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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

Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University
Elon, North Carolina

Parlor Press
Anderson, South Carolina



Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

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Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Sophie Grabiec



The current edition is distributed and sold by Parlor Press with these ISBNs:
ISBN (PBK) 978-1-64317-592-8 ISBN (PDF) 978-1-64317-593-5

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Adler-Kassner, Linda, editor. | Gallagher, Chris W., editor.
Title: Learning to lead, leading to learn: A collaborative syllabus for higher education leadership / edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Chris W. Gallagher.
Description: Elon, NC: Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University, 2026. | Series: Center for Engaged Learning Open Access Book Series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026014134 (print) | LCCN 2026014135 (ebook) | ISBN 9781643175935 (paperback) | ISBN 9781643175942 (PDF)
Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Administration. | Educational leadership.
Classification: LCC LB2341 .L38 2026 (print) | LCC LB2341 (ebook)
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2026014134>

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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the inspiring leaders who contributed their labor, time, and wisdom to this collection; we are forever in their debt. We are also grateful to Jessie Moore and Peter Felten for their generous feedback, for shepherding this book through the publication process, and for ensuring that books like this one are open access.

CHAPTER 14

Queering the Administrative Brew**A Possible Impossibility**

Jonathan Alexander, *University of California, Irvine*

This chapter tracks my rise into administration, first through directing a composition program and then through oversight of campus-wide initiatives, including general education and student support programs. While partly accidental, my movement into administration, which has dominated two of my three decades as a higher educator, has benefited from expertise I developed in composition theory and pedagogy. What I learned from composition in terms of course design, curricular sequencing, and the assessment of student learning became extremely useful as an administrator building student support programs, curricular design, and the purpose and execution of liberal educational programming. With that said, my public identity as a queer person and scholar has laced all of my institutional involvement with a strong critical bent, one of skepticism about programs that work from normative—or normalizing—understandings of students' identities, positions, demographics, backgrounds, and potentialities. That is, what I have learned from my engagement with queer studies and queer theory seems to work against what I learned from composition. However, in practice as an administrator, I have learned much about how to balance working within educational and bureaucratic structures that attempt to provide normative pathways for what we call student “success” while trying to keep open—or “queered”—a notion of what success is. This chapter should

be of interest to anyone occupying a traditionally marginalized identity position who is also considering a move into administrative work.

Becoming an Administrator: An Origin Story (of Sorts)

I don't exactly know how I got into administrative work—which strikes even me as odd because, in my thirty-plus-year career, I have easily spent over two decades administering a variety of different programs on two different university campuses. That variety extends from directing composition programs (not an atypical move for someone in my field, Writing Studies), to administering campus-wide general education programs, to coordinating campus-wide upper-division writing courses, to chairing a department, and to serving as an associate dean for undergraduate education overseeing diverse student support programs. But while administering a composition program might, as I suggest, be a *typical* opportunity (or in some cases obligation) for someone claiming Writing Studies as a disciplinary home, that does little to explain my apparent *persistence* in administering university programs. Indeed, after first directing a composition program at the University of Cincinnati just over twenty years ago, I have not stopped being an administrator and am now regularly tapped at the University of California, Irvine, for many different administrative tasks. I plan to step down from my current administrative work in three years and intend to retire five years after that, but no one—not any colleague I talk to about my plans—believes that those final five years will be free of administrative work, no matter how much I protest that they *will* be. (To be frank, I'm not always sure I believe myself; my colleagues may know more than I do.)

I suspect my story is not all that uncommon. I think that, from discussion with many different colleagues across the country, many of us find our way to administrative work, even when we didn't set out to be administrators, and then we find ourselves staying on, even if we do not imagine ourselves as following an administrative career trajectory. What I mean by that is this: despite my persistence in administrative

work, I have eschewed a “track,” which would typically be movement from program director to chair to dean to provost. I’ll be blunt: I hated chairing and thankfully only did it for two years, and I have no interest in being a dean or anything “higher.” I *did* enjoy my stint as an associate dean, which was a position primarily overseeing a variety of programs for students, and the story of my administrative career is one of such program oversight. I enjoy creating, maintaining, and assessing programs that directly serve students. I do not want to manage faculty and budgets at scale. I prefer the more hands-on administrative roles that envision and enact programs and policies that meet students’ needs. So anything I say about learning to lead and becoming an administrator might best be read with that caveat in mind.

