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LEADING TO LEARN

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# Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn

A Collaborative Syllabus for  
Higher Education Leadership

Edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher

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## CHAPTER 1

## A Case Study in Presidential Leadership in Perilous Times

### Rhetoric, Theater Training, and Life Experience

Elaine Maimon, *Governors State University*

When I started my career as an English professor specializing in composition and rhetoric, I did not imagine that I would learn to address governing bodies on crucial matters of higher education funding. And yet, as a college president, this was one of the activities I engaged in regularly. And how I learned to do this came from my experience as a writing teacher, theater student, feminist, program leader, and an increasingly experienced adult.

My PhD was in American literature, so the composition and rhetoric specialization developed later from curiosity and necessity. My University of Pennsylvania PhD dissertation was entitled *The Biographical Myth of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. In a funny way that perhaps only I understand, my interest in composition and rhetoric is not unrelated to my work on Fitzgerald. I was fascinated with the author of what might be considered the most successful American novel, *The Great Gatsby*, in part because I had trouble believing that the same writer just a few years previously could write the drivel of *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* and then proceed to write a masterpiece. My movement from Fitzgerald's novice attempts at self-expression to his soaring prose illustrated the guiding principle of my career, "Only Connect," the epigraph to E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. I've been known to challenge friends at social events to randomly name two unrelated items, and I will speedily find a connection.

That ability to make unusual and largely invisible connections is an unsung quality of leadership. Leaders must frequently identify common ground where others see only divisiveness and polarization.

Early in my career as a junior faculty member at Beaver College (now Arcadia University), I was assigned to teach many sections of composition, a course I had never myself taken, since the University of Pennsylvania exempted me from the requirement. But I was fascinated with the challenge of developing a meaningful course. I had spent the two and half previous years in a strange assistant professorship at elite, all-male (at that time) Haverford College. Not on a tenure track and, at twenty-five, one of only two full-time female professors, I was substituting for professors on leave and therefore teaching a wide variety of courses, including composition. I have many tales to tell about my experiences there—for another volume. I will say that I learned one important leadership principle from the bizarre Haverford experience. A sense of humor is essential. Sometimes you just have to throw your head back and laugh.

I also learned important points about composition teaching. Haverford is a highly selective liberal arts college. Every admitted student has a stellar academic record. And yet most students, perhaps because of their own internally high standards, struggled with writing. Writer's block was an epidemic. The good part was that even in the 1970s, Haverford taught composition in an enlightened way based on the British tutorial system. Students would meet with me in small groups to read and critique drafts of their essays. I brought this experience to my subsequent teaching at Beaver College.

In the 1970s, many of us were becoming self-taught experts. At a memorable meeting in New York City of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in 1975, Mina Shaughnessy, director of composition at the City University of New York (CUNY), where open admissions had been implemented, called on a ballroom full of English professors to "dive in" to the study and teaching of composition to students who had been named "basic writers" (1976). These were students deemed (by external agents) incapable of effective, mature expression—but

Shaughnessy believed that these students were smart, able, and capable and urged us, as composition teachers, to think about them in this way, too. Shaughnessy was my first comp/rhetoric teacher. Her scholarship pushed me and others to think about students and teaching composition in ways that defied both traditional perspectives on students, and traditional beliefs about the teaching of writing. It was my introduction to advocating for different ways of operating. We read international texts, too—for example, *How the French Boy Learns to Write* (Brown 1915) and James Britton's work (e.g., 1970, 1975). We read brave US-based scholars, Edward P.J. Corbett (e.g., 1969), James Kinneavy (e.g., 1971), Richard Lloyd-Jones (e.g., 1977), W. Ross Winterowd (e.g., 1968), Frank D'Angelo (e.g., 1973), and more, all of whom were defying conventional wisdom about valuing literary scholarship over their own ground-breaking work in the teaching of writing. We avidly attended the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) to listen and learn.

For me, these learning opportunities led to the realization that the teaching of writing was complex, while most of academe defined it simplistically as a matter of spelling and commas. As an assistant professor, who had just been assigned a full-time position, I decided nonetheless that the only way to succeed in teaching writing was to involve the whole campus. This process of learning from colleagues in various disciplines was an early leadership experience. With the help of senior colleagues from inside and outside my college and substantial grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), writing across the curriculum (WAC) was born. In its essence, WAC involves shared responsibility for an expanded and sophisticated definition for teaching writing. In every area, writing—from lab reports to philosophical arguments—manifests the essence of the discipline. Students demonstrate their underlying understanding of everything from anthropology to zoology by writing effectively in the inherent genres. In some cases, the writing is discipline-specific, illustrating ways of thinking in the field. But WAC also invites writing-to-learn activities to generate and to test ideas.

