"Lead the Way: What Exactly is Leadership Studies?"

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In the fall of 2012, my mother and I toured the beautiful University of Richmond campus alongside a dozen other nervous high school seniors, inquisitive parents and one top-notch admissions tour guide. The tour guide introduced herself as a sophomore from New Jersey (shocking, I know), who was majoring in leadership studies through the Jepson School with a minor in Business Management. My mom looked at me curiously, suggesting that she didn’t fully understand this girl’s academic agenda, and I noticed a lot of the other parents had similar expressions on their faces. Luckily, no one on the tour decided to question this girl’s life decisions by asking her the question most of us were thinking – what on Earth is leadership studies? And how or why would you major in it? However, while we were stopped beside Westhampton Lake (tour guides at Richmond are not subtle in forcing the campus’ beauty onto unsuspecting tourists) to hear some fun facts about the surrounding buildings, a rather Richmond-esque father assaulted the tour guide with one of his many hard-hitting questions of the day: “So what do you think you’re gonna be doing with a degree in Leadership studies?” he asked in a judgmental tone. The tour guide blushed and seemed dumbfounded by the question. Surely this couldn’t have been the first time she had been asked this, but like most Jepson students know, we all sometimes struggle to respond to this specific question. The confusion as to what a leadership degree entails is echoed all around campus, and Jepson students have had to prepare their pitch for their major accordingly.

If Julian Hayter from the Jepson faculty were on that tour, he would have had his response to that question loaded and ready to go. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to have a class with Dr. Hayter knows that his response to the question, “What are you going to do with a degree in leadership studies?” is brilliant and as equally condescending as that question is in the first place. Dr. Hayter would say, “You simply lack creativity, my friend,” meaning there is a plethora of opportunities for graduates with a degree in leadership studies and other liberal arts degrees. In looking at data from Jepson alumni, it is clear that Dr. Hayter is absolutely right: leadership majors don’t all become senators or congressmen, just as psychology majors don’t all become therapists or psychoanalysts. Jepson alumni are scattered not only all over the country and world, but also throughout dozens of different industries.

Kerstin Soderlund, associate dean for student and external affairs, frequently says that students can do anything they desire with a Jepson degree. “Our students work in every field and industry,” she said. “Jepson is small but mighty.” And mighty it is. Looking at one 3-year period (meaning three different Jepson classes), 19 percent of Jepson alumni are working in nonprofits or social services, 17 percent in education, 11 percent in consulting, 11 percent in marketing and sales, 7 percent in advertising and public relations and 4-6 percent in finance, healthcare, government and journalism, according to data provided by Soderlund. From the Jepson Class of 2015 alone, students have taken jobs at companies like Jaffe Communications, The Advisory Board Company, KPMG, Deloitte Consulting, Integrity Management Consulting, Sotheby’s, Barclays, Mercedes Benz USA, and White Board Advisors, which was actually started by a Jepson alum. Soderlund emphasized that Jepson students often pair their major with another one on campus, but there are also “leadership studies students with just the major who go off and live successful lives being gainfully employed,” she said with pride.

An example of one of Jepson’s successful alums, Ken Kraper from the Class of 2004 has worked to support the federal government for almost 10 years, first as a consultant and contractor and now as a federal employee. As a consultant, Kraper said his job was, “anything but routine, and required flexibility, adaptability to new environments and an intense focus on client relationships and customer service.” He was a manager at Booz Allen, which he believes added yet another layer of helping others with their client delivery and navigating daily and yearly performance goals. “Sup
porting Department of Defense and Homeland Security clients simultaneously also required a lot of movement,” Kraper said, “from the Pentagon, to DHS headquarters, to our corporate offices...sometimes all in one day.” Kraper also said that at times he would be sitting at a computer cranking out client deliverables, and other times he would be participating in or facilitating client meetings or reviewing contract performance to ensure that they were delivering on time, under budget and of the highest quality. He stressed that he continued to work in a fast-paced and, at times, unpredictable environment.

