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Leyla Benson caught the contagion of a Saint Mary's College education. The principal of Summit School in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District earned her bachelor's degree, her single subject and administrative credentials, and her master's degree from the Moraga campus. Here, she has witnessed the benefits of the small seminar classes and the supportive atmosphere that carries a student through her college career, from its undergraduate classes to its doctoral programs – the first of which was in educational leadership, a 60-unit course of study started in 1999.

"Saint Mary's programs are so well-rounded. They prepare you to handle all sorts of environments and they really emphasize the core values of the college," says Benson.

Resonating with the school's Lasallian, service-oriented tradition, she also discovered an affinity for working with at-risk youth. "It was only natural to seek opportunities to give back," she says. Benson was teaching English at the Stevenson Academy, an extended-day, alternative school in Pittsburg that operated under a guiding philosophy reflective of her own teacher training – and it inspired her to pursue her administrative credential and a master's degree in educational leadership.

Her thesis was on intervention academies. "It was about giving the students all the supports they need to be successful, to give them a community where they belong," she notes. Benson received the same level of care at the newly named Kalmanovitz School of Education. "It's theory, but it's also a ton of practical application. (The professors) hold your hand the entire way. They don't enable you; they provide the support so you can receive the credential in a timely fashion," she clarifies. Benson recalls the communal meals she and her colleagues shared during her Saturday coursework for her administrative credential, taking classes in various leadership, organizational and management strategies, educational law, technology – and working with special needs students. Retired administrators or those currently working in the field teach the courses, which are grounded in applied research. "The group becomes your family, your support system. In order for a school to be successful, there has to be a sense of community. The students need to be valued and respected, to feel like they belong, and Saint Mary's models that for the leadership students," she says. "You really bond with these people... and as you go out into the working world, you have contacts."

Bill Tschida, director for the Educational Leadership Program, maintains these connections can be life-long – and the networking is all the more paramount as future school administrators navigate the complexities of such realms as school finance, testing, the impact of No Child Left Behind – and refining their executive communication skills. Tschida cites that there are intangibles that an effective administrator must keep in mind when fostering a high caliber school atmosphere that transcends "textbooks and test scores." The quality of one's decision making, he asserts, hinges on one's concentrated listening skills – a practice which can run counter to the prevalence of hasty email exchanges – and an ability to work alongside the

vested staff members. The approach is modeled by the quality of interaction these future leaders are exposed to in graduate school – and in their ensuing professional lives, with graduates often calling on their former professors for advice as they grapple with the mire of school budgets or are faced with some ethical dilemma. “It’s the hallmark (of the program). We make sure that happens. It’s that openness. When you get your credential, that’s not the end of it,” he attests.

Tschida, a Saint Mary’s alumnus who subsequently served in the Peace Corps as a school principal in West Africa, espouses the college’s Lasallian creed: “Enter to learn; Leave to serve.” “If you keep that in mind, it keeps things in perspective,” says Tschida, who formerly taught and served as principal and superintendent of the Vallejo School District. “The students have made a huge commitment of energy and emotion, and that makes for a real invigorating environment,” says Tschida, who teaches two classes. “It’s like handing off the baton to someone else.”