

UCEDD Tip Sheets

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ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY CENTERS ON DISABILITIES
THE LEADERSHIP, EDUCATION, ADVOCACY & RESEARCH NETWORK



A project of AUCD, in partnership with ACL, to strengthen the network of UCEDDs

Admin Essentials Professional Development

What is Addressed in this Tip Sheet?

This tip sheet explores how centers think about professional development and succession planning. Three UCEDD content experts discussed their approaches and effective strategies and obstacles across the network. It summarizes a virtual roundtable conversation held on December 13, 2021, and [archived here](#).

The Admin Essentials series brings together UCEDD directors and business managers with content experts to address pressing administrative challenges. These virtual roundtables provide an opportunity to share resources, troubleshoot challenges, and brainstorm creative solutions to a broad range of organizational topics.

Why is it Important

Good people are typically seen as the most important resource for the UCEDD to work effectively. People are also what motivates future work. People, both UCEDD staff and members of the disability community, keep UCEDD employees coming to work every day and what brought them to this work in the first place. Strong relationships and effective mentoring were repeatedly pointed to as key for advancement and career paths. It is important to create a positive workplace culture that creates opportunities for these relationships.

When people stay at the UCEDD long-term, it is great to have their institutional knowledge. At the same time, it is critical to think about the opportunities and pathways for career advancement for all employees. This is essential for assuring long-term success for the UCEDD.

How is it Done?

Different UCEDDs have different cultures, whether because of their organizational setting, location, or something else. As such, there are many different strategies and approaches. Many roundtable participants discussed the benefits of learning from other UCEDDs about their practices. Getting advice from people at other UCEDDs can help find new methods for leadership and professional development.

Relationships are seen as critical for effectively providing professional development and planning for succession. Relationships, both within and outside the UCEDD, motivate people to stay connected and keep looking for ways for the UCEDD to improve. The roundtable shared many tips and strategies about hiring, developing new leaders, and succession planning.

“Mentorship was probably the number one thing that people said helped them advance to where they are today. It’s because someone took an interest in them, someone believed in them, and someone fostered a relationship to help them get where they wanted to” – Molly Tucker

Hiring

Network members see many traits and qualifications as important when hiring new employees. In a survey of personnel across the UCEDD network (see the AUCD Leadership Map), love of learning was seen as most important for successful candidates. UCEDD employees should be excited about new things and ready to learn. Content experts also reported that employees who come in sharing values and motivations with the UCEDD tend to do better.

Important Traits

Roundtable participants shared many traits of the ideal UCEDD employee or leader:

1. Flexible and thus open to their job changing as new circumstances and information arise
2. Entrepreneurial, proactive, and willing to take risks
3. Connected to the disability community
4. Curious and thus looking for new ideas, new possibilities, and new solutions
5. Humble
6. Systems thinkers who see how everything fits together
7. Solutions-focused
8. Comfortable with relationship-building and relationship management
9. Innovative
10. Collaborative and able to work on multiple teams
11. Positive and able to contribute to the rapport and morale of their coworkers

People have different strengths, and it is unlikely to find all of these in one person when hiring. However, many of these strengths can be taught. When hiring, content experts recommended prioritizing the traits and skills seen as most important for the job.

“One of the things that came up very, very frequently is that you can teach skills a lot easier than you can create a sense of values.” – Molly Tucker

Defining and Developing a Leader

Many individuals or centers only think of a few positions as leaders. Those positions include ‘director’ or ‘assistant director.’ It is important to recognize that being a leader does not depend on title. Content experts recommended expanding the definition of a leader to include everyone with leadership traits.

Mentorship is vital for developing individuals into better leaders. It is important to think about what people are exposed to while thinking about their advancement. Exposing young staff to multiple projects and opportunities can help them tap into the network and better consider future jobs and roles.

People who have received meaningful mentorship are interested in learning how to pay that forward and mentor effectively. Above all, roundtable participants shared that it is important to teach mentees to give and receive feedback and use it for personal growth and development.

