

Leadership Program

Visions Newsletter Volume XXI Issue IV



Leaving the World a Better Place

By Joelle Appenrodt ('15) and Rahi Patel ('16)

“What is a social issue of concern to you?” Leadership students are asked this question from Program Director Margaret Marr at the beginning of both their first and second years in the program. This question marks the beginning of a thirty-week journey to identify a social issue of concern to the student, research the issue, design a project to address the issue and then execute the project.

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. “A desire to address social justice issues is the common thread that runs through all Leadership students,” explains Nick Hunt ('17).

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 adult 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.

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. 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.

In a mere thirty weeks, first-year students in the Education and Activism issue group were able to impact adult literacy rates in Washington D.C. by producing and screening a documentary, “Without A Word,” at downtown D.C.’s restaurant and bookstore Busboys and Poets. Their documentary explores the lives of adults overcoming illiteracy through the help of a local non-profit organization, the Washington Literacy Center (WLC). All of the proceeds gathered from their documentary screening were donated to the WLC.

Another first-year issue group, Environmental Health and Sustainability, started the AU “One Less Cup Campaign.” Their campaign aims to reduce the amount of waste generated on campus through disposable cups by promoting the use of reusable cups.



An AU student pledges to be a piece of the solution to end sexual assault on college campuses at a social action project event.

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*“Success is going from failure
to failure without losing
your enthusiasm.”*

— Abraham Lincoln



Lindsey Halvorson ('16) hosts an Environmental Justice Fair on the AU quad as part of her sophomore social action project.



First-year students spend an afternoon at The Pentagon learning about leaders of national defense.



Dorian Kershaw ('17) works to combat machismo culture in Nicaragua by organizing a girls soccer program in the Rio San Juan Region.



Molly Morabito ('17) educates young people on how to be environmental activists. After a series of workshops, Morabito took a group of students to Capitol Hill to participate in a day of lobbying Congress.



Abby Lore ('17) founds a chapter of the College Diabetes Network on AU's campus.

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.

Individual sophomores in the program have executed their own social action projects in a variety of ways. Molly Morabito ('17) designed a series of workshops that taught college students about effective environmental lobbying and featured several policy experts as guest speakers. Participants learned specific lobbying strategies for today's political climate, different types of environmental legislation and how to advocate for them.

Morabito's workshops culminated on Capitol Hill, where participants learned environmental advocacy through a Congressional perspective from staffers in Representative Elijah Cummings's office.

"I would say the most rewarding thing about this project has been seeing that others are just as passionate about the issue of climate change and just as eager to make their voices heard about it. As someone who's been passionate about the environment since I was a kid, I sometimes forget that I'm not alone in caring," reflected Morabito.

Megan Crowley ('17) chose to address the marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals through a storytelling project. Crowley has collected stories from individuals that focus on how those who identify with more than one marginalized identity are affected. Crowley published her storytelling project in AU's AmWord magazine, as well as BuzzFeed and other LGBTQ+ blogs.

David Shadburn ('15) puts it simply: "I wouldn't be the person I am today without the Leadership Program." The resources and empowerment provided to Leadership students to address social issues of concern to them allows the learning to transcend classroom walls. Students begin in the classroom learning how to affect social change, followed by an opportunity to go out in the community and affect the social change.

Each year Leadership Program students address more than 30 social issues to leave the world a better place than when asked the question, "What is a social justice issue of concern to you?"

Speaking with LGBT Rights Champion Sarah McBride ('13)

By Daria Dudzinski and Ben Zook ('18)

Sarah McBride graduated from American University and the School of Public Affairs Leadership Program in 2013. She gained notoriety when she came out as transgender to the AU Community after completing her term as the Student Government President in 2012.

Today, McBride is the Special Assistant for LGBT Progress at the Center for American Progress. As an LGBT rights activist, she is largely credited with the passage of legislation in Delaware banning discrimination on the basis of gender identity in employment, housing, insurance and public accommodations. A native of Wilmington, Delaware, she currently serves on the Board of Directors of Equality Delaware. McBride has been featured in the New York Times, Huffington Post, ThinkProgress, BuzzFeed, the Washington Post and NPR. While at American, McBride interned at both the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund and the White House. In May 2013 this excellent student-leader won the University's award for Outstanding Service to the University Community.

