

## Illinois Arts Alliance *Mentor Connection Service* Evaluation

Completed March 5, 2008

The Illinois Arts Alliance's *Mentor Connection Service* was developed as part of a larger organizational effort, *Arts Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, which aims to conduct research and develop programs that support and facilitate the projected generational transfer of leadership at Illinois nonprofit arts organizations. Research, interviews, focus groups and discussions conducted during the early stages of *Arts Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* indicated a strong demand for one-on-one learning opportunities for emerging and mid-career arts leaders. In response to this demand, IAA developed the *Mentor Connection Service*, a program that facilitates mentoring relationships between established and emerging arts leaders in order to encourage professional growth, provide skill and leadership development, and promote retention within the nonprofit arts field.

With an initial grant from the Sara Lee Foundation, IAA conducted research on best practices and gathered significant input from the arts community before launching the program in 2006. A group of 38 mentors and mentees (19 pairs) were matched, received training and began meeting in February 2007. Over the course of the following year, each pair was asked to meet on a monthly basis. Individual participants received regular check-in calls from IAA staff to gauge satisfaction with their matches, activity levels and progress toward stated goals. Additionally, participants gathered as a group in September 2007 to share challenges and best practices with one another and to offer feedback to the program manager. Participants gathered again in February 2008 to provide additional feedback to the program manager and to celebrate the work they had done with their mentoring partner.

During the course of the program, three of the original 19 pairs dissolved. In each case, the dissolution of the relationship was due to a major career change on the part of the mentee which made continuation of the relationship impractical. In two cases, the mentee accepted a job out of state. In the third case, the mentee accepted a position with a prominent local funder, making it a conflict of interest for her to continue working with her mentor who represents a cultural institution that receives funding from the mentee's new organization. In all cases, the mentors were helpful in guiding mentees through their job transitions.

A final evaluation survey was administered to all program participants, and a total of 29 responses were received. The recommendations that follow are based on data collected from that evaluation instrument, feedback collected during check-in calls and at the September 2007 gathering, and the observations of the program manager.

### **Overall satisfaction**

Generally, the program met participants' needs and expectations and offered a useful and satisfying professional and personal development experience. All survey respondents indicated they would recommend the program to others, and 89% indicated they would participate in the program again as a mentor. A total of 74% of respondents indicated the program met their expectations, with 26% indicating their expectations were "somewhat" met. Interestingly, this is an area where a discrepancy exists between mentors' and mentees' responses: 64% of mentees responded "yes" to the question "did the Mentor Connection Service meet your expectations?", while 85% of mentors answered "yes" to the same question. There may be lessons here about

clarifying the goals of the program as well as articulating participants' definition of mentoring in order to better manage expectations.

**Benefits for participants**

All survey respondents indicated they received value from their participation in the program. When asked what they gained from participating, mentors and mentees responded as follows:

	<i>Mentees</i>	<i>Mentors</i>
Personal satisfaction	57%	92%
New professional contacts	71%	15%
Networking skills	36%	15%
Leadership skills	43%	31%
New information or resources	57%	31%
New partnerships with other organizations	14%	39%
Fundraising skills	21%	0%
Board management skills	14%	0%
Financial management skills	7%	0%

Respondents were also asked to describe the personal or professional growth they experienced as a result of their mentoring experience. A sampling of responses are below. (All are direct quotes.)

- ❖ *I feel more comfortable in my role as an arts professional. Just the experience of hearing what it is like at another organization similar to mine helped.*
- ❖ *When I realized that one of my goals was to become a leader in the family/children's theatre community and become more visible to the theater community at large, [my mentor] encouraged me to put myself out there. As a result, I'm now a board member for the League of Chicago Theatres.*
- ❖ *I have come a long way in learning how to lead my Board, as well as structuring the whole organization so it's streamlined with checks and balances. Thinking back to what my initial goals were before even meeting [my mentor], I believe I've probably met or grown towards every one of them. Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity!*
- ❖ *My mentor gave me great perspective on my career path and my personal areas of weakness that I need to work on. He was always encouraging and often confirmed my instincts about issues I'm facing, which has helped build my confidence to manage my career more assertively.*
- ❖ *As a new nonprofit leader, [my mentor] gave me confidence that my thinking was on the right track.*
- ❖ *I learned that I need to trust "my gut" more when making leadership or managerial decisions. I often founded that my instincts were spot on, but at times I second-guessed myself to disastrous results. [My mentor] really helped me to see that it is really important to trust those initial feelings.*

