

# Cultivating an MIS Faculty for a Tenure-Eligible Position at a Small Private College

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## ABSTRACT

One of the key difficulties faced by many small colleges in recruiting for tenure-eligible management information systems (MIS) position is the ability to attract those candidates with doctoral qualification. The competition for those candidates is intense because the demand for them exceeds the supply. There has been a gradual decline in the number of information systems doctoral students since 1993 while the number of tenure-eligible positions has grown dramatically. Besides pursuing an academic career, doctoral students are also enticed by career opportunities in the industry. The purpose of this paper is to share how a small, private liberal arts college supported the recruiting, nurturing, and mentoring of a female MIS faculty member for a tenure-eligible position after the search for a candidate with the required qualifications was unsuccessful. This initiative is in its fourth year of a six-year time frame. The college and the home department supported the faculty member by issuing longer-term contract, allowing course releases, helping her to obtain external funding, scheduling classes to facilitate her travel to attend graduate classes, giving mentoring support, providing funding to conferences, and providing monetary support for textbooks and tuition for her graduate program. Outcomes, perspectives, and lessons learned of various stakeholders are also presented.

**Keywords:** MIS faculty, doctoral qualification, tenure-eligible, small college

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The supply of doctoral candidates from business schools has not met the demand for business faculty members. Many positions in the top business schools have not been filled and thus there is "an all-out

bidding war for a limited supply of freshly minted and soon-to-be Ph.Ds" (Mangan 2001). There is also competition from consulting companies that entice the new Ph.Ds with higher compensation. There was a 19 percent drop in business doctoral students from 1994-2000 and average

salaries jumped 34 percent from 1998-2002. The recently revised accreditation standards approved by members of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) will help schools that are "struggling to recruit enough faculty members with doctorates" because they no longer prescribe how many faculty members with doctorates a business school must have (Mangan 2003). In terms of information systems (IS) doctorates, a recent survey shows that there has been "a gradual decline in the number of new IS doctorates since 1993 while the number of tenure-track faculty positions has grown dramatically" and the data also shows "a large and growing lack of supply to meet current and future demand" (Freeman, Jarvenpaa, Wheeler 2000). If the larger business schools are having difficulty hiring qualified faculty, it is a daunting task for small colleges to recruit new faculty members with doctoral qualification.

### **Luther College**

Luther College is a private liberal arts college with a business department of 13 full-time faculty members responsible for four majors: Accounting, Economics, Management, and MIS. In the mid-1990's, the department had two MIS faculty members with Ph.D degrees from a top-tier business school. The first faculty member took a three-year leave of absence in the mid-1980's to begin her doctoral degree in MIS after teaching at the college for many years. The college funded her study partially for two years. While studying at the business school, she met the second faculty member who was also pursuing a graduate degree there. After her return to Luther College, she encouraged him to give the small college a chance in the interview process in the early 1990's. He interviewed with the college and was attracted by the teaching environment in a small college. In the late 1990's the first faculty member left the college after her husband retired. The search for a new MIS faculty member with doctoral preparation was unsuccessful. One major reason for the unsuccessful search was the competition with larger colleges for a limited pool of candidates. A retired MIS professor, a mentor of the second faculty member, from the same business school was asked to come out of retirement to fill the vacant position temporarily while the

department contemplated how to fill the position. After careful assessment of the situation, the business department decided to cultivate their own Ph.D. candidate for the tenure-eligible position.

## **2. THE CULTIVATING PROCESS**

The business department chair approached the Academic Dean and proposed that the search should include candidates with a minimum of a Master's degree in MIS or a related field and possess industry experience. Besides advertising, he advocated that the search process should involve recruiting others on campus to spread the words to people who are interested in teaching in a small, liberal arts college. As Thomas (2003) advised, it was beneficial to contact those who are known "to prepare the type of individual you are seeking." One candidate, Y, was brought to the search committee's attention this way. She graduated from Luther college with a computer science major, acquired several years of information technology experience with a major company, earned a masters degree in software systems in her spare time, but had no teaching experience. The position offered was non-tenure eligible one with a three-year term. The contract stipulated that the faculty member, Y, must demonstrate effectiveness in the classroom and be enrolled in a doctoral program by the second year of her contract. A second three-year contract would be offered if the teaching and doctoral study were making good progress. It was expected that faculty Y should be in her dissertation phase by the end of her second three-year contract. The position would become tenure eligible upon completion of the doctoral program.

