



Leadership in the class room

by Eileen C. Herbert

Leadership training has been woven into the fabric of the Canisius curriculum since the college first opened its doors in 1870. So it comes as no surprise that thousands of Canisius alumni have taken their place among leaders in business, medicine, government, law and countless other professions.

“The fact that Canisius alumni are among the nation’s most eminent leaders would have pleased the founder of the Jesuit order, St. Ignatius Loyola, since Jesuit colleges were established in the 16th century to educate future leaders,” notes Canisius

President, Rev. Vincent M. Cooke, S.J.

Now, nearly five hundred years later, Canisius College faculty and staff continue to develop innovative ways to prepare students to become leaders in their chosen professions, their communities and their service to humanity.

The Jesuits have proven that leadership skills are not the exclusive domain of those who are “natural born leaders.” Here at Canisius, leadership is taught in the classroom and by example, but it also requires a healthy dose of self discipline.

Dr. Judith Larkin, professor of psychology at Canisius, has been teaching *Leadership and Motivation* for several years.

“Under Father Cooke’s leadership, we have a great sense of purpose because he has a focused vision and is very proactive,” said Dr. Larkin. “My course fits directly with the president’s vision due to its great emphasis on leadership training.”

Because she feels that an important component of leadership involves embracing change, Dr. Larkin begins *Leadership and Motivation* by asking her students to sit in

a different quadrant of the room each time they attend her class.

“Being comfortable with change is not always easy for students accustomed to taking their assigned or preferred seat and sitting back and waiting for something to happen,” she said. “This small behavioral change helps to get across the message that leaders are proactive, they view their surroundings from different perspectives and they risk the discomfort that comes with even minor changes.”

Dr. Larkin uses a “learn by doing” approach in her classroom as a way of awarding and

requiring students to engage in leadership activities. For example, students contract for a grade.

“This is where motivation comes in,” she explained. “The decision of what grade to opt for requires students to assess their level of aspiration, time management skills and self confidence.”

Dr. Larkin notes that it is interesting that 75 percent of her class contract for an “A.” Because the ability to work with others is an essential component of a leader’s skills, students that choose to achieve an “A” in *Leadership and Motivation* must be willing to work outside of class with students that they do not know. Student teams then develop service-oriented proposals, which include the support and involvement of others.

“Students must work extremely hard in my class to achieve an ‘A.’ I believe that if you have high expectations of students, they will live up to them. It is very gratifying to see what they can do if you empower them. That is what leadership is really about, empowering others. That is why I empower my students to take risks and challenge themselves.”

The students are required to implement all steps of their proposal, including research, planning, obtaining resources, scheduling, organizing and delegating. In addition, they must prepare written and visual materials, persuade and motivate others to work on the project and publicize the event.

“All of these leadership skills can only be learned through taking action and having experiences working with and learning from others. It takes character and it builds character to face and overcome obstacles, to persevere, to alter course where necessary, to know how to get along and when to go along and to respect and tolerate the strengths and weaknesses of ourselves and others.”

The college has benefited from many of the class’ leadership projects because providing a product that will be of use in the future is part of the criteria for the course. The CAP Society (Canisius Advocates for Psychology), for instance, was designed in Dr. Larkin’s *Leadership and Motivation* class to help new students adjust to college life. Freshmen are paired with junior and senior psychology majors for social interaction and to share information about courses and career direction. The CAP Society is now an official college club.

Dr. Larkin believes that leadership is a set of skills that can be learned.

“It is unrealistic to say that you can change a personality, but I have seen students find themselves. Not only is it gratifying to see my students develop, but it motivates me because I get very excited about getting students to take a leadership role and that encourages me to be more of a leader.”

Dr. Larkin recently developed a Mentor Program, which provides Canisius students with the opportunity to mentor high school students at Lafayette and Riverside High Schools, as well as City Honors. Dr. Larkin notes that Canisius students are taking a leadership role in recruitment through this program because it provides them with a great opportunity to talk with high school students about what Canisius College has to offer.

“At Canisius, we are experiencing a real change in the way we teach and it is very effective. Canisius faculty are becoming involved in training leaders by getting students to become active rather than note takers in class. By having students work in teams, perform outside the classroom and do presentations in class, faculty play a major role in developing the skills students need to be successful leaders. We are developing their confidence, poise, and their ability to function in life. Canisius College truly is a place where leaders are made.” ■