

2018 WTS-LA Mentorship Program: Helping transportation professionals advance to every level...

Abraham Lincoln is believed to have said, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” Though simple in concept, the 16th president’s words—whether apocryphal or not—are actually quite profound. But the ever-present underlying question is: how? That’s a question that the WTS-LA Mentorship Program answered in 2018. A year-long, comprehensive career-guidance effort complete with workshops, tours, events, and even a newsletter, the WTS-LA Mentorship Program helps WTS-LA members advance in their careers through professional development and by pairing established industry mentors with rising transportation protégées. By all accounts, this year WTS-LA Mentorship chair and Port of Los Angeles (POLA) civil engineer Mahsa Hematabadi Pan, PE, and her committee did exactly that. But in 2018, the program culminated with an especially unique event.



Amanda Heinke (former WTS-LA president), Katie Lemmon (Metro transportation planning manager), Tesse Rasmussen (InfraStrategies Principal), Photos by Eric Shen, 2018

“Our final program was held in November,” explains Ms. Pan. “Traditionally, the final event was a graduation that allowed our participants to network and catch up, while we distributed completion certificates. But this year, one of the mentor-mentee pairs contacted me and asked if we could host a mid-career professional panel. And I thought that was a great idea as part of our closing event.”

So, on November 1st, Ms. Pan and her team conducted a panel featuring mid-career professionals like Fehr & Peers senior transportation planner and former WTS-LA president Amanda Heinke, Metro transportation planning manager Katie Lemmon, and InfraStrategies principal Tesse Rasmussen. And as requested, they discussed everything from career transitions (e.g., moving from the public to the private sectors and vice versa) to going through different life events (e.g., getting married and having children) to transitioning to different roles within the same company. To some, this program may sound very familiar—there was a very similar program featuring WTS-LA Directors-At-Large only months earlier. But Ms. Pan points out a very important difference that made this program uniquely effective for her group.



“A few months ago, we hosted a Directors-At-Large panel that was very successful in imparting valuable career advice. But much of that advice was aimed at professionals who had already advanced in their careers to some degree. Entry-level participants felt a slight disconnect though. They wanted bridging material. They wanted to know how to get to the mid-career level. So, the thought process behind this panel was that entry-level people might better relate to mid-career professionals rather than industry leaders.

“So the panel aimed to teach entry-level professionals how to reach the mid-career point successfully. The protégées in the Mentorship Program had very specific ideas about who they wanted to invite and the topics they wanted to cover. In truth, I felt like the questions didn’t differ that much from the original



panel, but the perspective was very different. The wisdom this panel provided was from people that have been in the industry for 5-to-10 years, versus people that have been in the profession for 30 years or more. And that proved pretty powerful.” But that kind of responsiveness speaks to how Ms. Pan and her committee have handled the entire program this year. A number of participants have come forward to express their excitement and satisfaction with both the overall program and the specific pairing of mentors and protégées.

hope that I was helpful in relating my experience as a woman who succeeded in engineering, still very much a man’s profession. I also learned so much through my participation. From the regular group meetings to one-on-one meetings to articles and roundtables and books—I believe that the Mentorship Program was an invaluable tool for my own development. And I’m grateful for the opportunity to participate. The program also provided an excellent networking opportunity with high-ranking

professionals, both men and women, in a supportive and friendly environment. In truth, there’s no other program quite like this one.” Metro senior manager in Transit-Oriented Communities Georgia Sheridan, the woman Mercedes mentored, agrees.



“I highly recommend the WTS-LA Mentorship Program to WTS members, no matter what stage of their career they’re in. There’s never a bad time to meet someone new and gain a fresh perspective. For me, the program is what inspired me to join the chapter, something I’d been considering for several years. I prefer more intimate settings to large networking events, so the mentor format was ideal for me, as I got to know other members in a more comfortable setting.

“I also really enjoyed meeting with Mercedes over the past year and having someone outside of work to discuss professional challenges with and brainstorm solutions. It was so inspiring to be matched with a woman CEO and to hear her story! I loved getting to talk with her about her experiences living and working in Spain and how she views American culture. I really look forward to keeping in touch with her.”



Evidently, every mentor-protégée pairing had similarly positive experiences. Kita Pharma Transportation and Commuter Services associate director Tamar Fuhrer also enjoyed her experience as a mentor.

“Last year I was a protégée in the Mid-Career Leadership Program and I gained a lot from both the program and the complementary programs at WTS-LA. It was timely, as I was reflecting on my career experience and future goals and it really helped me. So, when the opportunity arose to participate as a mentor in this year’s program, I jumped at the chance. “Mentoring is a two-way street. Though I was a mentor, I learned so much about the industry and

myself through my protégée. I was fortunate to pair with Hannah Brunelle, an assistant planner at SCAG. And I offered her candid guidance in how to progress in both the public and private sectors. I have a good handle on the transportation network and initiatives here, and how different agencies mesh with one



another. So, I could provide a sounding board on how to approach different opportunities and career trajectories. And because my peer group is all over the industry (public, private, self-employed, non-profit, etc.), I connected her to others in the industry who she could learn from. Mahsa and her committee did a great job, especially in working with such a diverse group of mentor-protégée pairs.”

