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Back in Class

New Tower Fellows Program offers seasoned professionals a school year to study anything

By Mary Ann Roser

Monica Samuels has practiced law, staffed a presidential campaign, and co-authored *Comeback Moms*, a book about how to successfully re-enter the workforce after taking a break to raise children. Last year, while planning her own comeback, she realized she needed a boost before writing her own next chapter.

Paul Kinscherff, dual MBA and M. Public Affairs '85, retired in August 2017 after a long career in senior management and financial leadership jobs at the Boeing Co. He knew he wanted his next act to include guest lecturing at UT and mentoring students, but, at 60, he also was hungry to feed his own brain.

Samuels, Kinscherff, and 11 others have found a home for their inquisitive minds and a place to launch a journey of self-discovery: the UT Tower Fellows Program. In its inaugural year, the UT program is one of only a handful in the country that offer adult professionals the opportunity to spend a school year on campus as full-time students exploring any combination of subjects they want. Demand is growing for educational experiences that give accomplished adults a place to regroup and learn, says Tower Fellows Admissions Director Sally Brinker. Harvard, Stanford, Minnesota, and Notre Dame are among the other universities that offer similar programs.

The Tower Fellows “are all pivoting for some reason,” Brinker says. They range in age and background, from a foundation co-director and mother of three in her 40s to prominent lawyer Sam Perry, an 84-year-old retiree whose late wife, Shirley Bird Perry, was a beloved UT executive for decades.

UT gives the fellows wide latitude for exploring, Brinker says. “We’re from Texas. We let you go on your own journey here. The campus is your oyster.”

A big, diverse school like UT is an ideal venue, says Gaylen Paulson, associate dean and director of McCombs Executive Education, which oversees the Tower Fellows Program. UT offers a vast smorgasbord of courses and resources open to the fellows.

It's about lifelong learning, Paulson says. "This is taking it to a whole new demographic."

The fellows, who may or may not have a prior connection to UT, can audit up to four classes of their choice each semester. They find themselves making new friends and sitting beside millennials in courses that use technologies that didn't exist when they were in school.

Each Wednesday, the fellows meet for luncheons that feature speakers, many of them nationally known industry leaders. On Thursdays, the fellows gather in the evening for an intimate session at which each participant shares his or her personal story. This part of the program creates deep bonds among the participants, says Chantal Delys, McCombs assistant dean and Tower Fellows director of programming. "It's a powerful experience when you meet with such a small group several times a week and really open up with each other about your lives."

The fellows also take group "field trips" to campus landmarks like the Blanton Museum and even UT's football field where they meet and interact with high-level school officials. "I love the 'behind the scenes' element, where the fellows gain access to experiences and people that are very hard to come by," Paulson says.

An added perk is the offer of a wellness evaluation, in conjunction with UT's Dell Medical School, along with help devising a plan to reach personal health goals.

Program staff work with each fellow to make sure their course selection is tailored to fit their interests and abilities.

"This is a very immersive, high-touch program," Brinker says, noting the \$60,000 tuition is similar to a year's cost in a professional degree program at UT.

"We can get you connected with some of the best and brightest minds on campus. You are, without a doubt, going to go on a personal journey," says Isabella Cunningham, Tower Fellows faculty director.

Retired Boeing executive Paul Kinscherff, dual MBA and M. Public Affairs '85, is one of 13 participants in the first cohort of the new UT Tower Fellows program, created and managed by McCombs Executive Education. He is taking courses ranging from astronomy to the Business of Hollywood.

The Comeback Moms

For Samuels, a 1987 graduate of UT's School of Law, the program has been the spark she needed.

Samuels was practicing immigration and environmental law when she was elected national chair of the Young Republican National Federation in the late 1990s. In 2000, she worked in Austin on George W. Bush's presidential campaign, and after he won, was offered a job in his administration.

At the time, Samuels was pregnant with her second child, and knew she'd rarely be home. She turned it down.

"People were shocked," she recalled. "They said, 'Are you crazy?'"

Then she co-wrote *Comeback Moms*, which Random House published in 2006, leading to numerous media appearances.

Next, Samuels started working on another book idea, then switched gears to work on a podcast with her *Comeback Moms* co-author for women in transition — women like her. The podcast is about to launch, but she realized her book idea was languishing.

The Tower Fellows Program offered a path forward, she says. This semester she's doing independent study with UT's Michener Center for Writers, while taking a class on U.S. presidents taught by author H.W. Brands and a crisis management course taught by Admiral Bobby Ray Inman. "I feel I'll get the most out of it this semester, especially working with the Michener Center," she says. "That's what I'd like to be doing — writing full-time."

