

Servant Leadership and a Complete Education at the University of Mary

The question asked of me to answer is how my experience at the University of Mary has prepared me for a life of service and leadership. When first considering this question, I looked at leadership and service as two different elements. However, as I truly reflect on what it means to serve and be a leader, I realized these two elements are one and the same. True and complete leadership is based upon offering up your talents to best serve others around you who need the use of your skills more than you do. Leadership is about committing oneself to listen, to teach, and to make those who come after you possess the ability to achieve more than you ever could. The servant leaders and service opportunities I have had the opportunity to follow and be a part of through the University of Mary have prepared me for a life of servant leadership.

Two exemplary servant leaders at the University of Mary I have had the opportunity to learn from are Michael Silbernagel (Silby), the Head Strength and Conditioning Coach at the University of Mary, and Karel Sovak, the Dean of the Gary Tharaldson School of Business.

Throughout my years as a high-school athlete, a lot of the time I got by because of my athleticism and passion for competition. The type of “getting by” changed the day I met Silby. Silby is the definition of a genuine servant leader. He has a gift for challenging student-athletes to develop not only in their athletic abilities but in their servant leadership capacities. My freshman year during a women’s volleyball and soccer workout, Silby challenged me to compete against one of the soccer players in an agility race after the volleyball team had just completed an hour of agility conditioning. During that hour of agility conditioning, we had practiced over and over the steps for that same race, so I was feeling confident. As soon as the race started, I threw everything I learned out the window and just went as fast as I could to try and win. As you may have guessed, I lost the race. After the race, Silby exclaimed (not so happily), “Murphy, you could be so good if you would just be willing to slow down and listen!” At first, I was embarrassed because I was “yelled at” in front of the other team, and also confused because I pushed myself as hard as I could. But, that’s not what it was about. What I learned that day is even though I may have pushed myself to physical exhaustion, I was distracting myself from the real purpose of slowing down to evaluate my weaknesses in order to get better. Slowing down was one of the hardest things I had ever had to do and challenged me to become the best version of myself athletically. Even if I did not realize it that day, Silby was teaching me that being a leader wasn’t about being the fastest or the most confident person. Being a leader is about humility and doing things the right way.

Karel Sovak shaped my understanding of the difference between university education, and a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine university education. In my sophomore year of college, I was a part of Dr. Sovak’s Catholic Social Teaching in Business course. Throughout this course, we learned about solidarity, subsidiarity, the common good, and human dignity regarding the human person in business. While each of these elements on their own provides truth, the

combination of these elements helps transform our development in becoming a whole person whose mission is to act upon principles that helps form a more just society. A society that recognizes each other as brethren, shares in the treasures of goods, supports the internal life of local communities, and allows ourselves and others to feel communal and individual fulfillment. The type of education I received at the University at Mary, and from educators such as Karel Sovak, challenges the current education system to teach more than the tangible skills to become successful in our future occupations, but rather educate us on the intangible skills to become better people and better servant leaders in our intended vocation.

When others who have not had the opportunity to receive the type of complete education I have been blessed enough to receive think of leadership, they may imagine an abundance of confidence, a boss in a corner office, or an authority figure at the top of a pyramid in power. The University of Mary has challenged future leaders to think differently. The University of Mary has taught me that leadership is not prideful or boastful. Leadership, in its most basic form, stems from caring for others, asking for help in your areas of weakness, and developing others to be the best versions of themselves. In all my future endeavors, whatever they may be, I will remember the blessing I received at the University of Mary to learn the difference between being a leader of others, and what it means to be a servant leader for others.

Thank you,

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