Leadership Students Tackle Over 30 Social Issues

By: Cj Murphy (’15)

American University’s School of Public Affairs is home to some of the most politically active and passionate students in the country. The SPA Leadership Program provides students with a network of resources and support to translate this passion into social action.

During their first year in the program, students work alongside six of their classmates in an “issue group” to identify a social issue of concern to the group. This year, first-years are addressing issues including illiteracy in D.C., the school-to-prison pipeline, excess waste on AU’s campus from disposable cups, rape culture on college campuses, and inadequate resources for homeless veterans.

Once they identify an issue of concern to them, students conduct extensive research, including outreach to scholars, practitioners, and constituents. This shapes the students' understanding of the issue in both an academic and practical sense. Equipped with this knowledge, students work with community members to design and implement a project that meets the community’s needs and works to achieve social justice.

During the sophomore year, students are challenged to carry out this process individually. This gives them a unique opportunity to explore and address the social issues they care about with the support and resources of the SPA Leadership community. Their passions span across various topics and geographic areas. This year, sophomores are addressing issues like Machismo culture in Nicaragua, the prevalence of disparaging humor in middle schools, HIV treatment and support in D.C., and the global effects of food waste.

Throughout the year, students hone their research and writing skills to craft compelling policy memos, project proposals and grant applications. Students develop their relationship-building and public speaking capabilities through elevator speeches, informational interviews, project presentations and meetings with scholars, practitioners, and constituents.

Currently, members of the Class of 2017 are designing lobbying workshops, mentorship programs, support groups, resource drives, documentaries and awareness campaigns. Each year, over three dozen of these projects are completed addressing problems of concern to students.

These projects can create lasting change in communities. They always help prepare students for leadership roles in public service and in life. Students finish their first two years of the program more fully equipped with well-honed problem solving skills to help them create the better world they envision.
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“Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.”
– John F. Kennedy
Leadership Welcomes Families and Alumni

By: Stuart Algood (’18) and Alex Mosenson (’18)

During American University’s All-American Weekend, the SPA Leadership Program’s annual Family and Alumni Reception gave families greater insights into their students’ accomplishments in the program. Over light refreshments, families met each other, their students’ teaching team members and alumni, before hearing an overview of the current Program.

Program Director and Professor Margaret Marr emphasized the fantastic work students have done in the two short months they have been on campus. The first-years and sophomores completed their policy memos for their social action projects, juniors are taking advantage of all the city has to offer with their various internships, and seniors are preparing to come together in the spring for the program’s capstone class.

Prof. Marr also explained that the Steering Committee members exercised their leadership skills by creating the reception, running a mentorship program, pairing first-years with older students in the program, publicizing the good work of our students, fundraising, and creating numerous opportunities for program members to build a cohesive community.

Student speakers, including Wes Young, Lulu Chaker, Joelle Appenrodt and alumnus Peter Goelz shared their experiences during the first, second, third and fourth years in the program respectively. Sophomore Wes Young spoke about the social action projects he and his peers created during the previous year.

Lulu Chaker, a junior, talked about the leadership skills learned by completing an individual social action project in her sophomore year as well as becoming closer to her peers in the classroom. She gave first-years valuable insight as to what completing their own social action projects would be like and how they could accomplish them by reaching out to the community of practitioners and scholars working in their issue areas.

Senior Joelle Appenrodt shared her internship experience, particularly speaking about her current internship at the Department of Justice. She gave younger students an idea of internship opportunities that can become available to them through their hard work in the program.

Alumnus Peter Goelz discussed his capstone seminar last year that afforded seniors the opportunity to teach leadership lessons themed around uncommon and unexpected leadership. Goelz also shared the many professional advantages the program equips students with, as he was able to secure his first job after undergrad with the help of a Leadership alumnus.

Karen Wheeless, adjunct professor for the internship class, spoke about how energetic and engaged the students are in her class. She praised the students for their work in the classroom, explaining that the students were developing fundamental leadership skills to use in their professional experiences.

Alumnus Deon Jones returned to AU’s campus to speak about the program that he credits with his success. Even with his impressive accomplishments of being the youngest elected official in Washington, D.C.’s history, an intern at the White House and a 2013 Harry S. Truman Scholar, he is still most proud of his Leadership social action project. His project helped formerly incarcerated teens of color successfully transition, some into four-year colleges. Deon credits the program with providing him with the resources and opportunities to change the lives of young African American men. One of his mentees told him he recently became the youngest person ever to go to Howard University where he is now a pre-med student.

“IT was nice to see all the students come together with their families to share their experiences,” said Kiah Morrison, a first-year in the program. “I really felt inspired by all the speakers and now I am really ambitious to tackle my group’s social action project.” Students walked away from the reception feeling fortunate to share their accomplishments in the Leadership program with their families.
Leadership Hits the Campaign Trail
By: Joelle Appenrodt ('15)

During this year’s midterm election, Leadership students once again brought to life Princeton Review ranking AU as the nation’s most politically active campus. From local to national races, Leadership students ventured away from AU’s campus to gain valuable insights into the intricacies of running a political campaign.

