

July 2020

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Recommended Citation

Montgomery, Beronda L. (2020) "Academic Leadership: Gatekeeping or Groundskeeping?," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.132.1316>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol13/iss2/16>

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Cover Page Footnote

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research in the Montgomery laboratory, including efforts to promote diversity, inclusion and evidence-based mentoring, is conducted as a part of broader impact work funded by the National Science Foundation (grant number MCB-1515002 to BLM) and by support from the Michigan State University Foundation.



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Academic Leadership: Gatekeeping or Groundskeeping?

Abstract

Common approaches to academic leadership include serving as assessors of the progress of individuals towards organizationally-determined milestones and markers of success. Likewise, leadership development often focuses on leadership skills and tactics, rather than on cultivation and enactment of leadership philosophies and progressive vision. Here, I discuss the importance of cultivating leadership for progressive faculty and academic staff development through strategically tending the cultures and systems that one leads, in addition to tactical supervision of people. I describe this as systems-engaged leadership manifested as groundskeeping, or as attending to the individuals in an organization while simultaneously actively tending the ecosystems in which the work of the organization occurs. Groundskeeping contrasts with more traditional approaches of leading, which function as gatekeeping, or primarily via guarding who gains access and who advances based on conceptualizations and assumptions about who can function and thrive.

Introduction

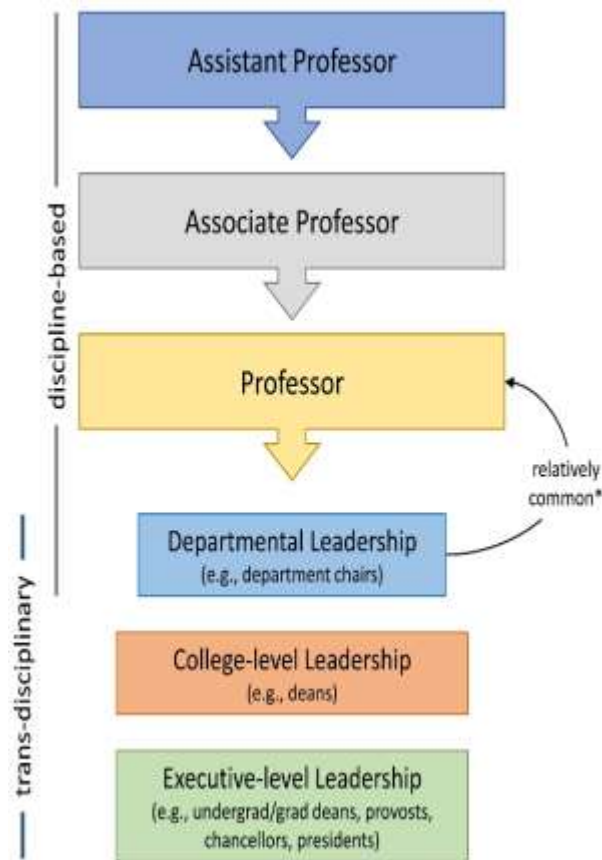
Common Leadership Practices in Higher Education

Academic leadership encompasses a range of different higher education roles, including distinct positions and titles. It often varies from tactical management, which centers on specific objectives, to administration, which is positioned as relational and mission-driven, to leadership, which is vision-driven and potentially transformational (Cheruvilil & Montgomery, 2019, p. 240).

Academic leaders can pursue a range of different leadership paths. Many academic leaders enter department-level leadership positions and beyond via a faculty route (*Figure 1*). Progression in the faculty ranks, both in the tenure system or for non-tenured faculty, can position individuals for consideration for leadership roles. However, progression on the tenure track from assistant to associate, with the checkpoint of internal and external review for tenure, as well as to full professor, with a second review period for promotion, can be required for advancement into particular leadership roles for which tenure or promotion is considered a prerequisite. Given the recognized disproportionate underrepresentation for marginalized and minoritized groups and barriers to advancement in the ranks of higher education tenure-track or tenured faculty (Montgomery, 2020a), these “checkpoints” can result in limited or disrupted opportunities for equitable progression into leadership roles for many individuals in academia.

