



COURTESY SCC

Seminole Community College's Leadership Challenge Team members take leadership into their own hands while planning the first retreat of the 2003-04 school year.

Creating the Challenge

A ground-up approach to leadership

By Stephanie R. Reck, editor

If you want to know how **Seminole Community College's** leadership program got so good, just ask its director and creator, Randy Pawlowski. Here, he lets loose about feedback, ropes courses, and knowing thyself.

What was the leadership program like when you came to SCC?

There was no program when I started—Dr. Ann McGee [President] had begun working at SCC in February of 1996, and one of her requests was that we sponsor a leadership program for our students. The first year, we did three programs, and every year since then, we've done 7, 8, or 9. One of the things we realized was that students responded so well that we needed to do it more frequently, so it's kind of become a monthly thing.

Why retreats?

Two reasons. When I first arrived here, Dr. McGee and our dean of students already had said they wanted one retreat a year. That seemed like a good idea, to just take everyone away. The second reason was I asked everybody. They wanted a weekend where they just work on themselves and their leadership.

Who's on your Leadership Challenge Team? Are they SGA leaders?

There's no overlap between the Leadership Challenge Team and the Student Government Association. When I first started the program, it occurred to me that the Leadership Institute needed to be the umbrella, and underneath it, one of the facets was SGA. It used to be that the SGA officers were my first LCT members. That worked out really well, but then we ran into a little problem—if you're taking

four or five classes, trying to work 10 to 20 hours a week, and then you're an SGA president or vice-president and you're a LCT member, it didn't leave you enough time to do anything well. I made the decision if you're going to be on LCT, you can only have one major position.

How big has the program gotten over the last seven years?

Overall, I think we've done about 65 retreats over the last seven years. It's the part of this job I like the most—I think it has the greatest impact on our students. We really push students to grow and achieve. It's hard for them to get the same kind of experience back on campus. It's very intense when you've got 25 minutes to complete a task with 10 other folks, and the same thing doesn't happen when you're in an executive board meeting or a club setting.

Walk us through a retreat.

We'll come in on Friday and do an hour's worth of Meyers-Briggs personality theory so they can get to know their strengths and their weaknesses. Then, we do 30 to 45 minutes on situational leadership modeling, and then we do a session on "Who Moved my Cheese?" After that theory component, we do a half hour of effective teamwork strategies. Then, they're into the rest of Friday and all day Saturday doing "Mission Impossible" or low ropes course elements. By the time we hit lunchtime—12:30 or so on Saturday—we're working on the feedback cards. They have to write feedback for each of the students in their group showing 9 to 10 of their strengths and weaknesses that were

demonstrated. That's probably the most powerful part of what we do. We try to give each person strategies, steps they need to take to minimize those weaknesses.

I know feedback is very important in this program. How is it handled?

In years past, we used to give all positive feedback. But what students really want to know is what they need to work on. So once people get past their fear or their lack of comfort or confidence about their ideas and people's reaction to them—once they start participating, wow! They have great ideas, and they're capable of leading groups. What I'm trying to get them to do is behave consistently and to improve at every retreat.

What are your goals for the participants?

I'm trying to increase people's knowledge of themselves—I want them to have a clear picture of what all of their strengths are and their areas of improvement are. I want them to be very aware of their confidence level and how to improve their self-confidence, about teamwork and effective teamwork strategies. We're working on people's knowledge of self, and in many cases, we're working with students who've never been in leadership positions in high school, so they come in to college for the first time and they've made a great decision to get involved.

What's next for the retreats and the leadership team?

We're working with more new people and trying to get more club leaders on board. And the advanced retreats are different every time. We try to build and develop new things so they're never the same. We've held off working on the workshop components because we want to ask people in August and September and say, "Tell us what you want—tell us what you need."

So did Dr. McGee get what she wanted?

She probably got more than she wanted. Dr. McGee and all four vice presidents are invited to attend the retreats. It's a great opportunity for the students and the vice presidents to hear what they need to work on.

What else do we need to know?

If I can give any advice to professionals who do this, you have to spend a lot of time developing student leaders. We spent nearly \$22,000 on development and retreats this past year. We change lives, and the students come back and change other students. The best way to learn about leadership is to teach leadership. 🐦

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