Seniors Tripp Frank and Harry Weiss both took the fall semester off from studying at American in order to gain first-hand campaign experience. Frank spent the past five months at the Clinton County Democratic Party Headquarters in Iowa working on key congressional races. Weiss worked tirelessly on the campaign trail in an attempt to elect Aimee Belgard to represent New Jersey’s 3rd congressional district in the House of Representatives.

Anthony Torres, a junior and former Vice President of AU Democrats, believes he and his fellow Leadership students are in a unique position to encourage others to affect social change through voting. “Members on Capitol Hill won’t listen to the challenges facing the next generation until they make their voice loud enough at the ballot box.”

Leading up to the midterm election, Leadership students traveled to Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina in order to rally the vote around key House and Senate races.

Shortly after joining the Leadership program, first-year Isaiah Beaton began interning with Virginia congressional candidate John Foust’s campaign. Beaton laid the groundwork for his classmates to get out the vote for candidate Foust on election day.

First-years Johanna Butler, Quinn Dunlea, Nick Guthman, Natalie Hedden, Bridget Anshus, Kiah Morrison, and Henry Watson went to Virginia’s 10th congressional district to get out the vote on behalf of Foust and senatorial candidate Mark Warner.

Even though only Warner won, Butler found the experience to be incredibly rewarding: “I enjoyed seeing the momentum and power of a grassroots effort and the way the entire community of VA-10 was getting involved with the election.”

Sophomore Nick Hunt meeting Governor George Allen.

Sophomore and AU’s College Republican’s President Nick Hunt believes political campaigns are an ideal opportunity for leadership lessons to transcend classroom walls. Hunt urges, “all members to engage in campaigns as students gain a unique perspective on policy formation, fundraising, the influence of special interest groups, but chiefly, students learn that an ordinary human being supported by a strong team, has the ability to enact nationwide change.”
Taking the spookyness out of course registration:

Halloween Leadership Dinner

By: Dominick Mortarotti (’18) and Monique Tinglin (’18)

Although hard to believe for many students, it is already time to register for spring courses. Students of all four years within the SPA Leadership Program joined together over a delicious, homemade Halloween-themed meal to exchange advice on scheduling spring courses, choosing majors and minors, fitting in internships and studying abroad.

Students left the dinner feeling confident in their ability to take on the challenge that is course registration for the spring semester. Tom Lynch, a first-year in the program, reflected “The dinner was so helpful and I was able to map out the General Education requirements I need to graduate.” Not only did the first-years leave feeling more confident about course registration, but older students also received useful advice.

Jordan Peebles, a sophomore and first-year teaching assistant, enjoyed her dinner experience. “I thought it was successful. I gave advice to the first-years, but I also received great advice from my peers. There was an awesome symbiotic relationship. I learned a lot about my own major,” Peebles said.

The October Leadership Dinner, or “Linner” as Leadership students like to say, was conceived, planned, cooked and executed by the Programming Coordinators, sophomores Natalie Giron and Emily Green, under the guidance of Co-Student Director Joelle Appenrodt, with the assistance of their wonderful committee of hard-working first-year students. The event represents the spirit of community, mentorship and inter-class relationships present in the program.
Abroad: Leadership Has No Borders

By: Wes Young (’17)

Similar to many students at American University, students from the SPA Leadership Program choose to study abroad for a semester or a year to enhance their college experience. In fact, the Leadership Program’s curriculum is designed to facilitate students’ spending one or two semesters immersing themselves in another culture.

Michelle Le is a junior studying abroad in Hong Kong this semester. She has been using her time to travel parts of Southeast Asia including Vietnam and Thailand, and also to explore Hong Kong Island’s many beaches, nature hikes, markets and crazy street food.

After studying social movements during her sophomore year in the program, Le is now witnessing Hong Kong’s election reform movement first-hand. Speaking to students and protestors participating in the movement is deepening Le’s understanding of social change.

Tyrees Smith is currently abroad in London, studying British politics and media, and learning the vast differences compared to that of the U.S. He is currently interning at the Institute of Economic Affairs, a free-market think tank working on British economic policy.

Smith describes his experience in London as being a wonderful mixing pot of cultures. “I’m having a great time soaking up the numerous cultures of London, and enjoying all of its world-renowned museums.”

Junior Lucas Wright, studying at Oxford University for the year, cites his time in the program as being crucial to the success of his abroad experience. “The SPA Leadership Program incredibly prepared me for my abroad experience, allowing me to feel comfortable traveling to a new place on my own. While I’ve only been here a month, I can easily say that I’ve worked harder and learned more than ever before.”

Karlee Ursta, currently studying in Ireland, shared similar sentiments. “Studying abroad has been the most challenging thing I’ve done in my life, but it has also been the most rewarding. By submerging myself in a completely new environment, without the safety net of family and close friends, I have become a much stronger, independent, and more capable woman.”

During her time abroad, Lia Gargano interned at a non-profit called Prisoners’ Advice Services (PAS) in London. PAS provides legal advice and information to prisoners in England and Wales regarding their rights, the application of the Prison Rules and conditions of imprisonment. Throughout the week, Gargano works on multiple grants and legal work regarding prisoners. In her spare time, Lia has enjoyed traveling all over Europe, visiting seven different countries.

