



The Power Is in Them

Experiencing leadership at BYU-Idaho

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A colleague from the BYU-Idaho Admissions office recently forwarded me an e-mail exchange he observed between two individuals in a student-led program called Student Ambassadors. The program, which enables current students to interact with prospective or newly-admitted students, allows volunteers from all backgrounds to provide practical assistance and share their thoughts regarding the BYU-Idaho experience.

A freshman, working as one of these volunteer Student Ambassadors, had contacted a young woman who was researching the opportunities offered at BYU-Idaho. The young woman eagerly responded to the ambassador and explained in her e-mail reply that she was starting her senior year in high school and wondered how she could be prepared to enter BYU-Idaho when the time came. She asked for information regarding admissions standards and scholarships and concluded her response by asking for advice on how to “get the most out of the spiritual side” of BYU-Idaho.

Very quickly the e-mail exchange turned into a conversation—the Student Ambassador sharing practical and personal advice and both individuals sharing information about their interests, families, and hobbies. The young woman expressed her growing excitement to experience college as she received valuable information first-hand from a BYU-Idaho freshman motivated by the desire to help.

Another colleague recently described for me some experiences in a student-led program in the Student Financial Aid office. Student leaders and volunteers in this program work in conjunction with full-time staff to teach and counsel other students regarding principles of financial responsibility. This colleague described a conversation in which the student director of this program, with tears in his eyes, shared his deep gratitude for a leadership experience that helped him grow in understanding and leadership skill.

The Student Ambassadors and financial aid programs are only two of many student-led programs that are emerging as part of a culture driven by BYU-Idaho’s emerging Student Leadership Model. This model is a process and system that helps guide the creation and management of programs designed to both develop

students and bless the university. If you walk around BYU-Idaho, you will see a lot of activity that may seem typical to any university campus. But if you look closer, you will see students acting in capacities that may seem unusual because of the responsibility they are given, the visibility of their service, and even the importance of their roles.

You will find students facilitating courses on different subjects, students providing insights in university administrative councils, students organizing large events, students running an outdoor trip, students managing focus groups about a university initiative, students organizing a service field trip, and more. Each of them operates in venues where the most powerful learning about leadership actually takes place as the student experiences a leadership role.

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The word *leadership* invites images that are unique and personal to each individual. Some visualize principles taught in business boardrooms, military institutions, or academic halls. Others may visualize a person with capabilities and instincts that are seemingly woven into that individual’s DNA.

However, many students at BYU-Idaho will probably tell you that leadership is taught a little differently in this place. President Clark described it when he said:

I like to summarize our mission with two words. The first is *disciple*. Our mission, our very purpose, is to educate, develop, and prepare disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.... The second word is *leader*. When I use that word I have in mind leadership with a small “L.” This is the kind of leadership we need in every part of every kind of organization in our society. We want our students to provide the kind of leadership that serves, and inspires—first and foremost in their families and in the Church, in their communities, and in their work. (President Kim B. Clark, Inaugural Response, BYU-Idaho, Oct. 11, 2005)

Developing these qualities of leadership with a small “L” isn’t so much about the number or structure of programs as it is about

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understanding, harnessing, and developing the universally present divine potential of each individual. This power in each person is the foundation upon which leadership can be developed. The Savior described this universal capability in terms of the agency that is given to each son or daughter of God. He described how people should do “many things of their own free will... for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves” (D&C 58: 27-28; emphasis added).

My recent experience with Student Ambassadors was one of countless confirmations of simple but powerful principles I have learned about leadership in my time at BYU–Idaho. When I first came to campus as an advisor in the Activities Program, I became acquainted with several student leaders in an area where students create a variety of music and talent events for other students. Although the volunteers I worked with had different ages, backgrounds, talents, and personalities, they all seemed so capable. They handled every aspect of planning and running their events. They made the contacts, toiled, created, managed, taught, executed, and even fumbled a little as they planned their activities. They were proactive, energetic, and eager to do good things.