Ms. Brunelle shares Ms. Fuhrer’s appraisal of the experience.

“As a young professional, the program offered me the opportunity to connect with experienced professionals and gain unique insight into the

transportation field. Meeting with my mentor and building a relationship with her provided great opportunity to ask questions, engage in conversation, and discuss ideas in a more informal setting that does not typically present itself in the everyday job environment. This type of relationship is invaluable for mentees, as we continue to build careers and advance in the field.

“My mentor, Tamar Fuhrer, and I worked together to organize the panel on mid-career professionals in order to add that perspective and learn about experiences from different career phases. The mid-career panel was especially applicable to the younger professionals, as many of the experiences and pieces of advice are relevant for application in the next five-to-eight years. So, it helped bridge the gap between where the younger professionals are in relation to the more established professionals.”



Mentorship Committee member, WTS-LA Director-At-Large, and Metrolink deputy CEO Elissa Konove served on the Mentorship Committee and helped craft its programs. She, too, found great value in participation.

“The Mentorship Committee sponsored several events this year to support career development. One of the most notable aspects of the program, though, was the candid, even personal, nature of the advice from mentors and panelists. The open discussions about work-life balance were particularly informative. And they provided a comfortable forum for mentees and mentors to speak freely about their experiences. The

Committee helped create a supportive network of professionals and encouraged relationships that will continue well beyond this year’s program.”

AECOM transportation planner and Mentorship Committee member Lynn Feng also participated as a mentee. For her, creating the programs and participating in them provided invaluable lessons.

“It’s a great team and I learned a lot from all of the committee members,” explains Ms. Feng. “This year’s program was based on the lessons learned from previous years and from other mentorship programs. I also participated as a mentee; my mentor was Meghna Khanna from Metro. We met once or twice every month and she’s been a great mentor! She not only provided professional suggestions on how to improve work efficiency and work-life balance, but she also gave me a lot of great advice on short and long-term career development planning. She is very much my role model and I’m planning on staying in touch with

her even after the program has ended.” Feng’s mentor, Metro senior director for Countrywide Planning and Development Meghna Khanna, shares her mentee’s assessment.



“The Committee did a wonderful job pairing entry-to-mid-level professionals with more seasoned industry leaders. Through this program, I developed some real long-term relationships, not only with my protégée—who was wonderful—but also with the other mentors. I view mentorship as a real responsibility, one that I owe to the industry and community of transportation professionals that have served me incredibly well for the last 15+ years. In addition, the mentees are wonderfully inspiring. I gain a lot of energy from these young professionals and I especially like working with them on ideas and then watching them take those ideas in new directions.”

Nelson/Nygaard associate Jewel DeGuzman served on this year’s Mentorship Committee. But a few years ago, she also participated in the Mentorship Program as a mentee. So, she used her experience from both sides of the table to inform her work on the committee.

“It was great being in the program, especially as a graduate student. I don’t think I could have gotten exposure and wisdom from transportation professionals in the field in any other way at that time. And I met with my mentor, Mahsa Pan, every few months to discuss professional goals, roadblocks, general advice, etc. I really appreciated the program’s

structure wherein your conversations were guided, but you also had great room for flexibility. It was wonderful.

“Now that I’m a working professional, I could approach my work on the Committee from a different perspective. So, it was a really rewarding experience. I had the opportunity to network with mentors and mentees and to participate in all of the activities. And I was able to take away so many lessons on everything from negotiations to career advancement from both the Directors-At-Large and the Mid-Career panels. I felt like we really struck a good balance that facilitated communication and support for everyone who participated in the program and the events.” For Ms. Pan and the Mentorship Committee, these assessments are most gratifying. But they also view them as instructive. For them, feedback is



vital. “Generally, when I talk to people at the events, they say the events have been productive and helpful,” adds Ms. Pan. “And after a survey and careful matching, both the mentors and the mentees expressed that they were happy with the pairings. Obviously, that’s very important, as we want this to be productive for both parties. But we’re also going to take that feedback and other feedback we’ve received and start working on next year’s program.

“We want to start the program early in the year and go through to the end of the year. For example, this year we started in March and we ended in November. And we really want to encourage people to participate in the program. You don’t really have to do any preparation. Whatever is going on in your life and your career is your syllabus, but if you’re going to join the program it would be worth the time to figure out some goals before you start. Most importantly, get involved. You definitely get out of the

program what you put into it. So, if there are particular things you want to get out of the program, you should prepare and work towards those goals.”

Abraham Lincoln is rumored to have said, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” Whether or not Lincoln actually said it is unimportant. It truly is the thought that counts. And Mahsa Pan and the Mentorship Committee have taken those words as a challenge to provide WTS-LA members with the perfect vehicle to help them become “good ones” at whatever they pursue in the transportation industry.