The department understood that it was critical to provide mentoring support for this new faculty member in both teaching and other aspects of a faculty member's responsibilities if she were to succeed. Therefore, mentoring became an important facet of the cultivating process.

### **Mentoring**

A mentor is someone "who inspired you, helped keep you going, and showing you the ropes" (Portner 1998). Sands, Parson, and Duane (1991) describe a mentor as a person who serves as a guide or sponsor, one who

looks after, advises, protects, and takes a special interest in another person's development. What is mentoring? Kronik (1990) states that mentoring goes well beyond teaching and advising; it involves friendship and providing guidance and nurturing in broadly defined professional and personal dimensions. For someone who enters the academic environment for the first time, current research affirms that the need for mentoring is real (Sorcinelli 1994; Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn 2000). Sorcinelli's study (1994) of new faculty members cites inadequate feedback (such as unclear criteria for evaluating teaching) and a lack of collegial relations (such as lack of support from senior faculty colleagues) as two of the key factors contributing to the stress level of new faculty members.

Is there a need to mentor new female IS professionals? This issue was part of a panel discussion, "Retention of Women in the Technological Sciences: Issues Impacting Education and Career Advancement" held at the 1998 Information Systems Education Conference. The panel "intended to clearly identify techniques and methods to improve the retention and advancement of women in the technical sciences and the work place, and to stimulate questions for additional investigations." The importance of retaining female faculty members becomes clear when we think of them as role models and mentors to our female students. In August 1998, the ComputerWorld publication also reported on a panel discussion involving nine female senior IT executives from the San Francisco Bay area. Several of those executives indicated that mentoring played an important role in women's success and that "rather than one or two primary ones, they often had dozens throughout their careers and learned different things from each" (Gingras 1998).

One of faculty Y's mentors, who was also responsible for the search and hiring process, was the second MIS faculty member who had over 14 years of teaching experience. He taught both courses expected of the new faculty member. His goal was to help her learn the duties of a faculty member and to handle the challenges of a new teacher. Nothing formal was arranged between faculty Y and the senior colleague. He simply welcomed her to visit

his office, which was next door to hers, whenever she had a question. And he made it a point to drop by her office to see if she was doing well professionally and socially. During the first year, they had frequent visits every week. Another mentor who came along was from the computer science department. He had been with the college for at least 25 years. He was faculty Y's professor when she was an undergraduate computer science major. Both enjoyed jogging and soon after faculty Y came onboard, they ran once a week together. It was during those jogging sessions that issues pertaining to teaching and other professional topics were discussed. In their research, Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) state that establishing strong relationships based on dialogue and reflection between mentor and the person being mentored is an ongoing process. It is a relationship that should help the person being mentored define his/her own teaching experience and teaching life.

Mentoring is a win-win process. In addition to the benefits gained by the new faculty member, the mentors also gain from the new ideas and questions posed by the new faculty member. In mentoring, the mentors are also learning to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and to challenge their assumptions. "When will I feel I am good enough?" should continue to be a challenge to all new and experienced teachers.

### **Search for graduate programs**

As mentioned earlier, faculty Y's contract stated that she must be enrolled in an accredited doctoral program within the first two years of joining Luther College. The department played an active role in helping her in the search process. Faculty Y started researching the doctoral programs within driving distance of Luther College. One of the factors was affordability and so in-state programs were more feasible. Another factor was the flexibility of the program in accommodating students who have full-time employment. Having evening and weekend classes would accommodate faculty Y's teaching and other professional obligations.

