Leadership Potential Not the Same as Academic Potential

By Paul B. Beran

Leadership is one of the most difficult topics to teach. Not coincidentally, it’s also one of the most important. No matter the field, nearly every graduate will be challenged to step into a leadership role during their career, whether it be supervising employees or leading a change initiative.

When I became chancellor at the University of Arkansas—Fort Smith (UAFS) 12 years ago, I wanted to prioritize integrating leadership into the university, but I did not want to do it from the traditional academic approach. One of the faults of scholarship is that it’s an inch wide and a mile deep. The qualities and traits most cherished in leaders—strong decision-making, creativity, innovation and direct communication—aren’t always qualities rewarded in academic settings.

One of our most sought-after scholarships at UAFS is the Chancellor’s Leadership Council (CLC) program. Each class of students enrolls in a three-hour leadership course that I teach the fall semester of their freshman year that includes a high expectation of campus involvement.

Instead of seeking traditional honor students with high ACT scores, the selection process I use is to look for students who have taken on formal and informal leadership roles, whether through church, school or some extracurricular group, and who demonstrate the most leadership potential.

Jordan Hale, one of the program’s many success stories, was a first-generation student with an average academic resume. But he had served as class president at his high school and in officer positions with different organizations and demonstrated the potential to become a transformative leader.

Without a CLC scholarship, Jordan may not have gone to college at all. But through the CLC scholarship, he was able to attend UAFS and became a prominent student leader on our campus. He became the first John Paul Hammerschmidt Fellow, a fellowship that sent him to work in Congressman Steve Womack’s office for a summer, and became president of the UAFS chapter of Kappa Alpha Order.

After working in the private sector, Jordan returned to UAFS to work in our Admissions Office. After successfully leading our admissions efforts in an interim capacity, I appointed Jordan as the Director of Government and Community Relations for UAFS last year, a position in which he is already excelling.

Indeed, many of the leaders we’ve developed through the CLC are just like Jordan. They came to college with a decent but not outstanding academic resume. But they demonstrate great potential for leadership, and we honed and developed that potential over their time at UAFS.

Graduates of my CLC have gone on to all manner of professional and graduate schools at prestigious institutions, great careers and prominent leadership roles in professional and civic organizations.

Jordan and the numerous other graduates from my CLC classes do not have me to thank for their successes. What I did was give them opportunity to prove themselves. Approximately half of our student body is Pell eligible, and just under half are first-generation students. If we look at our potential leaders through the lens of just those who ace their classes and are excellent test-takers, we miss out on a broad pool of potential leaders who have just as much to offer as their academically superlative peers.

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