Viewpoint

From the beginning – a commitment to bringing business women together

Editor’s Note: Karen Loch was one of the founding creators of the Women’s Leadership Forum. Here she reflects on the impetus for creating the event and how it has evolved in the last 20 years.

In the fall of 1997, Krista Tillman, a Georgia State alumna who was a senior executive at BellSouth at the time, asked Sid Harris, the then dean of the Robinson College of Business, about creating a women’s initiative. They discussed mentor programs and bringing together our women business students and the business community. Sid came to me, as I had been running a mentor program since 1992, and asked if I would help. The women’s forum was born. We matched students with mentors and offered our first forum in the ballroom of the Student Center in spring 1998. Over 200 women business leaders and students attended.

Collectively, our focus was to connect women students with women leaders in the business community by creating a mentoring role and providing an opportunity for the transfer of professional knowledge and experiences. We believed the forum would help our students enter into and thrive in business. The Robinson College was taking a lead in establishing creative, powerful initiatives on behalf of our women students and establishing connections to the business community.

In 1999, when I became director of the Institute of International Business, Beverly Langford of Robinson’s Business Communication program took over the forum. Beverly really grew the program, taking it from a luncheon to an almost full-day event, including keynotes and breakouts. For several years, the forum also continued to include mentor matches. Beverly can be credited for really establishing the event as a women’s program in the community.

Some years later, Atlanta Business Chronicle began partnering with us on the event. Eventually, we would pass the baton, so to speak, to them and they would become the organizers of the event. The forum shifted from being a student/women leader event to a professional development opportunity for established women in the workforce seeking to accelerate their careers. Students continue to be involved as volunteers at the event, a duty which comes with free admission to the activities.

Although Robinson no longer leads the event, the forum continues to provide students who attend with good opportunities to meet strong women role models across industries and functional roles. In addition, Robinson benefits from the connections in the business community, which can lead to greater classroom resources, internships and job leads, as well as potential funds for scholarships and other efforts, all creating value for students.

While I can’t look in my crystal ball and tell you what’s next for the Women’s Leadership Forum, I’m confident it will continue to provide an opportunity for women to grow.