**Roger W. Jones Award**

**Thomas L. Mesenbourg, Jr.**

Thomas L. Mesenbourg Jr. has demonstrated an exemplary commitment to staff development and building the next generation of government leaders. Over his distinguished career, he has focused time, attention, and organizational resources on career development, learning through doing, and implementing mechanisms that provide the opportunity for staff to learn new skills, broaden their experience base, and contribute to the organization.

In the early 1980s, Mesenbourg experienced the Grid Management, a week-long management training program and found that it provided him with useful insights into his management style and the Census Bureau’s organizational culture. As an assistant division chief, Mesenbourg and his division chief, Dr. Gaylord Worden went through the GRID instructor program and became certified instructors. They ran more than ten of these week long sessions over the course of four to five years, training over several hundred Census Bureau managers, many of whom later became Division Chiefs and, in several instances, even Associate Directors.

The Census Bureau, like many large organizations, faces a number of challenges. One of the biggest challenges is that the program areas – the Economic, Demographic, and the Decennial Census program directorates—as well as the support directorates such as Information Technology and the Research and Methodology directorates, became standalone silos or independent business units over time. Each directorate developed its own culture, its own way of doing business, and its own processing infrastructure. Moreover, employees traditionally tend to work most of their careers within one or sometimes two of the Census Bureau directorates, compounding the silo-effect. This organizational “stove piping” inhibits knowledge transfer, does not permit employees to achieve their potential, and often leads to insular thinking and the mindset that only the program area knows what is best for the program.

At the same time, the Census Bureau’s measurement tasks have become increasingly more diffuse and challenging. In observing this, Mesenbourg made five observations. First, the public, businesses, and state and local government entities have been less willing to participate in surveys and censuses, increasing data collection costs. Second, businesses, state, local, and community leaders are demanding more timely information on small population subgroups and small geographic areas. Third, new technologies are developed every day that can make survey participation more convenient and statistical information more accessible. Fourth, new digital business transaction level data has exploded, making federal statistical relatively less important. Finally, federal agency budgets are likely to be flat or declining in the future.

These five observations lead Mesenbourg and Census Bureau Director, Robert M. Groves, to the conclusion that current survey methods and processes are unsustainable, and the Census Bureau must implement enterprise solutions that leverage best practices and the best minds across the organization.

Mesenbourg’s leadership of the recent Census Bureau reorganization provides specific examples of how the organization is changing the way it does business, while at the same time strengthening the Census Bureau’s human capital base. An innovation for the 2010 Census related to the use of almost real-time data analysis to identify possible response problems and respond to them expeditiously. Mesenbourg gave the Center for Economic Studies, an organization with no decennial census role, the responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and modeling the daily census tract-level data. Initial resistance from the Decennial and Field directorates to use of an “outside” organization was quickly overcome, as all parties understood the benefits of real-time analysis. More importantly, through this experience Mesenbourg effectively demonstrated how different skill sets and experiences could be benefit programs and individual employees. Moreover, based on this success, Mesenbourg proposed that as part of the Census Bureau reorganization that the Center for Economic Studies be moved from the Economic Directorate to the Research Directorate, an idea that was fully supported by the programs and one that is breaking down longstanding silos. For the realignment of the regional offices, Mesenbourg and the Director established the overall objectives, but left the development of design options completely up to the twelve regional directors.

Mesenbourg has long been a champion of professional and career development, but as Assistant Director for Economic Programs in the late 1990s, he recognized that a new generation of recently hired employees needed additional training directly related to the work done by the Economic Directorate. Envisioned and largely guided by Mesenbourg, the Economic Directorate designed and institutionalized a professional development program, affectionately known as “Econ U.” The curriculum consisted originally of seven core classes and now includes 25 elective courses, all related to the work done in the Directorate. The courses have been taught by over seventy internal and external faculty, including Mesenbourg. Now in its fourteenth year, “Econ U” has offered more than 5,800 training slots and over 250 employees have completed the seven core courses.

Mesenbourg also lead the Economic Directorate in establishing a Career Enrichment Program (CEP) that encouraged employees to rotate across organizational units. Managers could easily post job opportunities and employees could apply online. This program was highly successful in permitting employees to lateral into new positions, benefiting both the employee and the organizational unit. Mesenbourg has extended the original CEP concept to Census Bureau Headquarters. As part of the Field Realignment, six of the twelve regional offices will be closed at the end of 2012 and over 270 permanent employees could lose their jobs. He mandated in July 2011 that any future Census Bureau vacancies would be posted on a Career Opportunities site, modeled after the CEP, and employees in the closing offices would be given first consideration for any vacancies. By the end of March 2012, over 80 affected employees have found other jobs and another 100 will be eligible to retire.

Most recently in March 2012, under Mesenbourg’s leadership, the Census Bureau officially established a Rotation Program Office and a Chief Rotational Officer position that will report directly to the Human Resources Division Chief. The Rotation Program Chief will be implementing a rotation program developed by a Census Bureau Labor/Management Council work team. The program incrementally will introduce corporate hiring with three planned rotations over the first five years of a professional employees career, the opportunity for mid-level employees to easily move across directorates, and a rotation program aimed at grades 13-15 staff.

As the Census Bureau responds to the challenges identified earlier, it is clear that the organization must identify whether the agency has the correct mix of skills and competencies within our existing work force, where do we have skill gaps, and a strategy for filling any gaps. Under Mesenbourg’s leadership, the Census Bureau has embarked on a workforce competency assessment. The approach was piloted with Information Technology specialists, involved self-assessment and supervisory feedback as well as an external evaluation of the program and processes by the MITRE Corporation. Our methods were validated, but research confirmed that anonymous self-responses were less reliable and had limited uses and we will be changing to identified responses. The full-scale rollout of the revised competency assessment tool across the organization will begin in the summer of 2012.

Over his career, Mesenbourg has volunteered his time freely to mentor interested employees. As Associate Director, Mesenbourg mentored several employees who were participating in SES development programs and provided career development opportunities for employees participating in several different leadership programs. This past year as Deputy Director, Mesenbourg formally mentored one SES candidate, informally mentored another and made her a team lead for a highly visible project. Mesenbourg, however, is not only interested in mentoring current senior leaders, but also in recognizing and mentoring future senior leaders, and last year mentored two grade 12 employees. Mesenbourg recognizes that mentoring not only helps the Census Bureau build future leaders, it also allows senior leaders, including himself, to gain diverse perspectives from different levels of the organization.

Over his career, Mesenbourg has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to developing the next generation of leaders within the federal statistical community. One of his proudest legacies is the long list of employees that once worked for him that assumed leadership positions either at the Census Bureau or in other agencies.