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For immediate release

Developing students' leadership potential (Why I'm optimistic about today's high school seniors)

By Ben R. Sells

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Note: Lisa and I have four adult children and when each were teenagers (at one time there were three in that stage together), it was often easier to see their problems rather than their potential. When I engage with today's high school seniors exploring Ouachita, it's their God-given potential that gives me hope for our country. Following are some remarks I recently shared with high school seniors about leadership.

In my early 30s, I spent seven years in a Christian nonprofit with work in 120 countries. My job involved traveling the world to direct a leadership development program for its top 1,000 people. For me, it was a time of deep learning about leadership, and I want to share three insights from that experience for your consideration: (1) Why leadership matters, (2) What leadership is and (3) How to develop your leadership.

Why leadership matters.

I'm 60 years old, but I clearly remember the spring of my senior year in high school. I grew up in a small town in Missouri. After spending a week in Washington D.C., I returned home dreaming about a career in politics and government. I thought it could be a meaningful way to make a difference. (I also had decided to give up my dream of being an NBA basketball player given I'm five foot five.)

To help me take the next step in that dream, I spent the summer volunteering full-time for a little-known state-wide candidate. He didn't win the race, but I loved the experience. As a college student, I became involved in local politics, took a semester off to work on another campaign, and three years after graduating from college managed a state-wide campaign for that same candidate – and he won.

I went to work for him as the education advisor. The experience gave me early leadership opportunities and an appreciation for how politics and government need people of Christian faith. Along the way, my dream of making a difference evolved – and eventually brought me to Ouachita.

What are you dreaming about?

It wasn't until my high school senior year that I began dreaming about my future. What are you dreaming about? For college. Your career. Family. Where you might live. In this room, many of you are beginning to dream about ways to make a difference in this world.

Where does this desire to make a difference come from? It comes from parents, teachers, pastors and others.

From experiences. From the satisfaction of helping people. I want to suggest that your desire, your dream to make a difference also comes from another source.

One of the wisest people to ever live, king Solomon, wrote “God has planted eternity in your hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). What does this mean? It means the God of the universe made you. He wants to use you and your talents and experiences to become the person you were created to be. We were designed to do something beyond ourselves with purpose and meaning, to live lives that make a difference – that’s “eternity in your hearts.”

Many years ago, a wise Christian leader asked me this question: “What needs to be done that’s not being done, that if it were done, would make a significant difference?”

We live in a world that’s both wonderful and wicked. Ultimately, I believe God will make our broken world right. He invites us to follow him, to join him and use our lives to make the world better. The process of translating our dreams into reality, as part of God’s larger redemptive purpose, involves many factors, and one factor is leadership.

And that’s why leadership matters. I encourage you to dream a larger dream for your life and to put it into action. God can use you now. You can utilize your college experience to turn dreams into reality. Ouachita students do that in many ways.

Dream and do to make a difference. Know that your dreams will change. Be faithful and go forward, and God can use all your successes and setbacks for your good and the good of others.

What is leadership?

If leadership matters, then “what is leadership?” There are many definitions, but I believe the following gets at the essence: “leadership is the ability to influence others.” Let’s consider two key words: ability and influence. Because leadership is an ability, we can improve. Because it is about influence, it applies to all of us.

Let’s think about ability.

Our perception of leadership is shaped by culture’s focus on well-known people, so we might believe that leadership is about personality – that leaders are born, not made. It’s not true. Leadership is more about ability than personality.

For example, there's a belief that effective leadership requires someone who is extraverted, rather than introverted. People who are extraverted tend to be energized by the exterior world: they would rather be around people – and the more the better – than be by themselves. People who are introverted tend to be energized by the interior world – being by themselves or a few people.

Extraverted people tend to more easily engage with people, an important part of leadership. However, they tend to enjoy talking more than listening and need to grow in their ability to be better listeners, an important leadership skill. Introverted people tend to more easily listen to others, which helps their leadership. Yet, they often need to grow in their ability to engage people.

God certainly uses our personality for developing our leadership. We aren't designed to be strong in all areas, which is why we need other people. At the same time, we can grow in our leadership ability.

Let's think about influence.

Our perception of leadership is also shaped by our culture's focus on people in powerful positions. Yet, leadership is more about influence than position. Influence is the capacity to affect the character, development or behavior of someone or something. Influence might be very public or very private, but we all exert influence. Let me illustrate with a story.

There's a friend of Ouachita who is 80 years old. He grew up very poor and was the first person in his family to attend college. He created a successful business employing hundreds of people; has been financially generous to many organizations, including Ouachita; and he helped pass a law and mobilize resources in Arkansas that has resulted in significant efforts to prevent the sexual abuse of children. He's a person of influence and the influence is public.