When considering individuals’ preparation for academic leadership roles, we generally measure success at each of the prior levels of faculty rank or academic leadership as evidence that individuals will continue to demonstrate success at the next (*Figure 1*). While a strong case has been constructed for this model of advancement across levels within a disciplinary faculty ladder, we also often make decisions about who can and should lead primarily based on an individual’s success as a faculty member, rather than based on their aptitude or demonstrated abilities for a role as an effective academic leader. We use such a selection paradigm frequently, although it is

readily recognized that “the role of the academic leader (department chair and/or dean) is very different from that of regular faculty members even though faculty members often are asked to serve in these capacities” (Rowley & Sherman, 2003, p. 1059).



In their roles, academic leaders provide administration (e.g., operational efforts) and leadership towards academic goals (Rowley & Sherman, 2003). However, in many cases the formal training and selection processes for these individuals center primarily on their academic training and success in disciplinary roles and distinct leadership positions, with little to no formal training in or assessment of demonstrated administrative or leadership functions for a particular academic position under consideration, nor necessarily any evidence of prior practical experiences (Baker et al., 2019; Bisbee, 2007; Gmelch, 2013; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Additionally, those who transition into leadership roles in academia often do so without a full understanding of, or preparation for, the complexities associated with these positions (Gmelch, 2013). Apart from deficits in training or demonstrated experience, many academic leaders also have no expressed aspirations for leadership (Rowley & Sherman, 2003).

Figure 1: Progression into Academic Leadership Roles. Academic leaders often emerge from faculty ranks (tenure system or non-tenured), for instance progressing from assistant to associate to full professor. Departmental leaders such as department chairs are often drawn from the senior-level faculty, and in a situation that is almost entirely unique to academia, these individuals may return to serve as faculty peers at the end of a leadership term. College-level and executive-level leaders or administrators are far less likely to return to the faculty peer level than departmental leaders.

Once in leadership roles, “good” academic leadership is often judged based on leadership traits or capabilities, such as planning, organizational skills, listening, communication, stakeholder engagement, decision-making styles, humility, and courage (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). While these are all critical functions, much more is needed for progressive leadership, especially in dynamic current times. Less frequently do we select or advance academic leaders on the grounds of having assessed their formal leadership preparation, evidence of active cultivation of leadership philosophy, expressed or demonstrated leadership values, or development and enactment of a leadership vision. A focus on values in the development, cultivation, or advancement of leaders can be rare (Smikle, 2019). In regard to vision, while *developing* a vision is sometimes recognized as important, an ability on the part of an academic leader to *execute* a vision is even more critical (Mathews, 2018; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). Given that we have not always insisted on academic leaders even having an espoused or highly developed vision, a widespread requirement for demonstrated vision and a plan for execution would represent a major leap forward. Effectively incorporating such a requirement into academic practices would require that we revisit the means by which we prepare, select, and socialize academic leaders.

Cultivating Academic Leaders: Common Mechanisms Used for Leadership Development

Gmelch (2013) has argued that in many regards the “socialization of academic leaders appears to be left to chance” (p. 26). Indeed, faculty and professional development often center on teaching or research in many academic institutions (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). Significant efforts at the level of administrative training and leadership development are scarce, although increasing, across the U.S. higher education landscape (Beach et al., 2016). For those institutions or organizations that do have leadership development programming, many of these efforts focus on skills development, situational competencies, or other tactical issues of leadership preparation (Cheruvilil & Montgomery, 2019; Orsini, 2019; Randall & Coakley, 2007).