When I asked Ken how he thought Jepson courses potentially enhanced his abilities to perform in his career, he said:

“A lot of people define success, particularly in a sales or consulting field, as being able to win the most business, bring in the most money, or expand the company’s footprint. Making money is something anyone can be trained to do. Doing right by your clients is a far more complex and complicated task.”

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Kramer added that he was far more equipped than his peers to break down and solve different types of problems for different groups of people to challenge them, grow them, and demonstrate respect for “who they are and what they wish to be.” Kraper said that Critical Thinking, Strategic Leadership, Communicating and Leading, and Conflict Resolution had been some of his favorite courses while at Jepson. He was a double major in Leadership studies and International Studies, but he thought it would have been wonderful if Richmond had an international studies minor so he could have focused a bit more intensively on his Jepson studies. “Jepson has found a unique way to teach skills—or
an enhanced sensitivity to them— that most people in the public and private sector often consider to be more innate or intrinsic, unable to be learned,” he said. “There’s a huge sell to who and what we are as Jepson students to the world beyond Richmond’s campus, and we have such an incredible opportunity to share something unique with those whom we interact.”

I think Jepson students, faculty and alumni would all agree with Krapar on the value of a Jepson education, and if you disagreed with us, we would reduce our cognitive dissonance to the point that your disagreement no longer falls within our latitude of acceptance, according to concepts learned in my Theories and Models of Leadership class.

Sarah Tondorf, who graduated in 2009, was a leadership minor with a major in history. She currently is a senior associate at Pricewaterhouse Coopers’s Public Sector Advisory Practice, where she consults with federal agency clients in Washington D.C. Her subject of expertise at PwC is human capital, and she advises clients on how they can more effectively recruit, retain and reward their people in order to meet overall business objectives and performance goals. In addition to her day-to-day work, which involves helping developing new trainings, eLearnings and professional development frameworks, she mentors newer employees. She also helps with internal PwC business development work by contributing to proposals, doing market research and helping to write leadership pieces on selected topics that are relevant to the government.

Tondorf said that the format of the assignments at Jepson had been extremely helpful for her real-world experiences. “Round table discussions, group papers and group presentations do not end when you graduate from UR,” she wrote to me. “For me, they became a big part of my day-to-day work.” She further said that in the workplace, leaders leverage different styles of leadership and power at different points and for different situations, a real world interplay of LDST 300 models. She also stressed the power of ethics and that “to have a sustainable business and happy people, you must make ethics and integrity a priority.” It is no surprise that she said that Ethics, Group Dynamics, and Theories and Models were among her favorite courses taken at Jepson.

Lastly, as a graduate of the most recent Jepson class, Hannah Hayes is currently working for Deloitte Consulting in Washington, D.C. Hayes, who majored in leadership studies and minored in business, is a business analyst for Deloitte’s federal consulting practice where she works on a project team to serve the various business needs of the federal government. Right now she is supporting the strategic management office of USPS to help them reach their goals across the entire company. “On a day-to-day basis I assist the team in organizing notes, creating Powerpoint decks to brief upper level management, and am starting to take ownership of the quarterly reporting process for the strategic initiatives,” Hayes said.

Hayes also commended Jepson’s emphasis on critical thinking. “Because it’s interdisciplinary, Jepson forces you to look at a problem from several different angles and be open to a variety of view points in solving the biggest issues of the federal government,” she said. Jepson taught Hayes to think critically, and she still uses some of the research tools and methodologies when tasked with a problem that she learned in classes like The Meaning of Work with Joanne Ciulla, she said.

As I am a double major in leadership studies and journalism, I am constantly challenged in the ways I interpret situations and problems as well as how to solve them analytically. Jepson students take classes that range in focus from social sciences to philosophy to history to one that focuses solely on critical thinking. Jepson students analyze ethics and engage themselves in the broader community through courses like Justice and Civil Society and Leadership in Organizations. We have a mandatory police ride-along and a broad internship requirement that allows us to explore career options in almost any field we can imagine. Jepson students are also exposed to speakers who are revolutionizing their fields of study or work.

If we can do that, I am sure we can also come up with responses to easy questions like “What can you do with a leadership degree?”

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