positive about the quality of Mentors that have been involved in the program, but both Mentors and Fellows believed that Mentor preparation could be improved. Fellow Mike asked: “What is the Mentor understanding and do they know what they are supposed to be doing with their mentees to make sure that the mentee gets everything out of it over the year?...I think he didn't quite get all that.”

Most new Mentors had a general understanding of the expectation that Fellows would be shadowing them and that the Fellow should be given entrée into their networks. Mentor Mark said, “[The program administrator] is very good at explaining what the role is and what the
expectations are; what the goals of the program are....I thought I was well prepared.” George however, noted that “I sort of learned by doing it and that was not a good thing.”

Not all Mentors felt that more preparation was necessary and, in general, Mentors believed that they knew how to mentor others. Some Mentors did express a desire for greater preparation and support, and for clearer expectations. Tom, for example, suggested that it might be helpful to have a kickoff meeting with Mentors to talk about ground rules, learning outcomes, and best practices. In reflecting on why this wasn’t happening, Tom said, “there may be a presumption that vice presidents either, 1) know how to do this already or 2) don’t have time to [attend another meeting].” Mentors generally seemed uncertain about what Fellows were told coming into the program and some felt that knowing this would help ensure that everyone in the program was on the same page. Mentors and Fellows felt that selecting Mentors who were new to their positions was detrimental to both the Mentor and the Fellow.

**Length of the Program.**

The yearlong, full-time commitment of the AFP was a dominant area of discussion in all of the interviews. The program length was established in order to: 1) allow participants to be involved in a unit through a full academic cycle, 2) provide time for trust and communication to develop between the Mentor and Fellow, and 3) provide both breadth and depth for the Fellows. Fellows were not unanimous, but generally saw the length and full-time nature of the program as a strength. Mentors typically were more open to considering either a shorter overall program or less immersive structure, in which Fellows participated in program activities for a certain number of days a month while remaining in their positions. The time commitment was noted as particularly problematic in recruiting high-productivity pre-tenured faculty. Mentor David
observed, “If you are running a lab you can’t just say to your grad students, ‘Well, I am going to go be an Administrative Fellow. See you next year.’”

Reservations about the length of the program were often tied to concerns about its lack of structure. Several participants posited that the University should consider either shortening the program or increasing the amount of structure for participants. In arguing for more structure or a shorter program, Mentor Don observed, “It was, you know, almost a 12-month shadowing experience. . . . Shadowing is interesting, but unless you are really engaged in the work, it has very significant limitations.” Some of the study participants thought that moving away from the full-time commitment and focusing on a more training-oriented model would open the doors to a greater and more diverse range of participants.

Mentors acknowledged the significant time commitment necessary to serve as a Mentor, which may be explain their beliefs that the program should be shortened or that Fellows be given a more concrete task. Shortening the program was also noted as a way to increase the number of participants by allowing more than one cycle of Fellows per year, limit the consequences of poor Mentor-Fellow fit, and encourage participants from other Penn State campuses.

**Structure.**

The relative absence of required program activities or a curriculum was one of the most talked about components of the AFP. Opinions on the appropriate structure for the program ran from no structure at all to an academy-type structure or curriculum, and appeared unrelated to Fellows’ or Mentors’ roles (e.g., faculty, administrator, or staff member). Brenda recalled a common frustration among Fellows, “I found myself with a lot of time on my hands with no constructive purpose to do something with. That was one of the most disappointing points of the Fellowship and one of the most frustrating parts of the Fellowship.” In contrast, Nancy felt that,
“structure means that someone has imposed a structure for you to go through and to learn. And this is the year, for me, free from my teaching, free from my other responsibilities, just to learn.” Like Nancy, many of the Fellows and Mentors felt that the flexibility of the program was one of its key strengths, but others saw it as the program’s greatest flaw. In questioning the unstructured nature of the AFP, Mentor Ken observed, “[The program] shows you how complex things are, the nuances of the Trustees, the President's Council, and all that. That's exposure, but I don't know if it's development.” For the Fellows and Mentors that desired more structure, the nature of that structure varied, but there was general agreement that it should not be too rigid. Fellow Mike said, “It was good to attend [meetings] and learn from whatever topic was discussed that day, but it would have been nice to have something that would be more . . . like a curriculum.”