There is an abundance of “misdirected leadership development” (Bellis, 2017, p. ix). For example, leadership training or development often plays out as imprinting. Imprinting, or the patterning of individuals’ behaviors after the norms of a recognized group, has been described as powerful for maintaining status quo or promoting acculturation in mentoring (Montgomery, 2019a) and in the support and training of youth (Liao & Sánchez, 2015; Pryce, Kelly, & Lawinger, 2019). As I have argued with regard to mentoring, a common mistake in leadership development is a focus on offering “what” rather than underlying “why” advice during developmental input and support to individuals (Montgomery, 2019b). For example, a specific recommendation for participation in particular programs or practices may be offered as critical stepping stones to success. Such advice centers on what one should do to pursue success, rather than describing the reasons or needs to expand specific skills that underlie why a particular intervention may need be engaged. Accordingly, I maintain that effective intervention depends on offering insight into why specific avenues may have been pursued or may be valuable, with the intent of supporting individuals in finding their own effective “what” to accomplish the more common and necessary “why” (Montgomery, 2019b). I have also argued that “those who insist on a very specific ‘what’ often are maintaining norms or gatekeeping” (Montgomery, 2019b, pp. 44–45).

As with mentoring, leadership cultivation should be about “much more than ‘supporting’ an individual to be successful towards some recognized, and customarily institutionally determined, goal or milestone” (Montgomery, 2019a, p. 10). Truly effective leadership development and enactment needs to promote individuals working at the interface of their personal goals and skills *and* the needs of the unit or institution. One means for accomplishing this is succession management or proactive training of individuals prior to their pursuing or assuming a particular leadership role or position and based on their passion and interests (Baker et al., 2019; Rothwell, 2015).

In the preparation of individuals for academic leadership roles, one area that is not often addressed is the importance of the explicit preparation of leaders based on best practices in organization leadership development. This point is especially true for discipline-based academic leadership roles such as department chair or dean, but also has implications and reverberations beyond these leadership roles as leaders higher in the academic leadership progression such as executive-leaders generally arise from this pool of disciplinary leaders. Current practices, which are based on assessment of performance at previous levels as mentioned above and which collide with long-standing disparities in who enters and advances in the faculty ranks, can be characterized by gatekeeping from the very entry point. Additionally, the ways in which these positions are performed and the leadership practices that are rewarded also can be governed by gatekeeping practices. Here, however, my purpose is to focus on the ways that leadership practices themselves, and not just the selection of who becomes and advances as a leader, are too frequently carried out as a powerful form of gatekeeping. I compare these academic practices to organizational leadership praxes that have been documented as effective for organizational

effectiveness and improved outcomes and argue that academic leadership needs to evolved from being driven largely by traditional gatekeeping to systems-engaged leadership practices that increase leadership responsibility for the individuals in a systems simultaneously with active care and tending of the grounds or ecosystem in which these individuals are operating.

Evolving Leadership from Gatekeeping to Groundskeeping

Leadership ability is frequently defined in general ways, such as an ability to align “organizational needs with human resource capabilities” (Rowley & Sherman, 2003, p. 1060). While leaders clearly must pursue the needs of their organization, such a perspective is often enacted as “gatekeeping.” Exclusionary language is characteristic of gatekeeping approaches to leadership that position constant improvement of the organization and its standing or rankings as driving the standards to which employees must aspire and contribute. Gatekeeping can be classified as measuring individual traits and performance as rendering someone worthy of passing through “gates of opportunity” or “gates of success.” In contrast, “groundskeeping” recognizes that individuals have aspirations that can be pursued and must be actively supported in the context of and in service to organizational goals or needs. Leaders functioning as groundskeepers, then, focus on whether the environmental landscape is conducive to supporting the development and advancement of individuals towards personally-defined goals, even as there are institutional expectations and metrics in place. Indeed, it has been recognized that “the engagement...of the external environment is at least of equal importance...Yet leadership competency frameworks and engagement processes rarely embrace this” (Bellis, 2017, p. ix). This groundskeeping work requires identifying unfettered paths, as well as working actively to open and clear paths with recognized barriers, roadblocks, and inequities that may prevent access and success by specific individuals or groups.