Her search indicated that most doctoral programs did not support working professionals; several MIS programs

required at least two, if not three to four years as a full-time student. The future direction of graduates of some doctoral programs could also be an issue as she found out during a visit to one campus. The director of that program indicated that their graduates moved on to research institutions; faculty Y's intention to continue at Luther College after graduation from their program was not viewed positively. As emphasized by Thomas (2003), "During the graduate program of study, students should consider the type of institution at which they want to work ...."

After much researching, soul-searching, and visiting with her mentors and a few other colleagues, faculty Y narrowed the choice to a doctoral program in higher education with an emphasis in administration. Y reasoned that she had a strong technical foundation from her industry experience, her undergraduate studies, and her graduate educational preparations. It was her desire to continue to learn and grow in the information technology field that drew her back to the educational arena. Her teaching position challenged her to maintain a broad knowledge base in MIS, and she thrived on being challenged to keep up with the rate of change within the field. However, doctoral work in MIS was not the only way for her to continue learning in MIS; she felt she could utilize the solid foundation she already possessed and build on that with continued professional work experiences and research in areas that would support her teaching.

In making her decision, faculty Y was also very conscious that a commitment to a tenured position at Luther College could be a career of service covering more than 30 years. She envisioned herself in long-term service to the college, but not solely as an MIS educator. There would be potential roles in committee membership, department leadership, and administration, where she wanted to be capable of serving the college as needed. She believed that the higher education doctoral program would help her understand those potential roles and responsibilities in a college system and would help to prepare her for the decision-making that pertained to those roles. In the liberal arts tradition, she was seeking the opportunity to prepare herself for the inevitable changes within her career. She

was confident that complementing her background in information technology with formal coursework and research in higher education would provide her a broader foundation. She submitted her proposal to the Dean in spring 2000, the end of her first year, and the college accepted her proposal to pursue a doctoral program in higher education.

It is important for a faculty member to find a flexible program and the college has to be supportive in accepting a doctoral field that will better the faculty and the college in the long term. Thus far, the higher education program with an emphasis in administration has been a fitting complement to her technical background. Her coursework has focused on general management and organizational theory, policy development, and law. While the context of her studies is higher education, much of the content has been applicable to a general business setting and thus has enabled her to more effectively address the non-technical issues of system development and application in her classes and to identify stronger connections with other department majors. Faculty Y believes this approach best fits her position of teaching MIS as a pre-professional program within a liberal arts environment.

#### **Supporting graduate studies**

After faculty Y enrolled in the doctoral program, the department head facilitated her pursuit by reducing her teaching duties when appropriate, scheduling classes to facilitate her travel to attend classes, providing funding to conferences, helping her to obtain external scholarships, and providing monetary support for her textbooks and tuition.

Combining and balancing teaching and graduate study was a challenging act. Hence in her first three years of teaching, faculty Y was assigned two preparations each semester, with one of the preparations for a course taught in both fall and spring semester. For a new faculty member with no teaching experience, this load was more manageable. Careful attention was also paid to scheduling her classes to accommodate travel and study obligations. For example, a flexible class schedule allowed her to make the two-and-half-hour drive to attend her Friday class.

In terms of release time and teaching load, a course reduction was proposed to the Dean last academic year when faculty Y was trying to balance the various demands on her time. The college accepted it. She was also released from teaching classes over two January terms to enable her to have blocks of time to work on her graduate program commitments. These reductions were not initially planned, but came about as a result of staffing fluctuations, and proved to be useful for faculty Y in her work and study. In the fall 2003 term, she teaches only an introduction-level MIS class to enable her to complete her course work and prepare for her comprehensive examination. She will also have no advising, committee, or senior research paper supervision responsibilities. The arrangement for Fall 2003 is considered an unpaid leave; this leave provision was specified in the initial contract and faculty Y could take it when needed. It was designed to be a leave of up to a year, but she requested only one semester due to the financial implications of an unpaid leave. Faculty Y and the department agreed that filling a one semester leave would be difficult, so it was agreed that she would teach one course. With adjustments in the schedule, no additional staff was needed.

In an effort to help defray costs, the department recommended faculty Y for several external scholarships whenever opportunities arose every year. The department took the lead in identifying appropriate scholarships to pursue and supported her applications with strong recommendation letters. She was successful in those applications. The department also funded her tuition, textbooks, and other resource materials (photocopies, manuscripts, and so on) from the department budget.

