

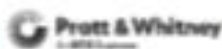
MIDDLE GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

# STUDENT LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2025



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CENTER FOR CAREER & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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# Full Length Session Descriptions

**Keynote Presentation:** *Leading with Conviction*

**Keynote Presenter:** *Ben Hoyer*

Great leaders are not magicians skillfully wielding tricks and techniques to manipulate people into following them. Great leaders are people of passion who've uncovered personal convictions, connected them to tangible action and are willing to go first. This is true of leadership in any sphere: fraternal, professional and among friends.

Almost ten years ago, in a moment of clarity, Ben committed to uncovering the sort of conviction that would move him to action. Eventually, that took shape in his credo.

In this presentation you'll hear the story of that credo and how it instigated a journey from Orlando to the rugged mountains of Guatemala and back again. You'll hear about how it propelled Ben to start regular trash clean ups in his neighborhood, to start, own and operate four name-your-price coffee shops along with a coffee roaster, even to launch a social enterprise accelerator and a co-working space. But most of all you'll be challenged to consider what your core-conviction is and how you are connecting that conviction to action.

As a result of this program students will:

Understand a simple process to pinpoint their own key values.

Learn the importance of acting on those values.

Learn strategies for connecting their values to organizational goals, and

Learn where great coffee comes from (of course)

**Plenary Presentation:** *Together Towards Tomorrow: Leadership, Character, Happiness, Teamwork, and Why We Need it All to Thrive*

**Plenary Presenter:** *Raven Scott*

This engaging 50-minute keynote weaves together character development, positive psychology, and leadership theory to inspire intentional alignment in personal and team growth. Grounded in the 7 Strategies of Character Development and the Flourishing Framework, participants will explore practical approaches to thriving as leaders and team members. Through interactive discussion, attendees will gain tools to build effective teams, foster intentionality, and align values with actions for sustained success. Walk away motivated, equipped, and ready to lead with purpose—individually and collectively. Recommended resources will be provided to support continued growth.

**BREAKOUT BLOCK 1**

**Leading with Conviction Breakout      Presenters: Ben Hoyer**

In this follow-up to his keynote presentation Ben will host a workshop to examine the topics presented in the keynote more in depth. Participants in this breakout will:

- Work on a simple process to pinpoint their own key values.
- Learn the importance of acting on those values.
- Practice strategies for connecting their values to organizational goals

*Presenters Bios:*

Devereaux Lindsey is a passionate higher education professional with nearly 11 years of experience at Middle Georgia State University (MGA), where she earned her undergraduate degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Master of Public Administration from Columbus State University. While the early years of her career focused on organizing fun student activities, Devereaux's more recent work has centered on community service initiatives alongside MGA students, with a particular emphasis on Greek Life. Greek Life at MGA has strong

roots in community engagement, and Devereaux's role has allowed her to blend her passion for service with leadership development in this vibrant campus community.

### **Volunteering Your Way to Leadership      Presenters: Devereaux Lindsey and Myr'lice' Dickens-Morse**

Want to become a stronger leader? This session explores how volunteering cultivates essential leadership skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability. Through real-world examples, you'll learn how community service fosters critical thinking and long-term leadership development. Whether you're a seasoned volunteer or just getting started, discover how giving back can shape you into a more effective and engaged leader.

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Throughout her career, Devereaux has witnessed firsthand the transformative power of service in developing strong leaders and building meaningful connections. In 2022, she was honored with the MGA Champion Award, a recognition of staff members who exemplify MGA's core values of stewardship, engagement, adaptability, and learning. This award reflects her commitment to the University's mission of transforming individuals and communities through higher education, and her positive impact on students, faculty, staff, and the broader MGA community.

Devereaux is deeply dedicated to fostering leadership, character, and service within her community and continues to inspire others through her work in student affairs and beyond.

Myr'lice' Dickens-Morse is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in New Media and Communication with a concentration in Public Relations. A dedicated student leader, Myr'lice' has received multiple leadership awards for her contributions to student engagement and service. She is deeply passionate about giving back to the community and often takes the lead in organizing larger service initiatives for her department. Myr'lice's strong communication skills and commitment to service make her a valuable asset to any team, and she continues to inspire others through her leadership and dedication.

