

## THE UNIVERSITY'S SECRET MISSION

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*What leadership really means and why universities are so effective at producing leaders.*

The University of Wyoming has a secret mission. That mission is to produce leaders. The only part of this statement that should astonish anyone is the word “secret.” Universities clearly produce leaders: just look at every U.S. President in living memory, every cabinet secretary, every general, almost every corporate CEO, every judge, every professor, every schoolteacher.

I call it a secret mission because professors hardly ever acknowledge it. The word “leadership” doesn’t appear in any course syllabus I’ve written in 31 years on the UW faculty, even though I’ve held formal leadership positions for two thirds of that time. Of course, most people don’t expect to learn about leadership in a course on partial differential equations. But the conundrum extends beyond my own discipline. I doubt you spent much time studying leadership in chemistry, English, art, geology, economics, or even political science. Professors feel most at home when we’re cultivating students’ virtuosity in the subject matter. Character traits strike us as risky ground in the classroom.

Now there’s nothing wrong with virtuosity. On the contrary, virtuosity in some dimension is an essential asset to any leader. Generals have to be exemplary soldiers. Conductors must be superb musicians. Deans must prove themselves as accomplished teachers and scholars.

In short, to lead by persuasion — which is the only way to lead effectively and sustainably — you have to walk the walk. More importantly, though, solid competence allows you to focus on other people’s success, instead of worrying about your own. I’ll say more about this idea later.

When isolated, virtuosity is dangerously close to narcissism. When you’re 22 years old and smart, the image of the lonely genius can be incredibly magnetic. This fact notwithstanding, most flashes of idiosyncratic brilliance have limited effect. Society moves forward not when lone wizards enjoy esoteric triumphs but, instead, when people succeed in groups.

If virtuosity is such an incomplete outcome of a university education, why does it carry so much explicit weight? I think there are three reasons. Two of them aren’t very compelling. First, as I’ve suggested, professors think it’s risky to depart from subject-matter expertise in the classroom. In 1940, the American Association of University Professors issued what has become the classic statement on academic freedom. It says:

Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject.

Consider the craftsmanship in this statement. It doesn’t prohibit controversy. It doesn’t forbid discussions about character or leadership. But professors are a cautious lot. I believe the AAUP

statement, for all its painstaking precision, exerts an unintended chilling effect on explicit leadership development. For some of us it's just too risky to stray from the crystalline beauty of the mean value theorem.

Second, leadership is an inherently risky aspiration. One of America's most enigmatic lyricists, Robert Hunter, wrote a sobering line about those who choose to lead: "If you fall, you fall alone. If you should stand, then who's to guide you?"

When you're out in front, there are lonely moments — moments when people look to you for an answer, and you don't have it. There are even lonelier moments, when you stumble, and people don't know how to help. It seems safer just to buckle down, focus on your GPA, and hope you get into Phi Beta Kappa.

But life is risky, and neither of those reasons stands much scrutiny. The third reason for not treating leadership as an explicit part of the curriculum is more justifiable: people just don't learn leadership very well in a classroom. We learn it by taking on the role, far beyond the confines of the lecture hall.

Universities possess what management experts call core competencies, and classroom-based leadership training isn't one of them. I don't mean to dismiss the substantial contributions that co-curricular activities make. I'm just saying that the classroom isn't the right learning environment.

Okay, then, let's set the classroom aside. Should leadership be a required baccalaureate course, delivered in a different setting? To me, the question is debatable. On one hand, several functioning models prove that it's possible. America's military academies make leadership training an explicit and unapologetic part of their missions, and they're spectacularly successful at producing a certain type of leader. On the other hand, that type is pretty narrowly focused, compared with society's broader needs. ROTC programs — which UW proudly hosts — provide an alternative model that lies closer to the spirit of the university. In a free society, there's tremendous value in allowing future leaders, military and otherwise, to experience unfettered intellectual growth and to grasp the value of free inquiry and expression.

One need look no further than Wyoming's borders to conclude that universities are quite successful at producing people who want to lead. But we aren't uniformly successful at instilling in them an enduring respect for the open exchange of ideas. If there's work to be done, it's in this latter arena.

Perhaps we can agree that leadership skills don't easily fit into the credit-bearing curriculum and that outcomes more directly related to core competencies deserve greater attention. Still, if leadership development is part of the mission, maybe it shouldn't be so secret.

There is one side of leadership that a university can impart within its native learning structures: it can explore guiding principles that make good leaders. And, in case UW has let this lesson fall between the cracks, let me take a few moments to reflect on three of these principles.

The first is the most important:

**Leadership is a commitment to the success of the group.**

These 10 words encompass a lot. The key point is to focus on the group, not on yourself. This is one reason why virtuosity is an asset: it frees you to focus on the successes of others. By the same token, virtuosity can be a trap if you treat leadership as just an opportunity to bask in recognition. As a leader, you need to get past the lust for praise and concentrate on how your colleagues are doing.