Organizational leadership literature has previously recognized these distinct forms of leadership. Gatekeeping has been positioned as serving as a “diversion effect” for those not deemed worthy of admittance in a particular environment, whereas gateway function — which parallels what I position here as groundskeeping — has been centered as a “democratization effect” for those who are supported and actively enabled to find success in a particular context (Dowd, 2007, p. 415). Groundskeeping, or the democratization effect, has been associated with improvements in equity in higher education for students, but also results in improved outcomes broadly (Dowd, 2007). Here, I argue that groundskeeping as a leadership framework is likewise powerful for the promotion of equity. Groundskeeping-centered leadership also aligns with the conceptualization of transformational leadership framing as compared to transactional leadership which aligns with gatekeeping (Howell & Avolio, 1993). Transformational leadership is a form of adaptive leadership in which leaders have a flexible style of leading that responds to the environment in which they operate (Bass, 1985; Bass et al., 2003, p. 207). Of note, transformational leadership is associated with greater positive organizational outcomes, as well as being important for incorporating the consideration and support of individualized needs of employees and their career aspirations (Howell & Avolio, 1993; Xenikou, 2017). Furthermore, transformational leadership is associated with organizational innovation and change (Xenikou, 2017).

Gatekeeping and groundskeeping-proximal leadership styles have been found to be complementary leadership styles that can both contribute to organizational effectiveness and positive outcomes (Xenikou, 2017). Notably, while gatekeeping can be effective depending on context and need, paying attention to individual considerations through groundskeeping-positioned leadership can lead to improved effectiveness and increased satisfaction of those being led (Xenikou, 2017). One of the reasons that individual satisfaction may increase under groundskeeping-positioned leadership is that attention to the environment on the part of the

leader may limit deficit-based engagement of leaders with those they are leading, including an emphasis on a reliance on resilience on the part of individuals for their persistence and advancement.

Invoking Grit and Resilience Theory as a Form of Gatekeeping

Emergence of Grit and Resilience Theory. There is an increasing dependence on the importance of grit for individual persistence in academic settings. Angela Duckworth (2016) introduced grit as a concept that describes an individual's proclivity to use passion and perseverance in the successful pursuit of long-term goals, even in the face of challenges. This conceptualization may include a sense that individual passion and perseverance serve as buffers or "barrier breakers" in the face of obstacles or difficulties that are encountered.

While frequently used to describe positive traits of students or youth, grit has been invoked in leadership realms as well, including in academic leadership circles (Mrig & Sanagah, 2017; Rowland, 2017b; Shakeel et al. 2020). For example, leader resilience has been embraced as a beneficial trait, including the definition that resilient leaders "don't let barriers or blockages prevent them from exploring possibilities. They do not deny the challenges; they just don't let the challenges overwhelm them or cause them to give up hope...they keep their eyes 'on the prize' to get through difficult times" (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017, p. 25). Furthermore, Hartley (2018) describes two types of resilience — preventative resilience and restorative resilience (p. 211). Preventative resilience is the proactive establishment of personal capacity to deal with challenging events, whereas restorative resilience operates when there is a need to recover from disruptive or stressful situations (Hartley, 2018, p. 211).

Beyond the reliance on resilience or grit as individuals, institutional resilience is also prized. This concept is generally understood as institutional recovery and stability in the face of change or after disruption (Barin Cruz et al., 2016). Central to institutional resilience is the idea that organizations that possess this characteristic enforce regulation and normative practices (Barin Cruz et al., 2016). Maintaining the resilience of institutions is sometimes used to aid academic leaders in embracing complacency or actions that maintain the status quo (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017, p. 5). This understanding is critical because "if senior leaders stay stuck in habitual response, so do their organisations" (Rowland, 2017b, p. 3). Complacent or status quo responses on the part of leaders and institutions can often be deeply ingrained in the fact that leaders act from a fear of failure, rather than from the perspective of embracing risks in pursuit of a defined vision. Functioning from a fear of failure perspective often leads to leadership moves that maintain the status quo, whereas a propensity to weigh and embrace risks makes room for considering new directions and requires forward-thinking, innovative leaders.

