

# Rutgers University Graduate School-New Brunswick Graduate Student Blog

A place for Rutgers Graduate Students to share experiences and reflections

## Grad Student Experiences in Leadership



This will be a different type of blog post. This is actually a blog post from 14 graduate students who are about to graduate (or graduated) from the [Rutgers Pre-Doctoral Leadership Development Institute \(PLDI\)](#). This post is composed of short notes about their experiences and serves to thank the Faculty and Staff involved in PLDI.

### What is PLDI?

Rutgers' Pre-Doctoral Leadership Development Institute program (PLDI) is designed to teach doctoral students aspiring to careers in academia how to navigate the challenges of academic leadership and thrive in the university environment. In this two-year certificate program, our professors shared a very precious gift with us – their experience. We created this blog in order to share our experience with them, with respect and appreciation for the gift they have so graciously given us. We hope that this will continue to serve as a reflective space for affiliates and future cohorts to share their perspectives.

**-The PLDI Class of 2013**

## **Tara Coleman: Program in Comparative Literature**

When I first started the PLDI program and told my Dad about it, he looked at me strangely and asked why I needed leadership training if I was going to be a professor. He doesn't know it, but I have already benefitted from my training a great deal, in ways as simple as being able to participate meaningfully in debates among my family and friends about Rutgers, the challenges facing higher education, and how I see my future in this field.

This program has given me not only perspective – opening my eyes to what the issues are and some of the history and background behind the problems we face – but also a sense of purpose that I wasn't sure that I had before. I love my research and I love teaching, but it is easy to be completely terrified at some of the proclamations about the future of higher ed and to get caught up in a negativity loop about the decline of the humanities, the decline in public support for what we do, and a host of other problems. In PLDI, I met people who are facing these issues every day and who are doing amazing work to benefit not only the students, faculty and staff at Rutgers, but the profession as a whole. I feel that it is possible to face the challenges ahead and that even if I can only contribute in a small way to positive change, I have learned some practical skills that can help me to do that.

## **Nicole Shea: Graduate School of Education**

Participating in the PLDI program provided me specific skills appropriate for leadership roles in higher education. The three greatest benefits of being a fellow in this program were the acquisition of foundational knowledge pertaining to issues in higher education, participating in the shadowing experience with an administrative leader, and developing my communication and project coordination skills with other PLDI students from various academic backgrounds and experience with leadership roles. Ultimately, these skills and experiences helped me secure a job in higher education after graduation.

Throughout the program but especially in our last capstone course, I learned how to carefully listen to other students as we shared ideas, developed strategies for our final project, and came together as a team. Our class was comprised of students from diverse academic and professional backgrounds with very different personalities. The skills I learned in previous PLDI courses, helped me and my classmates successfully collaborate to construct and present our final work. Without the experiences we had as a cohort in the previous semesters, this process would have been extremely difficult. However, we each learned to listen and respect each other's perspectives – skills that will be invaluable as we move forward with our academic and professional careers.

### **Deniz Daser: Anthropology**

Before attending the PLDI program I hadn't realized how much American higher education had changed. Spending time with fellow students, our guiding professors, various Rutgers administration guests, and mentors has particularly shed light on how a future in the academic profession will necessitate understanding the funding and institutional changes occurring, whether or not one is involved in leadership per se. As someone who believes in the public financing of our public universities and is concerned about providing access to public universities for a diverse group of students, I am worried by the growing influence of a corporate model for higher education. However, that does not mean I can shield myself from the realities faced by future leaders, and I am thankful to PLDI for training us in the institutional transformations that characterize higher education today.

### **Brad Forenza: School of Social Work**

There are four components to PLDI: two theoretical semesters (one pertaining to the construct of leadership and one pertaining to higher education administration), one applied semester in a leadership setting, and one capstone

project culminating in an academic symposium. While every semester was purposeful, I most enjoyed learning about higher education administration, as explicated and contextualized by vice presidents, deans, and program directors from throughout the university community.

## **Maria Dwyer: School of Communication & Information**

The teamwork and the mentoring were both extraordinary learning and bonding experiences for me. This kind of active learning is what research advocates . Dr. Ruben's program utilizes this method of educating to create a powerful and empowering teaching/learning environment . While tailored toward academic leadership, the skills we learned here have already been extremely helpful to me, both in the academy and in life in general.

Probably the key takeaway from this program for me is summed up by Theodore Roosevelt: "The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people." The collegiality of the four instructors among themselves, with our mentors , with the guest lecturers and especially with us, the students, provided a wonderful example of how to get along with others. They truly taught by example. We learned how to pay attention to and be sensitive to everyone's emotions and thoughts and to negotiate workable compromises. Because of our training and also because of the relationships we developed as a part of this program, a respect and a synergy emerged such that we were able to complete a large project with relative ease while simultaneously helping each other to refine our interpersonal and leadership skills.

