

Excerpts from a Program Proposal: MA in Social and Political Leadership

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Abstract: In 2011, Dr. Thomas was hired by a campus to design a master's program in "public service." After multiple faculty discussions and a review of course offerings in range of programs at other institutions, Dr. Thomas presented a proposal for a program in "social and political leadership." This paper describes the project's goals and recommendations.

Because Dr. Thomas was hired as a consultant, the program proposal was never published. The institution explored another MA in the health sciences and decided not to pursue either. As a result, the program itself was never adopted or tested. What follows are excerpts from the proposal published. without attribution. with permission by the institution's president.

Note, too, that this program was developed more than a decade ago, before loud alarms were sounded over the exponential rise of authoritarian threats to democracies globally and in some factions of American society. "Understanding populism, white nationalism, extremism, and authoritarianism" is an example of a content competency that should be added. And while "constitutional principles" is identified as a content area, today's list should also include separation of powers, the role of state v. federal governments, the need for an impartial judiciary, the First Amendment on campus, and the role of religion in public life. It should also include the threat of disinformation exacerbated by unfettered social media.

Democracy is an imperfect system that creates winners and losers (as do all other systems). Unlike dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, democracy, ideally, is constantly evolving and improving, leading to equity for communities that have been left behind. Envisioning, redesigning, and protecting democracy should be desired outcomes of the program. Further, in a system "of, by, and for the people," democracy is also a culture, a way that people interact and live, work, and solve public problems together. For this reason, a newer version of this list would emphasize threats to democracy created by a culture of rights and excessive individualism at the expense of community and the common good.

The point is that any program designed to educate for democracy needs to be both proactive and nimble. It needs to focus on contemporary challenges with a goal of creating a democracy, both systems and culture, that work for everyone.

Program purpose: To prepare students for careers as democratic leaders and civic agents in societies and institutions.

This program proposal responded to a recognized need for higher education to cultivate leaders who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be innovative problem solvers in communities facing increasingly complex social and political challenges. Communities can be geographic (local, regional, national, or global), interest-based, organizational, and/or virtual. Distinctive in its emphasis on democracy as both a means and an end, the program was designed

to maintain a commitment to democratic principles and practices as foundational to effective leadership, systemic change, and social innovation.

Student Learning Outcomes: In the appendix, the proposal included a draft list of learning content and outcomes for consideration. These were divided into three broad topics: (1) Leadership Theory and Skills, (2) Democracy and Civic Theory and Practice, and (3) Personal Dispositions and Skills. This list was intentionally too long so that the faculty eventually selected to teach in the program could easily edit and shorten the list rather than need to add.

Leadership Theory and Skills

Theory

- Comparative leadership and organizational models
- Analyzing organizational culture
- Understanding power dynamics

Democratic leadership approaches

- Deliberative democracy and public participation
- Public work and community organizing
- Ways women lead
- Social entrepreneurship

Change theories and practices

- Change theories, design and implementation
- Social change
- Social movements

Decision-making

- Assessment-based decision-making: analyzing data
- Shared governance
- Ethics and social responsibility
- Radical change and incremental reform

Communication skills

- Oral, written, and electronic communications
- Intercultural communication
- Facilitation
- Public speaking
- Marketing and messaging
- Advocacy and persuasion

Coalition building and public engagement

- Designing effective processes for public engagement and cross-sector collaboration
- Mapping community or organizational assets; leveraging community knowledge, skills, abilities, and interests
- Forming strategic partnerships and alliances
- Social networking and media

Teamwork

- Building positive working relationships
- Assessing team members' skills and knowledge
- Fostering collaboration; avoiding groupthink
- Managing difficult group dynamics
- Communities of practice
- Mentoring and coaching

Conflict management

- Intergroup dialogue
- Community mediation
- Stakeholder negotiating
- Crisis management

