

A Review of Pi Gamma Mu's 2021 Leadership Development Program

Pi Gamma Mu's 2021 Triennial Convention included a Leadership Development Program for the second time, again chaired and overseen by Allison G. S. Knox. The Leadership Development Program sought to offer leadership training, foster new ways of thinking about leadership, and bring people together to discuss their own perspectives on what it means to be an effective leader. Choosing to keep such a hands-on program during a time when the convention had moved online—an unprecedented move that highlighted the honor society's adaptability during a global crisis—may at first seem like a surprising decision. After all, many may assume that to be effective, such training and workshops require a face-to-face element, a shared physicality that creates a camaraderie and emphasizes an atmosphere of learning. Yet Pi Gamma Mu's decision to continue this program during the pandemic was an unqualified success, and the program was perhaps even more successful and brought even more value as a remote program than it could have in person.

This may at first seem counterintuitive, particularly because so many people find meeting in person to bring a value of its own, but the decision to hold the entire seminar online created a wealth of opportunity that would otherwise have been lost. As we came together online and shared our perspectives and stories, it immediately became clear that we were all calling in from a myriad of different places and situations, and for many of us the opportunity to attend remotely granted access to a program that would otherwise have been out of reach. Among my peers were people joining from all over the world, from the break rooms of their organizations, from dorm rooms, and from home offices where children played in the next room.

A remote event dramatically expanded access by eliminating barriers, including the need to budget for travel accommodations, purchase plane tickets, find coverage at work, and secure

childcare. Like many in the program, I could not have attended and would have been excluded from this wonderful learning opportunity if it had been restricted only to those who were able to attend in person. Decisions like these create a culture of inclusivity and allow full participation from people who might otherwise face financial or logistical barriers.

Like many people attending a workshop for the first time under unique circumstances, I was not fully certain what to expect when I logged on to join my peers, and to meet the facilitators who would help us process the lectures and share our perspectives. The first thing we were asked to do was turn on our cameras, which initially surprised me, as we were such a large group that I assumed we would be relying on audio only for bandwidth reasons. However, seeing everyone at once, all of us logging in from different places at different times of day, from a variety of time zones and in various settings, was a powerful thing. We had all made the choice to come here, we had all prioritized this moment, and we were all ready to open our minds to new ways of conceptualizing leadership.

Video conferencing can be stressful in a way that in-person meetings are not, in part because we see everyone's faces simultaneously, and everyone else can see ours. In an in-person meeting, there is a limit to what your eyes can take in. We may glance around and make occasional eye contact, but no one is watching one another all the time, and in a setting where a facilitator is presenting, most eyes will naturally be on the presentation. In an online setting, however, it is impossible to see who is watching who, with all faces looking forward, and your own eyes always staring back.

The workshop struck the right balance precisely because it embraced flexibility. While we were asked to turn our cameras on to meet one another in that first session, they were not required in subsequent sessions, and though cameras were encouraged during our breakout

groups for discussion, there was no obligation to enable them. Though requiring constant camera use during the entire week of sessions would have been too draining and stressful to be of real benefit, turning the cameras on during that first connection made it feel so much more natural for us to turn them on for our smaller group discussions. This allowed us to really connect with one another as people instead of as names on a screen. When someone made a joke, we could see each other laugh, and when someone made a great point, they could see everyone nodding in agreement. These social connections stand out to me as one of my favorite memories from the leadership program; I met so many amazing people and had the chance to collaborate and present with them when we otherwise may never have met.

The Leadership Development Program was divided into four sessions, each with a distinct theme. The seminars relied heavily on real-world experiences and brought in people well-positioned to speak on these issues to discuss them with us. We discussed contemporary issues such as leadership during a pandemic, military leadership, and editorial leadership with people who had firsthand experience leading in these settings, which was an invaluable resource for attendees.

Each session was approximately two hours in length, although we occasionally went over or finished slightly early. There were four sessions in total, occurring each afternoon or early evening between November 3 and November 6. Each session was further divided into three parts: first, an icebreaker in breakout rooms, then a lecture on a specific leadership topic from a person in that field, and finally a discussion of real-world application.

In addition to the sessions themselves, we were also given several assignments, some written, some personal, and some collaborative. In total we completed two formal assignments and several smaller assignments. The smaller assignments were to be completed either between

sessions or in the middle of the workshop, to help us apply what we were learning in the lectures. Among these were several leadership assessments to help us determine our personal leadership style, a case study to review and discuss with our team, and a strengths and weaknesses inventory.