The department head also recognized that it was important for faculty Y to meet colleagues from other MIS programs and to continue to nurture her connections in the industry. Therefore, the department supported her professional travel from the department budget above what was normally allocated to any faculty by the college. The college and department provided funding for her to attend ISECON and other professional conferences. She also coauthored a paper presented in

ISECON 2000 on mentoring first-year faculty member and contributed significantly to this paper. Two summers ago, she was hired by IBM to be on a project team in North Carolina; that experience enabled her to acquire up-to-date skills and information and provided fresh materials that she used in her subsequent MIS classes.

Finally, faculty Y's department head also devoted time to mentor her, including keeping her motivated as well as helping her to continue to develop classroom skills.

### 3. ASSESSMENT

After four years of this initiative, with a six-year time frame, faculty Y provided the following observations:

#### Pros:

- She found graduate coursework much more meaningful while she was teaching because she could find opportunities to incorporate her new knowledge and skills into her teaching and thus put it to use immediately.
- She appreciated the chance to get teaching experience while she was working on her degree.
- She has been extremely well supported by the college and department in terms of teaching schedule and supplements for financing. The department has been very supportive in other ways both professionally and personally.

#### Cons:

- Being a full-time student again for an extended period of time while holding down a teaching position is challenging. The sheer amount of time and energy it has taken to balance these two commitments has gradually eroded her energy level and has at times led her to question such a career choice. In addition, trying to balance being a teacher and a student has meant that sacrifices have had to be made at times both in the quality of her teaching and the quality of her work as a graduate student. While she has been able to maintain adequate performance in both, it is personally dissatisfying not to do either as well as she can.
- Another difficult issue is her feeling of being disconnected from fellow

- classmates and her teachers. Particularly at the later stages of her program, it can be helpful to have more socialization within the graduate school community and she is able to maintain little if any.
- The commute to and from the graduate school every week is challenging given that each way is drive of over two hours. This arrangement would work better in a metropolitan area where the college and the graduate school are closer.
  - The reality of taking an unpaid leave may not be possible for a primary wage earner. Leave can also be problematic if one has to sustain separate residences in where the college and the graduate school are located.

The department was entering a new territory when it embarked on this initiative of cultivating its own candidate. How has the arrangement affected the department so far?

Pros:

- This arrangement provides stability in the MIS program because the department invests in the development of a colleague for the long term. Conducting searches that yielded no results was wasting precious resources that could be put to better use.
- It gives the department an opportunity to see how the faculty member fits in the teaching environment and for the faculty to see if academia is where she wants to be. Both sides benefit because neither is constrained by a long-term commitment given the three-year term arrangement. Unless the faculty decides to pursue a doctoral degree, nothing needs to be pursued further after the initial three-year contract. If the faculty enrolls in the graduate program but does not perform well as a teacher over time, the college can terminate the relationship after the three-year term.
- Faculty Y has served as a role model to students by demonstrating life-long learning and her commitment to bringing new ideas from her graduate studies into the classroom.
- The arrangement with faculty Y brought her closer to a few colleagues who supported her during trying times and went to the Dean on her behalf to

negotiate release time and other resources for her.

Cons:

- There is less contact with department colleagues (particularly the MIS colleague) because of faculty Y's travel and class schedule. She had to miss some weekly department meetings where important issues were discussed and decisions made.
- An uncertain issue is what has been the effect on the MIS program and the department by having someone going to school and teaching at the same time? Would the department recommend such a model for filling other positions?

