Leadership Dinners “Linners” Build an Informed, Cohesive Community

Throughout the year, the Leadership Program students create Leadership Dinners – affectionately called “Linners” – as an opportunity to share information and experiences between all Leadership students and build community among them. Two most recent Linners focused on choosing classes and selecting a study abroad experience.

During the fall the events committee, a dedicated group of first-year students led by Paul Wells (‘16), Taylor Heath (‘16) and Harry Weiss (‘15), hosted a night focused on choosing courses. The evening started with advice from older students, which included suggestions to branch out and take courses specific to a student’s interests, to not be afraid to add or drop courses into the semester, and to learn more about the professors who are teaching the courses that students are interested in taking.

Sophomore Eesha Bhave commented on using the web to help plan a schedule in preparation for registration. Her classmate and Fundraising Co-Coordinator Alex Bradley followed up with his experience with a 7:30 AM class, stressing the importance of paying attention to what times sections of classes meet at, and to be aware of how well students perform at certain times of the day. In addition to this general advice, conversations at designated tables focused on specific areas of course selection, including General Education requirements, questions about the Honors Programs, and the possibility of early graduation.

By the end of the night, the first-year students benefited greatly from the advice of the older students and walked away more confident and assured about their plans for the spring semester at American University.

When the spring semester arrived, another Linner aimed to encourage students to consider studying abroad with a delicious worldly dinner. The menu prepared by the Events Committee members included a main course of Latin American enchiladas with chips and salsa, a Mediterranean vegetable salad, and Chinese green beans thanks to a recipe from first-year Events Committee member Elise Francis’ mother. The meal was completed with delicious Belgian waffles with an array of sweet toppings for dessert.

“We decided on doing a study abroad theme because it is a topic and experience that is usually very popular among Leadership students,” Wells shared. “There are many first-year and second-year students who are interested in going abroad and we wanted them to have knowledge about all the opportunities and resources open to them.” The Events Committee chose late January for this dinner, because as Francis pointed out, that “is when people start thinking about studying abroad and a bunch of people just got back from study abroad.”

Upper-class students in the Program shared stories and tips about their adventures from China to Canada to Kenya, and several places in between. Speakers also explained the variety of potential experiences including year-long programs, alternative breaks, interning abroad and securing scholarships. Hoping to make the abroad opportunities at American University more accessible to all Leadership students, Kandice Simmons, our Outreach and Inclusion Director, shared a list of study abroad scholarships.

Lucy Bertocci, a senior in the Program, spoke about her Nairobi experience, which sparked the interest of first-year Wes Young. Young said, “Going into the Linner, I didn’t expect to learn much that would impact my decision about going abroad, since it is so far in the future. However, after listening to Lucy speak about her time in Nairobi, Kenya, I realized I definitely wanted to spend time there my junior year!”

First-year student Aileen Day shared, "I have always been really interested in Africa and I am hoping to study abroad in Nairobi.” The Leadership students already have big plans to make the most of their time at American University.

Wells said, "I hope that people took away helpful knowledge and advice about the path to planning for study abroad opportunities.”
IN THE COMMUNITY

Connecting to D.C. at the Mentorship Reception

by Maggie Brennan ’16

The annual Leadership Program mentorship reception last October marked the beginning of some very special connections and relationships between sophomores and professionals in the Washington, D.C. area. The mentorship program is a staple of the SPA Leadership Program, committed to pairing each sophomore with an older mentor with shared interests who offers the student valuable insights and career advice.

The reception, orchestrated by Mentorship Co-Coordinators Lori Interlicchio, Jessica Murphy, and Justin Murry, started off with delicious food and the opportunity for students to practice networking skills mingling among the mentors. In the structured portion of the program, each sophomore met about a half dozen prospective mentors rotating every eight minutes. In the process, the sophomores made good use of their “elevator speeches” they had practiced the week before in the classroom.

“The room was just full of an amazing group of people,” said Edgar Ortega, a sophomore in the Program, who noted, “Every mentor has such a cool list of accomplishments that I feel lucky to meet them in general, let alone have one of them become my mentor. Just talking to them makes me excited to go out and accomplish the things I always wanted to do in D.C.” Many mentors are Program alumni.

Following the reception, the Mentorship Co-Coordinators worked to create final matches between the mentors and students. To assist the students in developing valuable mentorship relationships, students receive instruction in the classroom on conducting informational interviews. Sophomores are also guided by their senior TA and supported by the Mentorship Coordinators throughout the year. With this support, guidance, and structure, the sophomores have crafted valuable relationships with their mentors through regular contact and in-person meetings throughout the academic year.

