

# Emerging Leaders Empowered to Make Change

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**“Promote positive change, economic vitality, resource conservation, and enhance the quality of life in Michigan by encouraging leadership for the common good.”** That is the mission of the Great Lakes Leadership Academy (GLLA) conducted by the MSU College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Through two programs, the Emerging Leader Program (ELP) and the Leadership Advancement Program (LAP), the GLLA brings together current and potential leaders from a variety of sectors to broaden their conservation perspectives and teach them the necessary skills to tackle the multitude of environmental, social, and cultural issues Michigan (and the world) face today. Since 2004, the GLLA has developed bold leaders capable of envisioning and implementing solutions for the common good.



## Great Lakes Leadership Academy



In April 2015, twenty-four eager participants came together in Hastings, Michigan for their first of three sessions of the ELP. The ELP included participants representing diverse employers such as state and federal agencies, non-profit organizations, tribal groups, MSU Extension groups, and MSU graduate students, which provided us with an opportunity to network with individuals from many sectors. As anticipated, we did learn tips and tricks for planning a productive meeting, designing an agenda, facilitating discussions, and other classic leadership skills, but the GLLA pushed us further than that. Our GLLA cohort delved into complex and challenging topics, such as emotional resiliency and recognizing behavioral traits in ourselves and the people around us, diversity and the difference between equality and equity, and what it means to lead for the common good. Through difficult conversations and often emotionally draining days, these twenty-four once-eager participants transformed into a supportive and strongly bonded group of leaders. To give you a snapshot of our GLLA experience, four MSU graduate students discuss their perspectives on lessons learned from the 2015 GLLA.





## Kathryn Frens

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'Leadership for the common good' is a GLLA catchphrase, and we spent quite a bit of time reflecting on and talking about what this phrase means and how it looks when applied in real life. As you might expect, we were unable to articulate a single definition of "common good," but we still found ways to engage with the idea in several different settings. The first was a group project in which we identified a person who leads for the common good, and then interviewed that person about their work and leadership style. My group found ourselves implicitly defining "common good" while narrowing down our list of possible interviewees, and ended up interviewing a policy advisor and long-time public servant. Other groups ended up with different implicit definitions: while I was adamant that the head of a for-profit company could not be said to be working for the common good, another group interviewed a CEO, and made an excellent case for his inclusion.

This concept was also woven into our many discussions of values and dealing with differences in the workplace. A person's concept of the common good is shaped by what they value, which is influenced by their community of origin and experiences in life, giving rise to disparate ideas on what to do when the common good is your goal. During the third session, we spent most of an afternoon coming up with consensus-based policy proposals that would advance the common good in areas like food, public land, and transportation, which quickly brought up differences not only in strategy, but also in conception of what advancing the common good means. To finish the project, we had to understand the origin of these conflicts and find points of commonality.

"I never would have guessed how quickly our cohort would bond, or how strong those bonds would become over a relatively short time together. The relationships I formed will enhance my professional network, no doubt, but more importantly I gained lifelong friends. Sharing this once-in-a-lifetime experience truly formed us into a family, and I am grateful to be part of it."

- Julie Hinderer, GLFC, GLLA Participant



## Lisa Peterson

Ph.D. Student  
Fisheries & Wildlife

**Diversity.** One of the GLLA cornerstones, and in my opinion, an extremely uncomfortable topic of conversation. But a main take-away from our GLLA diversity training was that just because a conversation is uncomfortable doesn't mean it is not important to have. As a leader, we need to be aware of the systems of oppression in our workplace and in this country. Discrimination and oppression are not just present at the individual level; they are also present at the institutional and cultural levels. To combat that oppression, we need to acknowledge it and envision solutions from an inclusive and equitable perspective. But what is equity, as opposed to equality? This was another important topic of the GLLA. If we give everyone the same thing then everything should be fair, right? That's equality. But this assumes we are all starting in the same place, which we are not. We are all part of target and non-target groups, sometimes being helped by the system in place, sometimes being hindered. Equity acknowledges that. Equity means access, and recognizing the barriers in place and providing means to overcome them. Being an equitable leader means recognizing that people are different, and the way they are treated by the system and society is different, and it is working to meet people where they are.

The GLLA argues that including diversity and equity in our vision as leaders is about recognizing that people from different perspectives bring great value to the table, and that we need to combat the idea that this is not true. Power and privilege are, and may always be, present; but to be able to have open conversations with others about our differences, and come from a place of love, not of fear, is an important component of leading for the common good.



## Molly Good

Ph.D. Student  
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### Understanding YOU and Your Leadership Style -

The ELP challenges its participants early on with the difficult task of learning about themselves as individuals in both a professional and personal setting. To jumpstart this learning process, each participant receives their own DiSC profile, or personality and behavioral assessment. The letters in DiSC stand for: D = dominance, i = influence, S = steadiness, and C = conscientiousness. For instance, I received a D profile or a dominant personality and behavioral assessment. The DiSC profiles, though fairly general in their descriptions, helped me and other program participants quickly become more self-aware of our values, personality strengths and weaknesses, and our boldest behavioral traits – both in and out of the workplace.

During the year, we continued to return to our DiSC profiles to seek guidance on how to use our personality characteristics and behavioral traits to increase effectiveness in certain circumstances. This type of reflection was especially helpful to program participants during group activities, when we were requested to function together as a team. As part of our first team assignment, I was placed in a group composed of I's, S's, C's, and other D's. All eight of us spent time understanding our DiSC profiles and building trust within our team by recognizing our individual limitations and utilizing others' strengths. We learned that effective, strategic leadership is flexible leadership, in which we, as leaders, must adapt and adjust our style to others to achieve maximum success.

The ELP encouraged program participants to practice flexible leadership by providing us with additional tools and strategies. We learned about utilizing decision-making models, developing an agenda, and employing different facilitation techniques. Since the program wrapped, I have benefitted from flexing my own leadership style and experimenting with these tools and strategies in my graduate lab and at home.



## Zach Curtis

Ph.D. Student  
Environmental  
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### Emotional Wellness Skill Building-

At one of our first training sessions, we were asked to think of a leader for whom we had great respect, and to consider the sort of behaviors they exhibited that separated them from ineffective leaders. Thoughtfulness, optimism, patience, and resilience were some responses, and the link between emotional wellness and effective leadership quickly emerged in our discussion. But how do we maintain this sort of emotional stability given the large responsibilities and complex challenges we face as researchers, public professionals, or other leaders of the common good? Throughout the ELP, we practiced connecting with our emotional health to become more effective leaders in the face of adversity.

Time was spent identifying our own unique behavioral and physiological responses to stress, a necessary component of deciding when our "best self" is present to make effective decisions. We discussed various strategies for quickly finding our emotional health when we have been "triggered" by challenges in our life – from simple thinking and breathing exercises, to developing personal growth plans that strengthen our core values and make us more emotionally resilient. We outlined the dominant cultural "norms" that result in unfair expectations put upon ourselves and one another, and considered that, as leaders, we need to be aware of the negative impact that results from reinforcing unreasonable rules and expectations. To that end, we explored the power of self-empathy and empathy for others as a way to connect and build trust, which ultimately results in more successful leadership and wholehearted living.

Perhaps many of the ELP graduates were surprised to see emotional wellness training in a leadership curriculum – I know I was. I am confident, however, that many of us will agree that it was one of the most impactful aspects of the Emerging Leader Program experience.

**Visit [www.glla.msu.edu](http://www.glla.msu.edu) for more information about the GLLA. The GLLA accepts applications for the Emerging Leader Program and the Leadership Advancement Program during the fall before the program year.**