My persistence as an administrator is complicated by another factor: my queerness. What I mean by that is something a bit complicated and (another caveat) something not necessarily transferable to other queer academics. On one hand, I know that part of my persistence as an administrator has stemmed from actually enjoying the work that I do, even finding it valuable in promoting care for and investment in student learning at multiple levels and in multiple registers. As one administrative mentor once put it to me, you can get hooked on administrative work because you can see that you are actively solving problems and benefiting others, if you’re doing it right, of course; in contrast, academic work, including teaching, can seem to be a study in making investments that you might never see develop into concrete returns. How often do students tell us, years later, what they’ve done with what we’ve tried to give them? (Fortunately, some do.) And how often do we know how that article we wrote and sent into the world has affected other scholars’ and teachers’ thinking? (Fortunately, sometimes we find out.) Administrative work often rewards with immediate satisfaction or awareness of your impact (or, conversely, your failure, to be sure). Such immediacy can be *very* satisfying.

On the other hand, though, as a *queer* administrator, I find myself often confronted with the fact that my administrative work, for all its apparent “help,” is also in key ways part of a gatekeeping structure, one

that is not just supporting but just as frequently assessing and making decisions about what works and what doesn’t—all with the goal of creating pathways for success (a key administrative buzzword these days), and even creating at times normative trajectories for student learning based on measurable outcomes. The *queer* in me is, as I say, “confronted” by my administrative work because *my* particular queerness—which may not be everyone’s understanding of queerness, admittedly—is based on a deep and abiding *questioning* of norms. That is, queerness for me manifests as a persistent desire to understand—and just as often challenge—the ways in which all of us are “normed” along certain paths and trajectories, often with the goal of achieving various kinds of “success,” in relationships, in work, in developing families, in wealth accumulation, etc. Sara Ahmed, a cultural theorist and phenomenologist, describes how many “lines” or trajectories are often laid down ahead of us, guiding and directing our paths through life while also prompting how we feel about our being in the world—with good feelings often accruing mostly around following the normative path. As Ahmed puts it in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, “to follow a line is to become invested in that line, and also to be committed to ‘where’ it will take us. We do not stay apart from the lines we follow, even if we take the line as a strategy, which we hope to keep apart from our identity” (Ahmed 2006, 176).

Thinking of my administrative work in this way, I recognize that I am following certain lines, that I am indeed “invested” in creating lines that not only lead to student “success” but that value the ultimate “line” of higher education: that the pursuit of a college degree is a worthy goal, both in and of itself and for a variety of other reasons, including the supposed abilities, potentialities, and access it affords our students (if they can afford what we offer, that is). While investment in such lines might be understandable, Ahmed is keenly aware that not everyone can follow—or even *desires* to follow—such lines, such normative pathways. Extending her spatial metaphor, she recognizes that, sometimes, we are “disoriented” by the unfamiliar or taken aback by encounters along our varied paths; Ahmed argues that “disorientation is a way of

describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are” (Ahmed 2006, 20). And while for some, “following certain straight lines might be lived as a pledge of allegiance on moral and political grounds to ‘what’ that line leads to,” for others, the case might be very different: “certain lines might be followed because of a lack of resources to support a life of deviation, because of commitments they have already made, or because the experience of disorientation is simply too shattering to endure” (176).

More optimistically, Ahmed wants us to understand that our “orientation” toward certain paths may not necessarily be obligatory; in fact, she argues compellingly that “[t]he work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic renegotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects are within reach” (Ahmed 2006, 7–8). That is, we are all navigating a variety of lines and paths, sometimes willingly tracing the paths laid out, and at other times more *queerly* recognizing and pursuing alternatives; sometimes we are actively creating those “new impressions” and embracing different ways of being in the world. Personally, my queerness, committed to questioning of normative paths, has been crucial to me in resisting the powerful *heteronorms* that would have had me sculpt my intimate and relational life along certain *hetero* trajectories, as opposed to my willful and dogged pursuit of queer relations, of multiple and non-normative relations that extend, exceed, and defy the monogamous coupledness touted as the only key to happiness and well-being.

