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KEITH GARBUTT

# “Ah well! I am their leader; I really ought to follow them”: Leading Student Leaders

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the privileges of being the dean of an honors college or the director of an honors program is that you are allowed to work with some of the brightest, most motivated, and most innovative students in your institution. One of our responsibilities when working with these individuals is to provide them with an environment in which they can develop their skills and potential as leaders. This important element of leadership in honors is one item missing from Rew Godow’s essay. When I was thinking on this topic, a line came to mind from Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera “The Gondoliers” (Gilbert 1889). In the song, which with Gilbert’s usual wit and sarcasm spears appointed military leaders, we hear of the leadership style of the Duke of Plaza-Toro:

He led his regiment from behind—  
He found it less exciting

Not a very heroic stance, yet in many ways leading from behind is precisely what one needs to do in order to facilitate the developing skills of leadership among one’s students.

How can we ensure that the students who are part of our programs actually have the opportunities to develop their own leadership skills as part of the honors experience? There are at least four ways we can help leaders emerge from our programs.

## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

The first way we can help develop leadership is to create opportunities. Make sure that there exists within the program areas where students can be leaders, where they can take on responsibility for components of the program, social or academic, so that students can enhance the program and get the experience they need to develop their leadership skills.

“AH WELL! I AM THEIR LEADER; I REALLY OUGHT TO FOLLOW THEM”

When we structure the governance of our programs, we should be cognizant of the roles available to our students because different structural models can have different impacts on students. The Honors Council model of a governing board of faculty and students can, especially if the faculty do not have strictly limited and short terms of service, lead students to feel like second-class citizens and to be unwilling to challenge faculty with new ideas. A model with separate student and faculty advisory boards can alleviate this problem and allow for more student participation, but it also runs the risk, if not carefully managed, of making students feel they are given only trivial topics for consideration.

There are other ways one can integrate students into the governance structure of a college or program. You can set up student associations where the leaders are elected from the student body and act as the students' representatives directly to the dean or director in much the same way the leader of a student government association represents the student body to a president or provost. Creating these sorts of student leadership committees and positions within a college or program allows students to develop their skills as leaders of the student body and, perhaps more importantly, to be responsible to the constituency they represent, not simply to themselves.

## **FACILITATING IDEAS**

The second way to assist leader development is to be open to and ready to facilitate good ideas. One of the joys and challenges of being in charge of honors students is that from time to time a student will walk through the door and say, “Hey, I have this idea, do you think we could . . . ?” It is amazing how many times one is able to say “Yes.” The Duke of Plaza-Toro school of leadership suggests getting out of the way; however, there is no guarantee it will be less exciting—sometimes in fact it is nerve wracking! We need to give students permission to move forward with sometimes extremely ambitious projects. The trick is to be a mentor and behind-the-scenes facilitator of students' endeavors; the occasional phone call to a colleague or senior administrator can make a big difference. Doing this is a risk: you might be allowing students to move forward to an outcome as glorious (in its own way) as Wellington's victory at Waterloo, or you might be watching the “Charge of the Light Brigade.” Regardless of the outcome, you need to facilitate such opportunities if you are to build leadership skills in your students.

## **SETTING EXPECTATIONS**

The third way we can help is to set clear expectations. Whether working with appointed or elected students or those students bringing their own projects, it is vital to be clear about the parameters under which they will work.

## KEITH GARBUTT

Clear expectations, challenging but not impossible goals, and careful but not intrusive monitoring can go a long way in facilitating student success. It is sometimes important to leaven the enthusiasm of the students by ensuring they have a clear understanding of the appropriate time frame needed for a project to be completed. We all like instant gratification, and research on the “millennials” suggests they are used to it and expect it (Howe and Strauss 2000). However, experience teaches us that we must sometimes take a longer-term view.

### TOLERATING FAILURE

The final way we can help leaders develop is to be aware that from time to time we must expect and allow failure to occur. It is trite but true that one does not always learn from one’s success but one always learns from one’s failures. Tolerating failure is probably the hardest thing for any leader to do, particularly those of us who lead honors colleges and programs. We are by our very nature success-oriented individuals who have high expectations of our students because in general they meet them. We also tend to have high expectations of ourselves and have a hard time accepting our own failures, so allowing students the room to fail can be a significant challenge to us. However, the lessons learned from a project gone awry may, for the students involved, be far more beneficial in the long run than a success. If we are willing from time to time to allow failure to happen, take a deep breath, help pick up the pieces, and ensure that students understand what they have gained from the experience, we will find we have a program where students are active, where they learn, and where they garner wisdom.

### CONCLUSION

Happily, the failures are less frequent than the successes. In general, if deans and directors of honors provide the opportunities, give the background support, and create the environment in which student leadership can thrive, then good ideas and leaders will come forward, and student leaders will succeed. As such leaders improve the programs we lead, we will find ourselves in the position to quote with pride the nineteenth-century French politician, statesman, and sometime revolutionary Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin: “Eh! Je suis leur chef, il fallait bien les suivre”—“Ah well! I am their leader, I really ought to follow them” (de Mirecourt 1857).

So stand at the back, grit your teeth, and let them charge; you never know what remarkable things your students will produce. The essence of a good leader in this administrative role is that of facilitator, mentor, and occasionally sympathetic ear.

“AH WELL! I AM THEIR LEADER; I REALLY OUGHT TO FOLLOW THEM”

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