**Program Outcomes**

Fellows were asked a series of survey questions that asked them to judge the efficacy of the AFP in meeting its objectives. Eighty-four percent of Fellows felt that the program met or exceeded their expectations and 79% were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to meet their personal goals for the program. Fellows were asked to rate the program on each outcome using a six-point scale where: 1 = very ineffective, 2=ineffective, 3= somewhat ineffective, 4=somewhat effective, 5=effective, and 6=very effective. On average, Fellows rated the program as at least somewhat effective, and typically effective or very effective in each objective (Table 3). Fellows generally rated the program higher on providing learning opportunities than on providing opportunities for practice. The highest rating was for the program’s ability to enhance understanding of the environment in which University decisions are made.
Table 3. *Fellows’ Perceptions of the Effectiveness of the AFP*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhancing understanding of the environment in which University decisions are made</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a better understanding of the challenges of higher education administration</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing awareness of the complexity of issues facing higher education</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunities for learning about the decision-making process</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunities for participation in decision-making processes</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunities for participation in program management</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Knowledge of the University.**

Penn State is one of the largest and most complex institutions of higher education in the world. Although most Fellows came to the program after many years at the University, a primary goal for each was an increased understanding of the different facets of the University and their connections. Reflecting on her program experience, Carol recalled, “I sought out opportunities for those areas of Penn State that I wanted to know more about.” Mentors likewise felt that the opportunity to increase Fellows’ knowledge of the breadth of the University was a foundational function of the AFP. Different Fellows identified different growth areas depending on their mentoring unit, their personal experiences, and their projects, but many mentioned increased understanding of Penn State’s complexity as one of the most important things they learned.

**Administrative Understanding.**

One of the primary goals of the AFP is the development of Fellows’ understanding of the roles and skills of administrators, and of the complex and interconnected environment in which decisions are made. When asked about their goals for participating in the program, Mentors were
unanimous in this perspective. Scott noted: “To actually see it as a greater whole is very important, and to be able to go back to their unit and see how that unit participates and contributes to the greater organization is very, very important.”

Based on the experiences of the Fellows interviewed for this project, the program has achieved notable success in this area. Sandra said, “I gained a healthier understanding of the complications of running an institution of this size.” Fellows talked extensively about the importance of being exposed to different areas of the University, of considering big-picture questions, and of being exposed to the styles of various University executives. Linda said, “You can sit back and observe what's successful and what's not.” Similarly, Sharon reflected, “I know how to be civil, I know how to be an advocate without aggravating people because I learned from the best and I realize that and I am so appreciative of everything that I learned.”

While not an explicit goal of the AFP, an important outcome noted by many of the participants was a greater appreciation for the work, dedication, and commitment of University leaders. Carol observed “I have gained a better understanding and better appreciation for the many demands placed on the senior administrators. . . . [They] really earn their salaries and they really appear immensely dedicated to their jobs.” Mike reflected on his change of perception, “[I used to think that] the top, the Old Main building, they don't really think about us. They are just doing whatever they want. And at the end, it was a whole different point of view.”

Professional Advancement.

Not every Fellow enters the program hoping to get a new job afterwards, and most understood that the expectation was that they would return to their original units at the completion of the program. Carol observed, “Penn State's doing a better job at saying to Fellow
applicants, this isn't guaranteeing you a promotion, this is guaranteeing you a wonderful opportunity that you need to make the most of.” All of the survey respondents agreed that the Fellowship helps participants (in general) to compete for positions at higher levels of administration (Figure 3) and 89% felt that participation in the program had opened doors to advancement in their own Penn State careers (somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree). Kim credited the program with having a decisive role in her career progression:

*I don't want to be overly dramatic, but it changed my life. . . . It totally changed my career path. And I am doing different things that I never thought that I would be doing and I think I have much more, very different and exciting opportunities, that I don’t think I would have had before.*

When surveyed about their advancement following the end of the Fellowship, 47% indicated that they had advanced in some way within the first year after completing the Fellowship (Figure 4). Advancement in this context may have been interpreted by respondents to include advancement along the traditional promotional pathways of faculty (e.g., assistant/
Based on their survey self-reports, most Fellows (63%) reported advancing in higher education administration after participating in the program. Based on a review of the job titles and career progressions of all Fellows since the program’s inception, an estimated 79% advanced in higher education administration. Further, many Fellows who had not changed positions post-Fellowship did take on more responsibility in their existing positions. Among the post-Fellowship job titles of past Fellows are deans, assistant deans, vice provosts, and executive/senior directors. While such evidence supports the efficacy of the AFP, it is not possible to ascertain whether these Fellows – all high-achieving employees with a demonstrated interest in administration – would have advanced regardless of the AFP experience.