But this is not a chapter about my personal queerness. It is a chapter rather about my *professional* queerness, or a chapter in which I am seeking to explore how it is that I reconcile—or live with the potential contradiction of—working administratively to implement and assess a variety of normative trajectories for students while also not living with the constant cognitive dissonance of someone who is otherwise committed to a deep questioning of such, to the creation of “new impressions,” and to embracing alternative ways of being in the world.

It may be that these two dimensions of my being in the world are, in fact, *irreconcilable*. To be sure, they are ones I have been worrying over for quite some time, nearly the length of my career. An experimental essay I wrote relatively early in my administrative career, “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition” (2011), coauthored with Jacqueline Rhodes, argued that queerness and composition as a field *are* in fact *irreconcilable*, the latter dedicated to the training of students in academically normative ways of writing that are potentially transferable to post-collegiate careers, while the former is committed to a ceaseless questioning and undermining of how norms are created, with the hope—a somewhat *utopian* hope for queer theorists like José Esteban Muñoz—of an always ongoing exploration and pushing at the boundaries of what it means to be (or to write as a) human in relation to others, humans and nonhumans alike. Jackie and I were obviously attempting to be provocative, and many have picked up this essay either to extend or dispute its provocation. But I have held firm to the fundamental *incompatibility* of queerness and traditional composition studies—the schooling of writers in established genres and modes of written communication—if not a “deal breaker,” then at least as a generative tension. Indeed, I might have decided to “opt out” of administrative work altogether and instead spent my time queering the paths laid out by our institutions, helping students actively and explicitly cultivate alternatives and develop “new impressions.” Even further, I might have left the academy altogether as an always already corrupt and corrupting institution that “straightens” young people out for a set of narrow and prescribed paths leading to narrow and prescribed notions of “success.”

But I have not done the latter and instead coauthored another piece around the same time, this one with William P. Banks and entitled “Queer Eye for the Comp Program: Toward a Queer Critique of WPA Work” (Banks and Alexander 2009). This piece came directly out of my and Will’s (separate) experiences as writing program administrators (WPAs), and as you can tell from the title, it aimed to critique, from a queerly personal and theoretical perspective, the ways in which WPA

work often seems in the service of maintaining writing curriculum that both narrowly defines what writing is and does and that also serves a gatekeeping function, particularly as composition classes are some of the pivotal points through which students' eligibility to continue on in their studies are often determined. Again, as with "Impossible Subjects," the intent was to provoke, to produce what we hoped would be generative discussion, even as we recognized that our characterization of what composition administration does, and what queerness is and can be for that matter, were very broadly and somewhat stereotypically articulated. In fact, Will and I found ourselves in "Queer Eye" pivoting from pure and provocative critique to mapping out tentatively how we had both been attempting in our administrative practice to queer the "administrative consciousness." What might such a mapping look like? We suggested the following: a queer willingness to question the established status quo, to foster a deep sense of the political nature of language and language use, to cultivate a strong sense of how boundaries are created and potentially transgressed, and to develop an awareness of how promoting visibility (a cornerstone of much LGBT politicking) can assist in highlighting and valuing alternative paths and visions of "success." All of these were ways in which we were attempting to take our experiences as queer subjects and our knowledge of queer theory and actively shape an administrative practice that benefited from queer insights and ways of being.

I rehearse this work because it reminds me that one of the ways I *learned to lead* was through active critical reflection and writing about my own entrance into administration. I used the professional necessity of publishing (I've worked for the last twenty-five-plus years at research-intensive US campuses) to think about what it means to administer programs from a queer perspective. To be sure, joining administrative work with a publishing mandate doesn't seem very *queer*; after all, I was mobilizing queer critique in the maintenance of my own straight and narrow path toward merit, promotion, and success in higher education. Such are the compromises we make with ourselves, and you will find yourself, even if not queer, needing to reconcile a variety of different aspects of your identity, community affiliations, and values with the demands of

administrative work. With that said, however, the editors' invitation to contribute to this volume serves as yet another opportunity for me, not only to reflect on my administrative experience as a queer person, but also—especially now, over thirty years into a career two-thirds spent as an administrator—to get back to the question with which I began this chapter: the need to account not only for having entered into but having *persisted* in doing administrative work as a very open, highly visible queer person, and one who takes their queerness very seriously as not just a personal but an ideological approach to being in the world.