Drs. Bender, DeLisi, Lawrence and Ruben and all the guest lecturers gave us their absolute best and it was a privilege to have had their guidance . I am very grateful to Dr. Schement for his delightful and enlightening mentoring in relationship-building. Last, but not least, I am grateful to my fellow students for their insights and camaraderie. As we come to the close of this program, I know that I will miss all the wonderful people who gave their time and their

wisdom: our professors, our mentors, the guest lecturers and perhaps most of all, my fellow students. Thank you all for two phenomenal years!

## **Tayo Jolaosho: Anthropology**

As a PLDI fellow, I received leadership training that has prepared me to assume a more inclusive and collaborative faculty role. Through my participation, I have gained a broadened vision of the relationships among multiple constituents in higher education environments so as engage more efficiently across its various levels. My perspective of the field has been transformed in ways that enhance my teaching and mentoring engagements with students as well as my collaborations with peers and faculty mentors. I am able to discern the concerns that propel various stakeholders, where these concerns overlap and how they might diverge. This discernment contributes a more comprehensive orientation towards the issues and challenges at stake within my particular sphere of influence and in the system as a whole.

Upon the culmination of this two-year fellowship, I note personal transformations as well—we have grown together. I feel more confident about the contributions of my leadership style, which is one of empathetic leadership. Collaboration with my peers and the mentorship of administrative leaders through the program has helped me clarify the value and potential limitations of this approach. Furthermore, I have been able to expand my leadership practices in collective endeavors. My peers taught me the importance of individual initiative and active participation that is perhaps best illustrated by one fellow's email signature, a quote from William Arthur Ward: "Do more than belong: participate." I have also learned to temper my eagerness to contribute with consideration for others' perspectives so that our achievements are based on collective investment. And the process has been worthwhile.

## **Monica Vroman: Computer Science**

I have enjoyed each semester of the PLDI program. They were all different, and each came with experience that helped me think of leadership in new and helpful ways. But if I were to choose the semester when I have learned the most, it would probably be 503. I had the privilege of shadowing Barbara Bender and seeing her lead meetings, talk to the people who are under her leadership, whom she always calls “colleagues”, and treats that way. While those meetings were very interesting to attend and learn from, only in the past few months have I realized how much I had learned from them. This semester, I have been in a few leadership (“mentorship” might be a better word) situations, where I have had to make decisions which greatly influenced the atmosphere and productivity of the meeting. Before having the PLDI experience, I know that I would have felt stuck in those kinds of situations, not knowing what to do to help the group move forward in a constructive way. But the skills I have acquired (and I think especially the skills that I learned from Barbara, Brent and our other PLDI mentors) have helped me assess these crisis situations, and quickly figure out what I can do to help the group move in a beneficial direction. I am grateful for this experience and how the program has helped me grow and develop my leadership skills, challenging my previous views on what it meant to be a leader, and helping me develop the skills of effective leadership.

So I want to say a big “thank you” to all our PLDI mentors and the people who have put the time and energy into developing this wonderful program. On my part, it was definitely time well spent.

## **José Antonio Maldonado: Food Science**

At the beginning of the PLDI program I was not sure if I should continue with it, after all, I was not too interested in a career in higher education. Now I am very glad I decided to keep with the program. I cannot think of any better place to work together and learn from people with such a variety of backgrounds, skills, and personalities. The instructors gave a lot to foster a unique environment of discussion and learning that I could not have found by just keeping with my

regular graduate program.

Participating in the PLDI program has required me to develop a lot of interpersonal skills that I had not worked on in the past, both in order to understand different points of view on a similar topic and to make myself understood by people from different educational backgrounds. All the cases analyzed in class during the first and second semester helped me see leadership in a different way, since leadership in higher education strongly relies on listening and empathy skills. The field project allowed me to see how all the topics discussed in class actually work in the real world, and how relevant our discussions were. Finally, working on the capstone project that we just presented was almost like a lab experiment on leadership skills. For all these experiences I want to thank Barbara, Susan, Brent, Richard, and all the PLDI staff for all their effort and dedication to the program.

### **Arianna Fognani: Italian**

As an international student, being part of the PLDI program has been a real challenge for me. When I was accepted I was a little puzzled about the goals and outcomes of this new enterprise on which I was embarking. Leaving the niche of my department and interacting with students, administrators, and professors from different disciplines has expanded my vision of Rutgers, presented many relevant challenges faced by higher education today, and has also showed me alternative professional career paths.