Two of our assignments were formal and required submission to receive credit for the program: the Reflection Essay, and the Final Assignment. The Reflection Essay focused on what we had learned about ourselves from the program. We were asked to consider what kind of leadership style we favored, what we had learned about ourselves from the strengths and weaknesses inventory we completed, and how we endeavored to support others despite our own flaws. The Final Assignment was a longer and more scholarly essay, which required us to gather all that we had learned to make a final statement about what leadership truly entails, and how one might strive to meet that standard.

November 3 marked our first session together and served as an introduction to the themes of the program and an overview of what we hoped to accomplish. The first session, at 3:00pm Eastern Standard Time on the convention's opening day, focused on the question, "What is a leader?" Attendees were encouraged to share basic information such as their name and academic background, but also their views on leadership and whether they had any experience in a leadership role. These conversations were a great way to break the ice and get to know one another. We were also asked to complete two quizzes on leadership styles and submit our quiz results to the facilitator. This was our first assignment, and it was interesting to see whether the two different quizzes reflected similar tendencies or if they diverged. There was some variation among attendees, with some peoples' results being slightly different, while other peoples' results matched perfectly.

Our second session, on November 4, opened with the discussion of an opportunity we could pursue. This would occur several times throughout the leadership program and was an excellent reminder that we had the ability to get involved and engage with our community if we chose. In this case, the opportunity was the ability to apply for the position of Student Representative for Pi Gamma Mu International Honor Society in Social Sciences. This was a benefit of the Leadership Development Program that was not advertised or expected, and so the various opportunities that we were offered—to explore leadership positions, network with others, and learn the ins-and-outs of scholarly publishing—were entirely unforeseen. This was one of the most valuable elements of the leadership program, in that it gave us the opportunity to apply what we had learned and pursue possibilities that we otherwise may not have known about or had access to.

Once we had discussed the student representative position and completed our icebreaker, there were two lectures planned for the day: “Leadership in Academia,” with Dr. Susan Kinsella, and “Editorial Leadership and Leadership in Nonprofit Organizations,” with Dr. Candice Quinn. In this session we discussed leadership styles, including Kurt Lewin’s famous theory of leadership as well as transactional, charismatic, transformational, and situational leadership styles. From there we assessed which leadership qualities we felt were most essential and looked for commonalities in our responses. Our consensus favored traits such as humor, humility, and empathy, suggesting that we as a group trended towards a perspective on leadership that left room to admit mistakes, reassess, and connect collaboratively with our colleagues. We were given advice on choosing our own personal leadership styles, and then we transitioned into breakout groups to complete a case study.

The case study for this session was a real-life scenario: If we worked in academia, how could we balance the needs of all our different stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic? We were asked as a group to read over the case study, identify the problem, identify the leader, assess the ethical implications, and then determine the best leadership style and course of action. When we came together to share our results, the diverse mix of perspectives was refreshing, and it was eye-opening to hear everyone's different reasons for their beliefs. Some felt a laissez-faire leadership style would be best, as it would allow for adaptability and for the experts in our academic community to exercise their judgement however best benefited their tasks. At the same time, others felt strongly that an authoritative leadership style would be advantageous, because it would promote confidence and reassure others that everything was under control, reducing panic. Still others felt a collaborative approach was best, and supported polling the stakeholders, including the students, about what approach they preferred before making a final decision. The many perspectives and methods for approaching the problem, all of which came so naturally to us, but which varied so widely, were a tangible reminder that there is not always a singular correct way to address a complex problem, and sometimes a mix of perspectives and approaches is needed.

As we transitioned into the next portion of the session, which focused on leadership in editorial and non-profit settings, we dove right in with some practical advice on how often we should strive for perfection versus accepting something as good enough. This was through the lens of editorial leadership, and included further advice on maintaining morale, accepting rejection, and pursuing publication. We also discussed the importance of valuing your team, and making it clear how much you appreciate their efforts. Among my favorite pieces of advice from this session was "publish early and publish often." This challenged my long-held assumption that

it was best to wait to pursue publication until you were a person of great importance and renown. Much of the conventional wisdom that I have encountered around publishing has held that first you need someone to validate that you are an expert in your field before anyone would be interested in publishing your perspectives. However, by the end of the session it became clear that lack of opportunity was less of a stumbling block than the internalized idea that we need permission to write. We were given a list of different types of places that accept various styles of writing, and which accept a range of different levels of experience and credentials. Some of these suggestions were surprising, like writing letters to the editor, and others had a higher barrier to entry, like writing research papers for submission to scholarly journals. We also learned about volunteer peer reviewers, who are typically experts in their field with a terminal degree. Overall, the second session of the Leadership Development Program was absolutely packed with interesting and engaging information.