Students, families, and alumni of the Leadership Program came together on October 19th to share their perspectives and experiences with each other at the annual Family and Alumni Reception during All-American Weekend. The event started with time to socialize and enjoy refreshments and continued through a list of varied speakers.

Director Margaret Marr spoke to the crowd followed by three current students and a recent alumna who each described the experiences in each of the four years of the program and what they gained from them. You get the families, whose ideas may have been vague coming in, the different students, who are living the Program as we speak, and then the alumni, who have had time to reflect on what they learned in their time. But everyone was so excited about what this Program is doing and can do. “The room was full of people with different degrees of knowledge about what SPA Leadership is and what we do. You get the families, whose ideas may have been vague coming in, the students, who are living the Program as we speak, and then the alumni, who have had time to reflect on what they learned in their time. But everyone was so excited about what this Program is doing and can do. ‘They are so willing to share their experiences and perspectives. It was a privilege to see all of those worlds come together into one.”

IN THE COMMUNITY

“I ALWAYS WANTED WHY SOMEBODY DOESN’T DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT. THEN I REALIZED I WAS SOMEBODY.”

LILY TOMLIN

IN THE COMMUNITY

Worlds Mix at the Alumni and Family Reception

by Maggie Brennan ’16

Students take a much needed study break and enjoy a beautiful day on the Leadership Hike!

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“Freshman year was a chance to work with a group of people who were equally passionate about your subject as you were,” Esha Bhave, a sophomore, said of her previous year. “And the things you could do together were truly amazing.”

The other students spoke of the independent social action project of sophomore year and the internship class for juniors. After current students described their experiences, alumni of the Program had the opportunity to share their thoughts. David Simnick, a 2009 graduate of the Program, Founder and CEO of Soapbox Soaps, and recipient of this year’s Alumni Association’s Rising Star Award, shared how the Program is constantly evolving and improving. He also addressed the importance of following one’s passions.

The event concluded with some final remarks by Alumni Co-Coordinators Monica Murthy and Anthony Torres, both sophomores who

Steve Piff and Family

Worlds Mix at the Alumni and Family Reception

by Maggie Brennan ’16

Sophomores chat with possible mentors at the Reception!

Alumni Relations Coordinators Monica Murthy ’16 and Anthony Torres ’16 smile at the podium at the start of the Alumni and Family Reception!
The first year of the Leadership Program is as challenging as it is rewarding. First-year students work in small groups to address the social issues of our day. Based on their preferences stated in their applications, the Class of 2017 was divided among: Education, Environmental Sustainability, Gender and Sexuality, Human Rights and Equality, and Urban Development. In these “issue groups” as they are fondly known, students work together to do what they can to address a problem they feel passionately about. In the fall semester, they identify the problem, research it, and write a policy memo about it. They talk with people who are affected by the problem and those striving to address it and then write a constituency report. With this thorough understanding of the problem, the group then designs a project the group can execute in the spring semester to do what they can to alleviate the problem. They craft a project proposal and present it to the class at the end of the fall semester. In the spring semester they complete the project. In their issue groups, first-year Leadership students learn a great deal about essential leadership skills including teamwork, consensus-building, and creativity. Here is what the Class of 2017 Issue Groups are up to this year!

**EDUCATION**

The Education issue group is off to a great start this semester with a multipronged approach to improving literacy rates in D.C. through improved early childhood education. Working with AppleTree, a research and development institute that promotes literacy skills and enjoyable learning with young children in D.C., these Leadership students have designed a program they call “Reading Sidekicks,” in which they will read one-on-one with preschoolers. Evidence shows that reading with young children has long-term educational benefits. With AppleTree, the groups is also training and learning about early childhood education in D.C while preparing suitable curriculum. In addition, the group is working to publish their own children's book! This issue group intends also to attend the DC Links 2014 conference and there articulate the importance of early childhood education. This is a tight team that is ready to make a difference!

Allie Preston, Ben Link (TA), Mary Perez, Wheeler Brown, Shani Rosenstock, Monica Gilman, Ariane Schaffter, and Martin Slezak

**ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The Environmental Sustainability issue group has been hard at work preparing its social action project. The group aims to tackle pollution in the Anacostia River with three initiatives. First, they will work with students at the Benning Road Boys and Girls' Club in the Anacostia area to educate them about the degradation of the river. Then, they will work with their students to repair a damaged riparian area along the riverbank with trees and scrubs to help trap and store pollutants before they enter the water. Finally, they will host an event to bring together community members and local non-profits to motivate the community to continue restoring the Anacostia River. They are collaborating with Casey's Trees, the National Park Service, and the Anacostia Watershed Society. As one group member explained, the group has learned the valuable leadership lesson that “while nothing can be perfect, our project can be pretty awesome.” All members are looking forward to accomplishing their ambitious goals this semester.

