

RIVER FALLS JOURNAL

“Building the Engaged Leadership Pool”

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In the last two Perspectives I have focused on two of the goals of the UW-River Falls Strategic Plan, “Living the Promise,” the blueprint that we collaboratively created to help guide the university for the next five to seven years. After presenting Inclusiveness and Sustainability as strategic guiding principles for our endeavors, we now turn to the third operational goal, Leadership.

From the first phrases of the university’s focused mission statement, it is clear that leadership and its deliberate cultivation throughout UWRF is a prime target of our collaborative efforts. The promise is that we will purposefully and intentionally develop engaged leaders. This development is aimed at our students and our faculty and staff. We believe that by consciously creating opportunities for all of us to acquire or refine our leadership skills that we are creating a reservoir of talent clearly needed to address the multiple, intersecting challenges we face on the campus, in our community, state, region and beyond. We cannot afford to leave the cultivation of leadership knowledge, skills and motivation to chance or to someone else.

Everyone speaks of the importance of leadership, and each year we take the time in our communities to honor those who lead with purpose, passion and effectiveness. In this global century when the challenges of the planet and those we face locally seem to proliferate and intersect, we have a responsibility to consciously grow the next generation of trained leaders to serve throughout our society.

At UW-River Falls, there are countless opportunities to hone our leadership skills, fortify our values, and broaden our perspectives. Numerous programs sponsored by each of our four colleges and their academic departments, Department of Student Affairs, the Academic Leadership Center, the Involvement Center, Society for Undergraduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activities, the First Year Experience, and Enrollment Management as well as the 140-plus student organizations as well as intercollegiate and intramural sports, all pursue leadership development as an integral part of these experiences.

In this tradition, UWRF will be examining the current interrelationships among our existing programs and initiate a new program designed to identify entering students as well as transfer students who demonstrate an interest and capacity for advancing their leadership knowledge and skills. I, as well as a host of faculty and staff on campus, look forward to contributing to this emerging learning/leading development program. Collaboration with the community and the region through vibrant interaction with the areas leaders and organizations will be an integral part of the experience.

An essential dimension of this university commitment is Engagement. Leadership, for us, is not limited to learning about leading, but encompasses leading, as well. The experience has many names: servant learning, servant leadership, volunteerism, modeling the way, leading from the middle. While each of these terms offers a sense of leadership, our intent is to encourage students and each other to be productive, creative, ethical and engaged citizens and leaders. The key here is engagement, the application of theory to the active proactive of making a difference in our university, community and far beyond.

There are several current UWRF programs dedicated to pursuing this goal. One is the Leadership Development Series for faculty and staff. During the first year this voluntary initiative attracted 28 staff and faculty who completed the nine-month curriculum. We are already reaping the reward of these bright, capable, committed people finding one another, creating new connections on campus and undertaking fresh initiatives to address some of the challenges before us. The second two classes for the Fall 2007 are forming now.

A second expression of this commitment is UW-River Falls's participation in the national American Democracy Project. UWRF is one of over 230 public universities actively involved in this 3-year-old national program intended to educate students to be engaged citizens originated by the American Association for State Colleges and Universities, the New York Times, and 13 founding universities. Last month, we hosted a regional conference dedicated to civic engagement with institutions and speakers participating from several states. We will continue to publicly champion the connection between developing leaders and addressing the issues that we face in common, whether local or global. Through our academic courses and programs, and in increasing coordination with the full range of student activities, we are cultivating an attitude and expectation of involvement and service in our communities. This service leadership can express itself in countless ways. Our intent is that leadership and its continuing development become an essential and enduring value for us. In this way we believe that we can effectively serve the public who entrusts us with a responsibility to prepare our students for productive and meaningful lives.

Through our strategic plan, "Living the Promise," UW-River Falls pledges to directly contribute the dynamic and prosperous future of the St. Croix Valley, Wisconsin and the region. Over the next five years of the plan, the vital work of leadership development and engagement will be a central focus of our collaborative efforts on campus, and with our appreciated partners in the community and region.

At Portland State University in Oregon, the campus slogan is emblazoned on a pedestrian overpass that spans a major downtown boulevard for all to see. It reads, "Let Knowledge Serve the City." PSU has publicly pledged itself to link what it does with the city and its future.

In like manner, through its articulated values, mission, vision and plan, UW-River Falls is publicly declaring its intention to serve the communities and people of River

Falls, the St. Croix Valley and far beyond as they move further into this global century. We will meet the escalating challenges of this changing world together. In this way we believe that we are “walking the talk” worth walking.

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