First-year students Ben Zook and Daria Dudzinski (B&D) spoke with McBride (SM) about her work, experience in the program and future.

B&D: What inspires you to do what you do?

SM: Well, I think there are a couple of things. The first is that I have had an incredibly lucky and privileged upbringing and life. I'm so devoted to LGBT equality because I want to make sure that everyone has access to what I've had access to. Job opportunities not limited based on identity, things that not everyone has. I'm also just strongly motivated by the fact that I think LGBT equality is morally right and that this is part of our country, our community, our world's path towards a more inclusive and more accepting environment. I just want to be a part of that and I think it's important.

B&D: What was the experience like to lobby for anti-discrimination legislation based on gender identity and expression in employment, housing, insurance and public accommodations?

SM: It was an incredibly empowering experience. For me going to college for four years and worrying about policy and government and leadership--having that experience really helped validate that and reinforced that government can be positive and inclusive, prosperous and accepting.

Being part of that process really validated those beliefs and



Sarah McBride ('13) discussing a report released by the Center for American Progress on why Congress should pass a comprehensive LGBT non-discrimination bill.

lessons and the time spent learning about the process. For me, that experience from the standpoint of government and politics really restored my faith that positive things can happen and that government can do the right thing if you show people what's at stake. For me that was a big lesson: it's so important to demonstrate the personal impact and personal implementation of policies. Whether it's government assistance, or foreign policy, or health care policy, being able to show the legislators the personal consequences of their decision and to ground the decision in experience. It wouldn't have succeeded if it hadn't been rooted and based in those personal stories and personal narratives.

B&D: What would you say was the largest challenge in all of that?

SM: As empowering as it was, it was also difficult being that vulnerable in front of a large audience. Talking about things that I obviously had struggled with my entire life, and really putting it at some degree front and center with the hope of coming back to Delaware and having the story of my family front and center.

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SM (cont.): And that conversation had a positive outcome, but I felt very vulnerable. Sometimes I think you have to show that vulnerability because without it it's not an authentic experience and authentic voice. It was difficult being that open and that vulnerable, and at the same time the stakes weren't just about me and my outcome but the thousands of trans Delawareans who didn't have the choice to live in DC or Delaware or living without that discrimination. It really made a tangible difference on whether or not they could get a job or housing or the goods and services that everyone needs to live and thrive. Stakes that I, at 22, had never experienced before. It was difficult. It would have been difficult for anyone.



Sarah McBride ('13) speaking at the Human Rights Campaign's 17th Annual National Dinner.

B&D: Are we moving forward or sliding back?

SM: I think both is right. While there's definitely a pushback, we knew that every step of our progress wouldn't be met with total acceptance. Anti-LGBT groups would continue fighting. What you're seeing with these religious freedom acts and refusals is this sort of anti-LGBT voice, but what you also saw in Indiana was such a national outcry to this notion of legal discrimination that it's abundantly clear that the nation is overwhelmingly against the notion of discrimination against LGBT people and the one thing that's stopping that overwhelming discrimination is that people think it's already illegal to discriminate. We need to utilize these opportunities to both fight back and keep the bills from being enacted, but also to educate the broader public that with or without these bills it has been totally legal to discriminate against LGBT people. So it's both absolutely pushback and backlash, but the responses to those efforts have overwhelmingly shown the values and beliefs shared by the majority of America.

B&D: What are you working on regarding the new Indiana law?

SM: I was working on the estimate of the economic impact of the law that the state was putting at risk with the law. There were a number of businesses that came out in opposition, so we were able to estimate the money Indiana was potentially losing over the bill.

B&D: What do you see being the next largest fight for LGBTQ+ equality?

SM: Well, I think the next biggest fight is nationwide federal non-discrimination laws. Thirty-five states lack proficient protections from discrimination. With the growth of marriage equality and acceptance of LGBT nationwide, you'll see more authenticity but not an expansion of non-discrimination. What you're going to see in the next coming months is a major push for anti-discrimination legislation so that it's not a situation where your equality depends on your zip code and so you won't get married on Sunday and fired on Monday.