- ❖ *Professionally I created a collaborative opportunity that benefited both of us. Through our collaboration I also made new professional contacts and learned more about my mentor's organization, initiatives and co-workers.*
- ❖ *I feel much more comfortable with assessing my priorities and setting attainable goals and limits for myself regarding workload and commitments. I feel more confident about my autonomy in my job and my ability to be candid about how things are going. I feel comfortable sharing with [my mentor], although I still will probably be shy when I first meet a new colleague.*
- ❖ *It gave me a different perspective on my own work. It was satisfying to see how [my mentee] was meeting the challenges she faced.*
- ❖ *It reminded me, as previous mentoring has, that I have as much to learn as the one I am mentoring.*
- ❖ *I enjoyed experiencing the work of [my mentee's organization] and seeing [my mentee] grow as she dealt with her board, new space potential, and a new AD...and I thought I had challenges. I also enjoyed seeing their work.*
- ❖ *There's an old saying that you don't know what you know until you try to teach it to others. So it was very enlightening to recognize strengths and weaknesses in my own leadership and to also help me communicate more effectively.*
- ❖ *It is very important to stay in touch with young professionals, and it gave me pleasure to see [my mentee's] life grow and transform.*
- ❖ *I enjoyed sharing both my personal and professional experiences with someone earlier in their career and life paths. I also gained self-confidence in my abilities to listen and share appropriately.*
- ❖ *Being in the role of managing a new relationship that is built on the skill development of the person and how to be constructive without sounding like a "know it all".*
- ❖ *Just a confirmation that hopefully I was of support to the mentee to whom I was assigned. He already was a very capable administrator, and the opportunities that came to him were excellent. If anything, I felt he only needed some support.*
- ❖ *Just learning how to mentor; how to draw a mentee out, finding out what issues she is encountering and moving toward fruitful discussion.*
- ❖ *It was gratifying to see how my experience, knowledge and skills could benefit someone who was open to them and motivated to change.*

### **Matching**

The majority of respondents (83%) indicated that the matching process met their expectations, with 66% indicating that the process served very well in facilitating a good match and 34% indicating the process served somewhat well. Comments suggest that developing a larger pool of mentors, allowing mentors more input into their final pairings, and factoring personality into the matchmaking process (possibly through the use of personality or skill set inventories) would result in even more success in this area.

### **Training**

Response to the training/orientations session varied a great deal depending on individuals' comfort level with and personal definition of mentoring. 86% of survey respondents indicated the session was useful. However, increased clarity around the definition of mentorship for the purposes of this program would likely increase overall satisfaction with the training session, as would sharing real-world experiences and best practices from mentors and mentees from this or other formal programs.

It may not be necessary to ask that all participants adhere to one strict definition of mentoring for this program. (As stated above, though, increased clarity is needed.) However, it is necessary that each participant be able to clearly articulate what mentoring means to them, and the program provider must ensure that this information is shared with each participant's mentoring partner, preferably through direct conversation amongst mentoring pairs. It was also suggested that providing some training in coaching methods for mentors would be very useful.

### **Support & Structure**

While participants appreciated the flexibility of a program that allowed them to determine their own meeting times and frequencies and to set their own goals, they requested additional tools and guidance up front in regards to:

- ❖ goal setting
- ❖ structuring an overall work plan
- ❖ structuring individual meetings
- ❖ maintaining momentum once a mentee's major questions have been answered or during times when it seems there are no pressing questions

These tools could be incorporated into training sessions and made available via the IAA website.

Forty percent of survey respondents (57% of mentees and 23% of mentors) indicated they did not meet with their mentoring partner as often as they would have liked to. The discrepancy in responses from mentors and mentees indicates a need to better manage participants' expectations up front. Time and distance were the foremost challenges for those who did not meet as often as they'd have liked. When asked if more structure or stricter requirements would have helped overcome these challenges, the answer was a resounding no. Participants indicated that flexibility was of the utmost importance and urged the program manager to provide more tools to help pairs connect but to avoid placing stricter requirements on future participants.

### **Check-in calls**

Each program participant received check-in phone calls from IAA staff at the one-, three- and six- and nine-month marks. These calls were considered very useful by most survey respondents, with

mentors ranking them slightly higher in overall usefulness than mentees. From a program management standpoint, they were very helpful in gauging the success of individual matches and ensuring good progress and communication between mentoring partners.

One participant had this to say about the value of the check-in calls:

"Without these, I don't think I would have found any success at all with this program. As it is, my mentor and I had trouble keeping a schedule. These calls reminded us to keep working. And they allowed me to talk through some things aloud and gain some new insight."

Many of the early check-in calls involved troubleshooting communications issues between mentoring partners. Future training and ongoing communications with participants should emphasize the importance of regular and open communication between mentor and mentee as well as the availability of program staff to assist outside of staff-initiated calls.