Management

- Business and strategic planning
- Accounting, budgets, and finance
- Resource and funding development
- Trustees and bylaws
- Managing human resources (hiring, succession planning, delegating, accountability)

Democracy and Civic Theory and Practice

Theory

- Meanings of “the good citizen”
- Democracy as government; democracy as culture
- Evolution of democratic political theory, nationally and internationally
- Comparative practices of democratic societies
- Constitutional principles of freedom, justice, and equity
- Culture and power; racial and social equity and justice
- Democracy building strategies; emerging democracies
- Constitutional democracies
- Public work and community organizing
- Service, public work, and public engagement
- Individual rights and public interest

- Rule of law
- E-democracy, social networking, and internet-based coalition building

Political and Social Systems

- The independent sector
- The role of governments; government structures
- Public participation in policy making
- Integrating social, political, and economic systems
- Economic theory and systems
- Social movements and policy change
- Electoral politics
- Social capital
 - Courts, judicial systems, and the rule of law
 - Distributive justice
 - Collaborative governance

Individual Skills and Dispositions

Research

- Quantitative
- Qualitative
- Applied research methods – employed for social, political, organizational analysis and problem solving

Identifying, analyzing, framing, and resolving ethical tensions

- Structural, human, political, and symbolic frames of organizational development
- Managing trade-offs in process, relationship building and desired outcomes
- Freedom and equity
- Stakeholder analysis

Commitment to justice and equity

- Examining organizations, communities, problems, and solutions through an equity lens
- Understanding structural racism and other forms of inequity

- Constitutional protections; civil and human rights

- Assessing and managing power dynamics

- Civility and dissent

- Systems of oppression and historical discrimination

- Intercultural knowledge and communications

- Managing perspective-based conflict

- Intergenerational and cross-cultural mentoring and coaching

Self-knowledge and reflective practice

- Understanding power and privilege

- Internalized bias

- Global perspectives

- Personal integrity

- Transparency and accountability

- Personality traits

- Work-life balance

Brief Program Design Overview: This eighteen-month program was designed to span four semesters – summer, fall, winter and summer. Students complete their coursework in the first three semesters and participate in a practicum/field-based final semester. Because this was envisioned as a residential program, the field work was envisioned as off campus, allowing for a new cohort of students to begin.

The coursework consisted of a combination of four-credit core/foundational courses on content about both democracy and leadership and two-credit skill building “intensives.” Examples of the foundational courses included:

1. Pro-Seminar in Social and Political Systems and Institutions
2. The Art of Leadership for Social Change
3. The Crisis of Democracy [title subject to change]
4. Justice and Civil Liberties
5. Ethical and Legal Issues of Social and Political Leadership
6. Political Economy
7. Conflict Resolution and Communication Processes
8. Technology and Social Media
9. Methods of Social Analysis [research methods course]
10. The Art of Leadership for Social Change
11. The Crisis of Democracy [title subject to change]
12. Justice and Civil Liberties
13. Ethical and Legal Issues of Social and Political Leadership

While students completed their practicum, they were also required to take a virtual integrative seminar with their peers.

Examples of Intensives were divided into clusters, with students taking one or more from each. They included:

Management Cluster

Social Entrepreneurship
Ways Women Lead
Leading Socially Responsible Corporations
Strategic Planning
Accounting, Budgets, and Finance

Communications Cluster

Communications and Messaging
Public Speaking and Advocacy
Facilitation and Intergroup Dialogue

Community- and Coalition-Building Cluster

Community Organizing and Public Work
Assessment-Based Decision-Making
Asset Mapping
Issue Framing
Community Mediation

Conflict Management Cluster

Negotiation

Stakeholder Mediation

Crisis Management

Civility and Dissent

Other components of the proposal:

- Program leadership and structure
- Course and Intensive descriptions
- Description of the Practicum
- Career options for students
- Admissions processes and qualifications
- Faculty profiles and qualifications
- Qualifications of adjuncts teaching Intensives