In this program I gained a broader knowledge of the American academic system through readings and class discussions with our professors and guest speakers. I was encouraged to reflect on the nuances of terms such as “leader”, “mission”, and “challenge” when applied to different academic contexts, as well as to think critically about structures, dynamics, and policies that govern universities and colleges. This has helped me to feel a deeper connection to the Rutgers community, to be more critical about leadership roles, and to analyze decisions

that affect the future of our institution and of higher education in general. Shadowing my mentor provided me with a real hands-on experience for leadership skills, abilities, and strategies, which I am now able to transfer to my own working environment. I'm glad to have had the opportunity to observe Joanna Regulska (VP of International and Global Affairs) who was willing to share with me her vision of a more internationalized university. Finally, in these last few weeks of intense preparation for our group project, I have seen how diverging views can still converge in the final product. Observing our class dynamic and listening to our discussion has given me the chance to take away something meaningful from each one of my PLDI fellows.

### **Kelly Lovejoy: Spanish & Portuguese**

During the past two years in the PLDI program, I have witnessed many examples of leadership, and learned a lot about what makes a good leader. Despite the fact that there exists a generally agreed-upon set of characteristics that effective leaders possess, such as communication skills, expertise and organization, it seems clear to me now that a formula for successful or effective leadership doesn't exist. Even a person who possesses many of the skills and qualities attributed to good leadership is not always a good leader. So while the right combination of skills and characteristics may be difficult to define, there is one critical aspect of effective leadership that stands out to me: the ability to be a team player. Maybe it's counter-intuitive or oxymoronic, but some of the best leaders I know are in leadership roles because they are able to work well with others. They lead by example rather than relying on the authority conveyed by their titles or positions. They are compassionate and empathetic. They address others as equals and encourage them to voice their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. In my experience, the ability to lead while still being part of the team is difficult to hone, but it is something that I will strive to do in my future leadership roles.

## **Michelle Ouimet: Chemistry**

The PLDI class has been a tremendous experience and I feel grateful for the experiences and knowledge I've gained. The class not only taught me about leadership, but also helped me understand that people think in different ways. Working with my classmates opened my mind to viewing how others think and perceive various issues and ideas. This, in turn, taught me the importance of communication, as ideas may not be received as intended. We have learned how to collaborate effectively and respect one another throughout this process.

The formal learning of how to become an effective leader through understanding and implementing organizational change, conflict management, strategic planning, and learning the stakeholders' background proved integral to my interviewing with a world-renowned chemical company. Through discussing "What Leaders Need to Know and Do", a book by Brent Ruben read during the PLDI class, I was able to demonstrate my knowledge of the competencies for being an effective leader. I was also able to provide specific examples of my leadership using the described competencies as a foundation for skills I currently exhibit and those I hope to acquire. As a PLDI fellow, I can proudly say that I have had a PhD experience that was like no other and would only hope that a program such as this continues to train future leaders.

## **Hasan Johnson: Social Work**

What an incredible honor it has been to be a fellow of the PLDI program. I have learned so much over the last two years, both formally and informally, that as I look back on my experiences now, I am completely surprised by how much I have accomplished, experienced and learned since starting the program. The core team of instructors were absolutely amazing. Their leadership as instructors ensured that we, as program fellows, had plenty of opportunities to explore a variety of relevant topics and materials and to meet and engage guest lecturers in ways that further expanded our knowledge and skills. The best,

most rewarding part of the PLDI experience for me was being assigned a mentor and having an entire semester to “shadow” my mentor and learn as much as I could directly from this process. Imagine having the opportunity to sit down with and talk to an actual Rutgers Administrator about his/her journey, career choices, experiences, insights, and perspectives as a leader at Rutgers. Much thanks to all of the PLDI team, my cohort members and my mentor VP Courtney McAnuff. I’ve learned so much from all of you! Being able to do this program, make this journey with my cohort members, and have that mentoring experience in particular was priceless!

### **Brittany Graf: Plant Biology**

The greatest part of this program were the surprises – learning the unexpected, developing wonderful, unexpected friendships and mentorships, and discovering new things about myself. It has been an honor and pleasure to work with my fellow students and teachers during this two-year process. I feel that we have all been challenged to really look outside our individual perspectives and strengthen our abilities to listen and to share. It turns out, the sharing of ideas is an outstandingly difficult task when immersed in a group of leaders, and communication comes in so many forms. PLDI has been a great experiment in communication for me; I know I have gained deep, lasting insights for which I am forever grateful to the peers and mentors who challenged me to see them.

### **Vukosi Marivate: Computer Science**

The PLDI program has been a welcome part of my experience as a PhD student at Rutgers. Coming from another country it gave me a deeper understanding of issues that underlie the functioning of Higher Education. My most memorable experiences during the program were in the 3rd semester when we had to shadow a leader. This was not just about my experience with my mentor, but experiencing the interactions with the other mentors from my PLDI classmates.

Effective Leadership is a process that takes time and PLDI has equipped me with the tools to better understand the interplays involved. I would encourage other PhD students at Rutgers to get involved in this opportunity they have on their campus.

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