B&D: What is the greatest lesson you learned from the Leadership Program which helped you become the leader you are today?

SM: I think in terms of the Leadership Program, there are two things that have really stuck with me. Being in that environment of incredibly motivated, passionate and intelligent people really showed me that we need to take in as much as we give. We need to learn and grow and expand our knowledge just as much as we need to do that for others. I think the Leadership Program really showed me that environment of learning from your peers and listening to your peers. The second thing was that it really showed me that the core of leadership is heart and values. It's important to incorporate your mind and your brain, but you really need to speak from your heart.

B&D: What is your advice to future leaders and activists?

SM: I would say never stop challenging yourself to learn to be more inclusive, to challenge your preconceived notions, who you might be leaving out or forgetting in your work and always be vigilant and conscious of that. Going back to the second lesson of the Leadership Program, lead from your heart, lead from your values. Understand what you're talking about and know your facts... but it all starts with heart and values.

The Leadership Community

By Bridget Anshus, Austin Edens and Henry Watson ('18)

In addition to being a program committed to developing leaders both in the classroom and through experiential learning, the Leadership Program envelopes its students in a warm community outside of the classroom.

During the spring 2015 semester alone, Leadership students came together at program dinners, a game night, an event to showcase their social justice interests, laser tagging, hiking in Great Falls National Park and learning about the history of D.C.'s renowned Cherry Blossoms Festival.



Leadership students overlooking the rapids at Great Falls National Park.

In March, the Program held its first-ever “Speak Out” where students of all years came together and shared their social justice interests with their peers in the program. Some speeches were prepared, others were given off the cuff, but all carried a consistent passion and spirit in the pursuit of justice and self-identity.

First-year Ryan Trismen shared, “I was originally going to leave early from the Speak Out to do homework but soon realized that this event was worth much more than getting an extra hour of sleep. People’s willingness to share their passions and experiences was amazing and thoughtful.”

This year saw the pilot of another new program: Coffee Dates with Seniors. Throughout the semester, graduating seniors were paired with first- and second-year students for an opportunity to connect over coffee. Nils Franco ('18) valued his time with older members of the Program he had not met before. “Both conversations settled some issues I’ve been dealing with, from internship application tips to balancing school, work, and personal development” he said.

Leadership Program Dinners, “Liners,” providing opportunities students of all years to intermingle over



Students reflecting during the Speak Out.

students’ home-cooked food have become a time-honored tradition. The dinners are also informative as they are each centered around a theme that connects directly students’ experience at college or in the program. The last “Linner” this semester helped students examine taking a semester off AU’s campus by studying abroad, interning full time or working on a political campaign.

Laser tag and a hike in Great Fall National Park on a beautiful spring day added to the opportunities to get out of the classroom and enjoy the company of fellow Leadership students. The Program strives to be a source of social support, inclusivity and community engagement.



Leadership students at the annual Cherry Blossom Tour.

Students Connect with Over 20 Years of Alumni

By Stuart Algood, Thomas Lynch and Alex Mosenson ('18)

This year's annual Alumni Reunion at Clyde's of Gallery Place brought together the program's alumni and current students to reconnect, network and learn from one another. As sophomore Nicholas Hunt ('17) observed the "event provided current students with great opportunities to connect with our outstanding alumni." Alex Bradley ('16) concurred: "As an older student, I find the alumni reunions really valuable. Not only do I get to reconnect with former classmates, I get to use the Leadership network to its fullest."



Dani Nispel ('13) and Emily Horowitz ('15) enjoy the opportunity to reconnect at the Alumni Reunion.

Sam Shumate ('18), both a planner and attendee of the event, stated "it has been an honor to serve on the Alumni and Mentorship Committee this year. At the reception, I made several connections and one of them called me last week to offer me advice with an opportunity for the summer."



Alumni offer current students professional advice.

Shumate joins a long history of Leadership students who have benefited from opportunities made possible by the program's alumni. Alumnaus Dave Simnick ('09), founder



Georgette Spanjich ('10) reunites with fellow alumnus Elliot Friedman ('09).

and CEO of Soapbox Soaps--a social mission company selling personal care products in stores across the country and empowering customers to change the world through everyday purchases--ensures he has at least one Leadership student interning in his office each semester.