### **Authentic Leadership: Drafting Your Leadership Narrative      Presenter: Kimberly Leinberger**

This presentation will explore the concept of authentic leadership, emphasizing the importance of leveraging one's unique skills, character, and personality to lead with integrity and purpose. The session will delve into the core principles of authentic leadership, highlighting how self-awareness can enhance leadership effectiveness.

After the session participants will:

1. Be able to define authentic leadership, what it entails and why it is essential in today's organizational landscape.

2. Reflect on their personal values, strengths, and how they align with leadership.
3. Create a draft of their personal leadership narrative that articulates their unique leadership philosophy.

The session will incorporate several reflective writing exercises that will prompt participants to reflect on their skills, personality, and character and align it with their thoughts on leadership.

*Presenter Bio:*

Kimberly Leinberger is a native of Warner Robins, Georgia who earned a BA in English from Valdosta State University and a Master of Public Administration from Georgia College & State University. She began her higher education career in 2010 as an academic advisor at Macon State College before transitioning to Clayton State University as an advising coordinator in 2012. From 2015-2022, Kimberly served as Assistant Director of Advising for First-Year Students and finally as the Assistant Director of Advising for the Colleges of Arts & Sciences and Informational & Mathematical Sciences. As an Assistant Director, she led the implementation of advising and retention initiatives, trained staff on student management systems, and collaborated with faculty on curriculum. In 2022 Kimberly returned to MGA as the Online Academic Program Coordinator for the School of Health & Natural Sciences. After serving in that role for two years, she assumed her current role as the Director of First-Year Experience through which she continues to support student success initiatives. In her free time, Kimberly enjoys reading, writing, karaoke, and hanging out with her husband and dog.

**Why Should I Follow You? Leadership by Example      Presenters: Dr. Christina Jackson**

Leading others is a critical responsibility that warrants careful attention to the behavior of those that dare to do so. For those currently in leadership roles or who aspire to them, gaining buy-in from followers is a significant factor. However, why should a leader be followed? One could argue that the example they set plays a role. Does the leader model the same work behaviors that are stressed with employees? Regardless of the level of leadership and/or the leader's title, their actions can play a powerful part in the perceptions of others. This session will focus on attendees exploring the influence positive role modeling can have in leadership, especially as they contemplate why a leader at any level should be followed. A positive role model can inspire others to great actions and a leader who is seen as such can help drive organizational and team success. Alternatively, a leader who is a negative role model can harm success and impact team performance.

By attending this session, participants will:

1. Learn the importance of positive role modeling in effective leadership;
2. Identify qualities of a positive role model;
3. Identify qualities of a negative role model.

In addition to engaging in discussion surrounding role modeling in leadership, attendees will also participate in an interactive exercise to illustrate how role modeling in leadership can contribute to or hinder an organization's success. Attendees will evaluate scenarios to identify behaviors that could be associated with positive or negative role modeling and their potential influence on employees as well as an organization. The behavior of leaders is an important aspect to consider when trying to gain supporters and cultivate positive behavior among them. As such, understanding the influence of positive role modeling in leadership can help current and aspiring leaders reflect on ways they can be positive role models. Employees and team members not only look to leaders for guidance and vision, but also for behavior that will motivate them in their work. An individual's emphasis on positive role modeling in effective leadership can ultimately contribute to how one answers the question: *Why should I follow you?*

*Presenter Bio:*

Dr. Christina Jackson serves as the Executive Director for Housing & Residence Life at Middle Georgia State University. She has over 13 years of experience in higher education and has held several leadership positions

throughout her career. Dr. Jackson also holds a PhD in Organizational Leadership. Originally from Mobile, Alabama, Dr. Jackson moved to Georgia with her husband, Mark, and their two children, Mark III and Alexandria.

### **A Leader's Self-Reflection on Character      Presenter: Jeannie Ruggerio**

What is character? The Oxford English Dictionary (2024) describes the word "Character" as an action to impress, distinct[ively] mark, [and a] characteristic. Values provide a foundation that distinctively enhances the development of actions to generate a positive character through a practice of self-reflection. Ongoing self-reflection of one's values serves as a guide and assists in responding to the question, "Who am I as a leader?" Effective leaders are empathetic and engaged, active listeners, who serve as role models to encourage and motivate others in accomplishing goals. All members impacted by the influence of an effective leader have an opportunity to grow in confidence, progress forward with clarity, and practice mindful decision-making.