Becoming a "Queer" Administrator

So how does one come to do administrative work, much less *queer* such work? You will come to administration for a variety of reasons, many of which you will only discover *after* you have taken on the tasks offered you. You might *think* of what you plan to do or even cultivate a "vision" for how you plan to "change the world" (or your little corner of it) through your administrative work, but the practice of administration—what you actually *can* do—is only revealed in the doing of it. Once I understood, through my work with Jackie and Will in writing those earlier articles, that my sense of queerness and administrative work were likely irreconcilable, I let myself discover *in the process of doing* administrative work what was possible to "queer," to push, even to question, and in some cases radically alter or reject. In accepting administrative work, I discovered that I had been "let in," as it were, and allowed to work—and play—with those in charge of creating and maintaining the structures that keep our campuses working. And while I knew I was committing myself to being one of those people who is (at least to some extent) part of the maintenance of structures, and thus part of a status quo, I strongly believed that I could use my queer insights to push at the boundaries of what was possible. All of the tentative ways in which Will and I imagined our queer selves critiquing and expanding WPA work have certainly been true to my experience, but so have other queerer possibilities that I will explore in the remainder of this chapter.

I should note before I enumerate those insights that when I say “queer insights,” I’m not limiting myself to experiences of sexual orientation that have generated such insights. While it is certainly true (though not categorically necessary) that a queer sexual orientation can produce insights into the workings of normativity, it is just as true that not all LGBTQ+ people develop an attitude of “queerness”—one in which it seems not only useful but even desirable to adopt and cultivate a contrarian disposition, to question deeply normative structures and paths, and to promote capacious and alternative systems, ideas, and networks. Even more, such cultivation is hardly limited to LGBTQ+ people, and I’ve had many straight colleagues who are just as “queer” as can be in their orientation to work (and other areas of their lives). How does one “get to” and then decide to cultivate such queerness? Each story is different. While my queerness *has* in fact been born out of an early and seriously challenging experience of systemic homophobia, that is not the only “cause” leading to the cultivation of queerness as an *action* in the world. That action, I maintain, can originate in many life courses, but it often leads to that utopian sensibility I mentioned earlier—a utopianism arising out of a deep sense that what is given is not nearly good enough, and that what is possible must be capacious, even unexpected, plural, and rife with the possible stemming from an ability to see things aslant—to think and be queerly, in a word. And now, to the insights.

First, while recognizing that a queer approach to administrative work may not be as radical as one would like at times, there are ways to *queer* existing programs and projects, and by “queer” in this case I do not just mean making them more inclusive of and welcoming for LGBTQ+ students. Rather, I am reflecting on how I have learned in a few cases to *shift* some of the emphasis of tasks at hand so that they are functioning in not only more capacious but potentially in ways *in excess* of their original mandates—keeping in mind that one of the dimensions of queerness that makes it so fascinating is precisely its excessiveness, its willingness to consider and embrace far more than a narrow and acceptable band of possibility. When I served as campus writing director at the University of California, Irvine, I was tasked with opening up a writing center,

consolidating existing and dispersed writing tutorial functions under one unit. In a way, writing centers are about as “normative” as one can get in the realm of college writing and literacy education in particular and in higher education in general. They are often centers in which students seek out (or are sent by instructors to find) opportunities to “improve” their writing—which often means making it more “standardized” and recognizable as “marketplace English.” This function is often crucial for students seeking “success” in careers that rely (as so very many do) on effective, precise, and efficient forms of communication. While part of me was happy to create such a center on my campus, I also sought ways to think with my staff about not only the perceived *needs* of students to “improve” their writing but also their many and varied *desires* for writing—some of which exceed the creation of texts written in “marketplace English.” That is, I wanted to think queerly *beyond* just how a writing center could foster pathways for success and also consider how our center might cultivate a love of writing for itself, even if that writing wasn’t necessarily going to lead to normative notions of job readiness and career success. As such, we hosted poetry readings and even art contests, where students could express themselves in highly creative ways. We also opened our doors to student groups, encouraging them to visit the writing center to discuss *any* kind of writing project that they might have; we were thinking in particular about how student groups are often places in which students come to find their own voice and agency about a range of topics—from hobbies to political activism—and we wanted to make sure that we were serving and fostering student interests in these areas as well, areas in which the connection to job and career are perhaps tenuous or even nonexistent. In other words, we were invested in finding ways to make queerly capacious what a writing center could mean on campus far beyond “fixing” writing.