Lucas Wright (TA), Abigail Lee, Olivia Bullock, Natalie Giron, Molly Morehows, Dorian Keshe, William McNamara, Lindsey Halvorson

**GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

Seeking to redefine the way college students think about sex, the Gender and Sexuality Issue group will urge AU students to get rid of the baseball metaphors and talk about pizza! Inspired by the ideas of sexual education advocate Al Vernacchio, Gender and Sexuality is hard at work creating the “SEX = PIZZA” campaign. The baseball metaphors we currently use to describe sex have a tendency to emphasize competition and the need to conquer, which may lead to unsafe, nonconsensual sexual practices. The “SEX = PIZZA” campaign is meant to change this by encouraging college students to view sexual activity as we do ordering and enjoying pizza, emphasizing mutual consent, enjoyment, and freedom of choice.

Samantha Garrison, Wes Young, Elise Francisci, Emmu Stydahar, Justin Etheridge, Alleren Evans, London Swift (TA), Susanna Billings

The “SEX = PIZZA” campaign will launch officially in mid-April with the “SEX = PIZZA” summit to be held at American University. Currently, the issue group is in communication with several potential speakers for the summit, including Vernacchio, experts in sexual education advocacy, student activism, and sexual assault prevention. Outside of the summit, the “SEX = PIZZA” campaign will include a bold social media presence and a line of apparel featuring aspects of the “SEX = PIZZA” message. Gender and Sexuality hopes their project will begin to shift attitudes of college culture in a way that strongly condemns needless acts of sexual violence and instead encourages safe and consensual sexual activity.
URBAN DEVELOPMENT

At the beginning of the year, the Human Rights & Equality issue group knew they wanted to tackle the global issue of sex trafficking of children and youth. Finding that many people are unaware that sex trafficking of juveniles occurs in the United States, the group wanted to create greater awareness of this tragedy and support greater prevention and remediation efforts.

Their research turned up a compelling documentary, “Nefarious: Merchant of Souls,” that highlights the harms of sex trafficking. The group intends to hold an awareness event this spring, which will include a screening of this documentary and a panel of experts on the topic. Additionally, the group is reaching out to the D.C. Mayor’s Office, the D.C. Council and Mayoral candidates to explain the proven value of improved police officer training in this delicate area in which victims can be mistakenly blamed.

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JUSTICE, LAW, AND SOCIETY

Law and Society has chosen to tackle the issue of bias in the media. They will be working with students at Cesar Chavez High School in Northeast DC helping them to understand how to define media bias, recognize it, and identify its effect on our opinions. They are currently in the process of filming and editing an educational video to address these three learning objectives. The completed video will be shared with the Cesar Chavez students, as well as posted to an online platform for high school government teachers across the country to use. The Law and Society issue group is committed to educating youth about bias in the media in order to make them more well-informed civic participants.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Decemberfest Provides Loads of Community Cheer!

by Maggie Brennan '16

The day after Fall 2013 classes ended, the Leadership Program community joined together in the spirit of the holiday season to relax and appreciate each other before the rush of final exams.

Students, professors, and their families gathered to build gingerbread houses, play games, listen to music and take a much-needed break before intensive final exam studying set in. The events committee provided plenty of winter treats for everyone to share. Seasonal lighting and decorations offered a warm sense of home, even in MGC.

“This is one of my favorite events,” said Alli Heller, a sophomore in the Program, “this time of year gets crazy for everyone, so it’s nice that we all made time to be here. I got to see my freshman buddy again and talk about good study strategies, as well as eat some super delicious food!”

The afternoon was packed with community bonding highlights, including an interclass card game and the creation of a gingerbread White House. Students walked away feeling refreshed, reconnected, and ready to tackle their final exams before leaving for winter break.
The Leadership Program encourages students to be active members in their communities. The photos below are snapshots of the action Leadership students are engaged in every day. SPALeaders from all grades challenge themselves and their peers to be socially active citizens.

Leadership Shines at Dean’s List Reception!

Congratulations to the many Leadership Program members who made the Dean’s List this semester demonstrating their perseverance, intelligence, and excellence! Pictured here attending the Dean’s List reception are sophomore Eesha Bhave and first-year students Molly Morabito, Nicole Lam, Sara Pierson, Ariane Schaffer, Monica Gilsanz, and Allie Preston.