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1. THE IMPORTANCE OF NETWORKING TO ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

For future leaders, the importance of establishing a strong network of colleagues cannot be overemphasised. Studies of university leaders have shown that learning from others is among the top three most significant influences on their learning how to lead and their leadership effectiveness (Drew, Ehrich & Hansford, 2008; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008). Learning from experienced leaders takes place during the Mentoring and Leadership Skills Components of the PROPEL Program, but learning from peers is an equally valuable experience which is enhanced when a formal network is established.

Scott et. al. (2008) recommend that “universities investigate ways of setting up learning networks for people in the same role”. Forming close ties to others at a similar stage of their leadership career offers pre-leadership academics an invaluable opportunity to get to know and learn from the people who will most likely be in leadership positions alongside them in the future.

2. ORGANISATIONAL AIMS OF THE PROPEL NETWORK COMPONENT

Through establishing networks among pre-leadership academics, the PROPEL Network Component will contribute to achieving the following outcomes:

- Developing and retaining pre-leadership academics with recognised leadership potential.
- Providing a pool of candidates for future leadership positions who have broadened their attitudes towards and understanding of the tertiary sector.
- Forming connections based on mutual experience and trust among a cohort of future leaders.
- Fostering of a culture of working collaboratively across faculties and disciplines.

3. DEFINING ‘NETWORK’ IN THE PROPEL CONTEXT

‘Network’ in the PROPEL context is defined as the connection formed among the participant group for the duration of the Program. The definition of the Network can include the Program Coordinators, as they play an active role in this Component.

This is not to be confused with ‘networking’, which is identified in the Leadership Skills Component and refers to building and utilising a network of internal and external contacts to enhance leadership effectiveness.
4. BENEFITS TO PROPEL PARTICIPANTS FROM THE NETWORK COMPONENT

The PROPEL Network Component supports and connects participants as they work through the various Program Components. Participants will gain both direct and indirect support.

Direct support to:

- Plan and carry out the leadership project during the Active Component.
- Reflect on learnings from meetings attended during the Big Picture Component.
- Be self-reflective throughout the Program, and especially in preparation for elements of the Reflective Component.
- Benefit from knowledge and skills of other Program participants.
- Connect with staff in leadership and other key positions within the university through invitation to Network meetings as guest speakers.
- Receive feedback on any difficulties they are facing with elements of the Program or other general issues.
- Broaden their understanding and appreciation of the similarities and differences between their faculty and others.

Indirect support to:

- Increase confidence in their leadership abilities.
- Develop specific leadership skills identified through the Leadership Skills Component.
- Increase motivation to pursue academic leadership pathways.
- Build a personal leadership development plan with both long and short term goals.
- Extend collaborative networks.
- Establish other contacts and networks to support their development.
- Better balance demands of academic life.
- Reduce any sense of isolation.
5. HOW THE NETWORK COMPONENT OPERATES

The Network Component should generally follow the model outlined below, but can be as flexible and adaptable as the Program Coordinators and participants require.

The Network Component consists of:

- An email group containing all participants and the Program Coordinators. This list allows easy communication among the group.
- A blog site. This will be a place for participants to record thoughts and experiences during the Program. A blog may or may not suit the interests of different participant groups.
- Regular meetings of the Network. These meetings should take place around once per month. Meetings can contain a mix of the following elements:
  - Guest speakers — providing further insight or follow-up on areas identified as important for leadership development. For example, the university finance director would be a valuable speaker.
  - Pre-set discussion topics — providing guided discussion on any topic of interest to the group, or a topic relevant to the current stage of the PROPEL Program. For example, topics which the group feels were not comprehensively covered by the face-to-face workshops, or discussion of committee meeting experiences and active project progress.
  - Unstructured discussion time — providing participants the opportunity to chat informally about any issues they are having (with the Program, or generally); ideas they would like to share (including suggestions offered by the participants’ mentors); experiences they have had since they last met.

6. SUPPORT FOR THE PROPEL NETWORK

Initially at least, the Network should be administered by the PROPEL Program Coordinators to ensure it runs effectively. This will include setting up an email list and blog site (optional), scheduling monthly meetings throughout the Program, arranging meeting venue and catering, and organising any guest speakers requested by the participants.

If the cohort of participants is working well together, the responsibility for administering the Network should be handed over to them. One suggested model is to get participants to form pairs and allocate the coordination of each Network meeting to one pair. In this way, the participants are more invested in the success of the Network and can drive the agenda more directly.
7. FOCUS OF PROPEL NETWORK MEETINGS

The PROPEL Network is participant driven, and should reflect the needs, interests and motivations of the group. At the same time, it should mirror the progress of other Components of the Program. For example, discussion of committee meetings should be set as a topic once all participants have attended at least one meeting; progress of the active projects should be a regular discussion topic, especially prior to the Mid-Point Workshop and again prior to the Project Presentation Event.

There needs to be a good balance between pre-set discussion topics, guest speakers and unstructured discussion time. Too much focus on structured elements will limit participants’ opportunity to chat informally about issues/ideas/experiences they have had since their last meeting. What will tend to happen is that informal discussion will take place anyway and overtake the pre-set topics. However, if Network meetings are too unstructured they will not offer the full range of benefits anticipated and will not fully support the other Program Components. Discussion will be dominated by the stronger personalities and those with the most concerns to air. Meeting attendance rates will fall if the Network is not addressing the needs and interests of all participants.

8. SCHEDULE OF NETWORK COMPONENT ACTIVITIES

| During the Leadership Skills Workshop: | Introduce the Network Component. |
| | Encourage the participant group to discuss how they want the Network to operate and the benefits they expect to gain from it. |
| Within two weeks of the Workshop: | Establish the participant email list and blog site (optional). |
| One month after Workshop: | First Network meeting. Arranged by Program Coordinators. Discussion topics should include any unresolved issues/questions raised at the Leadership Skills Workshop (workshop evaluations should provide an insight into this). Optional guest speaker. |
| Each month until end of Program: | Four-weekly Network meetings arranged by either the Program Coordinators or the participants themselves. Discussion topics should mirror the stages of other Components in the Program. Active projects should be discussed regularly. Optional guest speakers. |
9. NETWORK GROUND RULES

The participant group should be encouraged to discuss the ground rules for their network, probably during the Leadership Skills Workshop. Network meetings will be a forum where sensitive information or personal details may be discussed, and as such all participants need to be in agreement about the limits of disclosing information during meetings and the requirement to keep information shared confidential.

10. REFERENCES