His older sister recently died. At the service, he talked at length about her. He told how she delayed going to college, got a job and helped pay his college expenses. How after his father died, his sister helped care for his mother as well as their youngest sibling who had a disability. She served as a public school teacher, never married and was a beloved aunt to her brother's children. For the last 20 years of her life, he bought her a house near him and took care of her financially. My friend talked about how his success and accomplishments were due to his sister. She was a person of influence, though it wasn't very public. He and she both exercised influence, but in different ways.

Leadership is the ability to influence others. It's more about ability than personality, and you can get better. It's more about influence than a position, and we all exercise influence.

How to develop leadership?

You've heard why leadership matters and what leadership is, so how do you develop your leadership? As I worked with 1,000 leaders over those seven years, there seemed to be two kinds of experiences that especially developed their leadership.

First, they developed their leadership by taking new opportunities. Sometimes it came from changing jobs and other times by taking on a special assignment as part of their job. In both cases, it was the act of doing something new that stretched them, and as they responded, it developed their leadership. Second, they talked about how overcoming a challenge, personal or professional, stretched them. As they responded, it too developed their leadership. In other words, doing something new or hard is often the catalyst for developing your leadership.

As a student, that can occur as you study something new or hard; as you develop new relationships and work through difficult ones; as you take on a new position in an organization. If you allow it, your life can become a laboratory for developing your leadership. Let me try to illustrate. Hopefully, we'll never live through a pandemic again, but it provided new problems to solve and challenges to overcome.

In late April 2020, about six weeks into the pandemic, we made the decision to be fully in-person for August 2020 classes. At that time, few universities made that decision. But we believe that the Ouachita undergraduate residential education and experience is at its best when in person. We didn't know how to do it or if we could, but we had to try.

A year later, only about 5% of the country's college students had a fully in-person experience like Ouachita. It was certainly the biggest leadership challenge I had ever faced. It illustrated three primary areas how people develop their leadership.

Developing your leadership includes growing in knowledge.

Someone once said to me, "God can't lead you based on what you don't know." During the pandemic, especially at the beginning, there was so much we didn't know. But we had to gain knowledge to lead the university. We gained knowledge in several ways.

We read. For example, a leading public health organization published a 600-item check-list to make it possible to do college in person. So, in the summer of 2020, we worked through every item on the list.

The Book of Proverbs in the Bible tells us that wisdom comes from good counselors, so we sought counsel. I formed a group of six administrators, and for the first seven months, we met every morning at 8:15 to hear reports and solve problems. We had lots of information, often confusing, and we needed wisdom.

We forged new lines of communication by forming a special partnership with students. We identified leaders of student organizations and formed a 150-member "President's Leadership Circle." Every morning they got a brief email from me with updates, an encouraging word and request for feedback, which provided information that helped us make better decisions.

If you want to develop your leadership, be a student for life.

Developing your leadership includes growing in skills.

Effective leadership requires communicating well. Often, we under communicate. In a crisis, like a pandemic when there was so much confusing information, we knew we had to elevate the frequency and quality of communication. We had to be factual and fast, to be comprehensive and careful. We had to build confidence that we could be in person when others weren't. If you want to develop your leadership, identify areas to become more skillful, and communication is a good place to start.

Developing your leadership includes forming values.

Crisis reveals character, and the pandemic tested some of our values. One of my responsibilities is raising money for Ouachita. Our Christian mission shapes our approach to fundraising. By that, I mean our role is to be faithful in sharing about Ouachita with people who want to help but to trust the outcomes to the Lord.

We don't apply pressure or employ guilt to shame people into giving. That's easier to say, do and believe in the good times. But what about in a crisis? When the pandemic came in March 2020, we still had a lot of money to raise before the academic year ended that May.

We had financial uncertainty about the future, but understood that our donors did, also. So, in the spring of 2020, we made a decision: we didn't ask for gifts. Instead, we sent a personal letter to all 13,000 donors, reporting how we were responding to the pandemic, expressing gratitude for their past giving, acknowledging that they faced financial uncertainty, asking them to pray for Ouachita and asking how we could pray for them. Based on our values, it seemed the right decision.

It tested us. Before the pandemic, we would say “we trust the Lord for the outcomes,” but would we really trust him in a time of great need? It was humbling and inspiring as people gave just what we needed. If you want to develop your leadership, form biblical values and, when tests come, trust the Lord.

Conclusion

When I look at you, it's a room full of students marked by academic and personal achievement; you have so much promise. I believe God wants to develop and use you to serve His purposes in your generation in special ways. It's why leadership matters. Because it's about *ability* and *influence*, you can become better. And by God's grace, if you will *embrace new opportunities* and *seek to solve problems*, you will develop your leadership potential.



By Dr. Ben R. Sells, Ouachita president