I soon realized that while proactive and talented students might certainly be inclined to seek leadership, many of my students weren’t necessarily in these positions because they were so capable, but that they were developing capabilities because of their service in these volunteer positions. Many had been invited to fill leadership positions and had, in their words, uncharacteristically responded positively to the invitation.

Though they displayed a wide range of abilities, the very act of responding to the invitation became the common step for many of them in discovering some important but perhaps latent skills. This realization helped me understand that the potential for leadership, growth, and achievement is divine and universal. It is developed and strengthened when it is exercised. While people may be at different points on a leadership development continuum, inviting somebody to take action and then giving them the freedom to act will foster development that needs only to be given an opportunity to happen.

While it may be simple to just say “they’ll learn leadership by leading,” there are some principles that have become clear as they have distilled across student-led BYU–Idaho organizations. These principles are the foundation for the processes and practices of the Student Leadership Model, and they speak to the way Heavenly Father has designed His sons and daughters. Many campus organizations have found that the highest quality development occurs in students when student-led programs are structured in a way to allow them to experience the following principles:

Principle One: They Learn by Study and by Faith

As President Clark described, learning by faith “requires, but is more than, teaching by the Spirit. To learn by faith, individuals need opportunities to take action” (President Kim B. Clark, Inaugural Response, BYU–Idaho, Oct. 11, 2005). Regardless of the setting, they need opportunities to apply the principles they are taught in order to deepen their learning. Knowing that the Spirit is the true teacher, these young people will rely on the Holy Ghost as they exercise their faith through application and action.

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Principle Two: They Act Rather than be Acted Upon

Individuals will grow and develop as disciple-leaders when given the opportunity to act for themselves rather than be acted upon (2 Nephi 2:14, 16). When people fill roles where they are accountable for decisions and feel the real success and the real challenge of their responsibility, it helps them see more clearly the weight of their power as agents. They will develop confidence in their abilities and understand the power of righteously using their agency. They will gain a greater understanding of accountability for their actions and the diligence required in the performance of their duties.

Principle 3: They Take Responsibility to Innovate and Improve

Individuals who are proactively engaged in their own learning and leadership experiences will have freedom to explore possibilities and create new solutions. Because of this freedom and because they are action-oriented, they will innovate to improve processes, systems, organizations, tools, and methods. Young leaders must be given real responsibilities, but must also be given the freedom to innovate and improve within those stewardships. This will come through inspiration, exploration, discovery, trial, error, and success.

Principle 4: They Teach in Order to Learn

People deepen their understanding and knowledge of principles and subjects as they prepare to teach them and then participate in the act of teaching others (D&C 88:77-78). In a setting where individuals teach and learn with each other, a collaborative learning effort takes place in which a variety of backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, and perspectives are shared to contribute to greater understanding for both teachers and learners.

Principle 5: They Build those Around Them

When leaders have experiences that help them understand the process of growing and developing personal and spiritual qualities, they will influence others to develop and grow as well (D&C 81:5). Through personal interaction, individuals will empower their peers, teach them, guide them, and challenge them to stretch and become better, more capable versions of themselves. Those who have experienced this type of leadership will be prepared and willing to help others have similar experiences.

I have watched hundreds of student leaders come and go in my time at BYU-Idaho, and I cherish the opportunity to hear many alumni tell me that their experience at BYU-Idaho prepared them in powerful ways they didn't fully comprehend during their time here. They serve in new callings, work in different careers, and have great influence in their families and communities.

Many of them realize, only in retrospect, that being placed in a position where they were required to tap into their potential to make decisions, be stretched, and learn by faith was the most important factor in their growth. Some of them attribute their growth to the programs, advisors, or circumstances; but I am constantly reminded that the programs merely invited them to exercise this power to change in ways Heavenly Father already had planned. The power was truly "in them." ∞