Below are some tips about leadership development and mentoring that emerged from the roundtable:

1. Make sure professional development is not seen as a punishment for doing something wrong. It should be seen as an opportunity to grow and develop.
2. Instead of thinking about ‘pipelines,’ it can be more productive to think about ‘pathways.’ Pipelines can feel more restricted as simply a path from point A to point B. The term ‘pathways’ suggests multiple ways to move forward. It can help people to see different ways to advance and grow professionally.
3. A cohort model can be used for mentorship. For example, when you have multiple employees start around the same time, they can be an informal cohort to share information about the UCEDD and discuss how to have successful careers in the disability space. This works best when the employees are at similar points in their careers. This can help the center nurture multiple potential future leaders at the same time.
4. Given UCEDDs’ reliance on soft funds, it can be stressful for employees to know their jobs are contingent on getting funding for the center. This is particularly true for early professionals. It is great to support these early professionals and encourage them to also focus on their other work. Encouraging them to not forget about their programmatic, clinical, or other work better positions them to advance in the network.

The most common advice for new and established leaders was to not do things alone. No leader can do everything by themselves. When possible, leaders can have someone alongside them to learn from the leaders’ experiences, successes, and mistakes. That person can better support the center and is better prepared to transition into leadership.

“Sometimes we’re looking for leaders, and they’re right there. Sometimes they’re people we already knew.” – Roundtable Participant

Succession Planning

Succession planning, particularly at the director level, is essential. While much of this section focuses on planning for the next director or assistant/associate director, the content experts urged UCEDDs to remember that since leaders exist at all levels, it is important to think about succession planning at all levels.

To continue the UCEDD’s legacy in the community, it is wise to groom more leaders. One way to do this is to have them sit in on discussions and decisions, even if they’re only going to listen. It is helpful to encourage people to be in spaces with leaders and to listen and speak up. Listening to conversations and watching decision-making helps future leaders develop.

Leadership is a team sport. One goal of a good leader is to know when to hand off the baton.

On a practical consideration, it is a good idea to have a relationship with the university’s human resources office (HR). Given the unique characteristics of a UCEDD, helping HR understand what the UCEDD does and how it works can make the hiring process smoother. The university might have required qualifications for certain positions. Having an ongoing dialogue can help prevent unwelcome surprises. It can also make the hiring process easier. This is particularly helpful when the UCEDD is hiring a new director. Information like this can help HR design the search process and choose the selection committee.

Content experts recommended not letting the university make decisions alone but instead trying to partner with the university. A great relationship with the university HR office can make a big difference. Content experts recommend putting time into those relationships well before it is time to negotiate transitions or hires. These relationships can help UCEDDs know what the university will approve. The UCEDD can then at the existing team and figure out who has the right skills to go forward. This helps the UCEDD and HR be on the same page for these conversations.

Promoting the Assistant or Associate Director to Director

Content experts recommend having a succession plan for the next director rather than leaving the choice to the university. Some say directors should be thinking about the succession plan from their first day on the job.

When the intent is to promote an assistant or associate director to director, it is essential to help them understand what the job entails from day one, and also to confirm university support for this intent. Content experts recommend starting transition planning as early as possible. Carefully consider what

university, community, or state-level meetings these assistant/associate directors should be attending to understand relevant dynamics and relationships.

It is important not to pressure the person being considered to succeed the director. Content experts recommended having conversations with potential successors – listening to what they want and not assuming they want the position. Even if they are interested in the job, it is wise to mentor multiple individuals in case plans change.

Content experts named a few topics for potential future directors to be mentored in:

1. Understanding the role – what is expected? What things will they need to focus on now that they weren't previously focused on?
2. The distinctions between management, supervision, and leadership
3. Finding and securing funding
4. Effective and transparent communication
5. Maintaining staff motivation and morale

Sometimes when a director is getting ready to retire, it turns out that the planned successor does not have all the qualifications required by the university or relevant federal regulations. It is wise to figure out eligibility early and do everything possible to prepare potential successors.

The university is typically the main decision-maker. When a director retires, they give up the power to make decisions. The power goes to the university and ACL. Content experts recommended that the outgoing director try to have a strong say in the replacement. This is when relationships with HR can prove particularly useful.

The other important consideration is to think about the history of your UCEDD and where it is headed. The person might need skills, competencies, and experiences different from the previous leader. Outgoing leaders should consider specific questions:

- What does the organization need that might be the same as or different from what was needed under the previous director?
- What is the growth and development necessary for the next generation of the organization?
- What does the new director need to stand for?

Relevant Resources

- [AUCD Leadership Map](#)
- [Charting Your Course: A Toolkit for New Directors](#)
- [Organizational Charts Library](#)
- [Admin Essentials Tip Sheet: Managing Staff and Volunteers with Guardians](#)

For More Information

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