Leadership Interview: Dr. Laura Farmer

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In preparation for this class assignment, I wrestled with identifying a leader in the field of counseling from across the continental United States versus someone from the State of Virginia. In the end, I settled for the latter, however, the next predicament that arose surrounded the topic of whom I was going to select to interview. Earlier this year, I attended the American Counseling Association 2017 Conference and Expo in San Francisco, California where the topic of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer + (i.e., LGBTQ+) issues took center stage. Here, I made the decision to learn from a counselor educator, leader, advocate, and ally of this population on her involvement with the LGBTQ+ population. Her name is Dr. Laura Farmer; an Assistant Professor of education specialization in Counselor Education at Virginia Tech. Dr. Farmer is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Certified Substance Abuse Counselor in Virginia, and earned her Ph.D. in Counselor Education from Virginia Tech. Her research interests involve two primary areas: counseling clients with diverse identities of gender and affectional orientation, and mindfulness practices in educational settings. Dr. Farmer’s leadership and advocacy roles have led her to present at state, regional, and national conferences, and publish on topics related to LGBTQ-affirmative counseling and mindfulness practices with children and adolescents (L. Farmer, personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Personal Reaction to Interview

At first it was a challenge finding a time that was convenient for both of us, but after two missed appointments due to unexpected emergencies at work, we were finally able to connect via Skype to have our almost one hour interview. What struck me was Dr. Farmer’s deep sense of passion for the work she engaged in as a counselor, educator, leader, and advocate. For Dr. Farmer, the road to becoming an ally for LGBTQ+ youth didn't exist from the start of her
counseling journey. Instead her advocacy work began only after working as a youth counselor during her Practicum and Internship fieldwork experiences, where she counseled bullied youths who were identifying as gay and/or bisexual, as well as the bullies who did the harassing. She remembered feeling burdened by the challenges the LGBTQ+ youth were facing from the school system, their peers, and parents/family systems. Dr. Farmer’s desire to learn from and serve the LGBTQ+ population led her to spend the last four summers volunteering in Virginia, working with LGBTQ+ youth at a diversity camp. More recently, she developed and served as President for the Virginia-Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, a proud division within the Virginia Counselors Association, as a way of advocating for and addressing issues affecting the LGBTQ+ population.

**Definition of Leadership and Being a Good Leader**

As our interview progressed, Dr. Farmer supported my view of leadership as I became aware of the saying that “leaders are not born but trained.” This realization came as Dr. Farmer spoke on the influence mentors have on her life; she named Drs. Gerard Lawson and Joy Whitman as counselor educators who continue to influence her leadership and advocacy development. Mentorship is a vital component to leadership, and for Dr. Farmer, mentors continue to influence the leadership roles she gets nominated to and/or committees she decides to serve on. Dr. Farmer explained that leadership is not a static process, but dynamic in nature; she stated that individuals usually develop their own leadership path in different ways. Sometimes “life” calls individuals into leadership positions, which reminded me of happenstance, but most times the path to leadership is intentional and sequential, as is the case for Dr. Farmer. The servant leader model of leadership is the model to which Dr. Farmer subscribes; she stated that, as a counselor and educator engaging in service to the profession and to society are both integral
and necessary components of her counselor identity. Servant leadership is not self-focused but other-focused; it is about collaborating with others and meeting the needs of others by investing in lifting everyone up as equals while working for the greater good of society. For Dr. Farmer, certain characteristics are important to leadership, first, is the ability to know oneself well, if someone does not have a strong sense of self, he/she is likely going to experience greater difficulty in making decisions and create chaos instead of clarity of vision. Second, leadership is an evolving process, therefore, a leader has to be open to the process of change, he/she needs to be aware of and learn from his/her trigger points and blind spots and be sure that they do not negatively influence their leadership style. A third characteristic that Dr. Farmer values in leadership and advocacy is passion, i.e., having a calling for the things one becomes involved in; she stated that passion is what got her involved in advocating for LGBTQ+ youth. Although passion can burn out, Dr. Farmer noted the importance of engaging in healthy relationships and activities, i.e., self-care, to prevent burnout. As part of self-care, Dr. Farmer enjoys spending time with her family, hiking with friends, and dancing through Qoya, i.e., an expressive art using movement to remember the essence of an individual as wise, wild, and free. Based on our interview, I gleaned that a good leader is first a good servant, willing to accept advice and challenge from his/her mentors, has a firm sense of self, is passionate about what he/she does, and takes time to engage in self-care.

**Lessons Learned in Becoming a Better Leader**

Overall, I left our interview having a deeper appreciation for the work counselors, educators, leaders, and advocates do for the profession of counseling. I learned that even leaders in the field experience challenges, personally, i.e., being too bold/passionate in some circumstances and too invested in what others think to the point of losing one’s own vision, and
systemically, i.e., when a system is not ready for change, a leader can become discouraged to continue his/her efforts, but simultaneously they rise to the challenge. I also learned that having to make difficult decisions comes with the responsibility of leadership. As a counselor, leadership involves supporting and encouraging our clients, which might involve the difficult work of breaking down faulty foundations to rebuild stronger and longer lasting ones. As a counselor educator, this is expressed in remediation processes where being a gatekeeper for the profession of counseling is a humbling and heavy responsibility. Being an advocate might involve engaging and winning smaller battles, and/or saving one’s resources for later when more important/difficult challenges arise. Collectively, becoming a better leader involves modeling service, i.e., demonstrating the ability to admit wrongs, asking for forgiveness, and saying thank you. Good leaders depend on others instead of working independently, they have strong knowledge of self, the ability to clearly articulate and encourage others to support their vision, and engage in challenges and causes that are meaningful to them while making decisions intentionally. It is my prayer that as I continue to develop my leadership and advocacy skills, I will draw on the wisdom of those who have gone before me, seeking to think, act, and behave from a heart of love for God, others, and self.