### Learning from Composition and Rhetoric Scholars in Beaver College's Writing Across the Curriculum Program

Beaver College's NEH grant for the WAC program provided funding for scholars in rhetoric and composition to work with a multidisciplinary group of Beaver College faculty members in January and July of each year from 1977–1980. In essence, these scholars influenced an eclectic group of Beaver College professors to reconceptualize writing. After these illuminating interactions, we always reserved a day for discussions around the question, "What does this mean for Beaver College?" This practice inspired a long-standing leadership principle: always explore what theories mean pragmatically and ask what we should do with them.

While I learned a great deal from all the visiting scholars, Richard Young's visit to Beaver College was particularly enlightening. He introduced us to Rogerian rhetoric, "a form of argumentative reasoning that aims to establish a middle ground between parties with opposing viewpoints or goals.... [T]he speaker seeks compromise, acknowledging positive aspects of each party's argument to arrive at a mutually beneficial solution to an issue" (OWL). I had read Young's coauthored book with Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970). But the real impact of Rogerian rhetoric was from my direct interactions with Young when he visited Beaver College.

Distinctive among scholars in composition/rhetoric, Young placed a strong emphasis on listening. At first, this Rogerian requirement of listening acutely enough to impartially repeat others' positions was useful in the development of writing across the curriculum itself. As the director of the NEH program, I was untenured, totally lacking in institutional power. Listening to colleagues and then asking them for advice (rather than telling them what to do) became a highly effective tool in the transformation of the College into a model WAC institution. But what I learned became even more powerful as I became a higher education administrator.

From directing WAC, I moved on to increasingly responsible administrative positions, culminating in twenty-four years as the chief executive officer at three public universities: Arizona State University West, University of Alaska Anchorage, and Governors State University (GSU), a public regional university in the Chicago suburbs. I've often said that everything I know as a university president, I learned as a writing program administrator, especially directing the WAC program. Listening, connecting, and building consensus were key among the strategies I learned. Moving from listening and learning to framing and communicating a strategy was essential. I emphasized this forty years later when I wrote a book called *Leading Academic Change* (2017), where I wrote that “a vision without a strategy is a fantasy” (11).

But how to create and communicate the strategy? This is where my background, particularly my experience with Rogerian rhetoric learned during my years developing the WAC program, was so critical.

### **Learning to Testify Before the Legislature**

Let's fast-forward thirty years from 1977 to 2007. As the president of Governors State University (GSU), at least once a year over a thirteen-year span (2007-2020), I defended my university's budget. Each year, the Illinois legislature through its education committees reviews the finances of its thirteen public university campuses. How did they spend the funds appropriated during the previous year? What were their accomplishments in enrollment and graduation rates? How did they plan to manage taxpayer funds in the coming year? Formal training for this essential task existed nowhere. But from the start, I felt better prepared than most university presidents because of my background in rhetoric, theater, and storytelling.

I knew that every spring I would travel to the state capitol in Springfield on two separate occasions to make my case before the Senate and House higher education budget committees. Although the Illinois Board of Higher Education presented an overall budget for public higher education, all campus presidents were required to justify their individual

financial requests by reviewing previous expenditures and accomplishments as well as future projections.

As a newbie, I was happy for the opportunity to watch and listen as more experienced colleagues met the challenge. In that first round of testimony, nearly all of the presidents read the statements that would be submitted into the record. So that's what I did, too. When it was my turn, even though I made sure to make eye contact and to read with some animation, it became clear to me right away that verbatim reading was not a good strategy. Few legislators listened to the statements. Many actually left the room. Some never returned; others came back for the question period. It became perfectly clear that it was the question period that was important. The elected officials preferred to talk rather than to listen to canned speeches from university representatives. And talk they did.

The question period was often raucous and unpredictable, exemplifying regional conflicts, individual hobby horses, and sometimes a general distrust of higher education. I particularly recall one early exchange. It must have been in 2008 or 2009. One legislator asked me what I was doing to stop the incessant playing of video games on campus. I answered honestly that we did not have any video games on our campus. These were the days before the eternal presence of hand-held devices. Maybe because free-standing video game machines were ubiquitous at the time, the legislator was not satisfied and repeated the question at least four times with rising decibel levels. I responded each time, politely and patiently, with the same factual answer. We were not using state funds to provide video games to students. I must confess that in that instance, it was not Carl Rogers or Richard Young whispering in my ear. Instead, I drew on my theater training, allowing me to remain poised and even-tempered during the ridiculous interrogation. (Here's where a strong sense of humor is also helpful.)