Despite there being powerful advice in regard to the importance of resilience for academic leaders, this perspective often focuses heavily on building up leadership deficits in individuals rather than discussing the need for environmental interventions to support leadership cultures (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). These authors also do not engage with the reality that many factors can impact "which" leaders need to be more resilient than others, including factors related to the identity of leaders such as gender (Wong et al., 2018) or race or ethnicity (Thomas, 2019; Whittaker & Montgomery, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2015). Concerns about disparities in who must preferentially operate from grit are similar to prior arguments made about the undue focus on grit and resilience in students (Goodman, 2018; Gorski, 2016; Ilela, 2019). When no attention is paid to whether certain environments inequitably require more resilience of some than of others in order to attain the same levels of success, then grit and resilience — which have great intrinsic value — can as a result be misplaced as tools that amplify structural inequity and injustice, rather than as tools to promote success more broadly.

Commitment to Grit/Resilience Theory as a Form of Gatekeeping. In many ways, commitment to concepts of individual resilience and grit, as well as to institutional resilience, can be invoked as excuses not to embrace more agile interventions that promote progress in institutional commitments to and innovations in promoting equity, for instance in regard to the recruitment and retention of students and faculty from underrepresented groups (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2012, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2015). This argument is not to say that resilience is not important for individuals; however, as aforementioned, institutional environments and leaders in particular often function such that some individuals – especially those from marginalized or minoritized backgrounds – are routinely required to exhibit more grit or resilience than others in order to persist and pursue equal (if not lesser) success (Montgomery, 2018e; Smith, 2016). Functioning accordingly serves as a powerful and operative form of gatekeeping.

Leadership and Advocacy

Leading Change

To embrace the recognized benefit to organizational outcomes of groundskeeping-positioned leadership requires leaders who embrace a need for assessment of traditional or status quo practices and a need for change. Such leaders understand that their leadership practices may require the incorporation of advocacy for change on the part of individuals whom they lead and potentially transformation of systems in which they lead. Leadership “combined with advocacy is not about guiding someone through a pipeline with blockages and inequities, but about clearing the pipeline,” as has been stated in the context of change-focused mentoring (Montgomery, 2019a, p. 11). Such advocacy-grounded leadership recognizes the power of broadly promoting the success of individuals, including via means that center individual goals and aspirations in service to a unit’s or institution’s needs or mission, rather than simply measuring individual performance relative to predefined metrics of success (Montgomery, 2018d), or via gatekeeping as defined above.

The environment or context must be tended actively to assess when and where opportunities versus barriers exist, which either promote or impede individuals’ success. Such a commitment to groundskeeping over gatekeeping draws on the recognition that individuals function in an environment, and that the environment, and its health and tending, has significant impacts on individuals’ potential for success or lack thereof (Montgomery, 2018d; Rowland, 2017b). Leaders have critical roles in cultivating a bilateral focus on individual growth and performance, as well as on the active tending of the ecosystems in which the individual exists (Montgomery, 2018a). Failure on the part of individual leaders to cultivate such a bilateral perspective, and failure to actively select for leaders with such capacities, leads us to engage environments or ecosystems as infallible (Montgomery, 2018a, p. 5; Montgomery, 2018b; Montgomery, 2018d, p. 11) or free of “environmental barriers” (Whittaker & Montgomery, 2012). Ultimately, progressive leadership and mentoring are not carried out “to manage symptoms” but to actively promote and leverage engagement “to address root causes” (Weiston-Serdan, 2017, p. 6). These root causes are what result in environments that are experienced as meritocratic by some and deeply inequitable by others (Wong et al., 2018).

One way for leaders to counteract gatekeeping is through using change leadership as a powerful means for groundskeeping. Such change-focused leaders can actively “work on the underlying system that produced the results, not try and drive new results through keeping the current systems and routines intact” (Rowland, 2017b, pp. 178–179). It is critical for groundskeeping-positioned leaders to avoid the mistakes that arise when one seeks simply to “layer change onto a system” (Rowland, 2017b, p. 154). Pursuing such a groundskeeping-perspective requires

leaders to see themselves as responsible for the environment through embracing active stewardship.

Environmental Stewardship

Leaders are likely to recognize the need for fiscal or human resource stewardship in effective leading. Yet effective leaders must also serve as environmental stewards (Montgomery, 2019a) and organizational stewards (Rowland, 2017b) – particularly during times of change.

