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## Facilitating women in leadership

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*Guest Opinion*

For a long time, I've considered myself politically negligent.

It's not that I'm fervently anti-establishment, or that I'm leading a crusade against The Man (though to be honest, he's not my favorite).

It's just that beyond presidential elections, I've just never prioritized civic involvement.

Balancing school, a job and a variety of extracurricular activities as a student at the University of Iowa gave me enough to do without trying to keep up with the details of local and state elections.

After recently spending six days attending the Iowa N.E.W. Leadership Institute, I intend to change my negligent tune. For me, the institute brought down to earth the once insurmountable task of getting your voice heard in the public sphere and crystallized my understanding of the dire need to diversify the voices that speak for us in positions of public leadership.

The first night, I was seated at a table with Mary Mascher, state representative for the 77th District -- coincidentally my own. Prior to the institute, Mascher was merely a name on a yard sign I'd seen around Iowa City. Now, I recognize her as a woman who passionately advocates for the causes she cares about and as a leader who listens intently to the people around her whom she represents. She isn't a distant politician who sits out of reach of her community, calling the shots without seeking input.

I recognize that this epiphany likely has already occurred to other politically active people in Iowa City. But as a 24-year-old member of our community, I'm willing to suggest that more people in my age bracket, particularly young women, would benefit immensely from sharing the sort of experience I had at the institute.

As I filled in the oval on the ballot next to her name during the June 8 primaries, I knew exactly whom I was voting for and why.

To say the least, it was an empowering sensation.

I'd like to clear up the possible misconception that the institute is about turning women into leaders. As it turns out, all the women in attendance already were leaders.

What the institute does is help facilitate and ease our trip down the often rocky path to the positions that will enable us to lead most effectively -- whether that be public office, a managerial position at a nonprofit, or the front of an academic institution.

On that first evening, I realized that I was in the company of some astounding movers and shakers. These women were undergraduate and graduate students from across the state, each of them involved

in a cause near to their hearts, be it the election of state representatives, domestic violence intervention, philanthropy, immigration rights or chemistry (just to name a few). These women were advocates, organizers, volunteers, campaigners, academics and social workers. These women were a wildly inspiring bunch.

Since my graduation from UI, I've been tossed into the world of job applications and future plans. While the economic climate and sea of cover letters are terrifying, the institute has given me an extra boost of confidence.

While many of the participants already were experts at advocating for other people, we each left with a tool set that will allow us to advocate for an oft-neglected population -- ourselves.

In our battle to the top, I'm not sure what could be more valuable.

I'd like to extend a sincere thank-you to the many people that made this experience possible for me: the staff of the Women's Resource and Action Center, the many presenters who donated their time and energy and all of the donors.

Your gifts are truly appreciated.

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