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[Mike] Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host, Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Rebecca Razavi, Director of the Southern Management Leadership program. Rebecca, thanks for joining me.

[Rebecca] Thank you so much for inviting me.

[Mike] Tell me a little bit about the Southern Management Leadership program, and I'm interested in how that program works with students to become better leaders.

[Rebecca] Sure. So, the Southern Management Leadership program, um, is a...um, I think I'll maybe...I'll talk historically about it because it became the Southern Management Leadership program just in the last couple years. Before taking that name, it was a program focused on developing entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial mindset of students who were interested in learning about entrepreneurship. And just in the last couple of years what I think one of the things we realized is that having an entrepreneurial mindset is very uh similar to what it takes to be a leader. So, we want to make sure that we're catching all types of students with... with all types of uh future plans and... um and... and we've been attracting those kind of students who really want to develop those skills. So... um so we take our students through two semesters here at Montgomery College. We get them ready for their transfer to the University of Maryland College Park. They're all chosen because that's their... their ultimate destination transfer school. And they continue in our program there for two more years. So by the time they finish, they've had three full years together as a very strong cohort. And we're helping them also build that network and that community um along the way to... to becoming leaders in whatever field they're interested in.

[Mike] So what kind of leadership skills do you teach?

[Rebecca] I... I think that, again, because it's been an evolution, it... it's not like we have today we're going to learn about you know leading from behind; tomorrow we're going to learn about a different type of leadership skill. It's really about helping the students reach their potential and realizing that there are a lot of different... just like there are a lot of different ways to be an entrepreneur there are a lot of different ways to be a leader um. So, we do choose students who are interested in uh you know reaching their potential, whatever that might be. We give them opportunities to get out of their comfort zone, so that's one thing that we focus on. So, they're going to do presentations and they have to go out into the community and meet people um and there are things like that that they might have some anxiety about, but the more that they do those kinds of out of their comfort zone activities, the stronger they become and more confident they become. And so, a lot of it does have to do with building confidence um and also building skills like communication skills that will allow them to be successful in those kinds of situations. Um so it's not like we don't actually have like a leadership uh curriculum we have a lot of experiences that the students do to develop skills that will make them better leaders.

[Mike] One of the things that I...I find fascinating, you do it on a regular basis, is this professional development series for students, and we usually see that from an employee standpoint not necessarily from a... a student standpoint. Talk a little bit about that.

[Rebecca] Yeah, sure. So, in the past we have I've always integrated into my program these uh requirements that students, again, get out of their comfort zone. I want them off campus. I want them meeting people who are in the fields that they're interested in. Um just kind of getting outside of their... the academic world. Um when uh... when the pandemic hit, and we all went home I was worried that those uh experiences wouldn't be available anymore. Um and so that's why I started this. It's the Professional Development for College Student Speaker Series. It's a long... long title but it's to um give them a way to interact with people who are in their professional capacities. Um so we have a huge range of topics that we cover. We had... just last night, we had somebody talk about intellectual property. Before that it was about LinkedIn, developing their LinkedIn or their networking profile. Um we've had members of chamber the... the President of the Chamber of Commerce has been in. We've had local and national politicians come in and talk about doing service. So, um... so there's so many different... so many different ways that we can look at this. And so, I'm trying to keep it broad and also trying to keep it focused on things that the students are going to be interested in and can benefit from. So yes, it is professional development um in that... in that regard. We're developing them into being you know professionals.

[Mike] Great idea. I want to pivot to this idea of comfort zone and leadership and your work in getting students out of their comfort zone. But we as leaders also have to get out of our comfort zone as well. Do you do you find that that's difficult for a lot of leaders to do?

[Rebecca] [takes deep breath] Well I... you know, I know my students as leaders and for them absolutely for... for adults I'm not as... I'm not sure because I'm surrounded by people who are really competent and really you know have a lot to give. I know for myself that getting out of my comfort... comfort zone has been a huge part of my own development. So, I started my career as I think of myself as kind of like a little creature coming out of a cave. So, I started my career as an editor where I did not actually have to talk to anyone. I could sit in my office and do my job and then send it off um and then getting out of that I was covering um they were scientific meetings, but you know then I'm in the room then I'd learned you know that I didn't only have to edit, I had a voice and I learned to be a writer and eventually ended up in the classroom teaching English. So, for me it's been you know kind of the crack in the door has gotten wider and wider and that's where I've gotten my confidence. So again, with my students what I try to do is scaffold their experiences. So, before they have to interview somebody, which is their next assignment, they actually have to look at a historical figure and figure out what their story is so that they can get comfortable with the idea of either learning about another person. And then they will do that they'll... they'll be doing podcasts like this one um in the week... next week or so... so you know kind of helping them take smaller steps to build their confidence. I think it's... it's been very helpful for me, and I think I think it's helpful for them as well so um I don't know if that answers your question but I think that it is a lot about getting out of your comfort zone and you don't have to do it all at once. It's like you don't have to throw yourself into the fire or the

deep end of the pool. You can do that by um allowing yourself to do little things that you might be a little bit nervous about and then as you get confident, you can do things that are a little more nervy. And uh, I go from there.