Fellows who participated in the Fellowship at least partly as a springboard to a new position but had not advanced, still saw value in the Fellowship experience. Anna captured this feeling when she said, “My career was not advanced by my Fellowship experience, but my career was enhanced by my Fellowship experience.” Fellows who had advanced in their careers post-Fellowship were generally more positive in their assessment of the AFP.
Mentors frequently mentioned and expressed concern with the expectation of Fellows that they would immediately advance upon completing the Fellowship. Committee Member John noted, “A lot of times the timing just isn't right. You see that people are really great, but . . . there is just no position. The opportunity just isn't there.” Both Mentors and Fellows, but particularly Mentors, felt that it was important to manage Fellows’ expectations in this regard. For example, some Mentors were concerned that Fellows expected a position to be created for them in the mentoring unit or thought that they would not have to compete for open positions. When asked whether having been a Fellow would make someone a more competitive job candidate for a position, one Mentor mused, “That would be an edge, absolutely. But to say that this is a program that is designed for the next step. . . . I don't know. But I do think it's a great program, provided we're clear about the expectations.” In general, Mentors seemed unclear about the messages that Fellows were getting about the expected outcomes of the program.

Although none of the Mentors described the Fellowship as a way to try out or identify potential new employees, several of them had brought prior Fellows into their units through competitive processes. In talking about this issue, Tom said:

I don't think we want to be going around creating positions just so that a Fellow can land in a new spot . . . and at the same time, after they've spent a year kind of following you around as a vice president and so forth, you know about them and they know about you and so it makes a hire easier, because you've basically been interviewing them for a year.

Better Employees and University Citizens.
As described previously, both Fellows and Mentors spoke to the importance of the AFP in providing an experience that prepares Fellows to advance and also enhances their ability to serve the University in their existing\(^2\) roles. Fellow Jessica recalled:

I felt that even if I didn't go anywhere further with it, that I would be able to contribute to the department. I would be able to help my students. I would be able to help the Senate. I would be able to contribute more meaningfully because I knew more about the institution.

Mentor Scott observed, “Anyone can aspire to leadership, but it could be leadership because you become a more active member of the unit.” All of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Fellowship helped participants to become more effective in their existing positions. Reflecting on returning to her position, Dorothy said:

I think others felt that I had knowledge, I had valuable knowledge that they liked knowing I had and it helped them. . . . We would have staff meetings . . . and people would . . . make comments where they really thought the upper administration didn't understand or didn't do things the way that they thought things should be done. I would have the opportunity to say, 'No, it doesn't work like that.' Or, 'No, there's a bigger picture here. You're thinking small, you are thinking just us, but this is how it impacts everybody.' And I think it was my experience as a Fellow and seeing those things, I could bring it to others and then help them to try to see things . . . from another side.

Some Fellows credited the AFP with opening up other opportunities for professional and personal growth, such as participating on key University committees. They credited these opportunities largely to the knowledge and skills they gained as Fellows, as well as to the

\(^2\) The position they were in upon entering the AFP.
connections they made during the program. Both Mentors and Fellows felt that the alumni Fellows were in a unique position to contribute to the University, no matter what their current role or title, and that they were underutilized post-Fellowship. Committee Member John said:

*I feel very comfortable that I can go to a former Fellow, and say, 'Look, this is a very sensitive issue. It's going to be very controversial. A lot of confidences need to be in place here. And you've been through this and I think you could do a really outstanding job of either chairing the committee or being an influential member of the committee'. . . . A lot of faculty and staff, absent the Fellowship experience, you couldn't ask them to do this.*

Many Fellows pointed to the networks established during their Fellowship year as one of the most important outcomes of the experience. For example, Brenda said:

*Getting to know the people, getting to know the structures of the University, how people intersect with one another, who has influence over whom. . . . I now had connections in an area of the University in which I previously had no connection. I could pick up the phone or send an email and people gave me the time of day in a nanosecond. That was the best thing I got out of the Administrative Fellowship.*

**The Price of Participation.**

Temporarily removing key employees from positions of significant responsibility can leave a void that sending units struggle to fill. For some Fellows, separating from their home unit during the Fellowship year was stressful. For faculty this can mean leaving ongoing research projects, graduate students, and collaborations. For staff, it often means leaving colleagues short-handed. Patricia recalled, “*It's very hard. Because I mean you work for years to build relationships and to put processes in place . . . and then you're just handing it over and praying.*”
In order to fully benefit from the AFP, Fellows are encouraged to separate entirely from their home units for the Fellowship year and many Fellows do not have difficulty doing so. Brenda said, “I did not have problems separating from my prior role. The office understood what I was attempting to accomplish because it benefited not only me but the office and the University, so it was a win-win-win.” For some, the opportunity to separate was seen as a type of sabbatical, where they were still working, but in a way that rejuvenated them and introduced them to new opportunities and areas for growth. But for other Fellows, conflicting loyalties were a significant source of tension. Fellows generally, but not always, credited the AFP with sending clear messages to the units about the expectations for separation (faculty felt this was less clear than staff), but did not think that this was always realistic. Mike gave an example:

I wasn't even done with my Administrative Fellowship, it was done in June, well in summer there was a class, and I needed to teach it. There was no way around it. So I was teaching a class . . . while I was finishing my Administrative Fellowship. . . . So, I was like, ‘Here I am again. I am doing two jobs for the next month and a half.’ But we have to do it. I mean there was no way around it.

A number of Fellows spoke of the guilt they felt over leaving their colleagues to pick up the slack in their absence and some Fellows were unwilling to separate because of their concerns about decisions being made in their absence.

For faculty, the Fellowship was often viewed in terms of the trade-off between their administrative interests and progress toward promotion in the faculty ranks. Faculty Fellows are typically tenured associate professors, but that is not the only promotional hurdle that faculty face. Jessica stated:
I knew that taking the Fellowship as a faculty member, meant . . . you were taking a year out of your trajectory toward full professorship. . . . I had to think very carefully about what it meant in terms of my reaching full professorship. So, I decided to go ahead, knowing that it would probably have some implications.

Unit support was an important factor in determining the level of separation difficulty faced by Fellows. Mentor Mark observed, “If . . . a department head . . . doesn't really understand the purpose of the program or simply isn't as supportive, it can be difficult, awkward.” For Fellows who were encouraged to participate in the program by their supervisors, separation was easier to achieve. Kim described the importance of her supervisor’s support: “She encouraged me and said you need to do this. . . . On my own, I would not have done it because there was just too much going on.”

Using a Mixed-Method Approach for Institutional Research

Qualitative research is an important tool in the toolbox of IR professionals but it is a labor-intensive effort for the typical IR office. In order to reap the benefits of incorporating qualitative research methods into program evaluation, an IR office must take a practical approach to qualitative research. The use of open-ended survey questions or focus groups rather than individual interview can make efficient use of staff and participant time. Likewise, interview or focus group notes, rather than word-for-word transcription, may be sufficient for evaluation purposes. Collaborating with other invested parties and units with complementary expertise (in this case Human Resources and the university’s higher education program) can bring additional staff into the evaluation, as well as a broader perspective on the evaluation itself.

Like quantitative analysis, the analysis of qualitative data requires specialized training and should not be undertaken casually. While theory development may emerge from an IR study,
the primary focus of an institutional researcher must be on actionable result. Reporting must balance the richness provided by qualitative data and the need to give voice to research participants with the need for brevity, succinctness, and relevance in communicating to University leaders.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Diverse perspectives were provided on how to improve the AFP. While few things were unanimously agreed upon, several themes emerged. These points apply not only to the AFP, but could be applied to other existing mentoring programs and should be considered in the implementation of new programs.

1. Clarify program goals so that expectations are aligned and consistent.
2. Consider providing a structured curriculum focused on specific administrative skillsets.
3. Actively recruit rising stars.
4. Orient and train Mentors.
5. Get buy-in from all members of the mentoring unit.
6. Communicate to Fellows that they must be the drivers of the process.
7. Require Fellows to set goals and monitor progress at regular meetings.
8. Mix and match program models (e.g., short- vs. long-term, full- vs. part-time) to find what works best at your institution.
9. Identify high-priority learning opportunities and make them a formal part of participation.

The AFP is a well-respected program both internally and externally. It has provided a model for similar programs at other institutions around the country (B. Bowen, personal communication, March 21, 2014). In this study, both Mentors and Fellows focused on the importance of growing university leadership from within and for providing unique opportunities
for a diverse group of faculty and staff members to learn about their institution’s complexities and its leadership. Participants were nearly unanimous in their belief that the University’s leadership is too homogenous and that directed efforts were necessary to diversify. Most saw the AFP as continuing to play a role in that effort.

The results of this program evaluation are already being felt in adjustments to Penn State’s AFP program. The survey data provides a comprehensive view of what Fellows experience, while the interview and focus group data provided a richness and depth of understanding that would not have been possible with surveys alone. The resources required to conduct mixed-method program evaluations are not insignificant, but the richness of their findings can provide the detailed level of formative or summative assessment needed to justify such resource-intensive programming.
References


