Students learn through programs and service

I n 1967 — the Vietnam War was in full swing, miniskirts and flowered shirts blanched campuses, and the Beach Boys and the Beatles blared from stereo speakers. The space race was on, draft cards were burning, and protests were commonplace across the country.

Young people of that generation spoke a different language, and Oklahoma State University President Robert Kamm wanted to interpret that language. To do so, he created the President’s Leadership Council. The initial class included 250 members ranging from freshmen to seniors.

Students were required to have a B average and the desire to develop leadership characteristics. Current OSU President Burns Hargis has been with the program 26 years. Under his leadership, the PLC has grown and seen significant change. Hargis has served as a Lutheran missionary amongst the Ena people in Papua New Guinea before coming to Stillwater.

Today’s President’s Leadership Council has grown into a program centered on service and ethics and is offered only to a select group of approximately 125 incoming freshmen.

“We really want to portray leadership through a unique series of experiences that result in positive social change,” Hasley says. “Students in this program should not just be asking what could be, but what could be better.”

The screening process is stringent and begins with approximately 8,000 applications. The first round of applications is screened based on GPA and student involvement, cutting out about half of the applications. More concentration is given to activities, class size, ACT and SAT scores, community service, employment, leadership positions and honors received in the remaining applications.

Ultimately, a committee made up of faculty and staff leaders across campus select the incoming members whom they believe represent active and informed students with 175 invitations sent. A class size of 125 settles in each fall. Students who accept the invitation benefit from a $1,500 scholarship.

Many major universities have some type of freshman leadership program. Oklahoma State University’s program stands out for two reasons.

“Most leadership programs do not include a rigorous academic component, and few are as long-running as our program,” Hasley says.

PLC is designed to help incoming students with the transition to living on their own and leading more independent college lives. The education portion of PLC consists of two semesters of a three-hour credit course. All PLC students must complete 40 hours of community service, a creative component, and plan and implement a leadership conference for Oklahoma high school seniors known as “The Conclave.”

“PLC gives students a head start in the leadership arena,” Hasley says. “They tend to get involved more quickly, the bar is set a little higher for them, and we find that a significant number of officers in clubs and organizations went through the program.”

Last year, former OSU President and state Senator James Halligan joined Hasley in working with the program. Through his political and professional connections, Halligan has been able to bring in a series of interesting guest speakers and outstanding alumni to speak to the class.

Many students continue with PLC as a mentor to the younger classes. This pay it forward mentality is not uncommon. Wyatt Shaw, an OSU junior studying agricultural communications, continues to be involved in PLC because he appreciates the opportunities and challenges the program offers him.

“I am serving as a PLC facilitator this year because I wanted to invest in the freshman class of OSU,” Shaw says. “They are going to be the leaders of our campus someday.”

The program also plays host to an annual reunion. In 2007, a minor in leadership was established. Students wishing to minor in leadership do not have to be a part of PLC, but they must interview with Hasley before being accepted into the program. Eighteen credit hours are required for the minor, and most of the program centers around ethics and developing social enterprises.

“Having been in PLC and minor in ethical leadership has imparted me in such a positive way,” says OSU junior Emily Sanderlin. “I feel more prepared for my future through these programs because they’ve allowed me to approach real-life situations that challenge the way I think and live my life.”

A faculty-led short-term Leadership Study Abroad program is available through the Center for Ethical Leadership and PLC. Each May, around 20-30 students travel to another country, such as France, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, England, Greece, Egypt or Italy.

“It is important for leaders to see what other cultures value and how they organize themselves to maintain their values,” Hasley says. “Students can learn a lot just by observing and interacting with others in these cultures.”

Hargis is not the only notable PLC graduate. Hundreds of past PLC students are succeeding across the country. Realty Executives sales professional and franchise owner Cindy Brown Card cites her time in the PLC class of 1985 as laying the groundwork for her career.

“The activities I was involved in through PLC encouraged me to have the confidence to follow my own path in ethically building businesses and relationships,” Card says. “It also gave me an appreciation for the differences we have and the importance of relating to different perspectives to solve problems.”

Hasley hopes more memories will be shared at the fall reunion. If you would like to attend the reunion or send in memories, visit leadership.okstate.edu or email coklass@okstate.edu.

Plans are underway to create a President’s Leadership Council endowment to upgrade the scholarship amount for these outstanding students. The university is committed to raising funds in support of leadership programs, including the PLC. The goal is to grow leadership programs for these outstanding students, who are the lifeline to the university’s leadership initiatives and impact OSU in astounding ways through their involvement on campus.

For more information about how to impact the President’s Leadership Council or other leadership initiatives at OSU, visit OSUgiving.com/plc.