Friday's session, on November 5, stood out as an exception to the theme. This session was just one hour, in the evening, and had two lectures planned: "Leading the Way Around the World and in the Neighborhood," by Dr. M. Katrina Smith, and "Emergency Medical Services and Leading from the Bottom Up," by Allison G. S. Knox. This session was filled with practical advice on successfully leading large teams of people, and a major theme of the evening was setting your team up for success. Leading from the bottom up was a significant point of discussion, and we explored the concept that leadership is not inherently hierarchical. We considered the idea that no one can give you what you want if you don't clarify what you're looking for, and that if you aren't able to explain what you want then you need to be open to others' suggestions and ideas. We were advised to meet people where they were, engage with colleagues as individuals and learn about them as people, and listen emphatically. Despite being

the shortest of the sessions, the third day was not short on advice or content, and it was great to hear from people with direct firsthand experience in this area.

The fourth and final session took place on Saturday November 6, and focused on leadership in the Marine Corps. The two events scheduled for that day both covered this topic and were addressed by Laura Shaw. The session started out with a discussion of leadership traits and what leadership qualities were most advantageous in a military leadership setting. The list of adjectives varied somewhat from the list we had generated in previous sessions, prioritizing traits like decisiveness, initiative, and stamina over humility and willingness to admit fault. We then viewed clips from the documentary film “We the Marines,” which depicted people helping one another succeed and cheering one another on while training in harsh conditions.

In contrast to the previous day’s discussion on leading from behind, this session focused on leading from the front. Though these ideas sound oppositional at first glance, they tap into very similar philosophies. While leading from behind emphasizes not using leadership for glory or trying to put your own vanity or ego above the needs of the team, leading from the front is about being willing to take on the risk, to do anything you are asking others to do, rather than hiding behind where it might be safer. In this way, both philosophies prioritize setting aside the leader’s own desires to help their team succeed. Despite sounding very different initially, both methods of leadership come from the same place of wanting the mission to succeed regardless of the leader’s own personal benefit.

For the workshop portion of this session, we were divided into groups, and each assigned a different film to watch from the National Museum of the Marine Corps. Each film profiled a different person or group who had demonstrated extraordinary leadership ability, and we were asked to consider which leadership traits we identified for the person or group our film profiled.

This was unexpectedly the most emotional part of the workshop for my group, as we were assigned a film about the Montford Point Marines. The film detailed the perseverance of the Montford Point Marines, who fought for the right to fight for their country during a time of violent segregation in the United States, and whose heroics did not insulate them from the effects of widespread and institutional racism when they returned from the war. The information in the film was valuable and important, and we were especially grateful to learn it because none of us had previously heard about the Montford Point Marines, but due to the upsetting and emotional nature of the subject matter it was jarring when we were dropped back into the main room to discuss our findings. The tone in the room was largely jovial and lighthearted, which felt discordant with the heavy information we had just consumed, and it took us awhile to get back in sync with everyone else. My group ultimately felt that many of the leadership traits from the initial list applied to the people in our film, chief among them loyalty and determination, as the Montford Point Marines fought so hard just for the chance to protect a country they loved, and which did not treat them with the same respect.

As the Leadership Development Program came to a close, we were asked to consider again what leadership looks like, whether leadership is subjective, and whether leadership can be considered culturally relative. We reflected on everything we had learned and shared our closing thoughts and well-wishes. It was also at this point in the session that we discussed our Final Assignment, and the certificates that would be mailed to us in January of 2022 if we successfully completed it.

In the new world that the pandemic has forged over the last few years, many experiences that were once in person have become virtual, and the Leadership Development Program offered a timely reminder that we are all here together. As attendees we all had shared goals, and we all

chose to pursue them there, to collectively join in and learn how to be more effective and fair-minded leaders. In our breakout groups we got to know one another and share our ideas and beliefs about leadership and where we wanted to go from here, we were able to connect just as we would have at an in-person conference.

The virtual realm that we have come to occupy during these unprecedented times has value that would previously have been overlooked: by leveraging the connective power of the internet, we were able to come together from across the globe. In that way, I find myself grateful for the adaptability of Pi Gamma Mu's leadership team, and their willingness to rethink what it means to meet. I connected with so many people during this conference who I am glad to know, and that would not have been possible if the conference had been in-person at a convention center.

I greatly value the time I spent in the Leadership Development Program, and I would recommend it to anyone looking to expand their understanding of leadership, explore what leadership looks like in different fields, and connect with amazing people whose perspectives can challenge and enrich your own. The assignments encouraged introspection, the lectures challenged our beliefs and informed our decisions, and the work was engaging and varied. I know that I am not the only one who took a lot from this experience, and I hope that Pi Gamma Mu will consider offering this program again in the future.