Similarly, alumnae Georgette Spanjich and Abby Matousek ('10) ensure their lobbying firm, ML Strategies, continues to provide professional opportunities to current Leadership students with as many as three Leadership students interning at the firm in one semester.

Founded in 1990 by now University President Neil Kerwin, the Leadership Program provides students with access to over 20 years of alumni to act as a foundation for their professional network in the nation's capital.



Kaileen Dougherty ('16), Nick Scida ('16) and Jessica Murphy ('16) catch up at the Alumni Reunion.

Alumna Returns to Share Insight on Interior Secretary Sally Jewell

By Stuart Algood, Thomas Lynch and Alex Mosenson ('18)

Three short years after graduating from the Leadership Program, alumna Emily Beyer ('11) now serves as the Deputy Press Secretary for the U.S. Department of the Interior with regular interactions with Secretary Sally Jewell. So, when the first-year students studied the employee-oriented leadership style of Jewell, Beyer was the natural choice to offer the insider perspective.

Beyer related that Secretary Jewell has said she “is happiest at the steepest part of the learning curve,” and believes that “leaders should not pretend they know everything.” She observed that the “people who are truly successful are those who recognize they don’t know everything and are willing to learn.”

Beyer recommended that undergrads “treat everything like a learning opportunity. There’s something to be learned from everybody.”



Emily Beyer ('11) returns as a guest lecturer for the first-year class, speaking on different leadership styles.



Emily Beyer ('11) (pictured left) attending the 20th Anniversary Reception of the Leadership Program in 2011.

First-year Nils Franco benefited from Beyer’s advice. “Having been burned out after campaigns before, I thought I’d never do a campaign again, but I think now I’m likely to look into such opportunities in the future,” he said. Franco thought his classmates similarly benefited from Beyer sharing her experience in the federal government. “She showed us communications positions require a knowledge of the ins and outs of policy issues at hand. It’s about helping people understand bigger ideas,” Franco related.

Beyer’s visit to the first-year class exemplified alumni’s commitment to the Leadership program extends beyond graduation day. Serving as a guest presenter is one of many ways that Leadership alumni give back each year. Alumni also serve as mentors to current sophomores, advise students on their social action projects and attend program events, such as the annual Alumni Reunion each March.

Many Leadership students hope to follow in the footsteps of Beyer upon graduation. Shortly after earning her degree in Communications, Legal Institutions, Economics and Government, Beyer joined the Obama for America campaign in Chicago serving as an Assistant to Digital Leadership. During the general election, she assisted in the management of digital activity and rapid response during Presidential and Vice Presidential debates.

Leadership Students Mentored by D.C. Professionals

By Justin Etheridge ('17)

The School of Public Affairs Leadership Program aims to equip students with the tools they need to pursue their aspirations and become the leaders of tomorrow. One of the many resources provided to Leadership students to achieve this mission is an entirely student-run initiative: the Mentorship Program.

Monica Gilsanz ('17), who serves as one of the Co- Coordinators of the Mentorship Program explains, "Once paired, mentees and mentors meet at least three times during the academic year, including one of the meetings being a shadowing experience."

Students who choose to participate attend a reception in early October where they meet several professionals. Students are then paired with mentors based on preferences stated after the reception.

Students serving as Co- Coordinators for the Mentorship Program are responsible for recruiting the mentors, organizing the reception and pairing students and mentors. This year Monica Gilsanz ('17) and Susanna Billings ('17) led the Mentorship Program. They pulled from the Leadership Program's alumni as well as their own personal networks from past internships and professional experiences to recruit mentors.

The class of 2017 has greatly benefited from the advice as well as the professional networks of their mentors allowing mentees to find internships, develop networks of their own or to implement their social action projects. Many of the mentorship pairings have grown into rewarding relationships.

Mary Perez's ('17) mentor Carol Foster, a 2012 program alumna, provided Perez with valuable insights into working in the United States Senate. "Carol has given me tips on my resume, given me internship contacts for the summer and invited me to a hearing from the Senate's Committee on Foreign Affairs."

Mentee Arielle Thomas ('17) has "had a wonderful experience with [her] mentor this year." Thomas, whose sophomore project seeks to address inadequacies in the Food and Drug Administration's testing procedures, found experts to interview through mentor Jed Perry's colleagues in the healthcare field.

