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## ESTABLISHING A LEADERSHIP MINOR: SOFT SKILLS FOR TOMORROW'S STEAM LEADERS



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## **Leadership in the Design and Construction Professions**

### **Synopsis:**

In the Fall of 2016, three distinguished and generous graduates of Texas A&M University established a Professorship and framework for a leadership minor for students within the College of Architecture who had taken at least 30 credit hours in construction science, architecture, landscape architecture, Urban Planning, or Visualization. The minor is a 15-credit hour program comprised of three one-hour seminars and other leadership courses within the College. The thrust of the program was rooted in the need for graduating students who not only knew the technical skills and fundamentals for success in the built environment, but for the personal and moral courage to lead a diverse team of professionals in the pursuit of achieving collaborative goals related to the architecture, engineering, and construction industry. This paper will describe the history, current state, and future plans for helping students graduate with the so called “soft skills” industry needs in their future college graduates so that other administrators or academics can pursue similar success and learn from the path that Texas A&M has navigated to this point.

## Leadership in the Design and Construction Professions Minor

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### Background

In the Fall of 2016, three of Texas A&M's former students and distinguished industry leaders in the design and construction industry designed what may be their most impactful project for years to come: a supplemental curriculum to help aspiring College of Architecture students become tomorrow's industry leaders. The initiative became a "Minor in Leadership in the Design and Construction Professions" and is offered within the nation's largest College of Architecture under the leadership of Dr. Jorge Vanegas and is taught and administered out of the nation's largest higher educational construction program at Texas A&M's Construction Science Department in the College of Architecture. The program is structured around eight leadership elements: character, competence, communication, collaboration, creativity, courage, competition and community.

### Course Specifics

The minor requires 15 credit hours and is open to students who have completed at least 30 hours in any of the College of Architecture's undergraduate degree programs. Specifically, there are three one-hour seminars created exclusively for the minor and four of any three-hour classes incorporating leadership principles offered in the college which are acceptable stepping stones to earning the minor before graduation. In addition to lectures from industry experts, seminar sessions include group activities designed to help students develop a leadership style, inspire leadership in others, and communicate a vision and purpose within an organization.

Students pursuing the minor are also asked to complete the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, a personality test that indicates the psychological preferences people use to perceive the world and make decisions.

"Part of leadership is understanding yourself," said Larry Fickel, a senior lecturer in the construction science department who leads some of the minor's leadership seminars.

### Founding Benefactors

The minor is the culmination of the time, talents, and treasure of three A&M graduates. The most senior member, Harold Adams '61, (see Figure 1) is Chairman Emeritus of RTKL, one of the world's foremost design and construction firms. Adams is a 2011 Texas A&M Distinguished Alumnus. According to the Association of Former Students, after graduation from A&M, Adams worked for several architectural firms before joining RTKL Associates in Baltimore in 1967. He became president in 1968, CEO in 1971, and chairman of the board in 1987. Most notably, Adams worked with President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy on the design of Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House, helped select the site for Kennedy's presidential library and was project director for the Kennedy gravesite memorial at Arlington

National Cemetery. After a long, successful career, Adams is proud to serve as a leader of the new leadership minor. “The capacity to lead and to inspire is what defines career success, and the lessons of leadership need to be learned early,” said Adams.



Harold Adams



Jim Thompson



William Peel

**Figure 1.** The founding graduates and mentors of the “Leadership in the Design and Construction Professions” minor program

Addressing the first cadre of students at one such seminar, Jim Thompson ’68 (See Figure 1). Thompson James R. “Jim” Thompson, Class of 1968, graduated from Texas A&M University with a Bachelor of Science degree in architectural construction. During his tenure at Texas A&M, he was a member of the Corps of Cadets and Ross Volunteers and was named a distinguished Military Graduate.