[Mike] I think there's benefit to doing it slow, right, to take in those small steps instead of just throwing yourself out there I... I found, in my journey that when I took those small steps and became comfortable it gave me more confidence to take those larger steps down the road.

[Rebecca] Right... right exactly. And the other piece of it is um you know having a community and finding that you're not alone, which can be really helpful. And you know you identify yourself with the people that you're around and if everybody is, you know, vulnerable enough to... you kind of admit that they might need a little bit of help or that they're nervous about something it can help everybody feel more comfortable. So that's something that I do in my program but it's also something that I think is true for all of us I know you know I've been at Montgomery College for I counted it this morning for 13 years and... and when I started I was nervous like everyone um but realizing that I was around other people who had been where I was as a beginner and um... and having mentors and advice and help from them. Really there are just other tools that we use to help us kind of get to the place where we ultimately want to be.

[Mike] You spend a lot of time working with students on leadership. What do you look for in a leader?

[Rebecca] Oh man, that's a good question. Um you mean if I could choose my own leader?

[Mike] Yeah what... what traits would you... would you identify?

[Rebecca] Sure. So, the people who have been mentors for me. Who are not I can I think of them as... as leaders um people that I look up to and that are a little bit further along the path. What I have really appreciated in them is um uh... foremost I think to give me the confidence to be my authentic self. You know that being a leader doesn't mean that you have to put on a special suit and mask, and you know paint your fingernails or whatever it is that we think of as kind of the corporate image. Um and I think that that's really helpful when you have a leader who says yes I want you to be your best self. It's not that I want you to be somebody else and how can I help you do that. So, I think that you know the term might be leading from behind for example is kind of a term of art about that kind of leadership, where... where uh you know you're helping everybody move forward and the ultimate goal of course is to help the organization or whatever the, you know, the enterprise that you're part of. Um so that's what I would that that's the kind of leader that I've appreciated working for in the past. I've been lucky to have leaders like that that uh that have helped me kind of get myself to the next space where you know I might have been too nervous but they're letting me know that it's okay and that if... and also that if you fail that's fine too. That's super, super um empowering if you want to be doing things that are outside of your immediate skill area. To realize that it's okay to um to stumble.

[Mike] We all do, right?

[Rebecca] Yes... yes. And as a teacher that's something that I tell my students all the time and thankfully they know more than I do in some regards, and they can help me along. But it gives

them you know it gives them the confidence that they're the actual helpers. Um one of the things that we've started doing the last couple years that I think is really great in this regard is um uh it's a volunteer activity. Well except that they get paid. Students step up if they're interested in helping middle school students learn about entrepreneurship. Gives them the opportunity again to be in a leadership position where they are um passing on the knowledge and skills that they have to somebody who is coming up through the pipeline. Um so I... so I think that that's also just one of the really nice things about developing a leader. Is giving them the opportunity to be a leader in another way and to you know pass it back. Reach back, pull people forward. [Laughs]

[Mike] What...what kind of leader would you not want to work for or work with?

[Rebecca] Oh gosh! Ah...[laughs] I had one leader I guess you could say like that in my past and it was... I thought it was kind of interesting... um is somebody who she was self-absorbed. I guess it was like her mission was to get the next promotion and we were there as her tools. I think that that's an awful dynamic to be in um with somebody that you're... you know you're expecting... you're needing them to kind of have your back; and that's not the kind of person who's going to have your back. You're looking for somebody who's going to be able to um help you uh get out of your comfort zone for, you know same old thing. Get out of your comfort zone or learn new things. And if... if... if that leader is concerned primarily with their own um ambition, then I think that... that's a, you know, that's a recipe for a disastrous relationship. I think that... that's the kind of you know work environment that people will leave if they can. Um and I've only had a... you know... one person who was an immediate supervisor who was like that, but it really taught me a lesson about what not to do [laughs].

[Mike] They spend too much time looking at their next job instead of doing the job they have.

[Rebecca] Right and instead of uh you know working with the people who are around them.

[Mike] Yeah, I... I used to have a gentleman who worked with me who was exactly like that. And then we'd often talk about how great he was in crisis management. And I said but here's the problem: you create the crisis simply so you can manage it. And it just created a toxic atmosphere. It just did not work because it was... there was always turmoil. Always this sense of a fright that... that the other shoe was going to drop at some point. Just not a good environment.

[Rebecca] That's awful.

[Mike] Yeah it was very... very awful. Um, in regards to this failure. How do you work with students and get them to understand it's okay to fail? You don't have to be perfect.