Overall, the lessons learned and issues to ponder from this initiative are as follows:

- There needs to be a well-conceived plan before embarking on this type of arrangement. What are the college's goals? The faculty member's goals? Is the arrangement voluntary or not?
- The faculty member must be fully committed to the program whether it arises from a voluntary or non-voluntary arrangement. If the goals are not clearly stated and embraced, the faculty member will question the value of the arrangement.
- If this is a high priority plan for the college it must identify financial resources to support the effort. This can include not only department or dean's office funding, but also donor gifts coordinated through the development office.
- The department head must work carefully to arrange teaching assignments that accommodate travel schedules and other graduate program requirements.
- Where possible, reduced teaching and advising loads should be used.
- Where possible, pre-tenure academic leaves should be considered to help the faculty member to either relocate to the graduate school campus or to focus 100 percent of his/her efforts on the graduate program at the college.
- The college needs to define the scholarship expectations of a doctoral candidate during the time he/she is completing the program.

- The department colleagues and department head must support and mentor the faculty member.
- There has to be a strong level of commitment on the part of both the college in supporting the faculty and the faculty member in wanting to teach specifically at that college.
- It can be difficult to justify the financial and personal cost of a doctoral education for an MIS faculty member in a small college when industry work can be much more lucrative and has no doctoral requirement.
- Even though having a doctoral degree can open doors to much more lucrative positions within academia, the greatest cost of a doctoral education is that in the long-term it is not likely to have a high financial payoff professionally in a small college.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

New faculty members are expected to "unravel the organizational structures and values, expectations for performance and advancement, and the history and traditions of their new campus setting.... The ability of new faculty to navigate these early years is critical to their success in and satisfaction with an academic career" (Sorcinelli, 1994). Therefore, the need to mentor new faculty is crucial to their short-term and long-term success. It is the college's responsibility to help new faculty members to establish a firm foundation for future growth and development.

In helping faculty Y to acquire an appropriate doctoral education, the college is not only helping a faculty member in his/her career development, it also addresses the challenge of competing with other colleges to fill certain positions with qualified faculty candidates. The faculty member, college, and department also benefit from a wider range of professional contacts that develops as a result. Furthermore, a doctoral program prepares the faculty member to develop a life-long habit of scholarship. Nurturing new faculty members will add to the strength and viability of the department and college

There are challenges faced by all parties in supporting a faculty to pursue a doctoral

degree. First, it can be challenging to find funds (operating budgets) to support this type of initiative. Second, it can be difficult to find graduate programs that will support a faculty member from a small school who intends to return to a small college environment upon graduation. Third, the arrangement requires a major commitment of time and travel on the faculty member's part. Fourth, it is a tough balancing act for the faculty member to be involved in a doctoral program and teach a full-time load, particularly at a college that is focused on high student contact including supervising research papers, advising, recruiting, and mentoring. Fifth, it is a fact that greater job opportunities exist for faculty with a terminal degree; there is always a concern on the part of the college that the faculty member may find more lucrative offers awaiting after completing his/her doctoral program. Sixth, it is challenging for the faculty member to teach and fulfill his/her doctoral commitments while trying to complete appropriate scholarship that is recognized by the college for tenure and/or promotion consideration.

How does the department feel about the progress of cultivating its own tenure-eligible faculty member thus far? Overall, the support provided to faculty Y has enabled her to continue to fulfill her teaching assignments and doctoral requirements. Even though the department could not foresee the scope of the resource commitment fully at the beginning, it was able to make appropriate adjustments to continue to support faculty Y the best way possible. It definitely has been an eye-opening experience. Although the process is not yet complete, there is optimism that a favorable conclusion is attainable in the near future. Without a doubt, the pressure felt by faculty Y in trying to be teacher and a graduate student at the same time cannot be ignored. It will be gratifying if this challenging experience can enable other departments that wish to explore this means of filling faculty positions to develop an even more supportive and nurturing environment to the faculty candidates involved.

Faculty Y is currently preparing for her comprehensive exam and the start of her dissertation phase. What is her assessment at this stage of her journey? The past four

years had been challenging ones for her. Although the college and department have been very supportive of her graduate study, the pressure of balancing her teaching assignments and doctoral requirements has taken a toll on her and her family. As she noted, "If I could start over again, I am not sure I would make the same choices. I can see the positives, but still being in the middle of it, it is difficult to know whether in sum it was worth it. I assume it will be, but right now the toll is accumulating faster than the full payoff, so it is difficult to see."

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