

Learning to Lead

One retreat at a time

By Emily Green

A grueling day and a half in the wilderness—sun beating down through the trees, bodies tired from waking up at dawn, scaling a bare 10-foot wall. Who needs such training? Well, nine times over the past year, students at **Seminole Community College** did.

It's not as painful as it may sound. Actually, these students volunteer (multiple times) to be a part of this trip, also known as the SCC Leadership Institute's "Leadership Retreat." The training is a way to up the ante on leadership at the school of approximately 32,000 students—and in the past seven years, approximately 900 students have taken on that challenge. Student Government officers, Student Ambassadors, leaders of almost every campus club, and members of the SCC Volunteers Community Service leadership team participate.

"In the past, I really didn't believe in things like this and I just kind of thought they don't work—I'm not going to go to a retreat and sit in the woods and sit around a campfire and sing *Kumbaya* with a bunch of strangers," says Michael Pallone, a freshman. Today, Pallone is a member of SCC's Leadership Challenge Team.

Every year, hundreds of students go through a rigorous application process to become one of the eight members of the student-run team. The team works hard year-round to promote the Leadership Institute and plan the retreat programs and workshops through essays and journals, committee meetings, and weekly meetings with their mentors Randy Pawlowski, director of student life, and Mauricio Garcia, coordinator of student activities. All the while, these students are held to the highest of academic standards. LCT members must establish not only specific academic and personal goals but also career goals. They complete tests such as the "Meyer-Briggs Personality Type Indicator," "Self-Esteem Inventory," "16 Personality Factor Questionnaire," and the "Strong Career Interest Survey" to further their self-understanding. "Knowledge is power; the more you know about yourself, the more effective you're going to be," Garcia says.

Once the LCT is selected for the year, members go straight to work on the process of creating the retreats. The first, entitled "Emerging Leaders," is built for new leaders in the SCC community. The students spend the first half-day preparing for the

retreat on campus. Each completes the Meyer-Briggs and then learns how to interpret the results. Students also hear presentations on topics such as the value of mentoring, dealing with change in their lives, success stories of previous retreats, managing time and stress effectively, creating their own personal leadership development plans, and useful teamwork strategies. "My first semester at SCC, I came to school, went to class, and went home. That was it—I didn't talk to anyone," says Ashley Simpson, an LCT member. "Then, when I went on my first leadership retreat, I got to meet so many different people and really got interested in the leadership aspect



During SCC's August 2003 retreat, Leadership Challenge Team member Leslie Brown (center) teaches that maintaining an effective group is a delicate balance.

of college and of life in general."

The second retreat is the "Advanced Leadership" program. This trip is constantly changing and evolving; once students have attended an "Emerging Leaders" event, they can go on as many "Advanced Leadership" retreats as they'd like. The program builds on the leadership styles that were discovered during the first retreat. For every advanced trip, new schedules, lecture topics, programs and activities are implemented, allowing students to come back for two, three, even four retreats. Each time students go on the advanced retreat, they learn something new and improve upon a personal weakness. "We tell the students all the time, 'You guys have to make a choice. You have to choose to be successful, you have to choose to be here, to listen to the things you need to listen to, and to put them into practice,'" Pawlowski says.

Even the recruiting for the program is student-centered. "Mauricio and I will go visit a lot of our college success classes on both campuses, and all eight LCT members market the program and encourage people to apply. We get a lot of word-of-mouth from students who've attended retreats before," Pawlowski says. And like the retreats, the application process has evolved, too. "Our application system is a web-based system, so you go on-line to our page and type it in and hit submit and it comes right to my e-mail box. The on-line form has been a wonderful thing and it's made it very easy for the students to apply."

"The number-one strength of the program is that it's totally student-focused," says Garcia, the other driving force behind these retreats. "They're the ones who are really making the big strides and doing the leg-work to figure out what they need to do to be as effective as they can be." Pawlowski agrees: "The reason it works so well is that our program focuses on personal development

first and then leadership development."

The program forces students to see their strengths and weaknesses and then learn how to utilize them to the best of their abilities. According to Leslie Brown, LCT member, "You're forced to see yourself for who you are and who you can be. It's the most insightful experience and valuable experience I have to date."

The retreats also involve "a lot of doing," as Pawlowski puts it. In the SCC retreats, participants put the theoretical to work. From completing "Mission Impossible" drills (half-hour long group tasks like those on *Survivor*) to doing a low ropes course, learning leadership through practicing is a key element in these retreats. "They give the knowledge," Simpson says, "but you have to have the desire to want to change yourself and to want to bring the leadership into your life. You have to want it."

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