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R4D3: Leadership Development: Presidential Scholar Mentorship

In my senior year of high school, I spent the winter applying to as many scholarships as I could, some exclusive to my high school, my state, and my prospective colleges. I applied for the Presidential Scholarship through Minnesota State. This scholarship is meant for high school seniors who will be attending Minnesota State who rank in the top 10% of their class and/or have a cumulative GPA of 3.8 or higher. I first submitted personal essays, from there I was selected to move onto the interviews and was eventually selected to receive the scholarship.

Beyond the financial support, the presidential scholarship also sets up a mentorship process between the students awarded and esteemed faculty. Each presidential scholar is given one or two mentors each year to connect with. My first mentor was Dr. Jean Harr, Dean of the College of Education. I was able to connect with her at a donor banquet and a luncheon. I was also paired with Dean of Library Services Chris Corley and Dr. Brenda Flannery, Vice President for Student Success and Engagement. Going into these experiences I felt some nervousness meeting a new person. I was unsure what to expect from the mentorship as there are not many guidelines for the conversation. The connection you facilitate is up to you.

There are two roles in the mentorship program- the mentor and the mentee. The mentor has strengths in education, experience, and overall wisdom. All my mentors have extensive education. They also all have experience in their role and have been very successful moving up the ranks and into higher positions. Lastly, they all have unique experience and wisdom. Their

unique experience allows them to share valuable information. The strengths of the mentor have allowed them to give me advice in conversations applicable to my future. I have been able to have conversations with them surrounding higher education, what they have learned when working with and managing others, and how to keep a personal growth mindset. These conversations have been inspiring and encouraging as a mentee.

As the mentee, my role is not focused on my strengths, but more on my weaknesses and how they can improve. Some weaknesses of mine according to StrengthsFinder are staying with familiar people, feeling stressed after networking, and needing motivation to reach my goals. The mentorship program addresses my weakness in wanting to stay with familiar people because it gives me an opportunity and forces me to meet and develop a connection. I also have to face the feeling of stress after these networking opportunities. After mentorship lunches I do feel overwhelmed because I am trying my best to make a good impression and have a successful relationship. I think this weakness of mine is improving and I think of it as tolerance. The more I encounter it, the better I will be in dealing with it. Lastly, needing motivation to reach my goals. My mentors are motivating in just being themselves; I hear how they have worked towards where they are today and feel inspired. Beyond that, they are also motivating in our conversations, praising some of my accomplishments which I value and helping me realize that I can reach my goals.

My mentors talk about their roles as leaders and what has been effective and ineffective in their experience. They have given specific examples to learn from. The common theme I have learned from them about ineffective leadership is how it is hard to lead when you do not have a connection with the people you are leading. They have said that it is important to see the people under you as the people they are- not just their role. I have also

learned that to be an effective leader you need to also see the value in those around you- even if they are 'below' you. My mentors have said that they have learned so much from the people they work with and have gained a new lens in their work. They have also shared how valuing those that they are leading contributes to better relationships and a positive environment. Lastly, and very importantly, I learned that to be an effective leader you must be open to change and growth. My mentors have shared their route to the position they are in today, and it was not always what they expected. Whether it was moving to a new region, pursuing another degree, or simply accepting a job role they would have never expected, it is all possible because of the openness to change. The changes they have experienced have allowed them to learn and grow and be effective leaders because they are not afraid, and they do not shy away.

My personal leadership philosophy before this experience was not extremely well developed. I knew leaders had to have positive connections with others and some authority to unite others, but I wasn't sure of the balance. Before, the leadership experiences that stand out most are the negative ones. I think of leaders I have seen and experienced that are too controlling and do not value those under them. I also think of the leaders I have seen who have good relationships but are not able to unite and inspire change effectively.

Conversations with my mentors have allowed my leadership philosophy to grow and develop. I have taken what I have valued previously and combined it with what I have learned from my mentors to create an evolved philosophy. I think as a leader you should value those around you and make sure everyone's roles are understood. Work to build an understanding between all people of the roles and that everyone has unique strengths. While everyone understands there is also a respect for roles and authority. Leaders need to understand those

around them so they can inspire and unite them. My personal values also come into play as a leader, I value accountability, independence, and time. I lead in a way that portrays these values strongly but also recognize that everyone holds unique values and strengths.

Leadership is something that will take different forms in my future and my philosophy will change. In the future as a special education teacher, I will be a leader to any paraprofessionals I work with and my students. I will apply what I learned about making connections to paraprofessionals and students and show them I value them by talking to them and connecting personally and showing them, I value their role through praise and thankfulness. Being a relator, I will have to work hard to develop an initial connection with my staff, but once developed I can use it as a strength. Beyond working as a special education teacher, I also hope to take on more leadership roles. Perhaps I will lead a committee or go on to have an administrative role, but I can carry over the same values and what I have learned. Overall, I can also take my mentors to inspiring stories of their growth to motivate my own personal growth. I have seen how an openness to change led to success in my mentor's lives and remember not to shy away.