Following graduation, Thompson joined the United States Air Force and served as an instructor pilot until 1973. After gaining 10 years of construction experience, Thompson founded James R. Thompson, Inc., a commercial general contracting firm. The company, which now is headquartered in Dallas, has received dozens of awards for construction excellence. Thompson is a member of Texas A&M’s Construction Industry Advisory Council, the College of Architecture Advisory Council, the Chancellor’s Century Council, the Presidential Board of Visitors, the A&M Legacy Society, the Corps of Cadets Association; the 12th Man Foundation’s Advisory Board and served on the Board of *The Association of Former Students* from 2006 to 2010. As a multi-term Chair of the Building Enhancement Committee, Thompson played an integral role in the 2008 enhancement of the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center. Thompson helped lead the effort to fund and construct the Freedom from Terror memorial on the Texas A&M campus—a gift from the Classes of 1968 and 2003—that honors the many Aggies who have given their lives for their country. In 2000, he received the Outstanding Alumni Award from the College of Architecture and he was inducted into the Corps of Cadets Hall of Honor in 2011. Thompson has also funded a President’s Endowed Scholarship, a Corps 21 Endowed Scholarship, two Sul Ross Endowed Scholarships, and a Construction Science Endowed Scholarship. another of the leadership minor’s accomplished authors, extolled the virtues of character, a major part, he said, of doing business successfully in the design and construction industry. A Texas A&M Distinguished Alumnus and president of the Dallas-based general contracting company bearing his name, Thompson focused on trustworthiness, an attribute that, he said, can distinguish a company from its competitors.

“What separates us from the other contractors?” he asked the prospective leaders. “Is it experience? No, we’ve *all* got plenty of it. Is it expertise? No, my competitors are darn good builders and they all know what they’re doing. The difference,” he said, “is our ability to talk about our principles and values and how we apply them in our projects, especially when we encounter adversity. When companies hire us, it’s because they believe we are trustworthy.”

“When they realize,” he continued, “we have an army of subcontractors and past clients who trust us, that we’ve got character in addition to competence, then we don’t have to be the smartest or the most talented... the one with the most character almost always wins.

Joining Adams and Thompson as a key collaborator in leadership minor’s development was William “Bill” Peel ’74 (See Figure 1), a College of Architecture Outstanding Alumnus and executive vice president and chief development officer for Tellepsen, a Houston-based construction company with more than 100 years of service. Peel Bill Peel, who earned a Bachelor of Environmental Design degree in 1974 and Master of Architecture degree in 1975, is a catalyst to executive leadership for creativity, innovative thinking, visioning, branding, and communications. He has held executive leadership positions in organizations ranging from international design/engineering firms to real estate investment, development and construction companies. The former students worked closely on the with faculty from the college’s four departments to assure that the lessons offered are relevant and beneficial to all of the disciplines taught at the college.

The minor was developed as a result of a recurring question in advisory meetings engaging the former students with college administrators and faculty, said Thompson, “What can we do better?”

The answer, he continued, focused on enhancing attributes “the design and construction industry not only needs, but demands this from its employees — excellent communication skills, good personal behavior based on solid principles and values, and the motivation to influence others through positive leadership.”

In preparing students for industry careers, the minor, he said, offers students an opportunity to learn and develop principles and practices for leading.

Students seeking more information on the Minor in Leadership in the Design and Construction Professions should contact their academic advisor. The College launched a new cadre for the leadership minors courses in fall 2017. The current Professors are Gary Boldt and Larry Fickel, both owners or leaders in the construction industry for 30 years before arriving back at Texas A&M to relay their leadership lessons to the students in the minor.

*Pat Suermann, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, helped launch GeoBase GIS mapping at Andersen AFB, Guam in 2000. He received his masters of construction management from Texas A&M University in 2003 and his PhD in Design, Construction, and Planning from the University of Florida in 2009. Subsequently, after becoming a Professional Engineer and spending time as a combat engineer in Afghanistan and a Commander in Greenland, he served as an Assistant and then Associate Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the U.S. Air Force Academy from 2012 to 2015. He retired after two years as the Chief of Emergency Services and Engineering at the newly formed Headquarters, Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center. On September 1, 2017, he became the Department Head of the nation's largest higher education Construction education program at the tier one research, Sea, Land, and Space Grant University, Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas.*

Note: This paper was accomplished in conjunction with the College of Architecture media relations team and contains excerpts from their online article regarding the same topic. The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and do not reflect the view of the Department of Defense, the United States government, the Texas State government, nor the Texas A&M University System.