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## ESTABLISHING

**a network of partnerships for a community that ranges far beyond the borders of the campus**



Usha Balakrishnan, director of the Office of Corporate Partnerships, is seeking alliances in the business world and in the nonprofit sector.

# *The* Work of a Matchmaker

## *Collaborations Build Economic and Social Capital*

When she talks about her position at The University of Iowa, the director of the Office of Corporate Partnerships exudes the boundless enthusiasm of someone who delights in bringing two unlikely individuals together in an attempt to promote a marriage.

Matchmaking is old hat for Usha Balakrishnan. As a graduate fresh from The University of Iowa's M.B.A. program, she worked in the late 1980s as a business consultant to start-up companies. As associate director of the University of Iowa Research Foundation from 1991 to 1998, she managed University patents and negotiated license agreements.

These days, forming partnerships has become more vital than ever before, according to Balakrishnan.

"Alliances with business and industry—especially during the present era of rapid technological achievements—could have great economic and social impact for the University and for Iowa, and also for every member of the collective citizenry of the world."

That's the far-reaching assertion—and deliberate call to action—Balakrishnan expressed two years ago when she took over the job of director of the Office of Corporate Partnerships.

Her background gave her the confidence to seek new alliances in the nonprofit sector, as she did when she met with UI professor of law Willard "Sandy" Boyd, the driving force behind the creation of the Iowa Nonprofit Resource Center. Now almost two years old, the Iowa law school-based center nurtures existing nonprofits by providing education and technical expertise.

"Usha has an eye for connections," says Boyd, who has been teaching courses on nonprofit issues since 1996. "While most of us look straight ahead, she has the peripheral vision needed to see collaborative opportunities combining University talent with business and community needs. She understands that building Iowa's economic and social capital redounds to the long-term benefit of both the state and the University."

"You can accomplish fascinating results by bringing the right people together," says Balakrishnan, who also serves on the Iowa Economic Development Board. "But you also have to know when to get out of the way and let the sparks fly. It's like an arranged marriage—the matchmaker can bring a couple together, but she'd better not go along on the honeymoon!"



High school students explore rocket science on a campus famous for its space research.

A case in point: shortly after she took over as director, Balakrishnan invited faculty from several colleges at the University and members of Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) to meet with community developers from Alcoa and administrators from the Quad Cities public schools in order to discuss SECME—a national

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program aimed at encouraging minority high school students, particularly females, to pursue careers in math, science, and engineering, through collaboration among public schools, higher education, and the private sector.

“Once we were all in a room together, ideas started flowing,” says Gary Fischer, professor of mechanical and industrial engineering. “We decided we had to reach out and get kids earlier, in their first year of high school, or even middle school. That’s when we [in the College of Engineering] came up with our own program, called ACE—Ambassadors Connecting with Engineering.”

The college received a \$26,000 grant from Alcoa for the ACE program and secured the “go ahead” nod from Quad Cities’ public school administrators. Since July 2001, the program—run jointly by faculty from the Colleges of Engineering and Education—has treated minority schoolchildren to a crash course on college life and an introduction to fields of study as diverse as rocket science, water treatment, and metallurgy. The program blends college-level lectures,

laboratory work, computer experience, field trips, and other activities on the University campus.

Fischer—also director of the College of Engineering’s Student Development Center—knows that reaching out and finding these students long has been a priority for faculty in many departments across campus. But at least an indirect nod can go to the Office of Corporate Partnerships, he notes, citing Balakrishnan’s early meeting with Alcoa and SECME representatives, some of the same people who eventually would become the college’s partners in ACE.

“The ACE program is a product of the work of our two colleges—engineering and education—and the Opportunity at Iowa program,” Fischer says. “But, with other agencies, like Usha’s office, working in the same spirit of things, innovative ideas seem to have an easier time flourishing.”

Through a joint effort among private business and the Colleges of Education and Engineering, the University encourages Iowa schoolchildren to consider careers in science.