From a staffing perspective, this aspect of program management was very work intensive. Calls from staff drew fewer and fewer return calls from participants as the year progressed, which seemed to indicate increased comfort on the part of participants with the process and their partners. Moving forward, it may be wise to continue to invest time in check-ins early on and turn to another method of regular evaluation during the second half of the program cycle. Regular full-group meetings, as recommended below, may help to address this issue.

### **Mid-year participant gathering**

Participants were asked to gather at the six-month mark to share best practices with each other and provide feedback to the program manager. Mentors and mentees met in small groups to discuss their successes and challenges and then shared recommendations with the full group.

This time for sharing with fellow participants was highly valued by all who attended. Of the recommendations shared during this session, foremost among them was a request to make more of these gatherings happen and to start earlier in the program cycle. Final evaluations support this recommendation. Requests were also made for meetings that focused on building a specific skill set as determined by the needs of current participants.

Moving forward, quarterly meetings (at the three- six- and nine-month marks) are recommended with one or two of these sessions focused on skill building. All meetings should include time for participants to engage in focused discussions about their successes and challenges in managing their mentoring relationship as well as providing feedback to the program manager.

### **Year-end participant gathering**

Participants were asked to gather again at the one-year mark to celebrate their accomplishments as a mentoring pair. Attendees focused their time primarily on sharing what their mentor or mentee did during their time together that was especially helpful or remarkable. This time was also used by the program manager to gather additional feedback.

This gathering was also highly valued by those who attended, primarily for the closure that it provided. From a program management standpoint, this gathering was an invaluable opportunity to clarify findings from the evaluation survey, gauge participants' overall satisfaction with the program and encourage continuing engagement between mentoring partners and with IAA.

## Other support

Participants recommended a number of possible vehicles for more, ongoing support during the program cycle including a newsletter, online community or listserv. The need behind these suggested formats was for more regular communication with staff and fellow participants as well as reminders about the tools available to them. Moving forward, a listserv is recommended as a first step as it is relatively simple to manage and enables easy communications amongst all members.

## Recommendations for future participants

Participants were asked to provide recommendations to future Mentor Connection Service participants. A sample of responses follows (all are direct quotes).

### What recommendations would you make to future MENTORS who participate in this program?

- ❖ *Be proactive. Check in with your mentees. Let them know you are invested in their progress. Don't come in with a really strict definition of what a mentor is. The pairing part of this process is inherently artificial. Don't let that be a reason to hold mentees at bay. Come in with an open mind.*
- ❖ *Make sure you have a clear idea of why you want to be a mentor and what you hope to gain out of the experience, and communicate that to your mentee. Follow up with your mentee and be proactive. Offer suggestions or advice even if it isn't specifically asked for. Your mentee knows they need help, they may just not know how to ask for it or what to ask for.*
- ❖ *Even though the program is mentee driven, don't let that stop you from making move to connect with the mentee. A short email with words of wisdom or encouragement can make a world of difference.*
- ❖ *Encourage your mentee to challenge themselves with their objectives and make smaller "benchmark" goals to get there.*
- ❖ *Each mentee requires a different style. Find out what works best for the mentee and then adjust to him/her.*

### What recommendations would you make to future MENTEES who participate in this program?

- ❖ *Take it seriously because you cannot imagine at the beginning how helpful it will be in the end.*
- ❖ *This is a process about your growth professionally and personally. This is not a process in which mentors will solve your current work-related crisis for you. It will be very difficult not to make your goals specific to your workplace. Think about your long term professional goals and see if your mentor can help you position yourself for a long and prosperous future in your field.*
- ❖ *Have a clear idea of what you hope to gain. Have specific goals. Communicate clearly with your mentor and make sure they understand exactly what you hope to learn.*
- ❖ *This is your opportunity to discuss your ideas with someone who knows the field. Don't hold back.*
- ❖ *Allow the relationship and your goals to develop organically. Attend events together and network.*
- ❖ *The more specific your goals the better.*

- ❖ *Be open; be proactive; and don't be afraid to ask for what you want.*

### **Conclusion**

When asked if and why they would recommend the Mentor Connection Service to others, participants offered the following responses:

- ❖ Learning from experienced leadership is the best learning I can think of.
- ❖ It has good potential for nonbiased advice and development.
- ❖ It is about leadership development for everyone concerned - I enjoyed the relationship and making a new opportunity available for my organization and for my mentee.
- ❖ It's needed in our field.

Demand for and interest in this program and others like it continues to grow. Based on feedback received throughout the pilot year, the Mentor Connection Service can be considered a success and should continue to be offered to IAA's constituents.