One of our most successful and innovative programs was hosting an annual Black Lives Matter writing contest, which aimed to support and promote smart and even provocative writing—ranging from the critical to the creative to even highly expressive rants and

performance pieces—about race and racism on campus. This initiative came out of a couple of failed writing center visits, in which some Black students approached tutors for assistance with papers that dealt substantively with racism. These were sometimes papers in which the students allowed themselves to give voice to their frustration with racism and white supremacist systems and structures. Some of our tutors, operating with a sensibility that “good” writing presented different sides of an issue with rational calmness, counseled some of these students to “tone down” their angry comments and sentiments. The students justifiably complained, and the staff had long conversations about the importance of honestly grappling with difficult experiences and how the expression of emotion itself can be a powerful rhetorical tool. Staff had to be tutored themselves in understanding that, for some people, a calm and “rational” approach to situations that are incendiary and outraging is not only rhetorically ineffective at times but also limits and narrows what writing can do not only to facilitate expression but also to mobilize that expressivity for critical engagement with complex issues. Part of what strikes me as important about the need to intervene in staff engagement with diverse forms of student writing is the way in which we were, at the prompting of our students, actively queering our own sense of what a writing center can do and, more importantly, what kinds of writing such a center can and should be valuing. In the process, our sense of the latter expanded significantly.

Rethinking “Success” Across the University

In many ways, what I just described is not that far removed from what many writing centers do, particularly as such centers are increasingly expanding and extending the kinds of writing that they “help” students with. But what these experiences have brought home to me, extending my own sense of queerness in the world, is that students often come to us with highly varied needs, experiences, perspectives, and desires for their own education. This comment seems obvious, but it is one that we need as administrators to remind ourselves of constantly. So many of the programs that I have been a part of creating, sustaining, implementing,

and revising have been focused on creating pathways through an institution, on facilitating “success” as students work toward degrees and develop employable skills.

As an associate dean for undergraduate education, for instance, I oversaw a number of “student success” programs that worked with low-income, first-gen transfer, international, formerly foster, and other groups of students for whom the institution deemed it important to set up additional resources to help them navigate a complex campus. As a former first-gen and low-income student, I was proud to help mount and maintain such programs, recognizing that I myself could have benefitted from some such when I was an undergraduate decades ago. At the same time, I *queerly* recognize that such programs, as valuable as they are, are often built (and often unconsciously so) on paternalistic positioning of students as somehow inferior; they just as often take for granted the belief that what such students want *most is* to figure out how to “belong” to the institutions serving them. Indeed, the rhetoric of “belonging” in student support services is often intense—and under-examined. The reality for many (if, admittedly, not all) of these students is that they are often bringing to campus significant ways of knowing and being in the world—ways of knowing and being they are unwilling to let go of in order to have them replaced with our institution’s values and modalities. I have spoken with many first-gen and low-income students for whom securing a high-paying job or gaining admission to prestigious graduate schools—values often earmarked by institutions as worthy and important—are not their highest priority. Instead, what they often want is to build and develop skills that they can then use when returning to their home communities, helping others like them create more sustainable and enjoyable lives. If anything, some of these students are highly skeptical of the worlds we are sometimes pushing them towards, worlds of greater and greater financial success and accumulation. They frequently use their own experiences to interrogate critically the kinds of wealth disparities and prejudices that have led to many people and groups being on the short end of the economic stick. For these students, the goal is not so much to “join” the middle-classes

and the aspirational pursuit of wealth but rather to return to their home communities and help create and foster alternative ways of being in the world that directly run counter to such capitalist aspirations. Moreover, for such students, the university is less a place that they want to “belong” to and more one they want to *use* to further their own particular vision of the world. Belonging, we sometimes discover, isn’t an unadulterated and always desirable good or goal.

