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Huntsman Post

Buehler Leadership Scholars Challenge Ideas, Apply What Resonates

By Steve Eaton

Vern Buehler has stirred up a group of thoughtful, restless students, who are tactful yet very direct, and opinionated but open-minded. It's a group that says it regularly challenges its preconceived notions of what real leadership is all about. They insist that correct principles that are not tested and practiced are of little worth.

They are called the Buehler Leadership Scholars and Chris Fawson, the faculty advisor to the group, said they are committed to extending what he calls the "legacy of Dr. Buehler," a man who has a long history of finding ways to help Huntsman students explore new ideas.

After graduating from Utah State University with a bachelor's degree in accounting in 1941, Dr. Buehler earned his MBA from Harvard in 1948, and his doctorate in economics from George Washington University in 1964. After a 27-year career in the Army where he eventually ended up serving in a senior administrative role in the Pentagon, he started a 21-year career as a business professor at the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business.

During his career at USU, Dr. Buehler was an academic entrepreneur who had a vision for exposing students to the leading business scholars of the day. He started the Partners In Business program that drew high-profile speakers such as Milton Friedman, Allan Greenspan, Peter Drucker, and others. He also founded, along with Norm Bodek, the Shingo Institute, which was originally called the Shingo Prize for Manufacturing Excellence.

Dr. Fawson, who is the Vernon Maughan Buehler and MaRee C. Buehler Professor, started the Buehler Leadership Scholars in the spring of 2013. Each semester he selects a small group of students to who are designated as Buehler Leadership Scholars and together they select a set of readings that could challenge their understanding of leadership principles. The books and a $500 stipend are funded through the endowment that supports the Vernon Maughan Buehler and MaRee C. Buehler Professorship.
Buehler Scholars meet every other week during the semester to share a meal and discuss the book selected for that week. After completing the reading, each scholar is expected to jump into an online forum where they exchange their thoughts on the book they are analyzing prior to meeting over dinner to continue their discussion in person. A review of past online discussions shows the students don’t seem the least bit shy about critiquing flawed logic or mundane prose, even while they consistently search to highlight any significant insight they have found in the books.

There are no grades, so there’s no motivation to please the professor, and even if there were such an inclination to impress Dr. Fawson, it appears that it would be difficult to do so. They aren’t always sure of his real opinions. Dr. Fawson admits the scholars sometimes see him as a “contrarian, whose primary function is to challenge their critical engagement with the readings.”

Sierra Hoffer, a junior majoring in marketing, said she remembers a time that the group found itself united against Dr. Fawson, disagreeing with his critique of a book.

“He wrote a pretty solid opinion and for some reason we all sort of ganged up on him and I’m going to say that we won, not that it was a competition, but he does definitely play the devil’s advocate,” Sierra said.

She said the Buehler Scholars are all intellectually curious but come from different backgrounds and majors. She finds the differences of opinions that are expressed to be helpful.

“You expect to be challenged but you expect to be challenged respectfully,” she said.


“When we talk about leadership and share our experience with the selected readings we are trying to mine those deeper meanings and understandings of leaders within the context of their time and within the context of the organizations that they are affiliated with,” Dr. Fawson said. “It’s trying to get at those core principles of the practice of leadership, not just a broad theoretical academic knowledge of leadership.”

Dallin Maxfield, a senior majoring in economics, with a minor in music, said he has been trying to apply the principles and insights he has read about and discussed into his own life.

“I feel this year we’ve really chosen some powerful books that resonated with me on a deep level,” Dallin said. “They sent the right kind of messages for me in my life right now. They helped me to really think about leadership at a more principled and fundamental level than I had normally thought about it before.”

The discussion posts show that the students wrestle with their own biases and contextual framing for leadership practice and principles as they seek to glean personal insight from what they read. For example, with the book “Steve Jobs” Dallin wrote:

“The first few hundred pages of this book, I consistently said to myself: ‘Jobs is NOT a leader. He may be a genius and a visionary, but he is no leader.’ I said this because of the way he treated others around him. By the middle of the book, I questioned myself asking many of the similar things already posted, such as ‘Is Jobs justified in his actions if it means considerable success and following? Is leadership about creating incredible products and having followers?’ To be brief, I was perplexed with Jobs and his character, always wondering if his story and success could be duplicated elsewhere in another company, for example.”

Dr. Fawson said he took the scholars to meet Dr. Buehler recently where he now lives at Sunshine Terrace, an assisted-care facility in Logan. He said Dr. Buehler spoke to the students individually, offering each of them advice.

“He’ll take your hand like he’s going to shake it and then he will raise your hand to his mouth and give it a tender kiss,” Dr. Fawson said. “It’s a sign of deep humility. He is showing you that you are someone who has blessed his life by coming and spending a few precious moments with him.”
The students interviewed said they appreciated the chance to meet Dr. Buehler.

“He’s got a really incredible, uplifting story,” Sierra said. “He didn’t come from a rich family but he worked hard and he applied himself and he’s always been a giving person. You can tell that he loves what he has done for the school and he is proud that he could help students.”

At the beginning of each new cohort of Buehler Scholars Dr. Fawson talks about the importance of the names people attach to themselves.

“These names we take upon ourselves extend the legacy of that honored name—and also serve to raise our own expectations for the choices we make each and every day,” he said. “The scholars come to know why it is an honor to have their names connected with Dr. Buehler, a man who in his own humble way has found a way to change the world for the better—one life at a time.”

Dr. Fawson describes Dr. Buehler as “a very accomplished--yet humble man.”

“In meeting him, you wouldn’t know him to be a man of great means and yet he has employed his endowment of time, talent and financial resources, in living a life that reflects purposefulness in helping others to discover happiness and cultivate success,” Dr. Fawson said. “I think that kind of legacy is an extraordinary example for our students—and especially our Buehler Leadership Scholars. Those selected as Buehler Scholars will have the Buehler name attached to them the rest of their lives—I hope it will be one of the defining moments in their lives where they affirm a personal commitment to living a life of service and significance. They will be able to carry the great legacy that Vernon Buehler left in his name as part of their own academic legacy.”