The process of being an effective leader is not bound by time; it is a learning adventure through experiences of gaining and sharing knowledge, commitment, and communication. An impact from building a positive character is its influence to effectively lead one into viewing all perspectives. By considering all viewpoints, an effective leader builds trust and establishes positive relationships. Leaders reflect and learn from mistakes, understanding that welcoming challenges leads to opportunities to grow and assist in other's success.

During this interactive session, participants will learn how values influence the development of one's character and serve as a guide in becoming an effective leader who practices consistent self-reflection. Attendees will have an opportunity to gain experience and practice values-based clarification through participation in a self-reflection exercise introduced in the beginning of the presentation. Then, an interactive discussion will be conducted on principles of leadership incorporating an active trivia review, and lastly, the conclusion of the presentation will include an opportunity for attendees to apply learned skills in a team-building leadership perspectives activity. Attendees will leave this presentation understanding the importance of commitment and values in serving in a leadership role, learning how developing a positive character may guide ongoing growth as a leader, assisting to create a positive environment for everyone to thrive and contribute to the success and shared values of an organization.

#### *Presenter Bio:*

Jeannie Ruggerio is a Coordinator for the Student Success Center (SSC) at Middle Georgia State University (MGA) since 2009. She also teaches American Government part-time for Middle Georgia State University (MGA). Ms. Ruggerio holds a Master of Public Administration (MPA) from New Mexico State University.

## **BREAKOUT BLOCK 2**

### **Leading with Authenticity: Communication and Leadership for the Current Moment**

#### **Presenter: Raven Scott**

This interactive workshop will equip participants with practical tools and frameworks that promote mindful and effective communication, personal development of their own leadership style, and how to foster a culture of accountability and understanding in both personal and professional interactions. Explore the art of conscious dialogue and cultivate skills that lead to constructive conversations and meaningful accountability, creating stronger connections and more harmonious relationships.

#### *Presenter Bio:*

Raven Scott is a speaker, facilitator, workshop leader and leadership coach that believes in empowering individuals and teams to live well, work together, show compassion and empathy, and grow as people. She is the founder of Chasing Light Collective and the Training Ground; two programs that support women in their

personal discernment, wellness, and leadership and team/tribe building through workshops, retreats, volleyball camps, and other engagements. Raven has spent her career educating in a variety of settings, including serving as Director of Leadership and Character in Athletics at Wake Forest University, teaching and coaching high school in Jackson, Mississippi, teaching English in Madrid, Spain, and developing leadership workshops and social emotional learning curriculum for Strive: How You Lead Matters, a sports leadership non-profit. Raven holds an M.A. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Mississippi and is a certified Higher Education Leadership Coach through Rice University's Doerr Institute. Raven will be the Plenary Speaker for the 2025 Student Leadership Conference and will be facilitating one of the break-out sessions.

### **Communicating with Empathy: Stepping into Another's Shoes**

**Presenters: Dr. Rhonda Amerson, Dr. Kelly Causey, and Dr. Karen Ochoa**

Empathy at work is a hot topic of conversation right now. It is considered an essential skill for successful leaders. Factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, current political tensions, social unrest, and economic uncertainty appear to be pushing people further apart rather than bringing them together to establish commonalities and connections. Communicating with empathy is needed now more so than ever, and it is up to leaders to set an example for others.

To communicate with empathy, a leader must possess the ability to put themselves in another person's shoes, grasp their perspective (regardless of whether they agree or disagree with it), and express genuine care and concern for this person. Communicating with empathy shows support for team members, may help to avoid unnecessary conflicts, and overall, it helps one to be a more caring individual.

The primary objective of this timely session is for student leaders to learn strategies for communicating with empathy. The student leaders will effectively demonstrate these skills through small group activities which will include role playing scenarios from various settings.

#### *Presenters Bios:*

Dr. Rhonda Amerson is an associate professor of Education, and she is the chair of the Department of Teacher Education and Social Work. Dr. Amerson joined the MGA faculty in 2014. She has 20 years of teaching experience in elementary and middle schools.

Dr. Kelly Causey is an assistant professor of Education, and she is the coordinator of the Elementary/Special Education Program. Prior to joining MGA in 2022, Dr. Causey worked as a teacher and a principal in elementary schools in Macon. Dr. Causey has over 20 years of teaching experience.