I'm relieved to say that not all legislators displayed that degree of unreasonableness. In fact, a few took me aside afterward and were personally helpful with suggestions about crafting future testimony. One local representative, who was avidly rooting for our campus to

receive improved funding, told me bluntly never to read my testimony verbatim—and I never did again. My written testimony was a packet of slides with visual and verbal elements—a set of soundbites with charts, graphs, and pictures. I referenced the bullet points without reading each one and reflected on what the legislators were viewing. “As you can see,” I might say, “we were able to attract students who had temporarily dropped out by contacting them and ascertaining what was preventing their return. Often we could help with additional financial aid—or, sometimes, by waiving a fee for an unreturned library book.”

Through the years I also learned to draw on fundamentals of my teaching experience. I followed simple adages like, “Show, don’t tell.” The slides would show visual evidence of students engaged, for example, in a voter registration drive—something dear to the heart of the legislators. When I did tell, it was in narrative mode and with what I hoped would be memorable lines. For example, I was always asked to name my university’s competitors. Since this was an expected question, I could be prepared with the appropriate research. As it turned out, the vast majority of Governors State University’s applicants who did not wind up attending GSU did not go to other universities, private colleges, or community colleges. They went nowhere. Higher education lost them. This was a powerful fact. We are not talking about “summer melt.” We found that throughout the year, students would apply, earn admission, and then become discouraged, mainly because of perceived financial challenges, and decide that it was immediately important to work additional hours and earn a larger paycheck for their families. I was able to respond to the expected legislative question by saying, “Our biggest competitor is *nowhere*.”

I could then explain the steps we were taking to address the challenge of this insidious competitor, emphasizing frequent follow-up with applicants, especially about scholarships, financial aid, and work-study opportunities. I could also point out that this intensive pre-college advising required additional staff time. Bottom line, it cost money. In effect, the legislator’s question about competition brought us to a legitimate reason to request additional resources. My colleague regional public university

presidents asked their own research offices to check about nowhere as a competitor. Many found that nowhere was the destination of many of their own applicants. Together, we could make this issue more powerful. It was even picked up by the press. I learned from experience and from my general identity as a rhetorician that it’s important to be prepped by research, but that’s not enough. It’s also crucial to tell a compelling story.

Let me make another point about working together with other universities. Over the years, the Illinois public university presidents developed a silent rule: Never bash another university, even when elected officials goad you to do so. And legislators often put us on the spot with questions tempting us to say how much better we were than a particular sister university, especially when one had been singled out in the media for special opprobrium. Most of us resisted the temptation, since it’s always a terrible idea to circle the wagons and shoot in.

Another thing I learned over the years was to partner with a student leader for our testimony. Legislators always listened more intently and courteously to students. They would even adjust the time of a scheduled testimony to accommodate the student’s academic or work obligations. They didn’t care at all about the presidents’ calendars and would sometimes unexpectedly postpone a hearing until the next day, necessitating an unanticipated overnight stay—and additional hotel costs charged to the state. Having a student with you provided some insurance that the student’s time would be respected, even if your own was not.

Preparing the student leader for testimony was often the most enjoyable part of the experience. It was gratifying to help students tell their own stories in their own ways. The public forum with real stakes attached to their performance was an effective teaching tool. I recall one student leader powerfully testifying that he was one of those applicants who might have gone *nowhere*. Instead, he chose to go somewhere and now, as he looked forward to graduation, he had the intellectual mobility to go anywhere he chose.

## Lessons Learned from Theater Experience and Feminism

Let me expand on the value of theater experience. During my childhood I took what were called elocution lessons from retired actress Mae Desmond. At five, I participated in a radio play of *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. Throughout K-12, I participated in every theatrical experience available, culminating in my role as Gloria, the reporter, in my high school's production of *Damn Yankees*. In college at the University of Pennsylvania, I performed with Candace Bergen (we called her Cappy!) in Penn Players' production of Jean Giraudoux's *The Enchanted*. Here is what I learned from these formative experiences:

### Teamwork with a wide range of participants

At my neighborhood high school, I was in what was called the block roster with courses reserved only for students with a record of high grades in academic subjects. My extracurricular theater experience allowed me to work with and form friendships with a wide range of students talented in diverse areas. A top inspirational memory of my teen years is the after-performance party at my West Philly house, where the music teacher played "You've Gotta Have Heart" on our piano and the *Damn Yankees* cast and directors joined in the singing.