I have previously discussed the role of environmental stewardship in mentoring (Montgomery, 2019a), and this is equally applicable to leadership. Environmental stewardship in leading and mentoring fully recognizes that “success of the individual [happens] in and with contributions to a particular context” (Montgomery, 2019a, p. 10). Environmental stewardship, then, is a means for “tending an ecosystem in support of an individual pursuing specific goals therein” (Montgomery, 2019a, p. 11). This role of environmental stewardship is linked to the aforementioned recognized benefits of transformational leadership, which aligns with a groundskeeping leadership framework, in prioritizing individual needs and promoting the individual satisfaction of those led (Xenikou, 2017). Leaders who can serve in an environmental-stewardship capacity have “a wider appreciation of context and system dynamics” (Rowland, 2017b, p. 51). Such leaders can also function through an equity-focused lens by recognizing that they “must maintain a dual perspective, seeing the [worker] as an individual, as well as part of a larger social context” (Crutcher, 2014). Leaders who serve effectively as environmental stewards or cultivators of systems prioritize positioning and rewarding individuals who also can serve as sensors and stewards of change in organizations.

Current academic leadership development models largely focus on three major areas: conceptual understanding of leadership, skills development, and self-reflection (*Figure 2*; Gmelch, 2013). Additionally, some attention is given to the intersection among pairs of these developmental areas, that is, leadership application that arises when using skills to enact conceptual understanding, adapted practice that emerges from reflection on the impact and use of one’s leadership skills, and the development and advancement of theory at the intersection of reflection and conceptual understanding (*Figure 2*; Gmelch, 2013). Ideally, the integration or synergy of all these major areas should result in leaders who are capable of demonstrating needed stewardship (*Figure 2*).

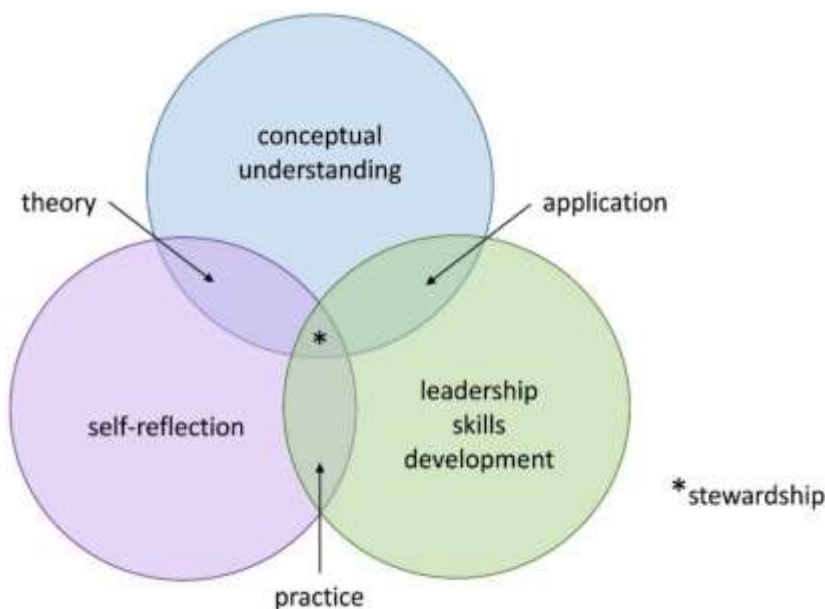


Figure 2: Model for Academic Leadership Development. Academic leadership developmental domains include conceptual understanding, skills development, and self-reflection. At the intersection of these individual domains are leadership actions, including application, practice, and theory. At the integration of all developmental domains (indicated by an asterisk) emerges the synergy of stewardship, a concept advanced in this text. Adapted from Gmelch (2013).

Discussion

The development of leaders and enactment of leadership requires a transformation to meet current and future challenges and to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education (Gmelch, 2013; Mathews, 2018; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017). Indeed, Mrig and Sanaghan (2017) have accurately observed that “the past and current leadership model that prizes vision, academic reputation and track record, communication and charisma, and fundraising expertise is no longer enough to meet our current and future challenges” (p. 4).