Working with such students, I realized quickly that, even as an associate dean responsible for multiple programs, I needed to queer my own understanding of student success, to enlarge my sense of what “success” means, even if such “success” run counter to some of the metrics we were using to gauge success—such as transition to recognizable careers and admission to graduate schools. Working out of my associate dean office, I spearheaded a student-led campus-wide festival for higher education in which our primary goal was to center the voices of students in helping to revision what higher education could be in the (supposedly) post-COVID-19 pandemic twenty-first century:

This festival both celebrates our return to campus and serves as an invitation to reflect on what we learned about higher education during the pandemic, as well as what lessons we might take into the future in our post-pandemic world. Now, as we embark on the “new normal,” what creative energies do we want to take with us from pandemic to post-pandemic? How will those energies continue to transform what we do, and what it means to be a “student” in the 21st century? Most importantly, how can our “new normal” in the academy proceed—from its inception—with the values of inclusive excellence? How can we turn the language of “DEI” (diversity, equality, inclusion) into transformative policies and practices that center social justice in our re-visioning of 21st century higher education? Centering the voices of students, [we] will host a week-long series of events, roundtables, workshops, speakers, viewings, and

activities that showcase what students, staff, faculty, and community partners understand as the major innovations in higher education that are emerging now in the post-pandemic. These innovations run the gamut of what we mean when we say “higher ed”—including experiments in delivering course content, creating different forms of community at a distance, restructuring learning environments, fostering connection, and enlivening learning opportunities and relationship building. (UC Irvine, The Futures of Higher Education Festival, 2021)

The goal in mounting such a festival was to recognize that not all students want to “belong” to our campus and that many indeed have very divergent views on what higher education can mean and what it can help them do. We wanted to center *student desires* for their learning while recognizing and then actively honoring the many diverse epistemologies that our students bring to campus—epistemologies with modes of creativity and critique that we should in no way seek to replace but rather value and appreciate. If anything, what we hoped to do with this festival was create a space in which we could question our own institution’s normative desires—as a reflection of capitalist culture—to inculcate within our students consumerist and capitalist notions of success and productivity.

The most radical version of this approach to higher education comes, I believe, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, which connects colleges and universities to larger systems of indoctrination and even incarceration that manage the surveillance and control of diverse populations, particularly the systematically marginalized. According to Harney and Moten, “The university is not the opposite of the prison, since they are both involved in their way with the reduction and command of the social individual” (2013, 42). The authors advocate for what they call a “fugitive” approach to such institutions, an approach in which “one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To

abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university” (Harney and Moten 2013, 26). In their introduction to this book, queer theorist Jack Halberstam connects Harney and Moten’s radical Black thinking and praxis to queer critique, arguing that “we [should] refuse to ask for recognition and instead... take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming” (Halberstam 2013, 6). While our Festival on the Futures of Higher Education did not actively tear down existing structures, I believe it queerly allowed students to find one another, and “see beyond” what was being offered to them and begin to envision modes of living—and making a living. Our hope was that it would allow students—and their teachers and administrators—to “see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming” (Halberstam 2013, 6).

Sustaining such work is not easy. The festival only ran for one year, but it initiated conversations that have touched many curricula, programs, and lives. To be sure, the goal of the festival was not so much to “tear shit down.” Halberstam’s comments, along with Harney and Moten’s, remind me that part of the challenge—even the incommensurability—of being a *queer administrator* is recognizing the tension with which I began this essay: the tension between administering programs within a structure that survives on stability and the generation of “successful” through-puts (what one administrator on my campus actually calls students) versus a queer critique that is invested in ceaseless critique (tearing shit down) in order to reimagine, re-vision, rebuild. I imagine Moten and Halberstam feel this tension as well, given that they work at prestigious east coast universities.

Indeed, I think many of us have been feeling that tension recently, with 2024’s student encampments protesting Israel’s invasion of Gaza.

