THE ACTIVE COMPONENT

The importance of practice-based learning to academic leadership development

The teaching profession has long recognised that learners need to actively participate in an activity in order to fully appreciate its implications. This has not always been reflected in non-Education fields, but is increasingly being applied to academic leadership. A recent study of over 500 university leaders strongly endorsed “role-specific, practice-based, peer-supported and self-managed learning” as the most effective means for learning about leadership (Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008, p. xvii).

The PROPEL Active Component

- Each participant will choose one project which they will lead during the 12-month Program.
- Your project will need to be identified and agreed on through consultation with your Dean and the PROPEL Coordinators.
- You will begin planning for your project at the Leadership Skills Workshop.
- You will then lead the project to completion, ideally by the end of the training year.
- Your mentor and the PROPEL Coordinators will be available to provide support.
- At the end of the Program, you will prepare a presentation and a final report explaining your leadership project, reflecting on what went well and what could have been done differently, and outlining the leadership lessons learned along the way.

Benefits of the Active Component

By having the opportunity to lead a self-directed project with strategic significance to your Faculty, you will be able to put into practice many of the leadership skills you are developing through other components of the Program. The project will provide you with a practical avenue to apply what you have learned, try out new approaches, and reflect on your performance. In this way you will be able to identify both your strengths and areas you need to further develop.
The project will have added benefits of:

- Elevating your profile within the Faculty and the University.
- Raising your awareness of what is happening around you, what other areas of your Faculty or the University need and how they operate.
- Giving you an insight into the strategically important issues in the Faculty/University.
- Providing a vehicle for collaboration.
- Expanding your connections within and outside your Faculty/University.
- Acting as a stepping stone to other leadership roles/responsibilities in the future.

Timeline for project activities

Following the Program Launch
- Consider a number of project ideas which would be relevant to your Faculty and would meet the PROPEL project selection criteria.
- Meet with your Dean to discuss ideas and find out about other options.
- Select a project and gain in-principle approval from your Dean to conduct the project over the coming 12 months.
- Submit your project proposal to the PROPEL Coordinators for feedback and acceptance.

During the Leadership Skills Workshop:
- Discuss your project topic with the other participants, coordinators, and presenters.
- Learn about leadership skills relevant to your project.
- Relate what you have learned about leadership to the reality of running your project.
- Formulate ideas, plans and strategies for your project.
- Develop a first draft of your project plan.
- Present your plan to a round-table of participants and coordinators and receive feedback.

After the Workshop (within 1–2 months):
- Discuss your project and draft plans with your mentor at the first meeting.
- Finalise your project plan, submit it to your Dean for endorsement and forward to the PROPEL Coordinators.
- Schedule project-work time into your workload
Half-way through the Program:

- Meet with your Dean to discuss progress.
- Attend the Mid-Point Workshop at which you will discuss project progress and receive feedback from the group.

Near the end of the Program

- Prepare a poster and give a presentation on the outcomes of your project at the Project Presentation Event.

End of the Program

- Attend the Reflective Event and give feedback on your experiences of the Active Project Component.
- Finalise your project report and submit to your Dean and the PROPEL Coordinators. (If project is still ongoing, a progress report to be submitted and arrangements made with the Dean to either continue leading the project or hand it on).

Your Responsibilities and available support

Leading your project to a successful outcome will depend entirely on your level of commitment. You will need to:

- plan and consult fully,
- identify and keep to milestones,
- make sufficient time available to progress the project,
- seek advice and take action to overcome obstacles.

There is a range of support available for you to make the process easier:

**Your Dean** plays a key role in ensuring the project is successfully completed. Deans need to show other Faculty staff that they value the project and expect a successful outcome. You should:

- Meet with your Dean to select a suitable project and be clear on what the Dean expects the project to deliver.
- Meet with the Dean again at the half-way point in the Program to provide a progress report.
- Request your Dean support you to overcome obstacles if needed.

**Your PROPEL mentor** will actively support you throughout the life of the project. Each mentoring session should touch on the progress of the project and review any difficulties you are facing. Your mentor will provide feedback on project planning and implementation strategies, and will also help you explore alternative ways of achieving a successful outcome.
The PROPEL Coordinators are available for advice or support with project issues at any time. PROPEL will provide follow-up support at regular intervals to see how you are progressing with your project.

The PROPEL Network will be established so participants can provide each other with feedback and support. You will be able to refer to the Network for advice and feedback on your project plans and strategies. An email list will be established for this purpose. The PROPEL Network will also hold regular catch-ups throughout the Program at which participants will be able to workshop common project difficulties or hear from guest speakers who have strong project leadership experience.

References