The Mentorship Program opened new doors for Thomas: "It has completely changed my viewpoint on healthcare, which is now a career path I am strongly considering for the future."

Wes Young ('17) shadowed his mentor, Emily Beardsley, at the EMILY's List 30th Annual Conference and Gala, the political action committee's gathering of donors and leaders within the Democratic Party. There Young benefited from the networking opportunities unique to the event. "I got to speak with Stephanie Schriock, President of EMILY's List, who has increased membership of the organization by 600% during her short time as President. I cannot wait to see her efforts continue to multiply in 2016," he said.



Wes Young ('17) and Leilani Alexa ('15) attend EMILY's List 30th Annual Conference and Gala.

Dorian Kershaw ('17) joined the chorus of gratitude. Kershaw is very passionate about early childhood education. She completed a year with Jumpstart, an AmeriCorps program where she worked with low-income preschool students. While shadowing her mentor, Emily Samose, who works for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, Kershaw met Naila Bolus, the CEO of Jumpstart. The surprise meeting led to an informative and inspiring discussion, Kershaw recalled.

Not only the students, but the mentors, enjoy the program. Mentor and 1997 Leadership Program alumna Gayle Kansagor Hope ('97) offered, "I'm thrilled to be able to participate in the Mentorship Program through AU's School of Public Affairs Leadership Program. It's wonderful to be able to get to know [my mentee] and help her understand a bit more about the professional world in DC and beyond."

The Class of 2015

By Natalie Hedden, Dominick Mortarotti and Monique Tinglin ('18)

For the class of 2015, graduation day marks both an end of a journey and a beginning of a new chapter. Many seniors in the Leadership Program feel nostalgic as they think back to their experience in the program beginning with the Welcome Week events at the outset of their first year. During her time in the Program, Madison Mullen ('15) served on the Steering Committee twice, as Publicity Co-Coordinator and then as Human Resources Co-Coordinator. The latter experience is one of her favorite not just in the Leadership Program but in her four years at American University (AU).

As Human Resources Co-Coordinator, she challenged her peers to engage in difficult, yet essential, conversations with one another and, ultimately, with themselves. Watching students grow with one another through honest and revelatory conversation has been "rewarding beyond measure," Mullen shared.

For Mullen's sophomore social action project, she started an oral history project entitled "The Privilege Project," to examine and expand definitions of power and privilege within American culture. The project's culminating event had an audience of more than 60 people, which came out to listen to 12 AU students speak about their identities. Her social action project helped her better understand her passions and interests, which ultimately led her to want to examine privilege in other settings.

This year the graduating class is working to create a magazine, detailing their experiences within the Program and lessons they have learned, to pass on to future Leadership students: *The Torch - Illuminating Leadership Through Experience*. In Mullen's article in *The Torch*, she reflects on how much she learned about vulnerability, personal connection and courageous leadership.

She examines the impact that shame and fear of disconnection had on her life and her leadership ability. "To me, leadership means connecting meaningfully with those around you. It means showing up fully so others can, too. None of this is easy work, but it's certainly worth it."

Similar to her Leadership peers, Jasmine Jones ('15) attributes much of her achievements directly to the Leadership Program. Jones shares that being in the Program has "helped to give [her] the confidence to tackle any problem that [she] desire[s] to address." Jones is looking forward to transitioning from academia to the workforce,

where she will begin her journey in the public health and medical sector. After gaining a couple years of professional experience, Jones is determined to attend medical school to become a family physician with a specialization in rural medicine.

"This time of year is so bittersweet," Program Director Margaret Marr commented. "I am extremely proud of each and every one of our students. They have given so much to both their communities and their growth as leaders. All that they have accomplished as a result has prepared them well for their wonderful journeys that lie ahead. Though it is hard to say goodbye to our seniors, we welcome them as alumni and look forward to the entering class of 2019!"

AT A GLANCE

of the 32 graduates...

Internships Completed 132

40% Graduating with Latin Honors.

In four years, the class has earned **33 merit awards**, including two Presidential Scholars.

Leadership Positions Held 96

14,000
Hours of Service