### Role-playing

It's a fact of life—and certainly of leadership—that everyone must learn to play multiple roles. While maintaining core values, we must learn to act on them in different ways in various situations. While being consistent in values and character, leaders must wear public masks to accomplish goals. In a sense, the university presidency is a role to be played. To do so effectively, it's important to separate one's emotional self from the task at hand. I recall many instances, when I had to respond professionally to people who were attacking me. That's role-playing—an ability learned from theater experience.

### Empathy

As Thoreau wrote, "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" (1854, n.p.) People are locked in their own perspectives. It's extremely difficult to escape from this natural subjectivity. But when you enter from stage left as another character—someone entirely different from you—you must experience and project an understanding of "the other." All those years ago with Penn Players, I played the role of an elderly woman whose hearing disability required her to use what was called an "ear trumpet." Even though she was a comic character, I have always recalled what the world would be like if I couldn't hear very well. Empathy is essential to leadership. Some call it emotional intelligence—the ability to connect meaningfully with other perspectives. Theater training helps leaders to develop this difficult ability.

### Listening and observing

My acting experience enhanced what I learned from Rogerian rhetoric. Actors must listen intently. In my role in *The Enchanted*, I had to strain through a disability to hear the other characters. But whatever parts actors play, they must listen intently to the dialogue. You can't just wait for your cue. You have to be fully in the scene whether you are speaking or silent. You also have to watch carefully every movement on the stage. Directors spend endless hours with what is called "blocking," the strategic design of every on-stage movement. Careful listening and observing are essential to leadership.

Readers might connect what I learned from theater and rhetoric to the foundations of feminist theory. In the 1970s, I was one of the organizers of the first NOW (National Organization for Women) chapters in my Philadelphia suburban neighborhood. Team spirit and empathy are foundational in feminism. These principles were reinforced by my active involvement in the movement.

## Concluding Lessons

Overall, here's what I learned about presidential communication and leadership from rhetoricians, theater training, feminism, friendly legislators, teaching experience, and common sense:

- When communicating with internal or external audiences, become familiar enough with your message to speak with spontaneity. A list of bullet points will jog your memory. Reading verbatim from a script will ensure that faculty members, students, or legislators will stop listening.
- Be brief. During practice sessions, my legislative liaison would time my opening statement, always encouraging greater brevity. It's important to be brief when speaking to all audiences. I was proud that my Commencement remarks clocked in at under three minutes.
- Involve students in university communication whenever possible. For legislative testimony my mantra was, "Bring a student; teach a student. Even if the overall testimony does not go as well as you would like, your student partner will have an unforgettable, meaningful experience."
- In any dealing with the media—and sometimes with internal audiences as well—context can be your enemy. If you are quoted, it's not an adequate defense to say that your remarks were taken out of context. In fact, when you are not telling a story, you often have to talk in a series of clear, quotable soundbites, any one of which could wind up in the media or on the internal rumor mill. Even when you are talking to faculty members, who are themselves lecturers, don't lecture.
- Especially for external audiences, written communication should be a series of attractive, compelling PowerPoint slides, with short sound-bite length oral explanations. Whenever possible, incorporate visuals. Be aware of the specialized genres dictated by different situations.
- For both external and internal audiences, whenever possible, invite questions. Listen intently to the questioner. Use the Rogerian

strategy of repeating a version of the question as part of your response. But make the response brief and to the point.

- Stay calm and poised even under personal attack.
- In 2023–24, we witnessed painful Congressional testimony from university presidents. In their cases, it was not possible to use PowerPoint or visual communication. It's difficult to know how they prepared, but from my perspective I found myself thinking that they would have been better served by studying previous Congressional testimony (its own genre). A little video training might also have helped.

Leadership, exemplified by public testimony or by the myriad other responsibilities of a university presidency, depends on well-framed messages informed by careful listening. That applies to inspiring the Faculty Senate to expand courses for working adults, encouraging the faculty to work with community college colleagues for seamless student transfer, and the full range of communication challenges. It's not necessary to be a rhetoric/comp scholar to learn how to implement a vision through listening and interacting with others. What's essential is to be a life-long learner.

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