Leadership students on campus this semester anticipate the return of their classmates to hear about their abroad experiences. Gargano shared, “I look forward to sharing my newfound knowledge, both from my travels and my internship experiences, back at American University, and especially with the Leadership community.”
Among the most treasured aspects of the SPA Leadership Program are the relationships forged in pairing each first-year student with an older student in the Program, called a buddy. This unique peer mentorship opportunity helps first-years adjust to their new life in D.C., at AU, and to the Leadership Program.

Each buddy pair meets at least once a week for activities ranging from dinner, to visiting the Smithsonian museums, to studying for the younger buddy’s upcoming exam. Older students serve as tremendous resources to the first-years by offering advice on the younger buddy’s social action project, choosing classes and applying for internships. For many pairs, this buddy pairing blossoms into a friendship that continues throughout their college careers and beyond.

Events such as the Annual Buddy Olympics offer additional opportunities for students to bond with one another. This year, Interclass Coordinator Aileen Day planned the November afternoon full of games for buddy pairings to showcase their brains and brawn.

First-years and their buddies flocked to Kay Spiritual Center, excited to spend a day engaging in fun, competitive bonding with their respective buddies. With last year's festivities being “really great”, according to former Interclass Coordinator Winston Pingeon (‘16), students had high expectations for the games. The afternoon was packed with an assortment of activities, including buddy trivia, that tested how well buddies knew each other, as well as a three-legged race, a balloon toss and an egg relay.

First-year Suzanna Steele noted, “This was my favorite leadership event all year. Not only did my buddy and I become closer, I learned the value of team building. The Buddy Olympics was the perfect start to my week!”

Cj Murphy started Buddy Olympics two years ago when she was Interclass Coordinator her sophomore year. “I’m excited to see how far it's come and how big it’s gotten. It's always so rewarding to see many first-year students interacting with older students in such a fun way,” she remarked.

Buddy Olympics also strengthened team building skills through the many relay activities, advanced networking skills when meeting older Leadership students and exercised strategic thinking skills when planning the most effective way to complete the given task to take home the gold!

At the conclusion of the games, three buddy pairs were declared the winners of the 2014 Buddy Olympics. Even though first-year Amelia Faraco-Hadlock did not take home gold, she focused on the positive, “It was awesome. We won in our hearts. More importantly I built a lot of connections with other members of the program, especially within my buddy family,” she said referring to the lineage of older buddies through her own buddy.

Silver-medalist sophomore Mahdi Khan, shared similar sentiments, “Competition aside we had some deep discussion about our future goals. This, it turns out, was the true prize of the day. No matter who won or lost, all who were present gained valuable insight and meaningful connections within the program.”
Eesha Bhave remembers seeing the White House for the first time during her 8th grade class trip to Washington, D.C. Six short years later, Bhave spends forty hours per week interning with the White House Initiative on Asian American and Pacific Islanders.

Bhave is joined by senior Lori Interlicchio, who currently interns in the White House Office of Legislative Affairs. Together Bhave and Interlicchio join a growing legion of Leadership students to intern for White House.

Since 2011, ten Leadership students have brought their talents to the White House Visitors Office, Office of Legislative Affairs, Council of Economic Advisors, Domestic Policy Council, Council on Environmental Quality, Office of Management and Administration, Office of Public Engagement and Office of the Vice President.

In her internship, Bhave is afforded the opportunity to have an impact on policies affecting Asian American and Pacific Islanders, “I am working on issues such as civil rights, language access, and youth engagement.”

The sophomore year of the Leadership program allowed Bhave and Interlicchio to be competitive applicants for this semester’s White House internship. Bhave explained, “The work I completed in the sophomore class for leadership opened my eyes to this particular office and the work that it does, and gave me the confidence and experience to apply.”

Senior Cj Murphy returned to classes this fall after taking a semester off to intern in the president’s humble abode. Spending a semester in the Office of Management and Administration deepened Murphy’s understanding of being committed to one’s work: “Each person there, from the cleaning staff to the Chief of Staff, is so passionate about what they do and inspired me to work hard and take pride in everything I did there, no matter how big or small.”

In addition to interning in the White House, Leadership students frequent the White House for the debut of initiatives, legislative signings, and even to introduce the President himself. Sophomore Wes Young’s involvement with sexual assault prevention on college campuses led to an invitation to discuss the “It’s On Us” campaign with other student leaders in the West Wing.

Alumnus Deon Jones witnessed the signing of the Declaration to Fulfill America’s Promise in the Oval Office.

Alumnus Deon Jones (’14) joined President Obama and General Colin Powell for the signing of the Declaration to Fulfill America’s Promise in the Oval Office. Alumnus Andy MacCracken (’12) was recognized for leading the college affordability charge in the nation’s capital with an invitation to introduce President Obama before delivering remarks on student loan debt.

Leadership students are afforded the unique opportunity to use their “strengths and skills to help in the administration’s efforts to serve the country,” Murphy observed.