



## Training for the boardroom

AU'S GRADUATE PROGRAM IN LEADERSHIP

by Elizabeth Lechleitner

When I stopped by Shirley Freed's Bell Hall office, the chair of the Leadership PhD was hurriedly booking an online plane ticket for January 2006's Leadership Roundtable conference at Peruvian Union University. During this annual Leadership conference, renamed the "Roundtable" in 1999, Leadership program professors join community leaders, business and health-care professionals, and church and university administrators—both Adventist and non-Adventist—to kindle the sort of synergistic networking the program thrives on. This gamut of Roundtable participants illustrates the diversity and universality that scaffolds the Leadership program at Andrews University and, according to Freed, facilitates its success.

Since 1994, Andrews University's School of Education, in partnership with other university programs and adjunct professors worldwide, has offered an innovative Leadership PhD program that is field-based and fully-tailorable—designed to meet the needs of modern, established professional leaders by equipping them to better serve their communities. Like any other PhD program

offered at Andrews University, the Leadership program requires its students to complete 136 credits and write a culminating dissertation. Although housed in the School of Education, the program is not exclusively education-oriented. Rather, it offers a veritable buffet of degrees, including a Master of Arts (MA), Educational Specialist (EdS), Doctor of Education (EdD), and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

Despite their differing emphases, each degree shares one crucial commonality: a focus on experience-driven competencies rather than a prescribed number of classroom-contained courses. Beyond the three traditional courses Leadership students are required to take, competencies serve as the Leadership student's credits. As defined by Freed, competencies are "complex skills undergirded by a knowledge base." In other words, competencies are real-life skills Leadership applicants must demonstrate mastery before earning a PhD in their desired program. Applicants are responsible for outlining a competency-mastery proposal in their Individual Development Plans (IDPs).

With jargon like “competencies” and “Individualized Development Plans,” you might understandably think the Leadership program further complicates the PhD-obtaining process. However, Freed assures applicants that it is in fact an inherently simple and straightforward program. “An Individual Development Plan (IDP),” clarifies Freed, “is essentially an applicant’s syllabus.” This self-written course outline guides the applicant’s degree-earning process and must be approved before the applicant is formally enrolled in the Leadership program.

The approval process is multifaceted. First, proposed IDPs are submitted to regional group members who must “sign off,” or approve, an applicant’s competencies before forwarding the IDP to Leadership faculty. Leadership student hopefuls must then secure endorsement from these faculty members, who serve as advisors and mentors. After collecting the necessary approvals, the Leadership student’s next step is to join a regional group.

Active participation in a regional group is one of the central requirements for success in the Leadership program. Regional groups meet on a monthly basis to bolster each other’s commitment to outstanding service and competency mastery. While each regional group is ultimately anchored at Andrews University, the international nature of the program explains the recent surge of regional groups operating from coast to coast and abroad. For Leadership students hailing from remote areas like Alaska or the Australian outback, virtual regional groups provide the community of support and synergy the program operates on. “Regional groups are built on the notion of socially constructed knowledge,” Freed says, “which, while highly personalized, is dependent upon interpersonal interaction to support function.”

Because regional groups meet only once per month, they do not interfere with Leadership students’ practical pursuit of skill-mastery. Says Diane Neuhauser, management consultant of an NLA (national lawyers association) firm: “I really appreciate the flexibility the program offers—the regional group component of the Leadership program truly facilitates the learning process and allows me to continue my job while pursuing a PhD.”

This element of job-embeddedness is as vital to the Leadership program’s success as is regional group participation. Since the program doesn’t depend on traditional academic methods of measuring competency and skill mastery, such as regularly-administered exams and essays, a Leadership student must demonstrate his or her skill mastery within the workplace. Consequently, if a student is fired while earning the Leadership degree, he or she is automatically dropped from the program. While this may seem harsh, Freed emphasizes that practical application is one of the few constructs of accountability the Leadership program subscribes to.

Beyond job experience, Leadership also requires that all students make an annual pilgrimage to Andrews to “eyeball an advisor” and renew their registration. This registration-renewal process doesn’t necessitate credit-taking, merely the continuation of the program. In addition, board members at the annual Roundtable Leadership conference review students’ progress, and, Freed adds, students are also required to complete their Leadership training within “reasonable time constraints.”



While skeptics of the program have criticized such seemingly skeletal accountability checks, Freed emphasizes that Leadership caters to established professionals whose self-motivation and commitment to excellence provide more than enough muscle to propel them toward success. Thus, Leadership students must not only draw from the support of their regional groups, but also “tap into their own personal initiative and sense of responsibility” to earn a PhD.

As chair and cofounder of the Leadership department, Freed is responsible for teaching the majority of required courses. She also chairs a number of dissertation proposal and review committees. But above all, Freed is devoted to “accommodating people’s needs.” Of the cooperation and flexibility characteristic of the Leadership program, Freed says. “It just continues to morph into whatever shape best facilitates its enrollees. And that spontaneity,” she continues, “is what ensures its success. Leadership really lets people go where their interests and passions point them.” Of the program’s highly pragmatic nature, recent graduate Cherie Whiting says, “The knowledge from the program is not something that I obtained and now set on the shelf with my diploma. It has integrated into who I am and everything that I do.”

But beyond the benefits of flexibility, Freed most values the diversity and life-transformation that the Leadership program promotes—attributes that set it apart from traditional PhD programs. Leadership touts diversity not only within the expected gender and racial arenas, but also within the sphere of religion. “The Leadership program doesn’t just operate within an Adventist niche,” Freed says. “It’s all-inclusive, which has opened amazing collaborative doors into the non-Adventist world,” and, she adds, “innumerable opportunities to witness.”

Ultimately, the Leadership PhD program aims to transform lives by holistically integrating mind, body, and spirit and refusing to skirt the spiritual element of success amid a secular work environment. Such a vision depends upon the dedication and independent thinking of students and faculty members alike.

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