Whatever one might think of those protests politically, those encampments represented a significant calling into question of how universities are themselves part of larger national and global projects of political intervention; most explicitly, they sought to call out the involvement of higher education in varied forms of capitalist, settler colonialist, and ongoing imperialist expansion. Again, whether one agrees or not with the claims made by the protestors, the push to highlight and question higher education’s entanglement with existing power structures constitutes important intellectual work; the fact that that work was being done (if not exclusively) by students and through encampments—that is, through forms that interrupted and exceeded normative modes of inquiry and education—seems to me quite queer in its way. Thinking about the encampment at UC, Irvine, I am reminded that not only did it consist of tents and spaces for meeting and conversation, but it also had a library, a collection of books of interest in explaining both the focus of the occupation as well as the importance of the strategy of occupation itself. Books on a campus may not seem much like an interruption of normative ways of “doing business” at a university, but the distribution of books outside a library, bookstore, or classroom and instead directly on a major walkway from one part of campus to another and as part of an unauthorized encampment—well, that *is* an interruption, a re-distribution of objects, namely the book, itself a metonym for knowledge production and dissemination, that signals a shift both in what knowledge is important and how that knowledge is shared. In suggesting there was something “queer” about these encampments, I do not want to align a queer approach with unquestioning support for the protestors. In fact, as a queer administrator, I found myself questioning both the student protestors and their tactics *as well as* the use of police force to disband the encampment on my campus. I will say that there were moments when passing the encampment on my campus that I simultaneously thought, on one hand, “Wow, this is so small, such a very modest kind of protest” and, on the other hand, that the word *intifada* or the phrase “from the river to the sea” made me uncomfortable. But I also reminded myself that that’s the point of

protest, to signal—and share—discomfort. And the point of a university campus should be to make room for divergent opinions, for holding difficult discussions, for engaging in challenging dialogues.

Toward Impossible Possibilities, or Working with Others as an Administrator

As I write that last sentence, I think back to my tutors in the writing center, those who were challenging Black writers to be less angry in tone. For sure, those tutors were very likely trying to help the writers create space for non-Black readers to engage their ideas and critiques, to join in a difficult discussion. But I might also counter by saying that our desire to create engagement and dialogue cannot always be on our terms. Divergent opinions are not always pleasantly articulated, and the registers of emotion, even unpleasant emotion, through which ideas are sometimes rendered is itself important information. The passion and force through which people offer us their thoughts and insights are at times a powerful register of their own commitment, even of the difficulties (and sometimes pain and suffering) that they themselves have encountered, the difficulties that have brought them to their ideas, their critiques, their interventions. “Toning it down” might not always do justice to the urgency of some claims.

Moreover, the larger context in which students are studying and moving into the world as citizens should give all of us serious pause. From climate catastrophe to our culture’s ongoing flirtation with fascism, our students’ world is on fire. We need platforms to listen to them, to engage them, to work with them on solutions to the damaged world they are inheriting. As an administrator, I hold firmly—and hopefully—to the view that the university campus is one of the last places in our culture to have such open discussions. The failure to engage our students and the move instead to enact policies that shut down discussion before every possible avenue of engagement has been tried—this is unacceptable.

With that said, I recognize that creating the rich, varied, and capacious spaces for ongoing, provocative, and probing debate is also likely an impossible challenge, and the very impossibility of it brings me back

to my contention earlier in my career about queerness and the impossibility of reconciling that queerness with certain kinds of work in higher education. But my queerness is also a kind of stubbornness, an insistence, even a utopian feeling, that the impossibility of a task does not exempt us from at least attempting it. And that stubborn and weirdly utopian sense may be where my queerness as an administrator has ultimately led me; it has become the way in which I have learned to lead.

One final thought. Any administrator is prone to think about their work in the world as cultivating a kind of legacy, and it’s pretty common for my administrative colleagues to consider their own legacies once they leave a position. I queerly urge you not to do this. When I stepped down as director of the university writing center that I founded on my campus, a graduate student asked me what I hoped my legacy would be. I told her that I had no sense of legacy, and that if another group of administrators had shown up the next day at the doors of the center and determined that it needed to be closed to make room for other projects, I would be absolutely fine with that. I am queerly *uncommitted* to my legacy, to reproducing into the future my desires, for propagating into someone else’s future my sense of the world after I have left certain work behind. I have no need to reproduce myself—and I have come to think of the desire to leave a legacy behind as a kind of reproductive arrogance. We can prepare our students and others for a future, but we cannot live it for them; they will have to make their own decisions, face their own challenges, craft the worlds in which they want to live. I queerly commit to helping prepare others, as I work toward the world I want to live in *right now*—but learning to lead is as much knowing when to step aside and let others take over as anything else. And with that, I wish you the very best on your own academic and administrative journey, queer or otherwise.

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