Expanding the Borders of Diplomacy

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The DePaul community embraces St. Vincent de Paul’s question “what must be done?” in all of its endeavors, but especially in upholding the dignity and worth of all people. In a world full of extraordinary opportunities, but also plagued by conflict and competing agendas, our duty is to collaborate with others to educate the next generation of leaders who will help create sustainable solutions in the neighborhoods, cities, states and nations where they live and work.

Thanks to a generous gift of $20 million from anonymous donors—the second-largest gift in DePaul’s history—The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy, housed in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (LAS), is now a reality. It is the first school of its kind to focus its curriculum on the emerging concept of “transprofessional diplomacy,” which expands the borders of diplomatic practice beyond the work of official government representatives.

With its very name, The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy announces its intention. Grace allows us to see beyond fear, ignorance and human limitation to form connections and work through collective action to make the impossible possible. Cultural competence is arguably the most important skill we can develop in this regard, and it is among the most critical components that will guide the work of this new school.

“The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy will prepare students from all backgrounds to work in a wide range of professions,” says DePaul President A. Gabriel Esteban, PhD. “Our hope is to cultivate a new generation of civic-minded, well-rounded leaders who will address some of our most pressing global issues—from migration and displacement to commerce and environmental sustainability.”
Transforming diplomacy education

The modern world has facilitated unprecedented communication and mobility among the peoples of the world, shifts that are as inevitable as they are uncomfortable to many people who fear changes to their established way of life. UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated in his first speech to the UN Security Council in January 2017 that “as societies become multiethnic, multireligious and multicultural, we will need greater investments in inclusivity and cohesion, so that people appreciate the benefits of diversity rather than perceiving it as a threat. … We must commit to a surge in diplomacy for peace … mobilizing the entire range of those with influence, from religious authorities to civil society and the business community.”

Guterres’ call is for “transprofessional diplomats,” that is, people working in many different professions who are equipped and empowered to collaborate in a variety of settings to accomplish mutual goals.

The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy is committed to answering that call.

Using an interdisciplinary approach and experiential learning opportunities, faculty of The Grace School will help students learn the skills they will need to foster dialogue, reach common understanding and devise mutually beneficial outcomes across a wide range of fields, from the foreign service and the public health sector to nongovernmental organizations and the arts. Unlike traditional diplomacy programs that focus exclusively on international relations, students will use an interdisciplinary lens to focus on pressing local, regional and global issues, readying them for any profession that requires collaboration, mediation, conflict resolution, interreligious understanding and bridge-building.

Building a 21st-century discipline

“There was an opportunity for us in the area of diplomacy, being here in Chicago, where most countries have some kind of consulate or representation,” LAS Dean Guillermo Vásquez de Velasco says. “But we realized that there was a significant amount of literature and scholarship on the importance of diplomacy to all professions. Whether you are a religious leader or a business professional or a doctor—we all need that skill set.”

Faculty from 21 academic units came together to create trailblazing Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degree programs in applied diplomacy. The programs, which launched this academic year, are designed to redefine and broaden the practice of diplomacy to encompass diverse fields including, but not limited to, international law, faith-based work and environmental science.

The bachelor’s degree program offers the flexibility of 10 concentrations that allow students to explore their interests. The master’s program helps students focus on one of six specialty areas: international public service, global public health, urban diplomacy, migration, critical ethnic studies and critical approaches to diplomacy. The college plans to offer both a minor and a certificate in applied diplomacy for interreligious engagement as pilots for building out its entire portfolio of concentrations.

Woven into the fabric of these degree programs is DePaul’s signature dedication to experiential learning that takes students into the community to understand the real-world challenges that cause conflict in the world. Under the guidance of faculty and practitioners, students may learn about the clash of cultures in gentrifying areas, the seemingly conflicting aims of industrial growth and environmental sustainability, or the difficult choices that need to be made when allocating scarce resources in distressed school districts.

Creating a school of applied diplomacy

Associate Professor David Joseph Wellman, author of “Sustainable Diplomacy: Ecology, Religion and Ethics in Muslim-Christian Relations” and “Sustainable Communities,” has been named to head The Grace School. He says, “Our job is to empower and equip our students to take the tools of diplomacy and to apply them in their own particular context with language that makes sense to them.”

Building on the foundation of the new degree programs, The Grace School’s comprehensive program plan includes development of three key components to ready students to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow:

1. An endowed chair in applied diplomacy
2. Endowed professorships in applied diplomacy
3. Expanded experiential learning opportunities

Meaningful scholarship is essential to the vitality of any academic program. By appointing to an endowed chair a noted scholar who can translate the interdisciplinary nature of applied diplomacy into
groundbreaking publications, classroom instruction and conference presentations, The Grace School will promote its mission many times over.

Similarly, the new endowed professorships will build a community of educators and scholars who can broaden the focus of the curriculum in meaningful ways. It is envisioned that these professorships will be dedicated to interreligious engagement, environmental sustainability and urban diplomacy, as well as other interdisciplinary areas.

Experiential learning taps the lived expertise of working professionals and community members. The college has in place innovative co-teaching arrangements, internships and experiential humanities programs that will be enhanced thanks to this generous new gift. More students will be able to study abroad thanks to experiential learning scholarships, and all students in the program will have the opportunity to build the experience and networks essential to the practice of transprofessional diplomacy.

Other plans include an endowed programmatic enhancement fund that will make possible paid research assistantships and undergraduate student worker positions in the school, as well as the establishment of a practitioners-in-residence program. Through this program, practitioners will partner with faculty and students to offer lecture series, classroom engagement and collaborative projects that demonstrate diplomacy in action.
On Sept. 10, the DePaul community celebrated what DePaul President A. Gabriel Esteban, PhD, termed “a significant moment for DePaul and the city of Chicago.” Guillermo Vásquez de Velasco, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, paraphrasing St. Vincent de Paul, marveled that “more than 400 years after his birth, here we are doing what needs to be done.” Then, they proudly unveiled a plaque reading “The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy,” which will permanently commemorate the latest addition to DePaul’s impressive array of academic programs.

An opening keynote address was given by Ambassador Ertharin Cousin, a distinguished fellow of global agriculture with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. She recounted that when she was executive director of the World Food Program, she mounted a social-media campaign that secured funding to feed the people affected by the “acute, protracted emergency” of the civil war in Syria, then in its second year, when formal diplomatic channels refused them aid. “Examples now abound of international forums bringing nontraditional actors with new skills and methods into the diplomatic arena,” she said.

Following the opening keynote, a captivating panel discussion moderated by Grace School Director David Wellman probed such issues as the role of the citizen diplomat in international relations, business and diplomacy, and creating a diverse diplomatic corps. Participating were Kasia Batorski, senior director of conference programs with NAFSA: Association of International Educators; Noé Cornago, associate professor of international relations at the University of the Basque Country; Rami Nashashibi (LAS ’97, DHL ’18), executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network; Caroline Savage, director of the Foreign Press Center of the U.S. Department of State; and Chris Tirres, associate professor of religious studies and director of DePaul’s Center for Religion, Culture and Community.

Closing the program was Ambassador Ivo Daalder, president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to NATO. He said that the U.S. Foreign Service has been decimated by decades-long underfunding and poor recruitment and retention. The result is that “our foreign policy has become militarized.”

He continued, “We need every social organization to be involved in diplomacy, and we need to make sure that people have the tools, the means and the skills necessary for success. That is what The Grace School of Applied Diplomacy is all about.”