Dr. Karen Ochoa is an assistant professor of Education. She also serves as the assessment coordinator for the Teacher Education Programs. Dr. Ochoa who is originally from South Africa joined the MGA faculty in 2023. She has 15 years of experience as an educator and a principal.

### **The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Shaping Leadership Character      Presenter: Angela Landers**

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a critical component of effective leadership. It serves as the foundation for building trust, inspiring teams, and fostering an environment conducive to professional growth. A leader who uses EI is better equipped to navigate challenges, build authentic connections, and lead with character. This session explores how essential components of EI such as having a robust emotional vocabulary, embracing change, utilizing curiosity, knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, and understanding personal triggers contribute to being an effective and positive leader. Emotional intelligence not only enhances individual leadership effectiveness but also serves as a model for others to follow, ultimately shaping a positive organizational culture built on trust, resilience, and mutual respect.

After this session, participants will be able to define emotional intelligence in both a theoretical way and how it is actionable by a leader in the workplace. Additionally, participants will be able to articulate the role of emotional intelligence in showing character as a leader.

*Presenter Bio:*

Angela Landers is the Leadership and Institutional Development Program Director at the University System of Georgia. She has a passion for providing professional development on leadership development, emotional intelligence, building team culture and community, employee wellness, and professional goal setting and attainment. Having worked in higher education for over two decades, Angela combines her programming and psychology experience to provide a strengths-based approach grounded in theory. She designs and facilitates innovative, interactive programs that give participants concrete tools for moving theory into application.

**STEMing the Way: The Influence of Professional Collaboration on Leading in STEM Education**

**Presenters: Dr. Luminita Hartle and Dr. Sumitra Himangshu-Pennybacker**

This session will explore practical strategies and activities that educators can use to seamlessly blend the teaching of positive character traits and leadership skills into math and science curricula. Attendees will learn how to design innovative lesson plans and projects that encourage students to recognize the influence of personal values on their decision-making and understand the ethical responsibilities of elementary school teachers as future leaders in promoting STEM in the P-5 classrooms.

*Presenters Bios:*

Dr. Sumitra Himangshu-Pennybacker has served Middle Georgia State University (MGA) as faculty and Graduate Program Coordinator in the Department of Teacher Education & Social Work. Her research is focused on learner empowerment in science using both face-to-face and virtual environments. Her interest in advancing pedagogical conceptual knowledge is intertwined with her extensive science background drawn from the areas of zoology, molecular biology, and developmental genetics. During her tenure at MGA, she has spearheaded a variety of community projects both domestic and international to enhance K-12 students and student teacher's conceptual understanding of science and pedagogy through partnerships with local museums, local schools, international exchange programs in the United Kingdom, establishing community gardens, and being a content developer, science mentor and judge both at local schools as well as on a longitudinal international virtual science fair project funded by the Department of Education. While her research interests involve higher education policy, science education, and authentic learning environments, her current research focus is in using meta-cognitive tools for measuring learner conceptual change. She is currently involved, at MGA, with several inter-departmental and intra-departmental research projects that focus on advancing student research in the field of science and science education. These research projects provide the opportunity for students to advance their own learning through collaboration with faculty and peers.

Dr. Luminita Hartle is an assistant professor at Middle Georgia State University, in the Department of Teacher Education & Social Work. She graduated with a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) from Illinois State University. Her research focuses on educators' professional development, and inclusive and innovative teaching practices for students with disabilities, particularly in multicultural and multilingual settings.

Her scholarship spans peer-reviewed publications and presentations, addressing critical issues such as early intervention, dual language assessment, literacy instruction, and culturally responsive teaching. Her research has influenced educators worldwide, with work published in journals like Reading Horizons and the International Journal of Primary, Elementary, and Early Years Education. Additionally, She has extensive experience designing online learning modules for innovative programs like the PULSE and ECACE initiatives for the state of Illinois. Beyond academia, she has worked extensively with families and children through roles as a developmental therapist, English as a Second Language (ESL) specialist, and registered behavior technician

(RBT). She has also conducted workshops and webinars on topics like environmental adaptations, curriculum modifications, and culturally appropriate practices for young children.