[Rebecca] Yeah... yeah... that's a that's a great question um because it's difficult, you know when you're... you're in higher education and you're a teacher. You're grading students all the time for their work and so you're setting, you know and I do the same thing I set pretty high expectations for them um and if they don't meet those expectations, then you know they are going to suffer. Um so again I think the scaffolding works in some regard. Having low stakes opportunities for students to do things, so that not everything is graded... or um if we're having a discussion and that say the discussion is graded to um [inaudible] time frame and if you do that you're fine and... and then the discussion can continue. So, we can continue to just probe and to

you know, learn without the grading being part of that... that learning process. I think that that's... that's one thing that's helpful. Um also I started out teaching English so and... and my background is in... in... um not in journalism specifically, but in writing and English and editing and those kinds of things. So, I am really upfront with my students. That's an important... that's really important for you to be able to... to you know you have to know how to read and you have to know how to write and those are two things that I can bring... to help you with that. So again, I'm not grading students on that because it's not part of our content, but I'm able to help develop them as writers. Which I think is... is... is useful for them in terms of ...like learning how to be better communicators. Um so it's kind of choosing what I'm going to grade on and then what I'm going to give feedback on. I hadn't thought about it until you asked that question, but I think that's something that... that can take some of the sting out and the nervousness out of failing. It's like just put something out there and we'll take a look at it.

[Mike] As a faculty member you're... you're demonstrating, at least from what I'm hearing, not just teaching tendencies, but you are demonstrating these leadership tendencies. So you know you're making this connection I think between being a faculty member and being a leader. It's not just going into a class and teaching content.

[Rebecca] Right... right... right exactly and yeah and that's something that I... you know I've... I've kind of stepped gradually into that... into that role. Um and I truly do try to model what I think we were talking about; you know what's a... what's your ideal leader and what's a... what's an awful leader. And I try to model what it means in my mind to be an... you know, a good leader or someone who's going to be helping other people so that they can see what that looks like. So again that... that you know that... that's being vulnerable in the classroom...

[Mike] ...you have to listen to the students ...

[Rebecca] ...yes yes yes! And to give them the opportunity to teach us as faculty members. I think has been really you know it's great for us to be able to learn from them but it's also great for them to be able to teach us.

[Mike] So when you give students this agency over their own learning, does that... does that take away from your leadership in the classroom or does it enhance your leadership in the classroom?

[Rebecca] So I... I well I think it enhances the leadership just... and I... and I say that because students come back to me all the time. One of the beautiful things about being in a three-year program which most of us in community college don't have the opportunity to do is that I get to stay in touch with my students even after they leave my classroom and um and they do maintain relation... I maintain relationships with them. Um they come back and volunteer, they want to be the voice of... of our program because they've had such a positive experience um in the program. So I... I think that it does make a positive difference. It certainly builds relationships that are long-lasting um which is part of you know... kind of you know... what I'm trying to... to accomplish as well. I also remember the first time I started what... the first semester that I took on this role and I started as an interim director. Stepping in, kind of, mid-semester out after the other director had left and um and it was rough because they had already bonded with the director before, and I was coming in with... trying to do things differently and trying to maintain

control and the previous director was is a friend of mine and... and she and I continued to talk and she said you just have to be yourself. You know don't try to maintain control. And this kind of thing... as... if you show your vulnerability, they're going to respond to you and that's been a real big lesson for me. I think that there was a shift in the way I teach um when I started doing that. And... and uh you know the... the fact that we're all human beings and we're all figuring this out together. I mean during the pandemic... this has been like a huge experiment for all of us in that regard. Because we are teachers and faculty learning together how to manage this new... new world. Um but that was the lesson that I got kind of early on and I'm so glad I did because I think it's made a huge difference.

[Mike] As we begin to wrap up, if... if I were to ask you where on your leadership journey you are. Where are you on that timeline or that...

[Rebecca] yeah...

[Mike] ...that spectrum?

[Rebecca] Yeah that's... that's an interesting question um. So I...I... I think I'm an... and... a lifelong learner um and I find that I continue to go back to school. To kind of plot my way towards my future, so you know starting with my undergraduate English degree and then I was a writer and then I started this program, got my MBA and I'm now finishing... finishing I've got about a year more on my... my uh I'm getting a doctorate in education, and um and I'm kind of learning through learning where I might want to land next. Um I'm not sure if it's going to be a leadership position you know in... in that regard I think what I find when I... when I go back to school or when I take classes, what I'm learning is what's important. And so, I just want to be where my energy can be best used. And the knowledge that I'm getting and the skills that I'm having... gaining. Um where I can use those to make the biggest difference um whether that's in a leadership role or you know maybe I'll find myself back behind a desk, editing. Something you know where I don't see anybody. I don't know, but um but I do know what's important to me and what I've learned is important and whatever...whatever path that takes me on is where I hope I'll be.

[Mike] Well Rebecca, good luck. Thank you for joining me today. I appreciate it.

[Rebecca] Thank you, Mike. It's been truly fun.

[Mike] If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward.

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