Evolving leadership undoubtedly needs to exist in academia, given the rapidly and continuously changing academic landscape, including demographics, funding models, technological advancements, and changing public expectations and support for higher education (Montgomery, 2018d; Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Zusman, 2005). There is an urgent need for leaders who do not default to business as usual, but instead adopt and fully embrace creativity and innovation to address emergent challenges (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017), including in the ways that we select, reward, and advance academic leaders. Many of the new changes facing higher education have been referred to as “adaptive challenges” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017) or “adaptive change challenge” (Rowland, 2017b, p. 8). These challenges require new models of leadership, including abilities to innovate, embrace risks, navigate resistance, and pursue continuous learning (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017; Rowland, 2017b; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Additionally, leaders who can undertake systemic approaches to leadership are sorely needed.

When we begin to embrace the need for environmental stewards as leaders, we will rapidly progress towards identifying, cultivating, rewarding, and championing academic leaders who are not focused on or rewarded for gatekeeping or “guarding” access to the “leadership table,” but who proactively and progressively promote tending to the environment to support change and progressive leadership needed in academic environments (Montgomery, 2018c). Indeed, as described by Rowland (2017b), “leading change demands a deep capacity to acknowledge the whole system over the selective promotion of certain parts, beliefs or interests” (p. 12), and I would add over self-promotion to this assertion. The required transformation will not only change the way we do business in academia, but will also foster new frameworks altogether for the development and performance of leadership in these environments.

Conclusion

Cultivating Progressive Academic Leadership

Whereas much of the focus on leadership selection in academic circles frequently centers on identifying leaders capable of maintaining standards and raising the reputation and ranking of institutions, new frameworks are required to select and reward leaders capable of the strategic, creative, and occasionally risk-associated leadership needed in our current dynamic environments. The current global pandemic associated with coronavirus is an extreme example of the lessons we must learn about the limitations of selecting and rewarding leaders with tactical skills best targeted towards managing established systems and “keeping the trains running,” rather than the critical need for creative, strategic leaders capable of focusing on necessary tactics while at the same time building new “trains” and paths in the midst of the need for them.

Such strategic and innovative leadership in our increasingly diverse and global context requires leaders with abilities to enact vision, who are equity-centered, advocacy-grounded, and stewardship-focused. The cultivation of such leaders requires our systems and the leadership development programs designed to identify and cultivate the leaders of these systems to rapidly evolve from being driven by gatekeeping practices and principles to being strongly groundskeeping-positioned.

Postscript

Academic Leadership in the Midst of Pandemics

At the time of revision, higher education leadership is facing challenges beyond the scope and impact of those that may arise in a particular institution or due to more current occurrences such as leadership transitions. The entire higher education ecosystem is facing two emergent crises: a crisis driven by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and the COVID-19 disease, as well as an ongoing, long-standing national crisis related to systemic racism and a need for social justice. The latter crisis has been revealed most recently due to persistent health disparities being brought to widespread attention due to disproportionate numbers of COVID-19 cases and associated deaths of Black, Latinx, and Native American citizens (Godoy & Wood, 2020) and a national catastrophe in the policing of Black Americans, the most recent case sparking widespread protests being the killing of George Floyd (Blain, 2020). These are both catastrophes of pandemic natures — a global health crisis pandemic and a national racism pandemic. The leadership needed to bring required change due to these pandemics must be groundskeeping-centered and break from leadership focused on keeping the gates, which in many ways contributed to the impact of these current pandemics.

Especially in crisis, leaders must recognize that some actions are required that simply cannot be “system maintaining”, rather than “system changing” (Rowland, 2019; Rowland et al. 2020b). Furthermore, timely leadership in crisis requires quick feedback loops without sacrificing open, timely communication and continued cultivation of trust (Montgomery, 2020b; Rowland et al., 2020a). In the COVID-19 pandemic, this rapid feedback and initiation of needed leadership action entailed the swift move to offering classes and assessment online for the remaining portion of academic terms, as well as other evolving approaches such as virtual celebrations offered outside the standard framework of rank and file graduation ceremonies and proactive extensions of tenure clocks related to review for promotion and tenure (Montgomery, 2020b). For the racism-associated pandemic, leaders and institutions have moved to issuing statements of positionality, support, and sometimes solidarity with Black students, staff, and faculty due to the latest killing and associated protests.

