The world rarely operates at the extremes. Few issues, few decisions, few of life’s complexities are black or white. The gray areas dominate the decisions that are made in the workplace, in the home, in communities, and across borders. Good leaders understand the burdens and frustration, as well as the potential and beauty, of gray.

Despite academe’s mantra and good intentions to broaden student thinking, most students often find themselves drifting toward or influenced by predetermined, sometimes narrow-minded, sometimes orthodox points of view. Rather than promoting people to analyze the pros and cons of arguments and to see the other point of view, our society broadly pushes its citizens to premature conclusions based on slogans, media hype, and oversimplified arguments. If an alien were to judge our planet from representations in the media, one might conclude we have become a nation of screamers. We put people on opposite sides of a stage, TV screen, or bullhorn and let them shout. Although universities such as Penn State are mindful of their responsibilities to transcend this approach, it is unclear that academe is succeeding. Our educational system, it can be argued, often leads its graduates to conclusions that don’t benefit from the range of viewpoints on issues of great or even modest complexity.

Penn State wants students to explore the multiple dimensions of a topic, to develop the critical skills necessary to appreciate diverse viewpoints, and to appreciate the value of more fully informed and respectful discourse. That is why we have established a new leadership program for a select number of our most promising students. The Presidential Leadership Academy (PLA) will create much more than well-rounded graduates. It will provide special preparation for students to become critical thinkers in our business, political, and social communities.

We believe this new system will identify future leaders and then present them with curricular and extra-curricular opportunities that encourage comprehensive and inclusive thinking—an appreciation of gray. The Presidential Leadership Academy will maximize the impact and value of the Penn State experience for a distinct group of incoming undergraduates, chosen from among their high school peers for their academic achievements, leadership potential, and commitment to critical thinking. Through a unique integration of resources and activities, the Academy will give this cadre of students the resources they need for an immersive and holistic education, and it will affirm Penn State’s pioneering role as an innovator in training the leaders of tomorrow.

The President of the University will serve as the chief architect, symbolic leader, and active participant for the Academy in its formative years and will teach a First-Year Seminar to those admitted to the program. He will be assisted in the development of the Academy by an advisory committee comprised of both Penn State faculty and external participants. This core group will advise University leaders on curriculum and the extracurricular activities.

**ADMISSIONS & CURRICULUM**

Penn State has established a special selection procedure to choose these Presidential Leadership Academy members. Because the administrative infrastructure and work processes needed for such a program already exists within the Schreyer Honors College, the Academy is ably administered through this unit, however this new venture is a separate initiative, and the students chosen do not need to be Schreyer Scholars. The goal is to identify a broad mix of students with a
capacity for critical thinking, leadership, passion, and ability to articulate—verbally or through writing—the capacity for a special kind of thinking, analysis, and leadership.

Thirty students are admitted each year as members of the Academy, for an initial program enrollment of 120 students (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) after three full years. Students are invited to apply for the PLA soon after they are offered admission to University Park. An on-line application ascertains service and leadership accomplishments and propensity for critical thinking skills, societal awareness, and community engagement. A faculty review committee reads applications, and finalists typically are interviewed.

Academy members have a number of required programmatic elements and enjoy other ongoing activities and events including leadership seminars and annual lectures.

- Presidential Academy members are required to take a one-credit seminar course led by the President of the University featuring intensive discussions led by the President, other faculty, and guest visitors from outside the University who represent a broad spectrum of views on issues vital to modern intellectual leaders.
- Members are required to take two additional courses, typically one that is specially designed for the program and one that already exists and is among a group of courses found to be ideally suited for the program.
- A required capstone experience in their senior year exemplifies critical thinking, analysis, and decision-making.
- The PLA sponsors at least one field trip per semester, and Presidential Academy members must attend at least four trips during their undergraduate career. These trips take students beyond the confines of University Park and are central to fostering a broader perspective on social and political issues. Examples might include a visit to FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C., a tour of reconstruction areas in New Orleans, a trip to a border town in the Southwest, and a visit to Wall Street in New York City.
- Presidential Academy members are assigned a faculty advisor, chosen from among Penn State’s honors advisors. Academy members meet with advisors once a semester and must prepare, and have approved by their advisor, an annual academic plan that outlines not only their progress towards degree, but also how their curricular and extracurricular activities foster their development as critical thinkers.
- Academy members are expected to maintain an on-line journal to record events attended and, most importantly, to reflect critically upon these events and any other activities, thus fostering a continued critical dialogue with their educational experience.
- A minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.0 must be maintained to remain in good standing. Students are expected to regularly attend lectures and special programs designed to expose them to a broad range of thinking and issues.

The University has committed a variety of resources to ensure the successful management of the Academy. It is also seeking significant private philanthropy to support scholarships, curriculum development, field trips, guest speakers, internships, and administrative support.

As an intellectual framework on which to build their Penn State education, the Presidential Academy complements and enhances the academic experience available to students. It will help the University achieve its historical mission of preparing the next generation of leaders and ensure that those leaders possess the critical thinking essential for understanding and solving the challenges of tomorrow.