Another fellow, Sandy Seaman, was a lawyer with the UT System's asset management office, overseeing endowments and estates for all 14 UT campuses, when she decided to stay home with her young twin daughters, now grown.

Seaman began thinking about next steps when Brinker emailed, telling her about the Tower Fellows. Seaman was intrigued. She signed up and is studying entrepreneurship, which she called "invigorating and highly challenging." Maybe she will end the program with clarity on a new career, but maybe not, she says. She's not worried because she loves the immersion in a field of study that's new to her.

"I can't even tell you how great the classes are," Seaman says. "It's probably the best investment in me that I've ever made. This program has been absolutely worth every minute and every dollar of it."

Mentors and Advisers

The program came together quickly, says Tower Fellows mentor Chris Harte, MBA '75. "It was incredible," says Harte, who has been a publisher at four newspapers, a director at various companies, a private equity investor, and an adviser to several other UT programs, in addition to working on land conservation in Spicewood and a third-party political effort, the Serve America Movement.

Harte and Amon Burton, an attorney and adjunct professor in the Plan II Honors program, were in on the early discussions with UT about creating Tower Fellows two years ago. They had studied in Stanford's Distinguished Careers Institute, a model for UT's program, and wanted to help UT get started. Both are mentors in the program.

Burton was winding down his law practice when he went to Stanford as a way to transition to his next phase. While there, he became fascinated by climate change and "realized it was one of the major issues of our time," as well as deeply complicated and intellectually stimulating. Burton took six climate-related courses at Stanford, and as a Tower Fellow, he is studying oceanography this semester. He's also begun teaching a Plan II seminar on the law and ethics of climate change — exactly what he wanted to be doing when he left Stanford.

To get the most out of a program like this, participants need to clear the decks and immerse themselves in it, says Harte, 71. He attends most of the lunches, including a recent one featuring Bill Cunningham, UT's James L. Bayless Chair for Free Enterprise, former chancellor of the UT System, former president of UT Austin, and former dean of the business school. Cunningham is the faculty adviser to Tower Fellow Glenn Lowenstein, who has been "really impressed at the really high-level UT plays at."

Lowenstein was attracted to the program as a way to expand his horizons after his real estate investment firm was sold a year and a half ago. At 59, he knows "there's definitely another chapter."

"Last semester, I took a new media class and a venture capital class," he says. "Both were like candy. It was learning about the world, and it was stretching my mind."

Being a fellow has connected him to what he finds exciting and what he loves, he says. "It's an experiment. I knew I wanted to do this but I didn't know how cool it would be."

And it doesn't hurt to have Cunningham as an adviser, he adds, someone who is "friends with everyone" and knows the university so well.

Sandy Seaman, the former director of the Office of Estates and Trusts for UT System, is studying entrepreneurship.

“An epiphany”

After he retired from Boeing, Paul Kinscherff moved to Austin and got heavily involved with the McCombs School of Business and the LBJ School of Public Affairs as an executive-in-residence. When the Tower Fellows Program launched, he leapt at the chance to learn new things.

In the first semester, he took an astronomy course and the Business of Hollywood, a popular choice among the fellows.

“The whole thing is an epiphany,” he says, including an awareness of what it’s like to be different than everyone else. “You’re the only one in the class who looks like you,” he says.

Having his wife, Ada, in the program is fun, especially making new friends together, often with the other fellows, says Kinscherff, who is taking corporate governance and venture capital courses this semester. He did not sign up for courses with a career goal in mind, but “I think the opportunity for continuous learning is a personal and social good,” he says. He sees it as a chance to become a more informed citizen and a better person.

Austin Ligon, BA ’73, MA ’78, an angel investor who co-founded CarMax Inc. and was CEO until he left in 2006, retired at 55. He traveled extensively with his three children and serves on other corporate boards.

As a fellow, he is delighting in courses unrelated to his career, including art history, Spanish, the history of mariachi music, and creative writing.

He’s also enjoying being around younger students. “I think millennials are an improved version of young people in the ’60s era,” says Ligon, 68. “They’re interested in what I’ve done, and I’m interested in what choices they are making.”

He looked into the Stanford program but is glad he chose UT. “A big state university covers the waterfront like no one else,” he says. Kinscherff, who expects to continue taking classes after the program ends, says it has had an immediate impact on him. “Just coming into the program changes you ... and it’s a heck of a lot of fun,” he says.

Lowenstein agrees: “It made me 25 years old again!”