These dynamic, and potentially volatile, moments require leaders to draw on expertise beyond themselves; in fact, leaders must often decenter their role and cultivate systems-based approaches to leadership and implementation of mechanisms for responsiveness and change (Rowland & Casimir, 2020). Certainly campuses across the higher education ecosystem made use of the expertise of a broad swath of individuals to support the transition to teaching at a distance at the onset of the health pandemic, as well as the current need to vet and facilitate a “return to campus” after months-long at-a-distance learning and working. In these times, leaders must recognize that needed change in the midst of crisis is more than ever a “collective, collaborative task” (Rowland et al., 2020b). Such a collective, community-engaged leadership perspective may be much more feasible for groundskeeping-positioned leaders than those accustomed to keeping the gates and centering their own or traditional institutional views and approaches. Leaders who understand and implement groundskeeping- or systems-based leadership methods in dynamic times focus on “creating stabilising structures and disrupting routines” (Rowland & Casimir, 2020); such leadership embraces disturbance as an opportunity for reflection and implementing appropriate change, rather than allowing the disturbances to feed anxiety and confusion about the way forward.

The responses to the systemic racism pandemic have been somewhat distinct in that many of these have been driven by sharing of position or solidarity statements with less frequent identification and implementation of rapid changes in processes and procedures. The danger is

that many institutional efforts have a great risk of being perceived as a performative declaration of an espoused commitment to equity – racial, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and more – in the face of crisis. This perspective is buoyed by the observation that many academic leaders have issued statements that point to national issues related to police brutality against Black men and women in the U.S. without fully acknowledging recent, long-standing, or systemic local issues related to these same issues of racism and inequity, nor are these leaders manifesting real plans to address them. It is much easier to espouse commitment to such issues through declaring alliance with individuals from aggrieved populations in response to a publicly-engaged national agenda with platitudes rather than specifically demonstrating lived commitment to social justice in leadership practices through engagement with and deployment of specific and meaningful interventions for the same populations at one’s own institution (Montgomery, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e).

Statements of commitment in the midst of a national crisis can be a powerful method of gatekeeping through serving as a means for encouragement of protest outward rather than inward. By contrast, groundskeeping-focused leaders would recognize that “leading change in today’s turbulent world is...a disciplined practice that requires intentional and continual effort” (Rowland, 2019). One-time statements on unit-level or institutional commitments to Black faculty, staff, and students or proclamations that “Black lives matter” simply will not serve to avow or demonstrate long-term lived and ongoing commitment to these members of a community as valued and valuable (Montgomery, 2020a).

Performative commitment to DEI as “gatekeeping”, as well as with the COVID-19 pandemic, can also be identified through the issuing of statements or decisions about solidarity to Black constituents or about campus reopening at a time that institutions are relatively certain that there will not be real push back or negative reactions. That is, these institutions often play it safe and take on limited risks by issuing statements of a nature and in a time that are consistent with the masses, i.e., joining a chorus and being reactive rather than being a leading and proactive voice. Such leadership responses allow “performing” commitment while “keeping the gates.”

Leading capably is founded in values and trust at all times, yet especially in the midst of crises when the outcomes and way forward remain largely uncertain. Importantly, trust ideally is cultivated before being the middle of a crisis and “needs to be firmly established and cultivated daily so that all can focus time, energy and resources [on] areas of greatest priority in times of crisis or urgency” (Montgomery, 2020b). Leadership grounded in trust and values requires paying attention to the system and an expressed *and* demonstrated commitment “to tune into and move the system around them” (Rowland & Brauckmann, 2020). Astute leaders recognize that their acknowledgement and actions can either demonstrate commitment to gatekeeping, or even in the times of crisis, groundskeeping-positioned leaders can move by assessing the grounds and responding accordingly. The navigation of these pandemics is adding even more credence to the position that we need to rapidly evolve academic leadership from traditional gatekeeping perspectives to systems-responsive, groundskeeping-centered leadership and engagement.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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