This first principle refers to success as if its definition is a simple matter. One challenge that any leader faces is to determine — and then to articulate — what constitutes success. Antoine de Saint Exupery had some great advice:

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

You want people to work with their brains and hearts. To define success, craft a vision.

One further aspect of the first principle deserves comment. Your concept of the group must be expansive. When the going gets tough, we all tend to define our groups in cramped and fearful ways. We circle the wagons. We protect turf. In a university setting, departments stop cooperating. Factions develop within departments, who then want to split. The sense of interconnectedness among disciplines deteriorates. Learning suffers. Outside the academy, the consequences can be far worse, as the wars and slaughters of the past century verify. Territoriality is our species' most destructive instinct.

Leadership, success, group: each word carries enough fuel for a lifetime of reflection.

The second principle is shocking only because, sadly, it's not always true:

**Leaders tell the truth.**

You probably know at least one leader who has lied. I'll bet it didn't turn out well. Someday you'll confront circumstances in which the truth is unpopular or in which it reflects poorly on you. You'll be tempted to fabricate a story, to get past the inconvenience.

It won't work. Set aside the obvious ethical argument and consider, the pure pragmatics. If people discover that you're a liar, which is overwhelmingly likely if you are one, then you'll have lost forever their trust — and their willingness to work for you with their brains and hearts.

And you don't have to lie to flout the truth. You can simply cave in to conventional wisdom, instead of thinking for yourself. Your education comes with a responsibility to follow reason and evidence wherever they lead, even when powerful voices demand to hear something else. Don't let your group's success run aground on a fantasy. Tell the truth.

The third principle has a poignant edge:

**It won't last forever.**

The task may be finished. You may decide you've had enough. Someone may force you out. One way or another, the job will end.

Understanding this fact all along can be liberating. Knowing that you'll relinquish the reins someday, you'll be less likely to protect your title at the expense of the group. As a side benefit, you'll be more willing to do what's right, even when it's bound to infuriate someone. It's better to step down because you had the courage to do this than to be asked to go because you made a habit of ducking.

That said, stepping down can be a delicate personal juncture. My best advice here is to cultivate a diversity of passions. Strive for versatility. Ecologists dispute whether any connection exists between diversity and stability in ecosystems. But in the ecology of the self, diversity gives you safe landings: your discipline, your volunteer service, your friends, your family.

I choose these four examples deliberately. Each involves a group in whose success you have a profound stake. In stepping down, you won't stop being a leader; you'll simply adjust your focus. Thus the principles come full circle. No leadership post lasts forever, but a commitment to the success of the group makes you a leader for a lifetime.

That's the short course. Leadership flows from three principles: commitment to the success of the group, scrupulous adherence to the truth, and the versatility needed to navigate the end of the job.

Now let's try to resolve the original question. It may seem a great irony that the American university rewards individual virtuosity, yet we produce leaders. How can we appear to hide part of our mission, yet accomplish it anyway? To wrap up my remarks, I'd like to propose that the academy's success hinges on the very two factors that I've already mentioned several times.

The first is the capacity to inspire virtuosity. A university education equips us with knowledge, habits of thought, and eagerness to learn that we need to succeed, in the huge array of tasks that we face as citizens. This preparation obviates the need to fret about our own prospects for success. It enables us to focus on the success of the group.

The second factor is university's insistence on the free inquiry and open sharing of ideas that any leader in a democratic society must honor. In 1967, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan wrote:

The classroom is peculiarly the 'marketplace of ideas.' The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers truth 'out of a multitude of tongues, rather than through any kind of authoritative selection.'

For Americans, this aspect of leadership development is essential.

Suppose UW had an extra 10 million dollars. I think the greatest return on investment would come in exactly these two areas. Subject-matter rigor and expertise are attributes that all leaders need, that our public rightly expects from us, and that figure prominently in our core competencies. And universities serve as America's safest harbors for free and open inquiry and debate.

I won't deny that we could do a better job if we were a little more explicit about the mission. Not all college graduates escape narcissism. And the evidence is quite clear that not every graduate retains a lasting respect for the marketplace of ideas. We really need to do a better job here. Still, no other institution in America stands so well equipped to address these two critical aspects of leadership. Whatever fine-tuning we undertake, let's not abandon the core.

I have just one more thing to say in closing. It's about my audience. No other citizens stand better prepared to become leaders. Today's Phi Beta Kappa honorees are among the most capable men and women on the planet. You're well on your way to becoming virtuosos who can take the helm confidently and competently.

Now I'll go out on a limb: I predict that you'll also help usher in an era of even greater respect for the free and open exchange of ideas that lies at the heart of any republic worthy of the name. As you do so, remember that your alma mater needs friends outside the academy — friends who will defend the value we place on expertise, our insistence on free and reasoned inquiry, and our independence from the rough and tumble of politics. Please, please prove me right. Your professors, your university, your society are counting on you.

Thank you; I wish you every success.